



Briefing paper

Promoting cocoa agroforestry in the Bafwasende landscape, DR Congo

Lessons from the Working Landscapes programme



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Takeaways

- > Tropenbos DR Congo built capacity among local farmers – women and youth in particular – to improve their income through cocoa-based agroforestry systems, while preventing deforestation.
- > They supported communities with formalizing collective land titles covering 90,000 hectares, offering tenure security needed to invest in agroforestry on lands that were previously deforested.
- > They enabled farmers to organize themselves in 20 producer associations and established contacts with financial institutions to increase access to credit for agroforestry.
- > They learned that it is crucial for any NGO working with communities to critically reflect on how the land-use practices they promote relate to local preferences, needs and customs.
- > It is critical to combine support for agroforestry with developing value chains for deforestation-free produce, and investments in land-use planning, monitoring and enforcement, to ensure that agroforestry expansion does not take place at the expense of natural forests.

Introduction

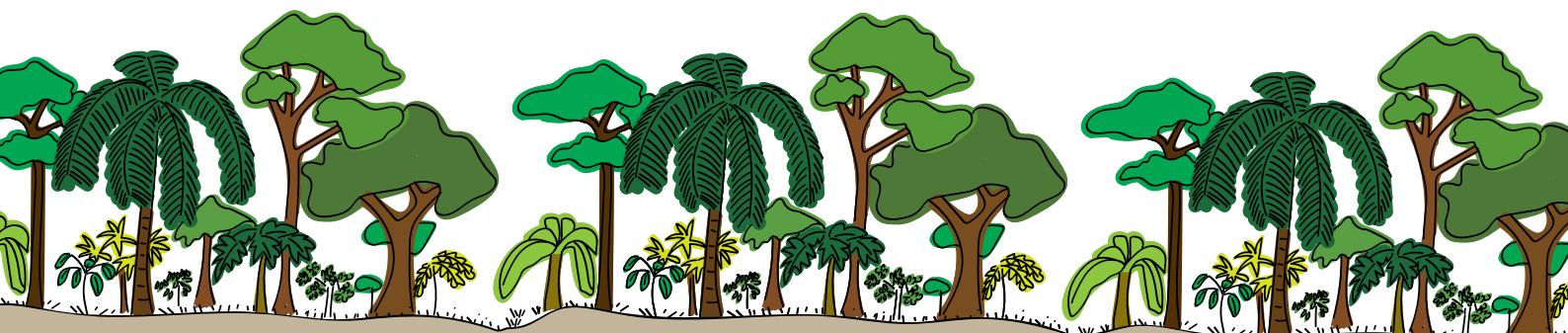
The Bafwasende landscape in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) stretches over roughly 4,710,000 hectares. The indigenous population is scattered across remote villages, and poverty is widespread. Traditionally, farmers have been practicing shifting cultivation for their subsistence. The landscape remains one of the most densely forested areas in the world, with a forest cover of about 98%, but in recent years the pressure on the forest has been increasing.

In the view of Tropenbos DR Congo, the adoption of agroforestry practices could help decrease the pressure on the natural forest. This is because agroforests are permanent, typically generate higher incomes per hectare than shifting cultivation, and provide all kinds of forest products that people would otherwise collect from the natural forest. Moreover, they are a source of fruit and vegetables for subsistence purposes, as well as cash income, needed to pay for healthcare and education.

In the Bafwasende landscape, the integration of cocoa with other plants and trees is particularly promising, due to an increasing market and high prices for cocoa. As part of the Working Landscapes programme (Box 1), Tropenbos DR Congo has therefore been working to improve the key conditions for scaling diverse cocoa-based agroforestry practices.

Knowledge of sustainable land-use practices

Cocoa is an attractive crop for farmers in the Bafwasende landscape. Three years after planting, a farmer can harvest about 2,000 kg of cocoa beans per hectare annually. This equals approximately US\$ 3,000 (at 2023 prices in the local market), which is much higher than the income that is typically derived from shifting cultivation practices. When combined with other crops and trees in an agroforestry system, the cocoa benefits from the shade, while farmers can spread their risks, and maintain diversity at the land-use level.



Box 1. The Working Landscapes programme

The Working Landscapes programme (2019 – 2023) is financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands and implemented by the Tropenbos International (TBI) network — a network of autonomous organizations in Colombia, DR Congo, Ghana, Indonesia, Suriname, Viet Nam and the Netherlands, with partners in Bolivia, Ethiopia, the Philippines and Uganda. TBI members and partners offer practical, locally owned and evidence-based solutions to achieve climate-smart landscapes, where local people manage forests and trees sustainably, contributing to climate change mitigation, adaptation, improved livelihoods and biodiversity conservation. The programme is built around three strategic priorities, i.e., sustainable land-use, inclusive landscape governance, and responsible business and finance. These are considered the pillars of climate-smart landscapes. As part of the programme, several TBI members have been supporting agroforestry as a sustainable and more resilient alternative to conventional modes of agrocommodity production.

