



Declaration of commitment by COMIFAC member states to the of Central Africa and call for fair financing

We, the ECCAS/COMIFAC States, commit ourselves to make the necessary and verifiable efforts to preserve our tropical forests and conserve biodiversity, and call on the international community to increase their technical financial and diplomatic support in an effective manner and on appropriate terms; this shared responsibility approach, as described in this declaration, was approved at a technical meeting (Workshop 8-9 December 2020) which gathered experts from the ECCAS/COMIFAC countries and representatives of the CBFP colleges ahead of the Eighth CBFP Council Meeting held from 10-11 December 2020, in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Preamble

(1) This declaration of the member countries of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and the Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC), based mainly on contributions from CBFP members and approved at the technical segment of experts from ECCAS/COMIFAC countries and CBFP colleges (Workshop held on 8 and 9 December 2020) prior to the eighth meeting of the CBFP Council (10-11 December 2020):

- Outlines the commitments these countries are willing to make to contribute to the success of the international negotiations on climate change, biodiversity conservation, the fight against desertification and the international dialogue on forests,
- Lists the expectations of these countries vis-à-vis the international community for support that is commensurate with the challenges facing Congo Basin forests in view of the sustainable development of the planet.

The Declaration builds on COMIFAC's Treaty, the priorities of its Convergence Plan and UN resolution 54/214, as well as United Nations resolution 54/214 which sets out the commitments towards sustainable natural resource management and the fight against climate change that were recently reaffirmed by the sub-region's Heads of State within the framework of the revised Treaty establishing ECCAS (Libreville, December 2019, article 74). It follows up on and reinforces the recent Brussels (Belgium) and N'Djamena (Chad) Declarations presented within the framework of the CBFP, with special emphasis on the need to co-finance the countries' efforts to preserve forests and their biodiversity.

The Declaration's text draws on the results of a 6-month participatory process that mobilized (through a survey) local, regional, and international expertise gathered in CBFP colleges (notably civil society, universities and research institutes, international and national NGOs, the private sector, and state actors in the Central African region). The experts formulated their vision of an appropriate regional policy and strategy, needed for the sustainable conservation of the environmental functions of the Congo Basin forests, and capable of justifying and mobilizing increased international assistance.

Hence the essential contributions of CBFP members are featured prominently in this policy statement formulated by the CBFP member countries. There is broad consensus that the statement provides a strong and important basis for discussions to inform/feed the next rounds of negotiations around international environmental conventions and to guide project design and support.

The ECCAS/COMIFAC states welcome the CBFP's continued commitment to supporting the efforts of the ECCAS/COMIFAC countries who for several years now, have been implementing initiatives to sustainably manage their natural heritage and forest resources.

I. Background

The Congo Basin forests: a globally recognized common heritage for mankind

- (1) Owing to their key role in regulating the global climate, preserving global biodiversity and as potential drivers of socio-economic development for the people of the countries they harbour, the Congo Basin's tropical forests are a common heritage for mankind. A host of international agreements and multilateral programs now exist to promote their sustainable and equitable development.

The Congo Basin forests and climate change

- (2) The Congo Basin forests are often rightly referred to as the second tropical lung of the planet. As such, they play a crucial role in regulating the climate at the continental and global levels. Their biomass and peatlands hold an estimated 80 billion tons of carbon, equivalent to roughly ten years' worth of total global emissions. This role is further enhanced by the dust of the Bodele Depression which contributes significantly to balancing forest basins and oceans through nutrient-rich diatoms.

Preserving them is thus key to ensuring the global climate balance. Conversely, their massive destruction would have a considerable negative impact, resulting in an increase in the rate of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere and in the average global temperature.

Recently published scientific studies show that the Congo Basin forests are more resilient to climate change than the Amazon. Despite their much smaller surface area, the Congo Basin forests, sequester as much CO₂ each year as the Amazon.

The Congo Basin forests and Biodiversity

- (3) The Congo Basin forests are a unique hub of global biodiversity and an invaluable reservoir of genetic diversity whose potential remains to be better understood and value added is yet to be organized. They are home to specific and highly varied flora and fauna, both in terms of species, genera and families. In addition to its importance in terms of biodiversity and endemism, the Congo Basin is one of the last remaining regions on the planet where the interconnectivity of tropical forests allows biological mechanisms to function naturally and undisturbed.

The Congo Basin forests, the well-being of local and/or indigenous populations and economic development

- (4) The natural resources associated with the Congo Basin forests provide livelihoods for at least 100 million people who live in their direct environment or in the vicinity. The forests also fulfil essential social and cultural functions for the local communities and indigenous populations who have flourished in their environment.

Consumer products obtained from processing the natural resources of these forests play a vital role in diversifying the incomes of these populations.

