



United Nations
Environment Programme

UNEP DR Congo fact sheet



Resource management key to nation's future

A major environmental assessment of The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) underlines the global significance and extraordinary potential of the country's natural and mineral resources – set against a backdrop of prolonged conflict and considerable development challenges.

Containing half of Africa's forests and water resources, and trillion-dollar mineral reserves, the DRC could become a powerhouse of African development, according to the assessment by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

However, the country's rapidly growing population (nearly 70 million) and intense international competition for raw materials are placing multiple pressures on the DRC's natural resource base. Also, patterns of illegal use of natural resources have helped to fuel conflict and human tragedies in the DRC.

UNEP's *Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment of the Democratic Republic of Congo* warns that if these trends are left unchecked, it will be difficult for the DRC to achieve a sustainable future.

The imperative for the DRC to overcome severe poverty and recover 20 years of lost development is immense. The UNEP assessment highlights successful initiatives and identifies strategic opportunities to restore livelihoods, promote good governance and support the sustainability of the DRC's post-conflict economic reconstruction and reinforce ongoing peace consolidation.

Key findings: a mixed legacy

- The DRC has the **highest level of biodiversity in Africa** yet 190 species are classified as critically endangered, endangered or vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Elephants and mountain gorillas are among the species under threat.
- Despite being **Africa's most water-rich country**, the DRC faces a **drinking water crisis** with around 51 million people lacking access to safe drinking water.
- The DRC's tropical rainforest extends over 1.55 million km² and accounts for more than half of Africa's forest resources – making the DRC's forests a critical global ecosystem service provider.
- Up to 1.7 million tonnes of bushmeat (mainly antelope, duiker, monkey and wild boar) is harvested annually from **unregulated hunting and poaching**, with an estimated value of US\$1 billion per year.
- The DRC's domestic energy demand causes the loss of around 400,000 hectares of forest each year.
- Around 300,000 m³ of industrial timber is produced annually in DRC with a value of US\$60 million. Artisanal logging accounts for eight times this amount but both are overshadowed by fuelwood consumption estimated at 72 million m³ with market value of over US\$1 billion.
- Among the successes, since 2007 the Congolese Wildlife Authority has secured the Virunga National Park by stepping-up anti-poaching patrols, stopping the destruction of forest for charcoal production and relocating Internally Displaced Persons. At the peak of the DRC's crisis, the national park was losing the equivalent of 89 hectares of forest each day due to illegal fuelwood harvesting.

- The DRC is **one of the world's most important mining centres**. Its untapped mineral reserves are of strategic importance to the global economy and are estimated to be worth US\$24 trillion.
- The DRC has the **largest artisanal mining workforce in the world**, estimated at around two million people, and as many as 12 million people depend directly or indirectly on this sector.
- Around 15 tonnes of mercury are used annually in artisanal gold processing in the DRC – the **second largest source of mercury emissions in Africa** – posing a serious threat to public health.
- The Congo basin supports **Africa's largest inland fisheries** with an estimated production potential of 520,000 tonnes per year. While at the national level this resource is under-exploited, there are many instances of serious over-fishing pressures at the local level.
- The most alarming climate change-related issue is the vulnerability of rain-fed small-scale agriculture on which the majority of the DRC's population relies for subsistence. For example, the drought prone region of Katanga is expected to lose two months of its rainy season as of 2020.
- Today, more than half of the DRC is covered with mining, forestry and oil exploitation and exploration permits, some which overlap with World Heritage sites. Yet concessions have not provided widespread employment or other benefits for Congo's population.
- There is a remarkable resurgence of people-based social enterprises and entrepreneurship as part of a Congolese grass-roots phenomenon. Yet with a fragile banking system and limited incentives to formalise transactions, the informal sector's growth is now a critical structural problem as businesses – including exporters of natural resources – can operate beyond environmental and labour laws.

Key recommendations: significant potential

- Four main policy actions are recommended to promote sustainable wealth creation, poverty alleviation and long-term peace building: (i) capitalizing on the DRC's emerging social economy to generate employment; (ii) maximizing synergies through area-based development programming; (iii) integrating economic valuation of ecosystem services into all development planning, and (iv) engaging in a 'green economy' transition to achieve sustainable development.
- A **doubling of aid** is urgently needed, including **US\$200 million per annum** for the environment.
- The assessment advocates for a fundamental rethinking of the DRC's 'frontier approach' to the use of its natural resources – to gaining greater value from nature to help provide funding for reconstruction. The main instruments are the UN-REDD scheme and the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism. By maintaining its forests (estimated carbon stocks of 27,258 million tonnes) REDD+ projects could **generate up to US\$900 million** per year for the DRC between 2010 and 2030.
- Sustainable reconstruction in the DRC should include creating decent work by building on the country's social economy and promoting 'green jobs', including for former combatants.
- There is an urgent need to develop a sustainable mix of energy sources as a basis for restarting most economic activities. The DRC has a huge hydropower potential of 100,000 megawatts – the equivalent of **13% of the world's hydropower potential** – which could also generate export revenue.
- The legacy of a century of mining in various parts of the country, particularly in Katanga, has created considerable environmental liabilities and a **new, modern approach to mining** is required.

The two-year assessment was conducted by UNEP in conjunction with the DRC's Ministry of Environment, Nature Conservation and Tourism. The project was funded by the Government of Norway.

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