

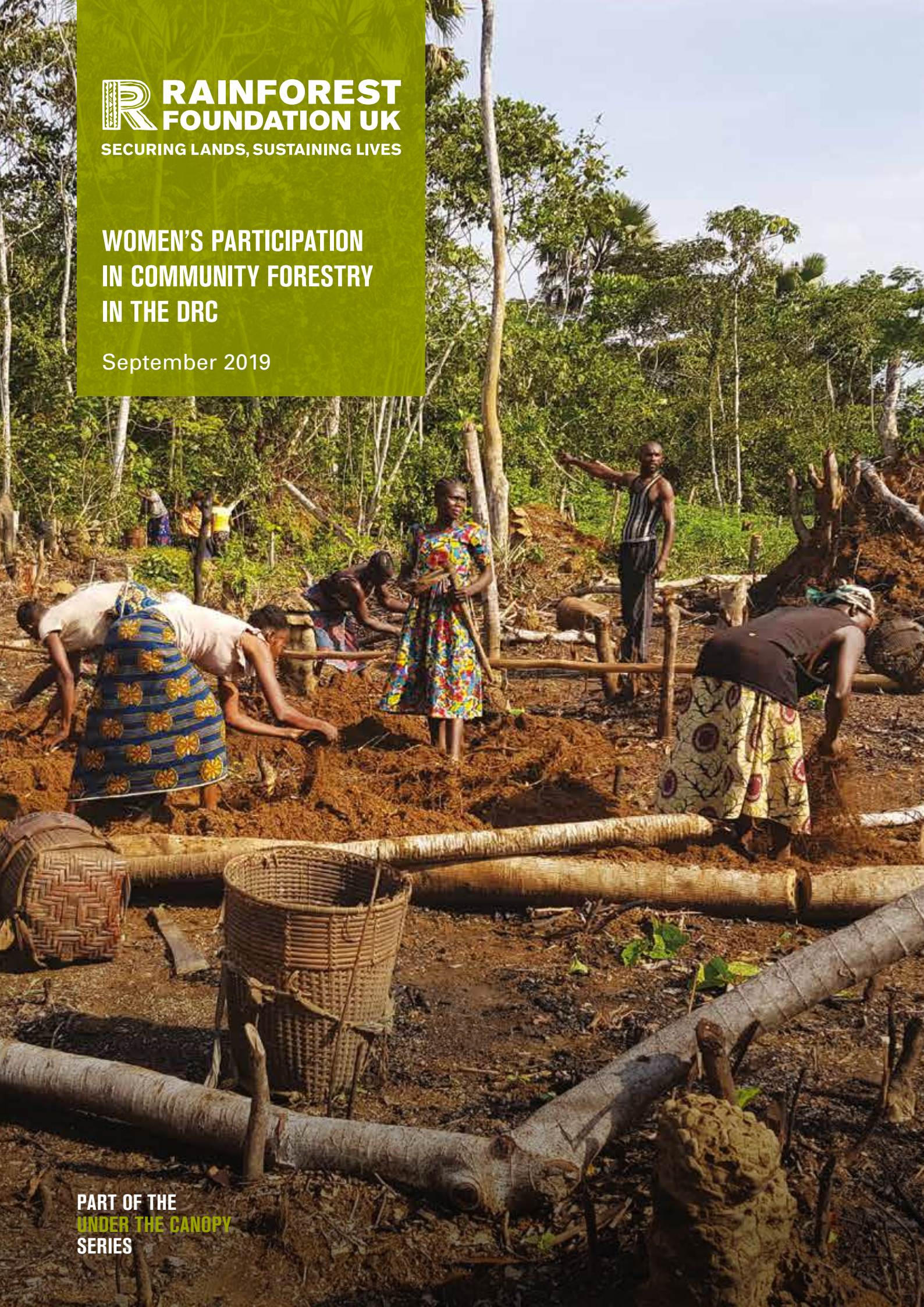


**RAINFOREST  
FOUNDATION UK**

SECURING LANDS, SUSTAINING LIVES

**WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION  
IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY  
IN THE DRC**

September 2019



**PART OF THE  
UNDER THE CANOPY  
SERIES**

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>APEM</b>	<i>Action pour la Promotion et Protection des Peuples et Espèces Menacés</i> (Action for the Promotion and Protection of Endangered Peoples and Species)
<b>CAGDFT</b>	<i>Centre d'Appui à la Gestion Durable des Forêts</i> (Centre for Supporting the Sustainable Management of Tropical Forests)
<b>CFCL</b>	<i>Concession Forestières des Communautés Locales</i> (Local Community Forest Concession)
<b>CFLEDD</b>	<i>Coalition des Femmes Leaders pour la Protection de l'Environnement et le Développement Durable</i> (Coalition of Women Leaders for Environmental Protection and Sustainable Development)
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>DfID</b>	Department for International Development, UK Government
<b>GASHE</b>	<i>Groupe d'Action pour Sauver l'Homme et son Environnement</i> (Action Group for Saving People and Their Environment)
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>IP</b>	Indigenous People
<b>NTFP</b>	Non-Timber Forest Product
<b>PREPPYG</b>	<i>Association Paysanne pour la Réhabilitation et Protection des Pygmées</i> (Rural Association for the Development and Protection of Pygmy Peoples)
<b>REDD+</b>	Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
<b>Réseau CREF</b>	<i>Réseau pour la Conservation et la Réhabilitation des Ecosystèmes Forestiers</i> (Network for the Conservation and Rehabilitation of Forest Ecosystems)
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of Congo
<b>REFACOF</b>	<i>Réseau des Femmes Africaines Pour la Gestion Communautaire des Forêts</i> (African Women's Network for Community Forest Management)
<b>RFUK</b>	Rainforest Foundation UK
<b>WWF</b>	World Wildlife Fund

## INTRODUCTION

With the adoption of the Community Forestry Decree in 2014<sup>1</sup>, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is implementing one of the most innovative community forestry legislations in the Congo Basin. Tens of millions of hectares are now potentially available to develop community-based forest management models that benefit forest communities, who are among the poorest and most vulnerable in the world. This new legislation could allow thousands of communities to manage up to 50,000 hectares of their habitual land in perpetuity, in accordance with their traditional practices and customs. The Ministerial Order (*“Arrêté”*) 025<sup>2</sup> of February 2016 completes the legal framework regulating the management of these local community forest concessions - *Concessions Forestières des Communautés Locales* (CFCL).