It is thus vital, to secure a better future for the Congo Basin forests, that the local and indigenous populations who live in their immediate environment and surroundings serve as frontline protectors. The populations

must therefore be provided with an economic and institutional framework that allows them to adopt sustainable farming models that enable them both to maintain and restore forest areas and meet their legitimate needs for food security, income, and socio-economic development.

Enhancing the value of non-timber forest products should be taken into account as part of the socio-economic development of local communities and indigenous populations, especially as part of efficient food systems and adequate nutrition.

Sustainable logging for timber production and the timber processing industry account for a significant share of GDP, formal business, and tax revenue of Congo Basin states, which is set to grow even further in the future. The same is true for tourism and the exploitation and processing of forest products besides wood, including non-timber forest products.

Regional transhumance dynamics deeply rooted in the local socio-cultural context have long played a role in maintaining the economic and food balances of Sahelian regions and their vicinity. With adequate regulation to keep their growing environmental and security impacts in check, these dynamics could help to bolster food security and drive inclusive economic growth and job creation for the local and indigenous communities of the regions concerned.

II. Challenges

- (5) Deforestation and forest degradation levels have long remained relatively low in the Congo Basin. It is estimated that between 2000 and 2005, the entire African continent accounted for only 5.4% of the global loss of tropical rainforests, compared with 12.8% for Indonesia and 47.8% for Brazil. That said, deforestation and forest degradation have increased significantly in the Congo Basin over the past two decades. It is estimated that the deforestation rate doubled between 2000 and 2015, resulting in the loss of 160,000 km² of tropical rainforests (equivalent to 10% of their area) during this period and that drought in the savannah areas has equally accelerated forest degradation and possibly even desertification.

In the past, the remoteness of many of the forests helped to effortlessly preserve them. Since the countries have now legitimately joined a forced march towards development, forests are now viewed as targets for conquest and used to develop the businesses needed to fuel the forested countries' growth and employ their youth. Hence:

- New opportunities and actors emerging as part of the globalization of commodity markets are opening forests up to traders, fuelling the expansion of industrial logging, mining and agro-industrial investments and infrastructure development, as well as carbon credits;
- Moreover, the poorly structured and insufficiently re-distributive development processes that are typical of the sub-region's economies, in a context of diminishing forest areas worldwide, perpetuate poverty in a significant segment of the population, especially in rural forest areas. This structural poverty combined with sustained demographic growth, increases pressure on natural resources in forest areas, which is further exacerbated by the expansion of low-yield agriculture and growing fuelwood needs.
- Socio-political unrest in several ECCAS countries causes large population displacement, internal displacements, and refugee flows, often with negative impacts on the natural resources of the receiving areas.
- The effects of Global Climate Change are noticeable on the most fragile areas in terms of loss of forest cover, particularly due to drought

- The adverse effects of the significant growth of herds practising transhumance in environmentally critical areas on the northern edges of Congo Basin forests have become a major concern due to overgrazing and pressure exerted on protected areas;
- The adverse effects of poaching, zoonoses and illegal exploitation of wildlife and biodiversity in general are deeply disturbing for several key species, such as the critically endangered forest elephant, as well as the health of ecosystems and by extension, that of human beings:

As they are increasingly opened and fragmented by this new and destructive dynamic, the Congo Basin forests have come to a critical juncture in their evolution, which may lead to more intense forest degradation dynamics and higher deforestation rates.

If not reversed by realistic, concerted strategies that are recognized as legitimate by the populations that depend on these forest resources, the above-described destructive trend will have an increasingly negative impact on the forests.

The global environmental functions of forest systems (regulating the global climate, genetic and biodiversity reservoir), as well as their potential as catalysts of sustainable socio-economic development for the countries they cover, could be seriously undermined to the detriment of all stakeholders.

Strategies to fight against imported deforestation currently being adopted by developed countries at this point are a cause for concern for the ECCAS member countries, especially considering the possibility of the creation of new non-tariff barriers, at the expense of added economic value of forest resources. Rather there is a need to increase access to international markets for the region's forest products that meet environmental standards, in order to support economic efforts towards sustainable forest management. New measures envisaged at the international level will therefore need to be negotiated in the framework of a constructive and partnership-based dialogue taking into account concerns raised by the sub-region. If these new strategies prove to be useful in promoting access to international markets for sustainable forest products, they could present a real opportunity for Congo Basin countries.

