



INTERFAITH RAINFOREST INITIATIVE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO LAUNCH EVENT | 3 to 5 december 2019

Declaration

Preamble

The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) unites religious communities and faith-based organizations, customary leaders, local communities and indigenous peoples, institutions, organizations and individuals committed to the protection of tropical forests and the life these forests generate and sustain.

The forest is a creation of God. The forests of the Congo Basin are the fruit of millions of years of evolution that have carried within them and safeguarded the essence of creation. If humanity has power over nature, this power is only temporary and limited. The human being is not only a consumer, he is a guardian of creation, subject to the critical gaze of God and of his peers.

Our forests in the DRC cover 155 million hectares and represent 62% of the forests in the Congo Basin. They are home to millions of animal and plant species, some of which are endemic. Our forests provide millions of people with habitat, livelihoods, medicines, water, and an environment of intrinsic beliefs and spirituality. They are home to vast peat lands, an ecosystem that is vital for carbon sequestration and for the preservation of biodiversity. Our forests are powerful biological pumps that produce rainfall and impact the lives of those who live there, and far beyond. Our forests and peat lands are an element of climate regulation. Their preservation and rational management is an existential issue from the local to the global level.

Our findings and concerns

The destruction of forests suggests ecological, social and economic challenges that are far greater than those known to date. If no action is taken, we are jeopardizing the efforts undertaken by the DRC in the fight against poverty and the promotion of sustainable development, including the DRC's ambitions in the areas of agriculture, food security, and hydroelectric power.

The loss of the rainforests is the loss of our own lives. "A crime against nature is a crime against ourselves, and a sin against God", as stated in the encyclical *Laudato Si*. If we destroy the forests and peat lands of the Congo Basin, we destroy humanity itself. We cannot accept this, especially since it is by no means a fatality.

The drivers of deforestation are multiple: slash-and-burn agriculture, industrial and artisanal wood exploitation, mining, industrial agriculture, infrastructure, etc. We therefore reject the stigmatization of local communities and indigenous peoples, who often live in conditions of extreme poverty, as solely responsible for deforestation. Our forests are the object of multiple and growing covetousness. We believe that the DRC must anticipate the expansion of the

industrial drivers of deforestation that are likely to occupy large areas and cause destruction on a much larger scale.

Our commitments

We have a collective and shared responsibility to act urgently and to find concrete and sustainable solutions to safeguard our common home. Beyond our respective confessions and beliefs, we are converging our spiritualities and cultures, to take up together the challenge of putting an end to deforestation in the DRC, and to ensure the emergence of a sustainable economic development that relies on and is nourished by the preservation of the country's forests.

We welcome the firm commitment of the President of the Republic to make the environment a pervasive and cross-cutting concern in all the country's development programmes. We wish to respond positively to this demonstration of strong leadership and his willingness to work with all actors working to protect the forests in the DRC, including through our support for better governance throughout the country.

We are committed to working alongside customary chiefs, local communities and indigenous peoples to research and develop sustainable economic alternatives. We have a sustained interest in promoting models of community-based forest management.

We commit ourselves to working together, with the DRC's governments, international partners, civil society and the private sector to develop an ambitious and courageous National Plan for Forest Protection and Land Management, which reconciles forest protection and sustainable economic development:

- the recognition and preservation of the close and specific link between the traditional knowledge and practices of indigenous peoples and the protection of forests. Securing their rights to their lands and territories is one of our best guarantees to ensure the protection of forests. We express our solidarity with the efforts aimed at the adoption of the proposed law on the rights of indigenous peoples in the National Assembly.
- the definition of a forest policy and other sectoral policies (agriculture, mining, hydrocarbons, infrastructure) based on values and principles aimed at the protection of tropical forests and peatlands, their ecosystems, their climatic functions, the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples living in them, as well as the promotion of gender and the involvement of young people in the management of our forests.
- the implementation of a land-use plan that guarantees the protection of intact forests, the securing of land and forest rights of local communities and indigenous peoples, following a participatory approach and dialogue between communities, prior to any decision to allocate rights to land or forests to third parties, as well as the identification of opportunities for sustainable economic development.

The DRC must make strategic choices and ensure effective intersectoral coordination, with the dual objective of promoting economic development and responsible, fair and sustainable land use, both based on the protection of forest ecosystems. We entrust the responsibility of translating the commitments made in this declaration to the National Advisory Council of our initiative into a National Program of the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Conclusion

Humans need to rethink their dominion over nature. We are only stewards, trustees. As such, we must ensure a responsible and fair management of the forests for the current and future generations. We unite our hands, our spirits and our hearts, confident that tomorrow will ensure life on this planet and a sustainable development for local communities and indigenous peoples in DRC

- Kinshasa, 5 December 2019