Concrete efforts are needed to ensure that this innovative legislation ensures equality and brings opportunities for all members of the communities, including the most vulnerable groups such as women. This study, conducted as part of the Community Forests in DRC project<sup>3</sup>, specifically aims to contribute to this – by providing an overview of the gender issue in the context of community forestry, and by proposing courses of action to ensure truly inclusive forest governance.

Women’s involvement and aspects of gender in community forestry are a growing field for research. Many lessons can be drawn from community forestry initiatives developed around the world. Research suggests that women’s participation in community forest management – within the formal frameworks developed by Cameroon, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Liberia – remains subject to local norms which marginalise women and focus power, decision-making roles and social status on men<sup>4</sup>. Analysis of these case studies shows that the lack of clear references to parity in laws and guidelines is one of the factors affecting discrimination against women in community management structures. Without

legal provisions – such as quotas or obligations on membership or the composition of executive structures – customary norms, which are highly unequal in terms of gender, remain the only references for women’s involvement.

Based on a literature review and a field study conducted in September 2018, this study illustrates the specific forms which these inequalities take in the DRC, particularly in the context of community forestry. The field research was conducted in four communities that recently obtained their CFCLs in Lukolela Territory, Equateur Province. Through group discussions, monitoring of women’s activities in the fields and community meetings, the study identified the main discriminations which women face, as well



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<sup>1</sup> Decree n°14/018 of 2nd August 2014 which establishes the framework and modalities for attributing local community forestry concessions (CFCLs).

<sup>2</sup> Ministerial Order (Arrêté) No. 025/CAB/MINECN-DD/CJ/00/RBM/2016 of 9th February 2016 provides specific requirements for the management and exploitation of CFCLs.

<sup>3</sup> The project, implemented by Rainforest Foundation UK and funded by the Department for International Development (DFID), aims to develop a successful model of community forestry which focuses

on the rights, needs and priorities of local communities, including marginalised groups. The project supports the establishment of ten pilot sites in the provinces of Equateur and Nord-Kivu through a consortium of Congolese civil society partners (APEM, CAGDFT, GASHE, Réseau CREF and PREPPYG).

<sup>4</sup> Tobith & Cuny, 2006 ; Rights and Resources, 2012 ; Banana et al., 2012 ; REFACOF, 2014 ; Ongugo et al. 2017.

as opportunities to support, increase and improve their participation in the management of their local resources. In addition, representatives from the national and provincial government, local civil society, international NGOs and donors were consulted.

It is important to note that this report is based on field research conducted with Bantu communities, and that members of indigenous groups did not participate in the interviews or focus groups. Therefore it should be noted that

the findings of this report are more specifically relevant to Bantu women, and that indigenous women may live in different contexts and face additional challenges. Further study would be required to identify these specific matters. Once the main issues have been identified and analysed, the study provides specific recommendations to improve the participation of women in community forestry initiatives and to raise awareness among stakeholders in the sector at the national level.



# GENDER INEQUALITIES, ACCESS TO LAND AND COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN THE DRC

The process of strengthening gender equality in the DRC is still in its infancy. Congolese women face many forms of discrimination on a daily basis, and the current legal and institutional framework is not adequate to improve their situation. Women's access to education, information and social and economic networks is restricted, as is their involvement in decision-making. Congolese women are not effectively represented and their political participation is very limited; after the 2018 electoral process, only 10.3 per cent of the elected members of the national assembly were women<sup>5</sup>.

The lack of access to reproductive health services and a limited recognition of associated rights significantly affect the lives of women and girls. A high number of women die from pregnancy-related causes, early pregnancies are common among adolescents and contraceptive methods are still not widespread<sup>6</sup>. The officially recognised marriage system in the DRC is monogamy, but polygamy is widely practised by men, with very negative practical consequences for women, as discussed below. Violence against women – in particular domestic and sexual – is a national trend and according to observers and local participants, widespread impunity is the main reason for continuing violence<sup>7</sup>.

This field study confirms that these discriminations are even more prevalent in forest communities, for several reasons:

- **The unequal division of labour between men and women**, and the dual role of women as both producers and having main responsibility for the domestic household. This leads to heavy workloads and lack of time<sup>8</sup>.
- **The lack of recognition of the role women play in forest resource management.** In DRC, women play a predominant role in agriculture as food producers for their family, and their involvement in production activities is almost equal to that of men<sup>9</sup>. However, this does not translate into effective involvement in decision-making at the household and community levels.

- **The profoundly unequal norms and customs** surrounding resource governance and particularly access to land. Women depend on men for access to land ownership and rights, and the lack of legislation guaranteeing their property and inheritance rights exacerbates this inequality.

These barriers and their implications for the representation of women and marginalised groups in community forestry initiatives are explored in more detail below.

## ACCESS TO LAND

In this deeply unequal context, women's very limited land rights are a crucial issue for the implementation of community forestry.

