

# EFFECTS OF EXTREME POVERTY, REPRESSIVE GOVERNMENT, AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY ON DEFORESTATION AND CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO (DRC): THE WAY FORWARD

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The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is characterized by significant social vulnerability, political instability, food insecurity, and high rates of poverty. Projected increases in temperature, more extreme weather events, and changes in total precipitation and rainfall variability are likely to exacerbate these challenges, particularly since agriculture, the majority of which is rainfed, is a central engine of the DRC's economy and the primary source of livelihood for most Congolese (1). Forest ecosystems in the DRC contain nearly half of Africa's dense, wet tropical forests (2) but over time, land-use change and deforestation have continued to prevent the ecosystem from providing its services to nature and man himself. Deforestation is expected to reduce the DRC's forest heritage from 12 to 13 million ha by 2030 (3). In the DRC, deforestation accounts for 78% of greenhouse gas emissions (2).

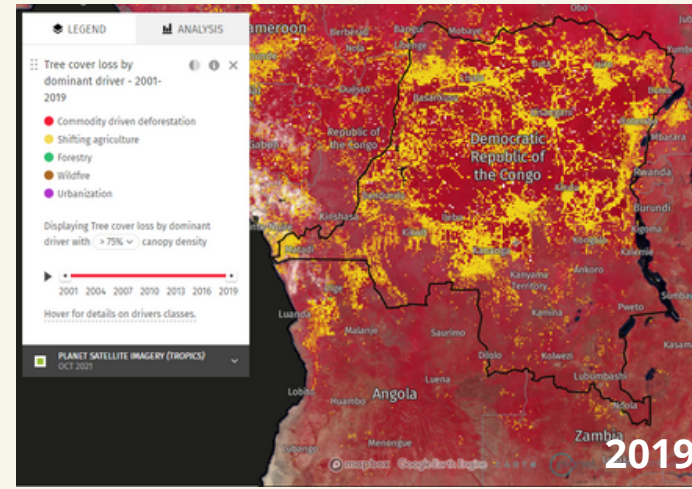
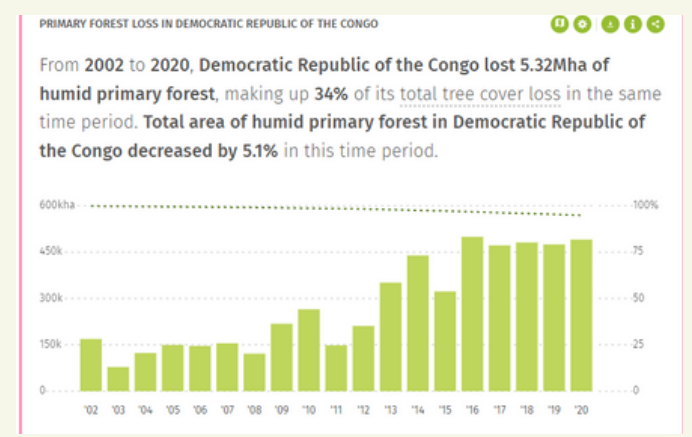
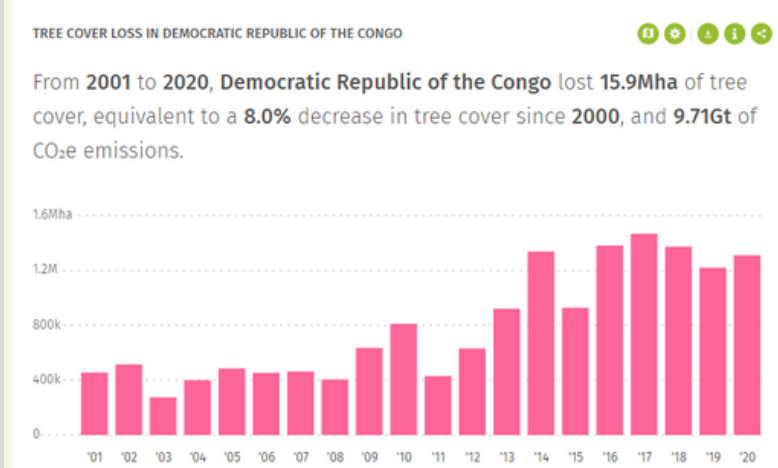
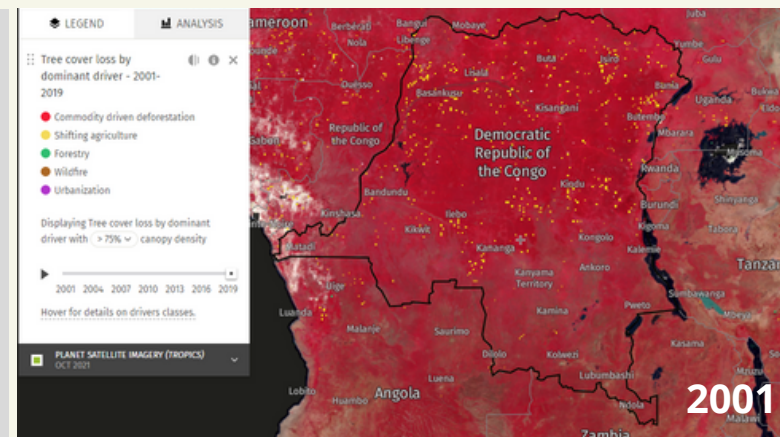