At the start of the Working Landscapes programme, Indigenous communities in the landscape had little knowledge of cocoa agroforestry. One of the first objectives of Tropenbos DR Congo was therefore to raise awareness among local communities about the benefits of mixing cocoa trees with other trees and shade-tolerant crops. They started working in several indigenous communities, where they organized trainings and workshops, sharing information from research, and facilitating exchanges with migrant farmers from North Kivu province, where farmers have been practicing cocoa-based agroforestry for many years. Tropenbos DR Congo made sure to engage women in all activities, which challenged existing gender roles, as women in the area traditionally cultivate food for home consumption and are not involved in agricultural production for the market. They also paid special attention to involving youth. Up until a few years ago, young people were leaving the landscapes in large numbers, going to cities to look for work. Recently, however, this outmigration slowed down, because young people saw new income earning opportunities due to the growing cocoa market. In the view of Tropenbos DR Congo it was therefore essential to actively engage them in their training and awareness building activities.

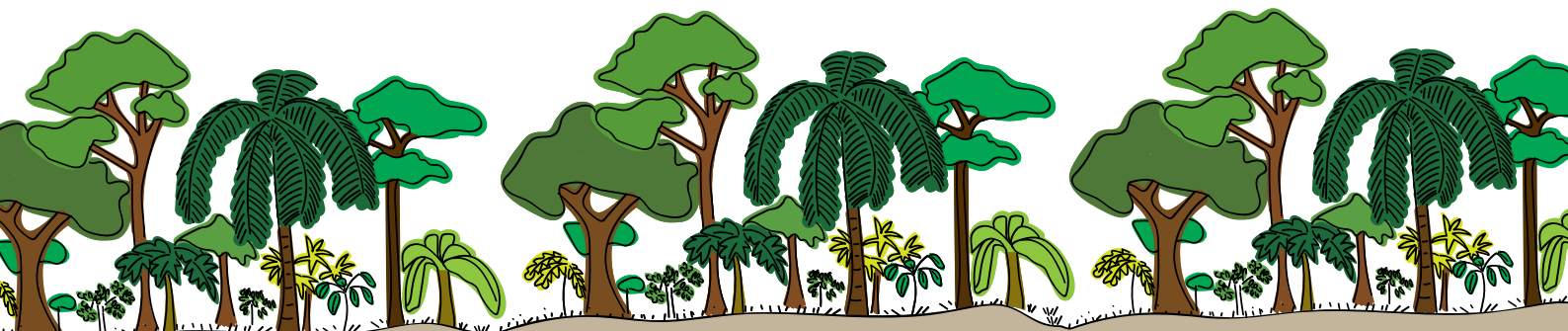
After the trainings and workshops, Tropenbos DR Congo started working with community members on developing agroforestry plots combining cocoa and bananas on community lands. The idea was for these farms to be managed collectively, but this did not work out as expected, as farmers showed little interest to work on the collective farms. In response, Tropenbos DR Congo changed its strategy. The communal farm

was transformed into a training plot. The field technicians provided technical support to develop and maintain community nurseries, and to transplant seedlings into farms of individual farmers. From then onwards things started moving rapidly. People from all over the landscape started requesting support for agroforest establishment.

The experience of Tropenbos DR Congo in the Bafwasende landscape underlines that building capacity and knowledge on sustainable land-use practices is never a one-way street, where external experts come into a community and tell farmers what they need to do. Field workers may come into a village with all kinds of assumptions that may not be valid. For knowledge about sustainable land use to be effective, it needs to be tested and discussed with the users of that knowledge, not just in terms of technical applications, but also in terms of the social constellation in which the new knowledge is to be applied. It requires attentive listening to local farmers about their needs and preferences, and the flexibility to adapt planned activities.

Tenure security

In the Bafwasende landscape, Indigenous farmers have been practicing shifting cultivation for many generations. They would open a piece of land, cultivate food crops for a couple of years, and move on after the soils were depleted. Over the last few decades, with growing commercial interests in land and natural resources, the traditional livelihoods of these shifting cultivators have increasingly been disrupted. Traditional leaders and local elites would strike deals



Box 2. Individual land titling programmes

Tenure insecurity is not only a barrier for traditional communities living in forest areas, but also for farmers in areas where the forest has largely disappeared. Individual land titling programmes can help to promote agroforestry in those areas. Such programmes can learn from recent experiences in several urban areas in DR Congo, where an innovative government programme enabled inhabitants to get land titles at very low costs. Also, lessons may be derived from a UNDP funded programme called PIREDD (Programme Intégré REDD+), which is currently supporting individuals to secure their perennial crop plantations in various provinces throughout the country.

with commercial parties and local administrators, handing out large parts of the forests for logging, increasing the livelihood insecurity of traditional farming families.

