



**Title: Atlas of indigenous peoples in the Democratic Republic of Congo
A NEW TOOL TO SECURE LAND AND RESOURCE RIGHTS OF FOREST GUARDIANS**

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), a key to the effective protection of the large areas of rainforest lies in the hands of the Indigenous Pygmy Peoples (IPPs) who have preserved this vital ecosystem for centuries. As the guardians of the World's second-largest rainforest (Congo basin), the largest carbon sink on Earth (footnote, DRC's part accounts for 60% of the Congo basin¹), their ancestral knowledge and traditional practices are of utmost importance in the fight against climate change and efforts to ensure sustainable development.

Yet, there is little documentation of where and how the IPPs live, how many they are and which areas they hold the customary rights to. Therefore, the organization *Dynamics of Indigenous Peoples' Groups* (in French, *Dynamique des Groupes des Peuples Autochtones*, DGPA) has begun a tremendous work to map the presence and practices of the pygmy population throughout the country.

Box?

Dynamics of Indigenous Peoples' Groups (in French, *Dynamique des Groupes des Peuples Autochtones*, DGPA)

National network of 43 indigenous Pygmy organizations and organizations advocating for IPPs' rights, established in 2009.

Awarded UNDP's Equator Prize in 2015 for the longstanding work for the recognition of IPPs and the securing of their land and resource rights in the DRC.

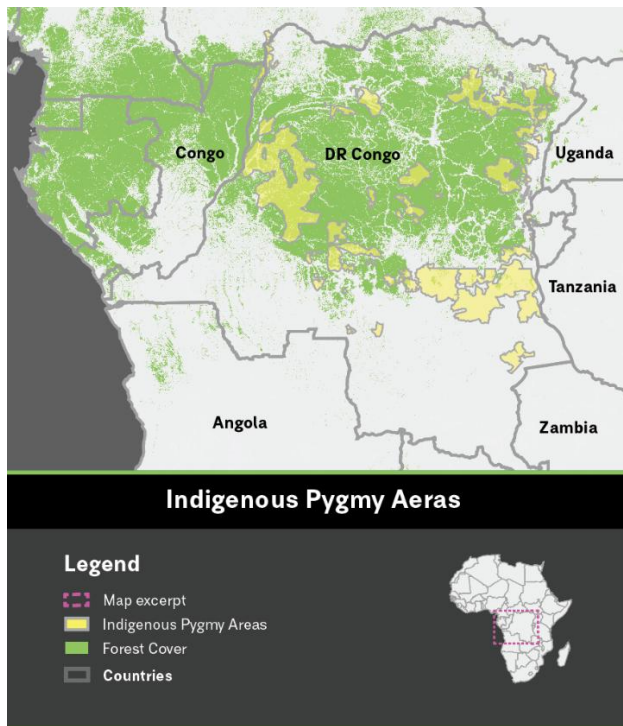
DGPA now releases key data from the atlas to continue the advocacy work in the headwaters of the law that was adopted in the DRC in 2022 prescribing the protection and promotion of the rights of IPPs, a major result of DGPA's policy and field work.

Over the past 15+ years, DGPA has done extensive field and desk research to put together a critical mass of data and information on IPPs in DRC that intends to help better understand how and where they live, with a view to effectively protecting and securing their rights.

This has resulted in an atlas showing more than 280 maps and providing data for the levels from province to groupment and village². There are statistics for numbers of IPPs at each administrative level, showing that total IPP population is estimated at over 725,000 individuals, present in 20 of the country's 26 provinces. In 18 of the provinces there are semi-nomadic groups, and in the Ituri province in the north-east, fully nomadic groups are identified.

¹ <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/story/critical-ecosystems-congo-basin-peatlands>

² DRC administrative levels include Province, Territory, Sector, Groupment and Village
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subdivisions_of_the_Democratic_Republic_of_the_Congo



Map 1: Indigenous pygmy peoples groupments (yellow)³ and primary humid tropical forest cover 2023⁴. Sources: DGPA for IPP areas and GLAD for forest cover, see footnote 4

In addition to maps showing where IPPs live, there are multiple maps showing overlaps between these areas and other layers of information, such as forest cover and various land use concessions (e.g. logging, mining, oil blocks) as well as protected areas.