The land tenure system in Congolese forests is the result of a legal pluralism where land is part of the private domain of the State<sup>10</sup>, which holds ownership<sup>11</sup>. However, usage rights are conferred on local communities in accordance with local customs and traditions, as long as they are not contrary to laws and public order<sup>12</sup>. This makes customary land rights precarious. The usage rights of local communities, governed by local customs, do not have legal recognition and do not protect communities from the loss of those lands and resources. This is because the Congolese state ownership system gives the State full discretion to make any portion of its land available to investors<sup>13</sup>.

The status of women in land tenure is especially precarious. On the one hand, formal land titles giving access to individual ownership of the land are uncommon. Procedures are complex and costly, and the majority of families have only "receipts" issued to heads of households – who are stipulated as having to be male<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, in the case of most customary land systems, access to land is mainly determined by membership of a clan or lineage. These are generally defined by men, since they are the ones who inherit and succeed their elders as

<sup>5</sup> See: <https://actualite.cd/2019/04/01/rdc-50-femmes-103-siegent-lassemblee-nationale> and UCOFEM 2017.

<sup>6</sup> UNDP, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Davis, L., Fabbri, P., 2014.

<sup>8</sup> Mbambi and Faray-Kele, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> JICA, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Law n° 73-021 of 20th July 1973 relating to property, land regime, estates and security.

<sup>11</sup> Long, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Law n°011/2002 of 29th August 2002 relating to the Forest Code, Article 36.

<sup>13</sup> Maindo, 2016.

<sup>14</sup> WWF International, 2018.

village, clan or family leaders. Land-use rights for agriculture are established through land clearing, which in the current division of labour is an almost exclusively male task. This automatically gives men an advantage in resource management – not only over women but also over other groups such as forest populations of hunter-gatherers, who do not cultivate the land<sup>15</sup>.

The inter-generational transfer of land occurs by patrilineal inheritance (from father to son or, in matrilineal clans, by maternal uncles). Women's access to land is therefore mediated through men<sup>16</sup>. Virilocal residence (in which the woman moves to live with the husband's family) means that married women leave their own clans and work the land belonging to their husband, without obtaining the customary rights of the husband's clan on their own account. Single women remain under the guardianship of their parents or clan chief, and widowed women are not entitled to an inheritance. In some parts of the DRC, women may have a greater role in land management and be part of chiefdoms which allow them to exercise some customary rights, but their numbers are limited<sup>17</sup>.

## CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY FORESTRY

An active and growing civil society has developed and organised to support gender equality in response to this situation, even as the seriousness and prevalence of violence against women has focused action on this topic<sup>18</sup>. The presence of organisations which combine expertise in environmental and natural resource management with a commitment to women's rights is an important asset for promoting the inclusion of women in forest management. In addition, a number of relatively recent legal developments (see Figure 1) offer new opportunities for change.

## FIGURE 1: GENDER EQUALITY IN THE CONGOLESE LEGISLATION

The **2006 Constitution** establishes the principle of equality between men and women and condemns discrimination against women in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural fields.

In 2015, the **Parity Law** enshrined the principle of gender parity in the political, administrative, economic and social domains.

A new **Family Code** approved in 2016 rectifies, at least partially, a series of provisions of the old Code that are highly discriminatory in terms of women's rights<sup>19</sup>.

The initiation of community forestry in the DRC provides additional opportunities for the empowerment of women and their genuine involvement in resource management, but the risks are also very real.

The expansion of extractive activities such as mining and industrial logging in the DRC is a growing threat. It has prompted projects aimed not only at conserving the region's unique natural resources, but also at protecting the communities on which their survival and development depend<sup>20</sup>. The combined efforts of Congolese civil society and international organisations, supported by the government, led to the approval in 2014 of the legislative decree on *Concessions Forestières des Communautés Locales* (CFCLs - local community forest concessions). This was then operationalised in 2016 by Ministerial Order 025, which set out the requirements and guidelines for the management of these local community forest concessions<sup>21</sup>. Under the new provisions, local communities can secure their forest resources in perpetuity for an area of up to 50,000 hectares, and manage them according to their traditional customs and practices.

<sup>15</sup> Kone, 2017.

<sup>16</sup> FAO, Base des données Genre et Droit à la terre.

<sup>17</sup> Long, 2011; interview with representatives of REFACOF.

<sup>18</sup> Davis, L., Fabbri, P., 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Davis & Fabbri, 2014; JICA, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> RFUK, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> RFUK, 2018.



## FIGURE 2: THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN THE DRC

**Decree 14/018** of 2 August 2014 establishing the terms for the Concessions Forestières des Communautés Locales (CFCL)

**Ministerial Order (Arrêté) 025** of 2016 sets out the terms and conditions for the management and operation of CFCLs. Communities can choose between “internal” or “external” management (i.e. with or without the involvement of external partner organisations). The governance structure of the community depends on which of these management methods are chosen. In the case of communities supported by the RFUK Community Forests project, the internal method was preferred, providing for the establishment of a **Local Management Committee (Comité Local de Gestion)**, a **Local Monitoring and Evaluation Committee (Comité Local de Suivi et Evaluation)**, and a **Council of Elders (Conseil des Sages)**. A **Simple Management Plan (SMP)** sets out the terms and conditions for exercising the community’s forest rights.

**The National Strategy for Community Forestry in the DRC**, officially adopted in 2018, endorses a progressive implementation of community forestry – based on community rights and traditional management practices – during a 5-year pilot phase (2018-2023).

The establishment of structures and a management plan for these CFCLs represents a significant opportunity to ensure the active participation of women and other marginalised groups in the governance of forest resources.