## MAIN DRIVERS

According to Achille et al (2), this deforestation results in particular from:

- 1) the population's heavy dependence on woody energy and low use of alternative energies such as solar, wind or hydro-electric;
- 2) the widespread practice of itinerant agriculture and the lack of zoning and forest land use plans for agriculture;
- 3) the anarchic establishment of mining quarries, and
- 4) the non-application of the legal and regulatory provisions relating to the sustainable management of forests.

The main drivers of deforestation and forest degradation in the DRC are food agriculture and charcoal production, which alone account for more than 90% of deforestation in the DRC. These are underpinned by social and economic problems. Two-thirds of Congolese are living on less than \$1.90 per day and the DRC ranks 179th out of 189 countries in the U.N.'s Human Development Index. Currently, the DRC counts more than 4 million internally-displaced people (4). With population growth projected to reach 200 million by 2050 (4), there will be more pressure on the forest ecosystem, therefore leading to more and more greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere. Extreme poverty has forced people to plunder the forests for trade in bushmeat, wood and charcoal, discrediting the fight against climate change. A history of war and ongoing conflicts has resulted in poor economic development and chronic political instability, challenging any potential solutions to these drivers.



Tree Cover Loss by Dominant Drivers from Year 2001 - 2019  
\*Shifting Agriculture Observed as Major Driver of Deforestation (Yellow Colour) in DRC\*  
Source: Global Forest Watch (GFW)

## HISTORY OF THE DRC

The indigenous people of the DRC have suffered a turbulent political history, from which they are only just beginning to recover, dependent on continued stable and democratic government (5). In the 16th and 17th centuries, European merchants captured five million people and shipped them to the Americas as slaves. Then Stanley 'discovered' the Congo River and, in 1885, King Leopold II of Belgium seized control of the country as his personal fiefdom. The people suffered land seizure, forced labour, brutal repression, plunder of natural resources, denial of local self-government and lack of healthcare and basic education.

In 1908, an international outcry forced the Belgian state to take over colonial rule. Although less brutal, this was characterized by the same problems, and also imposed local chiefdoms, one ethnic group ruling others, fuelling conflict, together with social inequality and racial discrimination (6). From 1945, however, it introduced extensive urbanization and development programmes to create a 'model colony', in an attempt to cling on to power. Most indigenous people could now own and sell property, and 42% were literate (6). But soon after Independence, in 1960, the country was plunged into civil war, followed by Mobutu's increasingly repressive dictatorship, which led to an exodus of foreign expertise and economic disaster. Under the 1973 General Property Law, all land belonged to the government.

