

The COP26 Deforestation Pledge Alone Won't Save the Congo Basin

The recent anti-deforestation pledge at the UN climate talks is a welcome announcement, but to protect the 'lungs of Africa' it must go further, writes Camilla Barungi.

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Only three days into the COP26 climate summit, [a major deal](#) was already in the bag: over 100 world leaders signed an agreement promising to end deforestation by 2030.

Part of this pledge was a [\\$1.5 billion fund](#) backed by the UK and the European Union to protect the world's second largest rainforest, the Congo Basin.

After the shock discovery that [the Amazon](#) rainforest is emitting more carbon than it absorbs, [the Congo rainforest](#) – which captures around 1.2 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide annually – has become even more pivotal in the climate fight.

But it's too soon to celebrate. Last month, [a leaked document](#) exposed how the anticipated funding initiative is likely to backfire if necessary steps to protect the forest are not taken. At worst, these funds could end up accelerating the destruction of the Congo Basin.

[Around 60 per cent](#) of the Congo rainforest is within the borders of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In July, [the DRC government](#) announced its decision to lift the 20-year-old logging moratorium safeguarding the Congo Basin.

But this did not stand in the way of the COP26 funding pledge, distributed under [the Central African Forest Initiative](#) (CAFI).

Campaigners have [raised concerns](#) that the funds are not conditional on banning new logging concessions. Moreover, the leaked documents revealed how the Congolese government avoided taking any position on the country's decision to lift the ban.

[Rainforest Foundation UK](#) criticized the move stating that it will trigger a mass sell-off of the Congo Basin, jeopardize local communities and exacerbate the climate crisis. [echoed these](#)

[concerns stating that lifting the moratorium would open up a new lucrative highway for foreign companies to wreck the rainforest.](#)

Between 2012 and 2019, deforestation in the Congo Basin has more than [doubled](#) and researchers fear that without urgent action, there won't be any primary forest left .

[Considering the Congo rainforest is the world's largest forest carbon sink](#), mitigating the impacts of climate change, this is rather concerning.

While the moratorium's success in tackling the corruption in the logging industry has previously [come under fire](#), lifting it could open up over half of the primary forest to logging, allowing the DRC government to [grant new contracts](#) to industrial companies.

In light of all this, one could be forgiven for assuming world leaders are more concerned about making a showy announcement during COP26 than possibly rushing through a half-done agreement.

Furthermore, many [European companies](#) are amongst the ones exploiting the Congo Basin. [Illegal timber](#) from the Congo rainforest is being transported to EU member states, the US and China, with foreign investors benefiting from Central Africa's threatened rainforest.

Although the EU has imposed a ban on illegal timber imports, European countries have issued minimal sanctions [for violations](#). As long as illegal timber can flow into China, there it will be turned into finished consumer goods, ready to re-enter the global market.

Central African governments have granted around [one quarter](#) of the Congo Basin to largely European and Chinese companies. Out of these 50 million hectares, just over 10 per cent is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Short-sighted attempts to pour money into the world's rainforests will fail without local governments' willingness to establish a legal framework to prevent illegal logging.

In practice, Western countries are doing their dirty laundry in Africa through their business interests. They are transferring their carbon footprint onto African nations while acting as 'white saviours' with their lavish funds, making Africa the biggest victim of the double standards of COP26.

Africa does need these funds. Yet, finance like the COP26 deforestation pledge should not be diverting attention away from Western complicity in forest loss in Africa.

Instead, they should help Africans to avoid the worst impacts of climate change - largely created by others. [OXFAM has revealed](#) how the richest one per cent of people in the world are responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the poorest half of humanity.

While there are no shortcuts to tackle deforestation, certain models have proven more successful than others. National certifications for forest risk commodities - if effectively enforced - could be a part of the solution.

In Malaysia, the government has set up [a legally-binding certification scheme](#) called Malaysian Sustainable Palm Oil (MSPO), which has resulted in reduced deforestation levels for [four years in a row](#). Notably, the Malaysian government issues sanctions for non-

compliant producers.

Growing Western consumer demand should not result in displaced deforestation when it comes to forest risk commodities like timber or palm oil and supporting local certifications could facilitate this process.

In the past, only [11.5 per cent of international funds](#) for nature protection and sustainable forest management in tropics have been allocated for the Congo rainforest.

'The lungs of Africa' [are dying](#). Short-sighted attempts to pour money into the world's rainforests will fail without local governments' willingness to establish a legal framework to prevent illegal logging. Initiatives to protect the Congo rainforest are crucial - yet without genuine dialogue and evaluation of plausible side effects, they only serve the purpose of political point-scoring.

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Featured image: Credit: [Pascal Maitre](#)/Panos/ Between Lokutu & Lukumete, rainforest grows beside the River Congo, dwarfing a pirogue sailing near the bank.

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