Gender and equality principles have also been included in the National Strategy for Community Forestry. Gender is referred to as a “cross-cutting component” and “its strategic axes must also incorporate the perspectives of gender, youth and vulnerable groups in order to be inclusive”<sup>22</sup>. In addition, the National Strategy refers to women, who “are important users of the forest ecosystem, and must be taken into account when setting

up governance structures, making decisions and allocating concessions”. It also warns specifically against a non-inclusive interpretation of customary practices: “the DRC model based on customary and cultural entities (families, clans and lineages) must not discriminate against women”<sup>23</sup>.

There have been other notable developments, such as the creation in 2018 of a Gender and Environment Group within the Ministry of the Environment<sup>24</sup>, which brings together technical partners and civil society representatives with the aim of integrating gender into the Ministry’s strategies and policies. This working group organised several workshops and began developing a sectoral strategy, before activities were halted due to lack of funding. At provincial level, advocacy by one of the main actors in the sector, the *Coalition des Femmes Leaders pour la Protection de l’Environnement et le Développement Durable* (CFLEDD), led to the adoption of an edict in Equateur Province which formally enshrines women’s rights to land and forests<sup>25</sup>. In addition, Congolese civil society



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<sup>22</sup> MEDD, RDC, 2018 p63.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. page 63.

<sup>24</sup> Arrêté ministériel n°059 CAB/MIN/EDD/AAN/TNT/02/2018 du 31 juillet 2018 portant création, organisation et fonctionnement du Groupe

Genre et Environnement .

<sup>25</sup> Edit 02/2018 portant reconnaissance des droits de possession et de jouissance des femmes aux patrimoines forestiers et fonciers.



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organisations (CSOs) have carried out actions and projects with local communities and women to support and promote their active participation.

However, significant gaps remain in the legislative framework for community forestry, and particularly in the Ministerial Order 025. For instance, it does not mention gender parity in the definition of management bodies, nor a minimum threshold or quota for women participants. When describing the Simple Management Plan, it refers to the exercising of individual user rights by community members, which – given the uncertainty surrounding women’s land rights – could further marginalise them. The Ministerial Order 025 includes a chapter on the Community Development Fund, whose operating, distribution and management methods are subject to the decisions of the whole community through the Community Assembly (*Assemblée*

*Communautaire*). The text does not mention any obligation to use these funds either for development projects in general, or for projects which could specifically benefit women. The pilot phase of the National Strategy on Community Forestry provides an opportunity to learn from experiences in the field, to eventually revise the regulatory framework – including procedures and tools developed as a result. It is essential to understand where those can be improved, and how they must adapt to the realities of daily life for women in local communities.

The results of the fieldwork, presented below, help to frame these issues and opportunities according to the daily reality of forest communities in the DRC, and to draw concrete lessons for overcoming the challenges.

# FIELD STUDY: THE PLACE OF WOMEN IN FOUR COMMUNITIES IN EQUATEUR

## RESEARCH SITES

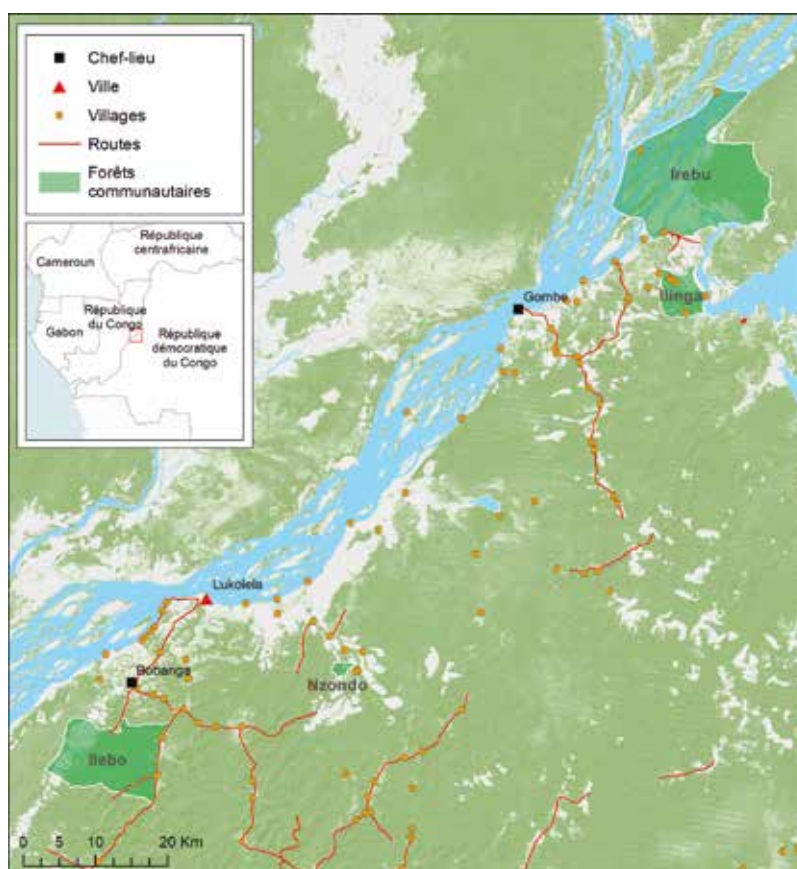
The research took place in the Lukolela Territory of Equateur Province, located in western DRC, bordering the Congo River. The population density (15 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>) is among the lowest in the country, and the province's social and economic indicators show a high rate of poverty and inadequate services and infrastructure<sup>26</sup>.

The specific communities selected for the study were Ilinga and Irebu in Lusankani Sector, and Ilebo and Nzondo in Mpama Sector. The population is ethnically Bantu and survives mainly from subsistence agriculture, and more marginally from hunting, fishing and gathering. As mentioned above, the study did not specifically target indigenous peoples' (IP) communities and the particular situation of indigenous women may vary from that

described below. The communities of Ilinga, Ilebo and Nzondo all obtained their CFCL titles in September 2018, a few weeks before the field mission for this study. Irebu received its title in January 2019.

