



Casting a wide net to control illegal logging in the Democratic Republic of Congo

OGF has helped to enhance the quality of independent forest monitoring and sparked the creation of RENOI-RDC, a network that relies on the synergy of different methods to tackle illegal logging.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) of the 2010s, the effects of two wars in which millions of people perished are not distant enough. Government efforts focus on a fragile reconstruction, and the timber sector is largely left to its own devices.

In this unsettled context, the Observatoire de la Gouvernance Forestière (OGF) began Independent Monitoring (IM) of the legality of forestry operations, becoming the only civil society organisation officially mandated to work alongside the government's forest authorities in 2013.



"Given the existing governance issues, it's impossible to eradicate forest crime easily," says Essylo Lubala, legal officer and OGF coordinator.

Even if the government had the will to focus on illegal logging – not a given – when it came to funding forest monitoring missions, it had other fish to fry. Assisted by financial partners, notably the Citizen Voices for Change (CV4C) project financed by the European Union and the Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), OGF supported joint IM missions with the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, monitoring operations on the ground and reinforcing the capacity of provincial administrations.

Enhanced quality of monitoring activities: The CV4C project has given OGF the opportunity to continue IM, and to strengthen IM activities through training sessions with the CCV (Control and Verification Unit of the environment ministry), courts and tribunals, the national police, the private sector and civil society; and through the multi-stakeholder development of provincial strategies to combat illegal logging and associated trade.

Currently, joint monitoring of legality unfolds in a fairly positive manner. "We bring to light the discrepancies between the law and what is happening on the ground."

After each joint mission, two reports are drawn up: the official report, and the report by the mandated IM, OGF. The latter must be validated by an ad hoc peer review committee that brings together the Congolese forestry authorities, technical partners, the private timber sector and civil society. There, the OGF team defends its findings, a formal procedure that tests the robustness of the data put forward – and encourages a pinch of restraint in how OGF presents the data.

Lubala values the stakeholder input, "Things are contested less. We've observed the same things, but we have a different eye from the inspectors, a different relationship with the law. We can provide solutions to remedy illegal situations. Once validated, the report is published on the administration's website and on that of the IM. Anyone can then use it as they wish."

An offshoot of these improvements is that IM has gained in legitimacy. For instance, more and more forest agents draw up, on the spot, the infringement reports that will later be forwarded to the Public Prosecutor's Office; this was not the case before.

Great big territory, very small IM team: As diligent and competent as they are, when mandated IM activities are held up against the vast DRC territory – 2,345,410km² including 145 million hectares of natural forests – it is obvious that the battle is far from won. Divided among the six OGF staff, this would translate to a single monitor for more than 24 million hectares. Forest monitors are used to being Davids against the Goliath of illegal timber exploitation – but that's a bit much.

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On a practical level, complications abound as well: difficult terrain, bridges in ruins, dense forests, impassable roads and obligatory canoe trips. Lubala says simply, “In these conditions, forest monitoring missions are not easy.” But they are urgent: Illegally logged timber continues to find access to important markets, both foreign and domestic, and illegal exploitation is on the rise. Artisanal illegal logging is showing strong growth.

Clearly, it is necessary to bring a bit of order to the situation. But how, with a country that is four times the size of France, 80 times that of Belgium?

The Creation of RENOI-RDC: As elsewhere in life, insurmountable problems require help from friends. Two birds, one stone: mobilising other monitors – non-mandated, this time – in the provinces would help to address the impossibility of covering the vast terrain, and the prohibitive cost of carrying out IM operations from Kinshasa.



OGF's efforts to be inclusive during previous missions opened a pathway toward this goal. Lubala explains, “Every time we went into the field, we tried to involve members of local civil society, so that they could receive on-the-job training – to perpetuate IM activities and fight more effectively against illegal exploitation.”

Thanks to the CV4C project, OGF brought their provincial civil society partners to Kinshasa for a workshop to validate the national IM strategy and the creation of the national network of independent natural resource monitors in the DRC (RENOI-RDC). The network was made official with the signature of its founding charter in November 2018, followed by another workshop in 2019 to plan the platform's activities. Since then, their strengths have multiplied, and the weaknesses of some members are offset by the skills of others.

