

Community Fund for Forests (CFF): *Direct Funding for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities to Protect the world's second largest rainforest*



Photo: Alexis Huguet/RFN

A group of women from Penzele attend a meeting to talk about securing their forest.

Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPs and LCs) have finally taken central stage in international policy. Not as beneficiaries of support, but as central players protecting forests and biodiversity while upholding local development. IPs and LCs have a deeply reciprocal relationship with high integrity ecosystems. Territories under the control of IPs and LCs show lower deforestation rates than any other land category¹. Still, only a fraction of international funding reaches these communities. These communities are in a position to cost-effectively preserve the integrity of some of the world's largest natural carbon sinks while delivering key contributions to protect 30% of the world's terrestrial areas by 2030.

The Community Fund for Forests (CFF), launched in 2023 by Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN) and Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), aims to bridge this gap by **mobilizing international funding at scale to support the establishment of landscape mosaics of rights-based management for forests and people in DRC**.

Currently incubated by RFN as a program, now transitioning into a multi-donor trust fund, CFF proposes a payment for

environmental services mechanism that would directly flow to communities. First of its kind in DRC, it not only ensures that IPs and LCs participation is at the heart of grantmaking to communities, but also provides technical assistance on how to effectively use funds.

CFF leverages the **major advances made in recognizing IPs' and LCs rights in DRC** – In 2021, President Tshisekedi committed to *“legally secure the lands and ancestral territories of the Indigenous Pygmies in the form of large natural, ecological and community reserves, according to the will and under the control of these peoples”*. The year after, a historic law for the protection of IPs' rights was proclaimed. This is a major landmark for the respect and promotion of IPs' rights in DRC and for the recognition of their role in protecting the country's rainforests and biodiversity. DRC is also equipped with one of the most progressive community forest legal frameworks in the region, allowing IPs and LCs to gain perpetual forest concessions over up to 50,000 hectares (ha) of their customary forests

1) Walker, W. et al. (2020) The role of forest conversion, degradation, and disturbance in the carbon dynamics of Amazon indigenous territories and protected areas. PNAS. 2020.
2) IFLs represent unbroken forest blocks of at least 500 km² without signs of intensive human activity (such as roads or industrial logging) detectable on satellite, imagery. Potapov et al. (2017)

The world's second largest rainforest

DRC's tropical forests cover 1 million km² and represent 60% of the Central African rainforest, the world's second largest. In 2016, high-integrity forests in DRC covered 604,000 km². The rate of loss of High-integrity Forest Landscapes (IFLs²) in DRC increased by more than 40% per year on average between the period 2000-2013 and 2013-2016. Maintaining the extent and ecological integrity of high-integrity forests is essential for climate-resilient development, to secure their carbon stocks and other ecosystem services. 50 million people depend on DRC's rainforests for their livelihood.

About 700,000 Indigenous Peoples Live in the DRC

For centuries, IPs' ancestral knowledge, traditional practices, and governance systems have contributed to the preservation of the most high-integrity rainforest in the country. Their sustainable use of customary forests, and involvement in the management of Protected Areas (PAs), are vital to ensuring the effective protection of DRC's remaining high-integrity forests.³

New Thinking for IPs and LCs and High-Integrity Forests

While DRC's regulatory advances can ensure long-term security for DRC's forests and strengthen the role of IPs and LCs in forest governance, funding is severely lagging for their effective implementation. By channeling technical and financial support directly to IPs and LCs, and local organizations, the CFF will provide a much-needed boost towards implementing effective, equitable, rights-based management regimes for high-integrity forests. CFF's landscape approach is key in creating integrated mosaics of Indigenous or community lands and PAs, recognized, and supported in government-endorsed spatial and jurisdictional plans.

Objectives of the CFF

- 1. Empower IPs and LCs**
Strengthen IPs and LCs' capacity to manage forest resources sustainably.
- 2. Catalyse Inclusive Biodiversity Conservation in High-Integrity Forests**
Contribute to DRC's 30x30 Target with the active participation of IPs and LCs.
- 3. Mitigate Climate Change**
Enhance the role of forests as carbon sinks.
- 4. Promote Sustainable Development**
Foster socio-economic development through sustainable forest management initiatives.



Photo: Alexis Huguet/RFN

CFF - Funding Needs and Opportunities

To achieve large-scale climate and nature positive impacts, direct support is needed for the following approaches in and around each high-integrity forest area:

- Direct financial and technical support to IPs' and LCs' projects for sustainable development and community-based forest management.
- Strengthening the involvement of IPs and LCs in PAs management.
- Advocacy and technical support enabling civil society to engage more effectively on land-use planning and decision-making with provincial and national authorities.
- Payments for Environmental Services and possibly climate payments to IPs and LCs managing their forests successfully, depending on national policy developments.