According to the communities consulted, the natural resources available to them are constantly decreasing. This is partly due to their exclusion from parts of their customary lands when that land is classified as nature reserves in which human activity is prohibited (specifically the Tumba Lediima Reserve), or allocated to logging companies. These reduced traditional living spaces, as well as other factors, have led to increased pressure on resources within CFCLs. Agricultural expansion is reflected in the increase in cultivated areas and the establishment of camps in the forest to access new land – driven by demographic pressure and the increasing monetisation of village economies.

**FIGURE 3: MAP OF RESEARCH SITES**



Sources:  
CFCL database,  
MappingForRights

<sup>26</sup> Ministère du Plan 2017.

The studied communities are largely ethnically homogeneous, but social stratification is evident: some families have relatively significant resources, whilst others are struggling to survive. Access to formal employment is almost non-existent and some of the younger generations

are migrating increasingly further away from the villages to seek either economic opportunities or new available land. Locally, leadership is rooted in the traditional system, under which clans are the main owners and managers of land.

**FIGURE 4: SOCIO-ECONOMIC DATA OF RESEARCH SITES**

Site	Surface (ha)	Population	Main economic and subsistence activities	Accessibility
Ilebo	12,973	3,816	Commercial (cocoa) and subsistence (cassava) agriculture, small businesses	Road allowing access to the market near Lukolela Cité and facilitating the circulation of money
Ilinga	3,393	606	Agriculture, fishing, hunting, NTFP gathering	15km from Irebu (only accessible by motorbike)
Irebu	29,815	9,828	Fishing, commercial agriculture	Direct access to Kinshasa and Mbandaka via the Congo River, leading to commercial dynamism
Nzondo	432	215	Logging, fishing, hunting, NTFP collection	Very isolated site, no road network and 4 hours by boat from Lukolela Cité



*c: Margherita Maffii*

## ACTIVITIES AND DIVISION OF LABOUR

The livelihoods of the target communities are based on agricultural production and, to a lesser extent, on forestry activities such as fishing, hunting and gathering.

### Agricultural production

The agrarian system is based on the practices of slash and burn agriculture or ploughing. Plots of land are successively cleared, burned and cultivated for one or several seasons, before being left fallow. New plots are also being cultivated in the developing secondary forest, as a result of agricultural activity in the vicinity of villages.

The main crop, essential for self-subsistence and partly for trade, is cassava. Other crops are grown alongside this (sweet potatoes, taros, maize, etc.). Fruit trees, bananas and plantains, papaya, coconut and palm trees are interspersed in the fields or planted along the margins.

Men and women are both active in agricultural production, but in very different ways. With crop types, men monopolise cash crops – such as cocoa, maize and bananas – even if women are involved in maintaining these plantations. Income from the sale of these products is also reserved for men only. Women are therefore confined to the production of subsistence crops like cassava which, although very important, do not generate income or autonomy.

*“Only men grow cocoa. The reason given is that cultivation is difficult, but in reality, women cannot own and do not have access to this important cash crop. Once planted, harvesting is easy, trees are low down, maintenance does not require any special strength or tools. Women are sometimes called upon to help men maintain the plantations, and do weeding.”*

*(From a focus group of women from Ilebo).*

The second major difference relates to the division of tasks. While men are responsible for soil preparation (felling, clearing, brush-burning) – activities which require more strength but are time-limited – women are in charge of seed selection and preservation, sowing and weeding. These chores are less intense, but more frequent (almost daily). Brush-burning, before it can be completed, requires even more work from

women, who have to eliminate the remaining roots. The division of agricultural labour leads to gender-specific skills and knowledge. Men’s relate to plot selection, cutting trees and soil preparation, whilst women are responsible for the selection and improvement of seeds.



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### Ilebo women weeding

According to women, the division of labour is unfair. They often help men to clear land, but are required to do weeding and the rest of the tasks themselves. While this inequality is recognised by some men, others seem convinced that male work is the only one that matters.

The system is undergoing significant changes, as agricultural production intensifies in all the villages. According to the communities, this is due to demographic pressure and the growing need for money, which favours the cultivation of cash crops. The traditional system based on plot rotation is increasingly evolving into a permanent crop system. There is also a mounting problem of lack of space, which means the same plot must be cultivated several years in a row. This can lead to lower yields, especially for cassava. According to women, who go to the fields and forests every day and have more opportunities to observe environmental transformations, climate change is also an increasing challenge to crop production. Irregular seasons and unpredictable rainfall patterns create significant losses – such as when entire cassava fields dry out and have to be replanted.

These changes have implications for the division of labour. Shorter fallow cycles eliminate the need for tree felling, while repeated cropping cycles on the same field intensify weeding. As a result, male work is decreasing while female work is becoming more burdensome.

Land availability is perceived by all communities as a rising problem. To overcome these constraints, new fields are cleared further away from the village, and entire groups of families sometimes move to new forest camps. The distance from the fields (often more than 5km) is a problem for women who have to walk back and forth during the day, laden with produce or firewood.

Another ongoing change is that the size and number of family plots is no longer limited by the availability of family labour. The use of paid extra-familial labour for clearing, felling and harvesting is now a possible and frequent option in villages. Indigenous People (IPs) are often hired as an alternative to regular workers, and their rights are regularly violated without consequences. In some villages, the need for increased labour has led to more cases of polygamy, where one of the aims is to take advantage of more female work.

The use of paid labour reflects a growing social stratification in villages, where selected families can afford to hire workers, expand their fields and avoid strenuous work themselves. This leads to differences between those in the dominant clans and those struggling to find sufficient resources - a problem that affects widowed and destitute women and young households in particular.