In the 1980s, mismanagement and corruption caused a steady decline in Belgium's economic, financial and political interests in the DRC. Two civil wars ensued (1996 and 1998-2003), in which millions died directly or through disease and starvation. Laurent Kabila, who ousted Mobutu, was assassinated, and his son, Joseph, succeeded him as president. The first nationwide free elections since independence were held in 2006. But Joseph overstayed his constitutional term of office, until, in 2019, opposition candidate Felix Tshisekedi became president, following controversial elections. The Land Rights for Indigenous People Bill was passed in 2021, and free education and healthcare are expected to follow (7). The DRC still scores low on Freedom in the World's assessment of Political Rights (5/40) and Civil Liberties (15/60), but is improving (8).

The DRC's eastern neighbours, Rwanda and Burundi, also have a history of extreme poverty, political instability and lawlessness and also score low on Freedom in the World scale: Rwanda, 21/100 in 2021,, down slightly from 2020, and Burundi, 14/100, slightly up in 2020 (8). The Rwandan army still sometimes makes incursions into the DRC, pursuing remnants of militias from the civil wars. In the Virunga National Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, armed gangs threaten park rangers, twelve of whom were killed in one ambush in April 2020 and six in January 2021, because the rangers work with the Congolese army to stop the plundering of natural resources, such as charcoal and fish, in the national park. Tourists have been kidnapped, too. (9).

## SOLUTIONS

- Conservation, peace-building and indigenous community support organisations need to work together to build social stability and facilitate forest management. Many of them are already funded by the same bodies, providing a strong basis for integration of activities (10). Additionally, one of the main drivers of deforestation during the war was the exploitation of the forests for charcoal by militias - proper protection cannot be achieved without conciliation.
- Establishing protected areas of forest can reduce deforestation, even in times of conflict. This is largely due to the dedication of the rangers, 200 of whom died in the wars, and international support and funding (11).
- Regulation of mining activities. It was found that in areas where conflict disrupted mining, deforestation was often reduced (11). The effects of mining on forests include not only the land taken up by the mine itself but also the roads and surrounding infrastructure needed to run it.
- Community forestry - Rainforest Foundation UK's Community Forestry scheme for crop diversification on family farms insures against extreme and unpredictable weather and broadens income streams. Co-operatives are formed to sell local crafts, providing work for all village women. 75 million hectares of forest could be available to local communities (12).
- Financial security, education and employment (particularly of women), good healthcare and family planning will help solve overpopulation in the long term.

## OBSTACLES

- Law and Order - There are still areas of conflict in the DRC, and violence and corruption are widespread, largely due to its colonial legacy. Violent behaviour and mental illnesses are passed from generation to generation (13). Poor governance is mainly why most of the promised aims of the 2012 REDD+ programme have not been delivered (4).
- Urbanisation - There is a conflict between rising energy demands, often met with charcoal, and the need to protect forests (4).
- The colonial legacy of government by regional chieftains fuels conflict among indigenous groups, but to divest customary leaders of power is difficult, and citizenship requires belonging to a chiefdom (14).
- Concessions over natural resources extraction, especially rubber, held by companies since Leopold's rule, must end if Rainforest Foundation UK's principle of minimising harm to indigenous people, forests and wildlife, and the climate is adhered to (15).
- Indigenous Rights - For decades, indigenous rights were not enshrined in law, and the people were often subject to discrimination and violence. Only in 2021 was a law passed to protect the Mbuti, Baka and Batwa peoples (16).
- Bureaucracy - The application system for community land concessions needs to be simplified to enable the indigenous people to apply, without depending on support from NGOs, which is so costly that it is severely limiting the scheme's roll-out (12).
- The UK Government has slashed its overseas aid budget, which was financing projects in the DRC, though some suffered higher than necessary environmental and social impacts, due to bad planning and management, and corruption (17).

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