

When all voices are heard, communities work together

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As the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) recovers from its war-torn past, IUCN is strengthening local voices to conserve the nation's forests, which not only suffered during wartime but are still threatened in a time of peace.

With little awareness or implementation of the new forest code introduced in 2002, local people who depend heavily on forests were unaware of their rights, had no means of expressing those rights even if known, and so had no interest in creating opportunities to use their forest resources sustainably and improve their livelihoods. As a result their forests were continuing to disappear.

IUCN's European-Union-funded project *Strengthening Voices For Better Choices* (SVBC) works in the Bikoro region of DRC to address these problems. Since 2006 the project has helped break down ancient cultural and community divides by supporting the creation of a regional committee bringing together representatives of local government, village members and their chiefs, and



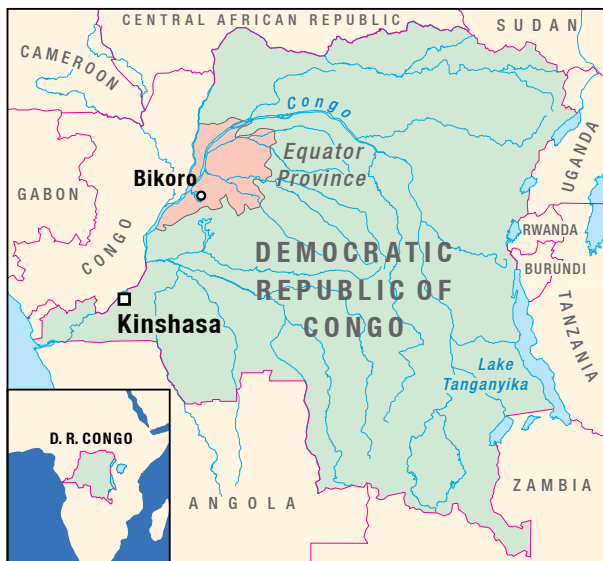
Meeting place in Bokongo village, Bikoro. Photo © IUCN

the private sector, to learn, understand, share and discuss information about forest governance issues.

And the project has gone even further. In 2006–07, IUCN supported the creation of village committees in 15 villages across the region. Through these committees, villagers who previously did not talk to each other, such as the pygmies and the Bantu people, have begun working together to improve their forests and communities. Villagers also have been able to meet with local government officials and logging companies to learn about their rights. Once aware of these, villagers have voiced their opinions on securing socially responsible contracts with the logging companies, and on using their proceeds for communal benefit.

IUCN's priority through SVBC is to build awareness and understanding to ensure that local people can raise their voices and be heard. Enge, a pygmy from Mabonzi village, knows only too well what it is like not to be heard: *"I live in the margins of a life dictated by the Bantu people. I did not have equality in my village. I was not allowed to speak during public gatherings or contradict the chief of my village. Now, thanks to our village committee, we have free and equal discussions with other groups, including women, other tribes and the logging companies, on all issues concerning [our] needs as well as the needs of our forests."*

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0 200 400 Kilometres

Map of DRC showing the location of Bikoro. Map © IUCN