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To protect the planet's climate, France should phase out its support for industrial logging in the Congo Basin

Tropical forests play an indisputable role in climate change globally: they are massive carbon sinks and their destruction releases huge quantities of CO₂. At a global level, almost 12% of greenhouse gas emissions are produced because of the degradation and destruction of forests.¹ Forests also offer livelihoods to millions of people and host animal and plant biodiversity in unparalleled abundance. The Congo Basin rainforest, stretching over 200 million hectares across six forest-rich countries in Central Africa, has exceptional environmental value to the planet. Today, as the second largest rainforest on earth, it is under serious threat; France carries some responsibility for this.

For over twenty years now, France has supported the region's logging industry, believing that by helping companies adopt certain rules and instruments, notably "forest management plans", they will manage their logging concessions sustainably and contribute to the development of timber producing countries. In this way, France has since 1990, through its Development Agency (AFD), provided more than 120 million euros' worth of grants and loans to industrial logging companies in order to help them establish "sustainable management" instruments.²

But this policy of support for the logging industry is based on false assumptions and has disastrous results.

¹ IPCC (2014), Climate Change 2014: Mitigation of Climate Change. Contribution of Working Group III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Edenhofer, O., R. Pichs-Madruga, Y. Sokona, E. Farahani, S. Kadner, K. Seyboth, A. Adler, I. Baum, S. Brunner, P. Eickemeier, B. Kriemann, J. Savolainen, S. Schlömer, C. von Stechow, T. Zwickel and J.C. Minx (eds.)]. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York, NY, USA,

² *Secteur forestier dans le bassin du Congo : 20 ans d'intervention de l'AFD*, Samyn J.M. & al., Agence française de développement, 2011.

Moreover, it has already been shown that industrial logging - even when it is “selective” (logging only a few selected species) and under a “forest management plan” - causes long-term damage to biodiversity and leads to vast deforestation, as illustrated by the experience of West Africa. One study, published in 2014, even showed that logging concessions in Republic of Congo managed by companies with a “forest management plan” had higher deforestation rates than concessions that did not have such a plan.³ The lack of growth, and even shrinkage, of forested areas certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, indicates that certification has neither addressed the deficiencies of concession-based forest management nor overcome the environmental problems caused by it. Moreover, it is indisputable that forests degraded by industrial logging, even when certified, are more vulnerable to climate change.

The AFD has committed to ensuring that forest management plans “do not lead to logging of primary forests or ancient or critical habitats, in the context of its financing instruments”.⁴ It has also committed to ensuring that “forest management, notably through the creation of roads, does not lead to an opening of road axes leading to the fragmentation of forest landscapes but foresees on the contrary the closure and regeneration of the forest canopy in these roadways after the logging takes place”. In view of these commitments, the AFD should already guarantee that industrial logging does not take place in intact forest landscapes.⁵ In addition, the AFD should also adopt other priorities in order to remain faithful to its mission of fighting poverty and contributing to sustainable development.

From an economic and social perspective, it's important to note that no forest-rich country in the Congo Basin has ever reduced its poverty rate thanks to industrial logging of these forests. On the contrary, the logging industry gradually destroys the forest ecosystem, on which 75 million people depend, and deprives indigenous and local communities of their land and customary rights. Conflicts often arise between companies and local communities.

In addition, logging companies, which are mostly of European or Asian origin, have tended to increase their profits by breaking laws and fuelling corruption. For the past fifteen years, reports have multiplied on the many illegalities committed by the timber sector, without any effective solution being found to put an end to the lawlessness. An audit in 2014, funded by the European Union, showed that no logging company operating in Cameroon could be considered legal.⁶ In Democratic Republic of Congo, 90% of forest taxes failed to reach public coffers in 2012 because of tax avoidance by logging companies.⁷ Companies targeted by the AFD's development programmes, like the Support Programme for sustainable forest management (Pagef) in Republic of Congo, had reportedly committed many breaches of the forest code.