III. *Commitments of ECCAS/COMIFAC member countries to the Congo Basin forests and their vicinity*

The ECCAS/COMIFAC countries:

- (6) **Are aware** that key sectoral policies such as agriculture, forestry and nature conservation must be deployed with an integrated vision of land use planning, closely aligned with national objectives for water and power supply, development of industrial and transport infrastructure, public health, food security, tourism and decentralization. In this regard, the Planning and Finance Ministries, as well as the Prime Minister's Office and the Presidency of the Republic have a strategic role to play in providing coordination and technical guidance. These considerations are key to ensuring that the NDCs (*Nationally Determined Contributions*) of the ECCAS / COMIFAC countries become structuring frameworks for the contributions of these countries to the fight against climate change, in addition to communication.
- (7) **Recognize the need for urgent action to stem the uncontrolled expansion of transhumance dynamics into Equatorial Africa's forest areas.** In keeping with commitments made within the framework of the N'Djamena process (*N'Djamena Declaration*), **they shall take appropriate and sustainable measures likely to allow a gradual control of the negative impacts of transhumance on wildlife / biodiversity conservation**, on the potential for renewal of natural resources in host areas, peace, and security, as well as the populations' well-being.
- (8) **See the need for greater involvement of civil society, local communities and indigenous people** in all decision-making processes relating to the sustainable management of natural resources in the Congo Basin forests and their vicinity. Shall ensure that they are closely involved in defining, implementing and

monitoring policies to combat climate change and enhance the value of biodiversity at the international, regional, national and local levels.

The ECCAS/COMIFAC countries undertake:

(9) **to remain and be increasingly involved in global climate governance**, in close collaboration with the entire international community. To this end, they reiterate their commitment to help fight climate change, notably by working within the framework of the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) process, as part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

To continue improving control of their CO₂ emissions in order to contribute to the global effort to hold the average global temperature increase to below 2 ° C, in accordance with commitments made in Paris within the framework of COP 21;

To contribute actively towards restoring forest landscapes within the framework of the Bonn-challenge and AFR 100 (*African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative*) with an already announced firm pledge of 34.56 million hectares (equivalent to 3.37 GtCO₂ of carbon) and a joint objective provisionally set at 50 million hectares;

(10) **To continue working to strengthen intersectoral coordination**, which is crucial for the emergence and effective implementation of climate-adapted operational development strategies on the ground;

(11) **To strengthen biodiversity, wildlife and protected area management**, especially in biodiversity *hotspots* located in primary forests and their vicinity, especially for the forest elephant, an endangered species, and zoonoses using “One Health’ approaches

As part of these efforts, shall implement participatory planning and co-management approaches, by making more robust contributions to protected area financing, and developing policies to promote eco-tourism and strengthen governance and the fight against poaching and zoonoses.

Consider in this regard the strengthening of national agencies as well as, where appropriate, the possibilities of increased use of protected areas management methods that ensure their security and development through the establishment of Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs), in close collaboration with the relevant State services, and in countries where these management methods have proven comparative advantages that are recognized by all stakeholders.

Shall maintain and strengthen regional cooperation in biodiversity conservation, notably through transboundary protected areas without prejudice to State sovereignty.

(12) **Undertake to exercise extreme caution** in all policies likely to impact forest areas, **when dealing with the current forest cover** and prospects for maintaining it, in order to preserve the potential of these areas to fight climate change and preserve global biodiversity, and sustainably increase the well-being of the people who live in and depend on it.

Regarding logging for timber production, shall promote an appropriate and comprehensive approach based on the following building blocks:

- i. **Improving forest governance**, with particular emphasis on enhancing transparency and accountability in relations between private operators and public administrations in charge of regulating, controlling and monitoring the sector;
- ii. **Establishing a tax incentive system** for sustainable management;
- iii. **Promoting independent certification and deploying traceability systems** for export products;
- iv. **Formalizing local and regional timber markets**;
- v. **The development of modern and sustainable value-added chains**, built on industrialization that meets the imperatives of socio-economic development and enhances the comparative advantages of the countries of the subregion, notably implying a ban on the export of timber logs, the creation of special

economic zones and the development of woody plantations outside forests that respect biodiversity principles.

