



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

René Ngongo (Democratic Republic of Congo)

(2009)



"...for his courage in confronting the forces that are destroying the Congo's rainforests and building political support for their conservation and sustainable use."

Photo: Wolfgang Schmidt

The Congo rainforest, in global importance second only to that of the Amazon, is under grave threat from the aftermath of war, population pressure and corporate exploitation. Since 1994, including through the civil war from 1996-2002, René Ngongo has engaged, at great personal risk, in popular campaigning, political advocacy and practical initiatives to confront the destroyers of the rainforest and help create the political conditions that could halt its destruction and bring about its conservation and sustainable use.

Life and career

René Ngongo was born in Goma in October 1961, and took a Bachelor in biology from the University of Kisangani in 1987. It soon became clear to him that the Congo rainforest, the second largest tropical forest in the world, is under very grave threat - both because of the poverty of local people who cut the forest to satisfy their need for food and fuelwood and because of commercial logging and mining.

In 1994 Ngongo founded, and became the national coordinator of, OCEAN (Organisation concertée des écologistes et amis de la nature). OCEAN started as an environmental NGO in Kisangani, but has managed to reach out to the entire country through the work of volunteers. OCEAN's main activities are agroforestry, urban tree-planting, reforestation nurseries for the most threatened species, distribution of improved cooking stoves, monitoring of the exploitation of natural resources, education, especially through radio and TV broadcasts, and the advocacy and lobbying on local, national and international level.

Ngongo has also worked both for the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI). From 2008 to 2011, Ngongo worked for Greenpeace to build up the new Greenpeace DRC office. He handed over the leadership of OCEAN to a younger colleague and became a member of its Administrative Council instead.

Promoting sustainable land use

The first focus of Ngongo's work was to promote sustainable land use models that would allow the local population to satisfy their need for food and fuelwood, and to receive a better income, without destroying the forest. From 1992 to 2000, Ngongo had a weekly radio programme on nature protection and the impact of deforestation called 'L'Homme et son Environnement - MAZINGIRA'. At the same time, Ngongo developed pedagogical tools and provided trainings for farmers to learn about alternatives to the destructive "slash and burn" agriculture. He created in Kisangani demonstration fields for sustainable agricultural techniques like agroforestry (growing food in the forest without destroying it) and taught locals how to save on fuelwood through improved cooking stoves.

Ngongo also co-ordinated the creation of a seedling plantation with 20,000 seedlings of the most exploited tree species in the Eastern province. This plantation provided trees for several events such as 'green city' (Ville Verte) during which tree planting took place in abandoned parks, along avenues and in schools. Children were actively involved in these events to ensure widespread dissemination of the environmental messages.

Exposing destructive mining and logging

Throughout the wartime years of 1996-2002 Ngongo was actively monitoring the exploitation of natural resources by the different warring parties. Many international organisations and research institutes recognised OCEAN as a key source of information. For instance, Ngongo's research on illegal mining operations (diamonds and other minerals) contributed to the UN Security Council expert panel report on the illegal exploitation of natural resources in the DRC. Ngongo is convinced that the struggle for the control over natural resources was the main driving force of the conflicts in the DRC that left millions of people dead.

Since the civil war ended, the destruction of the Congo rainforest has accelerated even more, because the DRC is now safe terrain for the big forestry multinationals to operate. OCEAN became the key organisation exposing irresponsible logging practices as well as weak governance and a lack of transparency in the forest and mining sectors. Not surprisingly, Ngongo has experienced a considerable amount of threats, manipulation and intimidation.

Today, the rainforests of the DRC are at a crossroads. In January 2009, the government finished a legal review of 156 forest concessions (on 20 million hectares) and concluded that 91 of them had been illegal. However, in September 2009, several companies whose contracts had been declared illegal by the joint ministerial commission in January continued their activities in total impunity. Thus, it is one of Ngongo's priorities to campaign for the implementation of the government's decision and for respecting the moratorium on new logging activities in the forests of the DRC. He is arguing that the further destruction of the Congo rainforest would put local communities, who depend on the forest for their livelihoods, at great risk. It would also further accelerate global warming and make the DRC more vulnerable to its effects.

Capacity building

Much of Ngongo's work is dedicated to strengthening the knowledge and capabilities of NGOs, politicians and local authorities in the Democratic Republic of Congo to effectively protect the forest. He has coordinated training sessions for national and provincial politicians on the forest code. OCEAN is working with local communities affected by road construction projects to make sure that their voices are heard. In addition, Ngongo's ongoing support of grassroots initiatives provided a strong basis for the development of the 'Réseau des Ressources Naturelles', a Congolese umbrella organisation for civil society groups working on mining and forestry issues. Ngongo has also

organised many consultations with politicians, donors and industry representatives to promote sustainable forestry practices.

Quotation

"The forests of the DR Congo and the Congo Basin, the planet's second 'lung', are a precious heritage that should be preserved. Those forests should not be considered merely as raw material to be exported and should neither only be seen as a carbon reservoir. Before anything else, it is a living environment, a grocery store, a pharmacy, a spiritual landmark for millions of forest communities and aboriginal peoples, those who are our forest's main guardians. Destroying the forest means destroying lifestyles that are worth as much as others... Those extraordinary forests, with a unique biodiversity, also represent a major asset for the DRC and the entire planet when it comes to the fight against climate change. Valorising them as standing forests brings about a quarter of the answer on how to defuse the threat of climate change. But unfortunately, with 13 million hectares disappearing each year, what future are we handing over to future generations? And in the meantime, so many meetings, speeches, good intentions... It is time to act and mobilise the necessary resources in order to guarantee an ecologically responsible and socially balanced future for our forests..."

René Ngongo

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