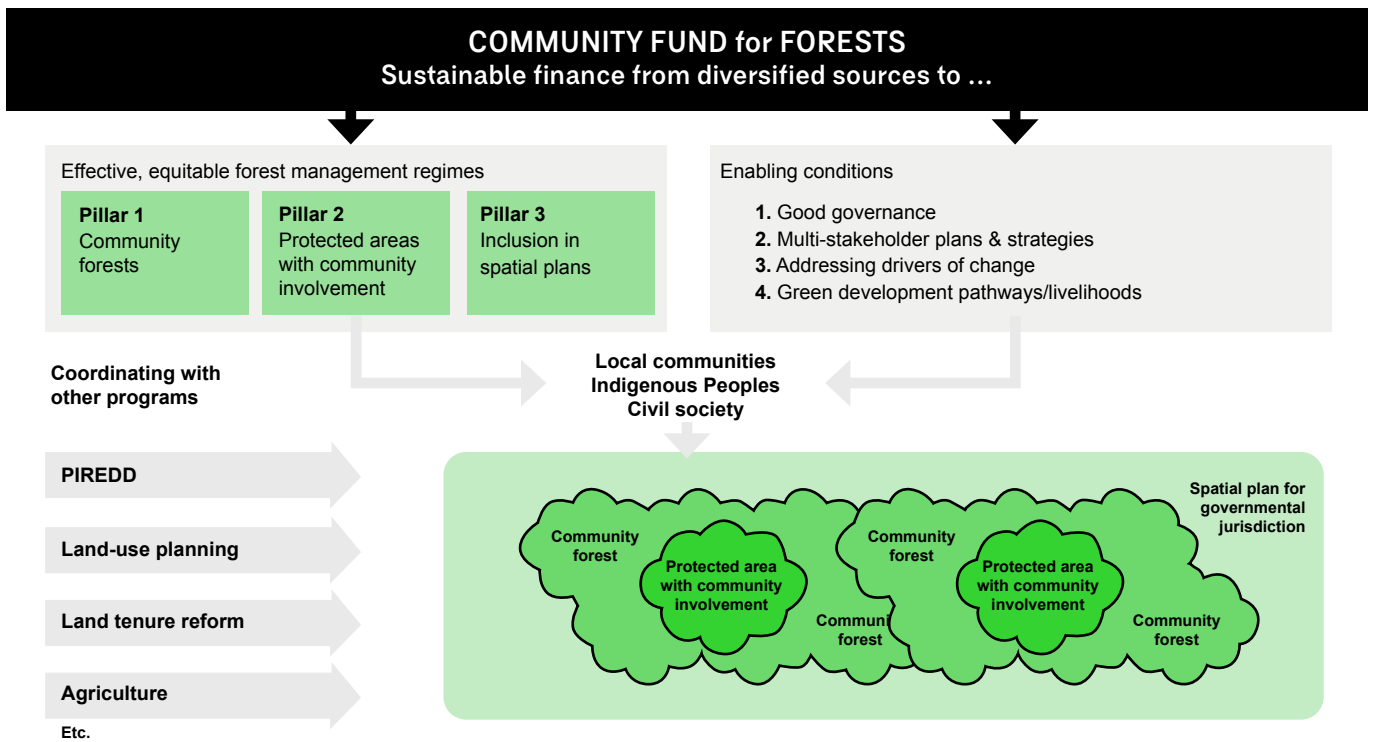
Furthermore, investment is also needed to support greater civil society involvement in establishing four key enabling conditions (see Box 4).

CFF Governance and Operational Structures

Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) - FPIC is a core principle of the CFF that applies throughout its governance and operational structures. IPs and LCs representatives and organizations play a pivotal role in decision-making. The CFF National Advisory Committee, which includes representatives from IPs and LCs, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), government agencies, technical and financial partners, is responsible for setting strategic directions, validating key decisions, and ensuring transparency. To address the urgency and to test its model, CFF has initiated a trial phase in two pilot landscapes, the Equator and North & South Kivu which cover a combined 2 million ha of high-integrity forests, featuring both PAs and advanced community forests. The CCF Secretariat operates from RFN's country office in Kinshasa, together with a coordinator in each landscape. By the end of 2024, only one year after its launch, \$500,000 will have been granted to support 24 community forest concessions, totaling 250,000 ha.

3) World Bank. 2009. Cadre stratégique pour la préparation d'un programme de développement des Pygmées en RDC

What does CFF support?



CFF - A Scalable Model Leveraging the Expertise of Actors at Landscape, National and International levels

Solidly anchored in local realities, keeping its inclusive governance and direct link to communities as a north star, the CFF is well positioned to rapidly scale its impact. It can count on the support of Forests for Life⁴ (FFL) partners, collectively representing several decades of experience of working with IPs and LCs rights, PAs, forest management, as well as data and technology use for decision-making and forest policy in DRC. The unique collaborative power and complementary expertise of FFL partners can bring the needed technical support to CFF national advisory members and be a cornerstone of the further expansion of CFF in DRC, consistently with its objectives.



CFF Donors and Partners - Invitation to be Part of a Transformative Initiative

CFF represents a transformative approach to forest conservation and community empowerment in the DRC. We invite donors, partners, and stakeholders to join us in this ambitious endeavour. Your support will play a crucial role in preserving one of the world's most vital ecosystems and fostering sustainable development for IPs and LCs who depend on it:

- Effective and phased materialization of IPs' and LCs' Forest Tenure Pledge.
- High impact on climate mitigation and biodiversity conservation.
- IPs and LCs empowerment and enhanced community engagement.
- Enhanced governance and spatial planning at provincial and national levels.
- Enhanced cost-effectiveness, qualitative, and quantitative outcomes.
- Enhanced IPs and LCs livelihoods, resilience, and well-being.
- Capitalization on best practices (including FPIC).
- Leveraging of additional funds, geographical expansion, and increased impact.



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4) Forests For Life (FFL) is a partnership of five leading international organizations: Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS), Rainforest Foundation Norway (RFN), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Resources Institute (WRI), and Re:wild, aiming to secure more than a billion hectares of the world's high-integrity forests. Its vision inspired the establishment of CFF, launched by WCS and RFN, with seed funding from Bezos Earth Fund.