The imbalance in the division of agricultural labour between men and women is also reinforced by cultural norms; for example, older men have the right to retire (and some adult men even enjoy early retirement). This increases the burden for women, who continue to work even in their old age.

### **Fishing, hunting and gathering**

The forestry activities of women and men differ substantially.

Hunting is an exclusively male activity, to which young men and boys in particular are dedicated. However, they face a considerable reduction in game, which is sometimes limited to small

rodents, such as field rats, squirrels, and more rarely, monkeys.

Both men and women fish. Often, women can only fish by scooping – a practice of catching fish with baskets – which takes place during the dry season in ponds and small streams, or between dams. However, the importance of fishing activities for women should not be underestimated. In some villages women and men can fish in the same areas and with the same tools, while in others the women go on fishing trips in the forest for several days. In general, women who fish are involved in the processing and trade of what they catch (fresh or smoked), which gives them the opportunity to take part in commercial activities more independently than in other areas – and sometimes to earn significant income.

However, the increased pressure on fishing resources has obvious impacts on available stocks. Some species have become very rare, especially the more profitable large fish. Small fish are not only sold for less but also require more time for processing, which is mainly done by women. The increasing scarcity of fish also poses problems for the nutrition of forest communities (whose main source of protein is derived from fishing) and increases women's work in finding food for the family.

The gathering of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) is a predominantly female activity. Women do this either in the secondary forest near cultivated plots, or on expeditions further into the forest in search of specific products. However, this activity seems to have lost importance as cassava production has grown, since cassava provides very popular edible leaves that are easy to collect in large quantities. Men tend to focus on the most profitable products, but less frequently. They have more freedom to organise longer and more distant expeditions to gather produce.

*“Women have excellent knowledge of forest produce, edible products and medicinal plants; while men have excellent knowledge of construction materials for traps, baskets and houses.”  
(From a focus group of men from Nzondo).*



*Women fishing near Irebu*

Women's knowledge in this area is acknowledged by communities, and mothers are responsible for passing it on to new generations. Bantu women, however, recognise that some of this knowledge also comes from their exchanges with indigenous women, who have an extensive understanding of forest products – particularly their medical benefits.

### **Household work**

Domestic chores are entirely the responsibility of women. They are strenuous activities, such as cutting and transporting firewood from the fields to the house, preparing food and supplying water (which may require several trips from the river carrying 20-litre buckets). This is in addition to caring for several children and elders, doing laundry and cleaning, looking after animals, and performing a multitude of other daily tasks.

The main food, cassava, is made into bread (*chikwangué*). The leaves are kneaded and cooked (*pondu*). The production of *chikwangué* is an exclusively female activity, requiring several stages of preparation:

- Soaking cassava in ponds for a few days to activate fermentation
- Breaking up and cleaning the fibres
- Kneading to prepare the bread, which is then wrapped in wild banana leaves and cooked

After this laborious process, *chikwangué* can be stored for several days and is an important resource for both subsistence and sale.

In the villages, there is no water supply system or means of transportation to bring firewood back from the fields. Energy sources are only available for a few privileged households (batteries or solar panels), and there are no processing machines such as mills.

The unequal distribution of work between men and women, both in the fields and at home, contributes to women's lack of time and limits their social participation. This is compounded by the absence of essential public services (schools, health centres, etc.), creating a further burden on women. The situation has repercussions for the next generations, since girls are preferentially called upon to help their mothers. In addition,

there are stereotypes and prejudices about women's activities, knowledge and skills, which are often trivialised or ignored. Although women are responsible for agricultural production (daily harvesting, supplying water and firewood) and processing food, they are not involved in decisions regarding the management of these resources. Even if they complain strongly about these inequalities, they do not seem to be able to resolve them. There is limited space for negotiation within the household, and they dare not push men to take on more responsibilities.

## PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

### The private sphere

In spite of women's substantial involvement in the household economy, their decision-making power with regard to income management is extremely limited. Households where decisions are made jointly by spouses are the exception rather than the rule, and women deplore the misguided use of family income by some husbands.

*"Sometimes the woman participates, but usually it's the man who decides in the household; he manages the money and*

*decides on its use. Sometimes the women hide part of the income to buy salt or clothes for the children. The men tend to spend money on themselves, whilst women spend on the family!"*

*(From a focus group of young women from Ilinga)*

One of the major consequences of women's lack of decision-making power is the impact on family planning. Husbands tend to consider that spacing pregnancies is not a concern for them, and women are unable to negotiate their rights with regard to sexuality. A woman's life is affected by every pregnancy, given the current state of the available health service. Women from the most remote villages have to travel to access maternity services. Under-age pregnancies are common and a significant reason for dropping out of school.

In polygamous marriages, household management and decision-making is entirely the responsibility of the husband, but other mechanisms contribute to weakening women's power. Competition can arise between wives, which hinders cooperation and blocks collective action. The human and emotional aspects of polygamous marriage are particularly difficult to bear.



c: Margherita Maffii

*Women in the forest at Nzondo*



*“It is a very difficult, complicated and inharmonious marriage. The children are neglected, either because the husband is unable to take care of them, or because he always favours the children of the favourite wife and neglects the others. And in this marriage, there’s always a favourite wife.”*  
(From a focus group of women from Ilebo)

Widows are in a fragile situation, subject to the decisions of the husband’s family and clan. This can lead to the loss of land, including the fields which the couple owned and worked throughout their marriage. The situation is further complicated in polygamous marriages, and can lead to the irreversible socio-economic marginalisation of the surviving women and children.