- vi. **Benefit-sharing for local populations** (through effective sharing of forest royalties),
- (13) **Undertake to further promote the green economy** by adopting public strategies that foster sustainable natural resource management. These strategies will be aligned with the following main guidelines:
- i. Recognizing and promoting the central role that private sector companies and civil society organizations must play in the practical implementation of policies;
 - ii. The promotion of sustainable agriculture in rural forestry areas, in order to offer prospects for local development that are no longer based on the "default" strategies that local stakeholders use today, such as accelerated land clearing and slash-and-burn agriculture;
 - iii. Pursuing the "net zero deforestation" objective in all sectors of production (wood/mining/agro-food/infrastructure);
 - iv. Promoting sustainable value-added chains for agro-sylvo-pastoral products;
 - v. Institutionalizing independent certification for natural resource exploitation to regulate the impacts of deforestation in all the formal sectors identified in point (iii) above;
 - vi. Ensuring strict compliance with mandatory environmental and social impact studies in all investment projects in the formal sectors identified in point (iii) above;
 - vii. Strengthening the organization of local populations in forest areas.
- (14) **Undertake to place land use planning and allocation strategies** at the centre of their development policies. To this end, they shall:
- **Develop and implement land use plans** built on stakeholder involvement at all levels, including civil society and private sector actors, based on resource inventories that consider the economic value of forest ecosystem services;
 - **Reflection on a possible revision of land codes** to strike a better balance between modern law and traditional law, by clarifying and specifying the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples over soil resources in keeping with the United Nations Declaration on the rights of indigenous peoples and the terms and conditions of use rights acquisition for private owners.
- (15) **Pledge to take practical steps to mainstream "One Health" approaches to payment for Eco-systemic Services (PSE) and / or Payment for the Preservation of Eco-systemic Services (PPSE)** into public policies, support programs and investment projects, based on a scientific assessment of all these services, and by including the private sector, local communities and indigenous populations and family farms among the beneficiaries.
- (16) **Undertake to participate actively in ongoing discussions at international forums** as part of the Post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. The priority for the Central African States is to reconcile conservation and inclusive biodiversity management by aligning them with development pathways.
- (17) **Undertake to formulate incentives** for the development of value-added chains and more advanced processing of wood and non-timber forest products in Central Africa.
- (18) **Undertake to strengthen the capacities** of their national senior officials for developing and maturing bankable projects that can be submitted to raise funds from various international donor agencies.
- (19) **Undertake to establish compensation mechanisms** to offset damage caused by wildlife and transhumant animals to the plantations of local populations and villages of the Congo Basin forests.
- (20) **Undertake to operationalize COMIFAC's gender strategy** and assess how it is being incorporated into projects.

IV. What the countries expect from the international community

- (21) **The countries request the international community's active support** in implementing their forest policies and building the capacities of their senior officials for preparing bankable projects and raising funding from various international donor agencies.
- (22) **The countries of the Congo Basin, the "second largest tropical forest lung" on earth,** request a share in the climate financing mobilised in proportion to the Congo Basin's contribution to maintaining the planet's equilibrium, as decided by the Paris Agreement, in support of the conservation and sustainable management efforts made.

This claim entails, among other things:

- **That, contrary to what currently obtains, equity be recognized in the distribution of resources mobilized by climate finance to maintain the planet's equilibrium as decided by the Paris Agreement,** considering the relative magnitude of the contribution of the Amazon, Congo Basin and Southeast Asian tropical basins to the global objective;
- **Fast tracking the payment, to Central Africa particularly, of contributions pledged** during the establishment of the Green Climate Fund;
- **That financial mechanisms** supporting the development and implementation of Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), as provided in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) **be better equipped and more accessible to the Central African States;**

The ECCAS/COMIFAC countries call for:

- (23) **Continuous fund raising geared specifically towards implementing commitments made** by the Congo Basin countries, notably:
- Within the framework of the **Bonn-challenge;**
 - **Within the framework of the N'Djamena Declaration;**
 - **Within the framework of the CAFI initiative.**
- (24) **Rallying more technical and financial support to develop mainstreaming projects** as part of the implementation of the COMIFAC Convergence Plan;
- (25) **Rallying suitable technical and financial assistance** to provide the needed capacity-building and technology transfers. The infrastructural, institutional, and individual capacity building would be geared specifically towards meeting the human and institutional resource needs of regional and national scientific bodies;
- (26) **Foreign investments from sustainable development-driven industries,** such as renewable energy, more advanced processing of wood and non-timber forest products (NTFPs), agriculture.
- (27) **Improved coordination and harmonization of technical and financial support,** and greater mainstreaming of this support into public planning and programming mechanisms in beneficiary countries and their regional organizations (such as the COMIFAC Convergence Plan), in line with the principles of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness;
- (28) **Joint assessment of REDD+ implementation** in Central African countries to support phase II of the investment process;
- (29) **Greater consideration, in international economic and trade relations,** of issues relating to the conservation and sustainable management of the Congo Basin's natural resources. This increased consideration should be underpinned by favourable pricing conditions aimed at promoting sustainable value-added chains (ecologically and socially sustainable wood / zero deforestation commodities / non-timber forest products), especially by increasing the value of forest certification in international public contracts.
- (30) **Helping to fund compensation mechanisms for victims of straying animals** (wildlife, transhumance) in production sectors of the Congo Basin and especially for resolving human-elephant conflict, a worsening

problem across the Congo Basin, owing in part to climate change impacts on forests. This is especially important for the forest elephant, a critically endangered species, to help mitigate any negative perceptions of the species and thus preserve its important ecological and cultural role.

- (31) **Consideration of States' priorities in project development** and implementation of rational use of finances granted, thereby reducing transaction costs to promote truly sustainable development at the local level.

Done in Kinshasa (DRC) on 11 December 2020

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