In response to this situation, the government introduced a national strategy for community forestry, enabling communities to apply for Local Community Forestry Concessions (CFCLs). These are meant to reduce the risk of land grabbing, while empowering indigenous and local communities to practice sustainable forest management. Within a community forest concession, a community is allowed to exploit the forest for subsistence and commercial purposes, forever, as long as it follows a management plan that has been approved by the authorities. A concession is governed by a community forest committee, which consists of several elected community members. This implies that traditional leaders and powerful elites can no longer make decisions about the land and forest resources on their own behalf; all decisions regarding the CFCL are to be made in consultation with the committee members who are accountable to the community. As of January 2023, Tropenbos DR Congo had helped establish community forest concessions covering 90,000 hectares, and more applications are in process. These communities can benefit from the management of their concessions through locally controlled selective logging of the natural forest, in combination with permanent cocoa-based agroforestry on fallow lands.

The community forest concessions provide a basic level of tenure security needed for farmers to establish agroforests on lands that were previously deforested. However, formalized community forest concessions do not guarantee that the pressure on the forest will decrease, and the expansion of cocoa agroforestry may even become a new threat. After all, higher profitability of cocoa cultivation is likely to serve as

an incentive for farmers to expand further, leading to more, rather than less deforestation. To minimize this risk, Tropenbos DR Congo has been supporting farmers to develop cocoa agroforests on the condition that they are established on degraded lands. But this alone is not enough. There is also a need for better planning, monitoring and enforcement. Tropenbos DR Congo has therefore been helping to develop land-use plans at the community level, as well as at the provincial level. These plans, if enforced, will ensure that agroforestry expansion does not go at the cost of natural forests.

Economic feasibility

At the start of the Working Landscapes programme, Tropenbos DR Congo wanted to convince farmers to mix cocoa with banana trees, as this has been a successful system in North Kivu province. However, the cocoa-banana combination was met with very little enthusiasm among local farmers. Farmers saw bananas primarily as a food crop for their own consumption. In the absence of a nearby market for fresh fruits, the production of more bananas would only become economically attractive if they could be processed into products with a longer shelf life. Rather than intercropping cocoa with bananas, farmers indicated to be more interested in planting avocado, lemon, mango and orange trees, as well as certain tree species that host edible caterpillars (*Albizia gummifera* and *Pentaclenthra*), which had become increasingly scarce in recent years due to deforestation. Field staff of Tropenbos DR Congo then started working with farmers to collect seedlings of these species, develop nurseries, and transplant the seedlings into their farms. It is an example of how agroforestry systems can be co-developed with farmers, based on local preferences, customs and needs.



In recent years, the demand for cocoa beans has been consistently high, and traders are willing to travel to remote villages, where they are paying the same price for cocoa as they do elsewhere. Access to the market is therefore not considered a major obstacle. And market access is likely to further improve, as one of two approved cocoa buyers in the province (Société Commerciale de Cacao de Kivu) is planning to set up a buying point in Bafwasende. Access to finance is more complicated for smallholders. In the view of Tropenbos DR Congo, improving smallholders' access to credit could potentially help them with investing in agroforestry practices, which take a couple of years before they start generating income.

Tropenbos DR Congo started talking with banks and microcredit organizations active in the region, to discuss options to develop financial services catered to the development of sustainable smallholder cocoa production. One bank expressed interest in developing such a credit programme if a third party (e.g., an NGO or a government agency) could provide them with a guarantee, to cover their risks. Tropenbos DR Congo also started facilitating farmers to organize themselves in producer associations, which is expected to eventually increase their opportunities for accessing credit. This resulted in 20 producer associations that are close to being formalized at the time of writing (January 2023).

Future priorities for scaling

- There are currently no market incentives for sustainable cocoa production in the Bafwasende landscape. This could change through the integration of cocoa producers into existing and emerging value chains for deforestation-free cocoa, by developing connections with traders, and working with farmers' producer associations to comply with social and environmental requirements.
- Notwithstanding considerable progress over the last couple of years, there is still a long way to go to secure tenure for smallholders across the landscape. This can be done through community forest concessions, as well as through innovative programmes for the titling of individual lands for agroforestry farmers adjacent to community forest concessions (see Box 2).
- Integrated land-use plans have been developed, but community forest committees and local governments will need support with the implementation and enforcement of these plans, to avoid that the expansion of cocoa agroforestry practices results in deforestation.
- Customary authorities in the landscape have a lot of power, and must be actively engaged in an ongoing multi-stakeholder dialogue, to consolidate their support for community forest concessions, where community members can combine selective logging of the natural forest with cocoa-based agroforestry on fallow lands.

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Illustration:	Generic representation of a multistory agroforest, it does not represent the system described in this brief - Juanita Franco

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