### The public sphere

There do not appear to be any community consultation and discussion activities in which women systematically participate. With regards to CFCL attribution, the involvement of women has been very varied, with significant differences between communities. One of the reasons for this seems to be related to female leadership: in some villages, the process has benefited from the intervention of a “woman leader” with a strong capacity to raise awareness. This has led to the education of many women (including young women) on the importance of community-based resource management, and the need to prepare for the challenges that management in partnership with men can create. In other cases, however, the “woman leader” has not succeeded in raising awareness of women more widely, and a majority of women have not understood the issues involved in acquiring the community forest concession title – or are even unaware that the process is ongoing.

*“We participated in the meetings and discussions that took place and we understood the issue of community forestry. We feel able to talk and participate in discussions, even if there are men.”*  
(From a focus group of young women from Ilinga)

There are women’s associations in the villages – sometimes linked to churches or established by previous projects – but they do not seem very active. On the other hand, women are used to working together when farming, fishing and on



forest expeditions. Mutual co-operation allows them to carry out heavy tasks such as weeding and sowing cassava cuttings. Formalising these collective and associative activities (jointly cultivated fields, women fishing associations etc.) is a way of overcoming the obstacles faced by women, empowering and enabling them to take part in decision-making. Study participants indicated that they would like to benefit from capacity building to engage in associations, and to be actively involved in community resource management.

In all communities, women identified a series of barriers and obstacles that limit their participation. These include:

- A chronic lack of time, which leaves very few opportunities to participate in community activities
- A lack of confidence and skills to play an active role in meetings and discussions
- Shame and fear of making mistakes and crossing the boundaries of the traditional female role, in which they are subject to men’s decisions

## CONCLUSION

The results of the fieldwork show a context of significant inequality. Women face a series of cultural norms and barriers which deprive them of their rights and negatively impact their private, economic and social lives. These findings are consistent with the results of other surveys conducted in the DRC<sup>27</sup>. Women's decision-making power is very limited and their social status is low, despite their role as the main providers of livelihoods and household care. To justify this state of affairs, men and women refer to norms and customs, which recognise the role of men as heads of households, resource managers and key players in social life.

Ongoing changes, such as land and resource scarcity, crop intensification and the introduction of cash crops, are increasing gender, social and economic inequalities. In this context, the customary system appears unable to reduce social tensions and correct inequalities, as highlighted by other research conducted in the DRC<sup>28</sup>. Female leadership, limited in terms of numbers and to the privileged classes, does not yet seem to be able to trigger a wider participation of women, or to counter their marginalisation.

Finally, these results also confirm wider experiences, which show that without specific measures to support women's involvement at the legislative, political and structuring level of community action, participation in community management remains marginal<sup>29</sup>.

Changes are however possible, and conducting this study has enabled some positive developments. Some women felt empowered to actively participate in providing feedback for this research during community meetings, even though the topics discussed were extremely sensitive. Some men have also become aware of the extent of the inequalities, and have gradually changed their point of view during organised discussions – for example, on women's ability to manage family resources. These shifts show that women's empowerment is possible with each external intervention. Such interventions must be carefully planned to bring about change.

As the community forestry process develops and the crucial stage of management and exploitation is on the horizon, it is crucial to recognise this lack of women's involvement and identify effective strategies to address it. Without serious consideration of the importance of the gender dimension, active female participation in the management of forest resources will not be ensured. The risk is that a substantial proportion of forest users, whose needs and knowledge are essential for effective and sustainable resource management, will continue to be ignored.



<sup>27</sup> Stiem & Krause, 2016; Samndong & Kjosavik, 2017.

<sup>28</sup> Gauthier, 2018; WfWInternational, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Agarwal, 2015; Elias et al., 2017.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY FORESTRY

The recommendations made by this study are based on three key principles to overcome gender inequalities:

1. To improve (quantitatively and qualitatively) women's involvement in public life
2. To support collective action and networking, to build capacity and foster the emergence of female leadership
3. To encourage changes in attitude and the overcoming of discriminatory stereotypes, within communities and on a broader scale.

Although these principles are applicable to addressing gender inequality in general, the following recommendations are specific to the implementation of community forestry initiatives. They are mainly aimed at civil society organisations that assist communities in obtaining their CFCLs, international funding agencies which support the process at various levels, as well as the Congolese national, provincial and local administrations.

## FIGURE 5: THEORETICAL PRINCIPLES TO SUPPORT THE INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN

**Critical mass theory**, which has strongly influenced initiatives aimed at women's political involvement, has been analysed in the context of community forestry in India and Nepal<sup>30</sup>. The interests of women, and in particular the poorest women, are given greater consideration when their number reaches a minimum threshold, which is around 30 per cent. Women are then in a better position to overcome obstacles and build solidarity, and the increased presence of women encourages others to participate more.

A larger presence also enables women to assume different roles and move up the hierarchy within the group. However, the idea of a critical mass is only an instrument and not a goal in itself: the target for parity remains that of 50 per cent.

**Qualitative analysis of female participation.** The inclusion of women in local management structures does not guarantee effective participation in decision-making. Some research<sup>31</sup> therefore differentiates between several types of involvement:

- Nominal participation (group membership)
- Passive participation (being informed of decisions after the event – or attending meetings and listening to the decision-making process, without speaking or being questioned)
- Consultative participation (advice is sought on specific issues without any guarantee of being able to influence decisions)
- Active or interactive participation (expressing opinions, whether invited or not, or taking initiatives of all kinds; influencing group decisions)

Where there are local structures where women actively participate, manage to interact and influence decisions and advance their agendas, they are often the result of external support from specific projects<sup>32</sup>.

## DESIGN GENDER-SENSITIVE COMMUNITY FORESTRY PROJECTS

The gender dimension should not be an afterthought within a project whose objective is community forestry, because of the risk of falling into the pitfalls outlined above. On the contrary, it must be taken into account from the design stage of the project, and should be included in particular:

- In the Monitoring and Evaluation for Learning (MEL):
  - **Develop indicators** to measure in a relevant way:
    - i) the quantitative and qualitative involvement of women in all project activities and community activities
    - ii) the direct benefits of the project for women (including changes in their living conditions)

<sup>30</sup> Agarwal, 2010; Agarwal, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Agarwal, 2001.