Member methodologies differ widely. Mandated joint missions are carried out on the basis of an order from the Ministry, allowing OGF to have access to such records as proof of payment of taxes, operating documents, site logs, maps of the annual cutting allowances, quarterly declarations. Such access is not available to non-mandated IMs.

“But they know how to go about it; they're strong in number and they have many strengths. They keep watch on the ground, talk to their contacts and work directly with chiefs, traditional communities and Indigenous Peoples. They are steeped in reality,” says Lubala. “It is they who closely follow the implementation of the social obligations. It is they who remind logging companies of their obligations to build basic social infrastructure to benefit local communities, such as schools, bridges and roads to transport agricultural products.”

Non-mandated IMs go it alone and uncover opportunities that OGF, required to 'colour within the lines', does not have. They go out in the field on their own, draw up their report and call attention to it in their own manner.

“For OGF, the only way to work is with the peer committee; we don't host a press conference about our observations and findings. We do everything we can to be heard by our stakeholders, but not by a wider audience. By contrast, RENOI-RDC organisations make noise, they make themselves heard, they're good advocates – they use everything at their disposal.” The network thus becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

Lubala continues, “We have annual and occasional meetings, funds permitting, to take stock of the situation and exchange – we share official information, for example, and they share the information they gather from local communities. Each of us learns from the other. We encourage the synergy of different methods in order to achieve the objective that remains the same for both mandated and non-mandated IM: to fight against illegal logging.”

The results are becoming apparent: The involvement of RENOI-RDC members in the field made it possible to observe, for example, generalised violations of the moratorium on granting new forest concessions and the illegal transfer of forest concessions, and to draw the forest administration's attention to the situation of widespread non-compliance, denounced in a [RENOI-RDC press release, 9 April 2019](#).

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Yet here, a problem emerges that calls into question the will of the state to tackle the problem of illegal logging. For the OGF coordinator, "The administration does not follow up. We make a lot of recommendations, but very few are followed through. There is a gravity pulling us downward."

Notably in the province of Equateur, an NGO member of RENOI-RDC carried out missions and brought violations to the attention of Kinshasa. The representative of a Chinese company that failed to respect operating rules, contractual obligations and workers' rights, was arrested – only to be released soon after, and the case closed.

DRC underwent its first peaceful transition in 2018 and has been managing a delicate political cohabitation since then. Nonetheless, various political forces are at work, and not all are pulling together. "The president fights against corruption, but it is institutionalised and has reached worrying proportions." For the European Union and donors to continue support would be helpful.

IM missions are the cornerstone of progress. An IM network expanded across the provinces offers a cost-effective perspective on the state of timber activities: "Without monitoring we don't know what's happening in the forest. If, via RENOI-RDC, we manage to fight against illegal exploitation and corruption, we hope to be heard. We hope to truly shake things up with the competent authorities, so that they take our recommendations into account."

From an interview with Essylot Lubala, 28 August 2020; Nicole Gérard



AT A GLANCE

- 1 RENOI-RDC Charter, signed November 2018
- 1 Strategy against illegal logging and associated trade adopted in Kisangani in 2018 for the provinces of Tshopo, Haut Uelé and Ituri
- 1 Workshop within the framework of CV4C to develop a similar strategy in Mbandaka, 2019
- 2 Workshops within the framework of CV4C to train a new generation of forestry officers in the provinces on the legal procedures necessary to support a legal case, in Mbandaka and Isiro
- 12 IM missions by OGF within the framework of CV4C
- 8 OGF mission reports validated
- 10 Infractions (PVs) recorded by the forest administration following IM missions
- 3 Missions by RENOI-RDC (2 in Maindombe province and 1 in Tshopo)
- 1 [RENOI-RDC press release, April 9, 2019](#)



Led by the University of Wolverhampton's Centre for International Development and Training (CIDT), the 'Citizen Voices for Change (CV4C)' project was designed to establish a strong, sustainable partnership of forest monitoring non-state actors (NSAs) or Civil Society actors in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon and Republic of Congo. The project sought to address this challenge by strengthening the capacity, influence and long-term viability of IM organisations to perform essential watchdog functions. Find out more at <https://cidt.org.uk/cv4c>.