The consequences of bad governance and disrespect for rights and laws can be dramatic: in Central African Republic, the main logging companies active in 2013 and 2014 became complicit in grave human rights violations because of their funding to armed groups.⁸

Currently, the bad governance context, the choice of ineffective tools and the basic ecological conditions of the Congo Basin rainforest mean that France's policy objectives cannot be achieved through its public funds. Furthermore, the evaluation of AFD programmes appears weak and quite un-transparent. Some projects, including the Support Programme for the development of forest management plans (Parpaf) in Central African Republic, have never been evaluated, while others, including the mid-term evaluation of the “Support for sustainable forest management” programme (Agedufor) in Democratic Republic of Congo, are not published. Weaknesses identified by the evaluation report of 20 years of AFD programmes in 2011, such as the choice of instruments (with no guarantee of environmental

³ Foreign capital, forest change and regulatory compliance in Congo Basin forests, J S Brandt et al, Environmental Research Letters, 2014.

⁴ *Cadre d'Intervention Transversal Biodiversité 2013-2016*, AFD.

⁵ <http://www.intactforests.org/>

⁶ *Évaluation de la conformité des documents associés au processus d'attribution de chaque titre forestier en vigueur au Cameroun*, EGIS-BDPA-OREADE BRECHE, 2014.

⁷ “The cut-price sale of DRC's forests”, Global Witness, October 2013.

⁸ “Blood Timber: How Europe helped fund war in Central African Republic”, Global Witness, July 2015.

sustainability) or the weak benefits to local populations, have not yet prevented the continuance of these programmes.⁹

It is important to underline that the technical instruments that France finances with public (development) funds are not only ineffective: by making it seem they're a solution, they help logging companies pursue their activities, causing harm to the environment and local populations.

In light of the facts and evidence, we believe it is irresponsible to continue promoting industrial logging and the tropical timber trade in vital forest ecosystems like the Congo Basin rainforest. It will not be possible to achieve sustainable management and fight climate change by entrusting tens of millions of hectares of fragile forests to commercial enterprises whose activities are fundamentally unsustainable and failing to deliver equitable benefits to local communities. As international donors start to invest hundreds of millions of euros in REDD+ financing in the Congo Basin, it appears all the more important to stop the use of public funds for industrial logging that is a motor of deforestation and forest degradation.

As France hosts the COP21 climate conference in Paris, it is urgent for it to revise its development policy for the Congo Basin rainforest.

As this continues, the rainforest is emptied of its resources. The loggers themselves recognise that the stocks of tree species in their concessions are diminishing.¹⁰ **Meanwhile, the climate crisis continues to get worse.**

We are calling for:

- France to end its development policy support for industrial logging in the Congo Basin, by phasing it out according to an established calendar, and instead support genuinely sustainable alternatives that protect tropical rainforests and forest-dependent local and indigenous communities. The French government should support innovative, alternative approaches to sustainable forest management, which secures the land and customary rights of local and indigenous communities, such as community forests or the co-management of forested areas.
- The AFD to organise a public consultation, with civil society participation, before establishing a new “roadmap” for the Congo Basin rainforest. Moreover, the AFD should guarantee that no logging should take place in intact forest landscapes, prioritise the protection of intact forest areas, and commit to not supporting companies where independent reports signal illegalities, complicity with human rights violations and the non-respect of the free, prior and informed consent of local and indigenous communities. The AFD should also strengthen the independent evaluation system of its projects, its transparency (publication of all evaluations of Agency projects) and improve its processes for civil society consultation.
- France to oppose the lifting of the moratorium on new logging concessions in Democratic Republic of Congo, in view of the sustainability and governance problems described herein, and in order to allow the piloting of other models of forest management that secure the rights of local communities and ensure ecosystem preservation.
- France to ensure that French funds made available for tropical rainforests through the COP21, FLEGT and REDD+ processes must not be used to subsidise industrial logging via the failed model of ‘sustainable forest management’.

⁹ For example, the evaluation report stated that: “Current scientific knowledge does not allow us to guarantee yet that the technical choices made [by the logging industry] (...) will mean the sustainable management of the resource. The impact of human intervention in a complex, natural environment is far from being understood and the results of research will take many years before providing all the necessary analytical data.” *Secteur forestier dans le bassin du Congo : 20 ans d'intervention de l'AFD*, Samyn J.M. & al., Agence française de développement, 2011.

¹⁰ Cyclope report 2014. See also interview with logging company in *La semaine africaine*, 28 March 2011.

SIGNATORIES

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Centre for Support of Sustainable Management of Tropical Forests (CAGDFT) DRC

Coalition des Femmes Leaders pour l'Environnement et le Développement Durable (CFLEDD) DRC

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