<sup>32</sup> Agarwal, 2001b.

- **Ensure regular monitoring of the indicators** and measure their evolution using baseline data, so that the project's approach and methodology can be adapted if necessary.
- In the methodology, budget and planning:
  - **Develop field tools adapted** to gender mainstreaming (revision of socio-economic analysis methodologies, inclusion of specific issues for women, etc.).
  - **Conduct field activities separately with women**, such as focus groups or mapping.
  - **Document women's knowledge and practices of forestry**, as well as their aspirations – particularly in socio-economic surveys, participatory mapping and the development of simple management plans (SMPs) – and ensure their inclusion in all relevant community documents.
  - **Ensure the involvement of women in field activities** by planning the date, time and duration of activities around their schedules.
  - **Take into account the budgetary and time implications** related to the above points (additional and longer activities).
- In expertise:
  - **Recruit experts, consultants and partners** with the necessary experience and know-how to navigate a difficult subject and facilitate cultural, social and equitable economic changes within communities.
  - **Ensure the diversity of teams in contact with communities** (recruitment of female facilitators) and **build the capacities of all teams** to use participatory tools and methodologies.
  - **Ensure the sharing of experiences between local, national and international partners**, so that field expertise informs national and international advocacy actions, and vice versa.
- **Encourage the active involvement of women in community meetings and discussion groups, but also in CFCL management bodies** (management, monitoring and evaluation committees, etc.), in order to achieve a critical mass from which women's interests have a greater chance of being taken into account.
- **Ensure that the redistribution of community income (through the local development fund) directly benefits women** by reducing their workload and promoting their empowerment. This may include supporting:
  - new roads or tracks (providing easy access to markets and facilitating the transportation of firewood)
  - collective childcare
  - field machinery and the processing of food and commercial products
  - water supply networks
  - health and family planning services
 At the same time, build women's capacities to manage these funds, such as by participating in management and monitoring and evaluation committees.
- **Identify the profit-making productive activities through which women could achieve economic and social autonomy.** Women's producer organisations, savings and credit funds, micro and small enterprises and cooperatives all facilitate women's access to information, networks and markets, increase their bargaining power, encourage and strengthen their capacities to take on leadership and responsibility roles, raise their social status and help them circumvent discriminatory practices.

## ENCOURAGE LOCAL ACTION FOR FAIRER COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

- **Draw up an inventory of existing collective practices** (mutual aid, village associations, tontines, groups linked to churches). It is from these activities that representation within management structures can be drawn, as women who participate in such collective initiatives build up experiences, capacities and legitimacy with others.



- **Encourage networking between women from different communities** to share the tools and solutions developed (for example, participation in agricultural fairs, seed sharing). Networking provides opportunities for exchange and experience, and increases the representational strength and legitimacy of those involved. Also necessary is support from external structures, organisations and networks capable of inspiring approaches and solutions which are accessible to local women. This allows the women to: make their voices heard, be informed, participate in initiatives that affect them, learn from existing models, and form alliances.
- **Continuously raise awareness among different groups of men** (elders, heads of household, young people) about gender relations, decision-making and social roles. Make available and discuss the main legislative and policy texts referring to equality, presenting the benefits of fairer community management. The study highlighted that in communities men do not reject critical gender perspectives and are open to discussion.
- **Identify male equality “champions”** who can act as role models through their involvement in productive and household tasks and raise awareness among other men.
- **Encourage the formation of mixed working, discussion and leisure groups.** Organise discussions on village planning and mixed sporting, social or economic activities (collective fishing expeditions, trips to markets, etc.). Create discussion spaces for husband-wife couples around central themes such as household decision-making, division of labour, family planning, etc.
- **Share knowledge and pool the expertise** of actors in the gender and forest management sector. In particular, involve organisations which already work for women’s rights and highlight their experiences and approaches (facilitation methods and data collection, income-generating initiatives for women, legal, social and anthropological analyses, rights promotion strategies, etc.).

## STRENGTHEN THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ADMINISTRATION

- **Provide financial and technical support to the work of the Gender and Environment Group** of the Ministry of Environment to finalise the sectoral strategy initiated in 2018. Identify synergies with other ongoing processes, such as land reform at the national level, in order to harmonise approaches in favour of women.
- As part of the Multi-Stakeholder Roundtable Process on Community Forestry, **set up a joint gender working group** responsible for monitoring gender issues in community forestry through regular meetings and by making recommendations, including for improving the legal framework.
- **Raise awareness and strengthen the capacities of national and provincial administrations** through regular training on the importance of gender mainstreaming. Raise their awareness of a series of “gender criteria” to be taken into account before approving a Simple Management Plan.
- **Review the legal framework for community forestry as well as related legislation** (land-use planning, land laws, nature conservation law) to ensure that these texts take gender issues into consideration (for example: specific references to gender, representation, good governance, inclusion of quotas).

## TAKE ADVANTAGE OF AND STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITIES OF CONGOLESE CIVIL SOCIETY

- **Identify and take note of Congolese civil society actors who promote women’s rights**, and make them aware of the importance of this issue in forest areas – in relation to the implementation of community forestry in particular.
- **Strengthen the capacity of Congolese civil society organisations** in terms of gender, to ensure greater inclusivity of their organisations and the projects they implement.

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2-4 The Atelier, Old Dairy Court,  
17 Crouch Hill, London N4 4AP  
+44 (0)20 7485 0193  
info@rainforestuk.org

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