In this brief English version of the atlas, we show only a few of the maps. *Please visit DGPA's website to access more maps covering all provinces where IPPs have been located, from national level down to groupment level (link and QR-code).*

It is our hope that by making this atlas publicly available, the information can be used to securing the tenure rights of the IPPs in the DRC, and to systematically inform spatial planning at national, provincial and local levels. Sectoral ministries should all refer to the atlas when planning and executing their respective policies, be it from sectors that are already destroying or potentially threatening IPPs' lands and forests, or from sectors like the environment or human rights for whom this atlas represents opportunities for securing IPPs' rights and preserving forests.

POLITICAL CONTEXT AND OPPORTUNITY

Since 2021 (UNFCCC COP26 in Glasgow), international climate policy and finance have recognized that indigenous peoples and local communities (IPs and LCs) efficiently protect forests and biodiversity. However, this protection often meets an impasse where these peoples and communities lack the formal rights to their lands and resource management. This impasse has been tried solved both by scaling up governments' national processes for tenure rights

³ The long, straight line on the north side of the large IPP areas west of Tanzania is due to the administrative border drawn south of Maniema and Sud-Kivu provinces.

⁴ Overlay of <https://glad.umd.edu/dataset/primary-forest-humid-tropics> and global forest cover for 2023: <https://storage.googleapis.com/earthenginepartners-hansen/GFC-2024-v1.12/download.html>

recognition, and by donors stepping up finance for this work, as well as finance for IPs and LCs' forest management. Despite some advancement made, there is still a lot to be achieved, also in the DRC.

At COP 30 (Belém 2025) there will likely be a renewed pledge for forest tenure, based on the experiences and lessons learned from the first round since COP 26. The Forest Tenure Funders Group, consisting of both bilateral and philanthropic donors, have been able to provide USD 1.8 billion for tenure rights and IP and LCs' sustainable forest management in the years from 2021 to 2024⁵. Albeit important, there is still a lot more to do, and a renewed pledge could help finance the advancement of tenure rights recognition and implementation, also in the DRC.

Although IPPs are commonly recognized throughout DRC as the original occupants and the guardians of the forest, and the DRC has passed a law for IP rights in 2022⁶, they do not yet hold formal titles to the lands and forests they traditionally own, occupy and use. This insecurity, combined with discrimination and deforestation pressure from extractive industries, leads to forced evictions, conflicts and precariousness, which in turn threaten their role as guardians of the forest.

There is now hope for remedy also from DRC's new land-use planning law⁷. With this law, community customary land rights are explicitly acknowledged within the national land-use system. The law promotes a bottom-up planning approach where indigenous and local communities can actively participate in the design and development of land-use plans that impact their customary lands. By adopting this rights-based land-use law, the DRC has laid the foundation for sustainable development that respects both biodiversity and its inhabitants' rights. When the land-use planning under the new law now begins, the atlas of Indigenous Peoples should be extensively used.

THE ATLAS BUILDS UPON LEGAL ADVANCES AND PAVES THE WAY FOR IMPLEMENTATION

The atlas aims at providing DRC authorities, donors and private sector actors with data and information to ensure effective protection of IPPs' rights, living environments, and traditional lifestyles. This protection should come as a result of effective implementation of both the 2022 IP law and the 2025 law on land-use planning, both fundamental for the realization of IPPs' rights

"The State shall grant recognition and legal protection to the lands and resources that IPPs traditionally own, occupy, and use. This recognition shall be carried out with respect for the customs and traditions of the peoples concerned." (our translation of Article 48 of law 22/030).

Putting indigenous pygmy peoples on the map: the traditional guardians of the forest

In showing where IPPs are located down to the sector and groupment levels, the atlas highlights where authorities should begin to protect and secure IPPs' land and resource rights. As can be

⁵ Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities Forest Tenure Pledge: Annual report 2024-2025, <https://www.tenurepledge.org/ftfg-annual-report-2024-full.pdf>

⁶ Law No. 22/030 of July 15, 2022

⁷ Law No. 25/045 of July 1, 2025

seen on map 1, there are enormous areas where IPPs' areas overlap with the primary forest. The presence of IPPs' is hence an opportunity to preserve and manage forests in all regions.

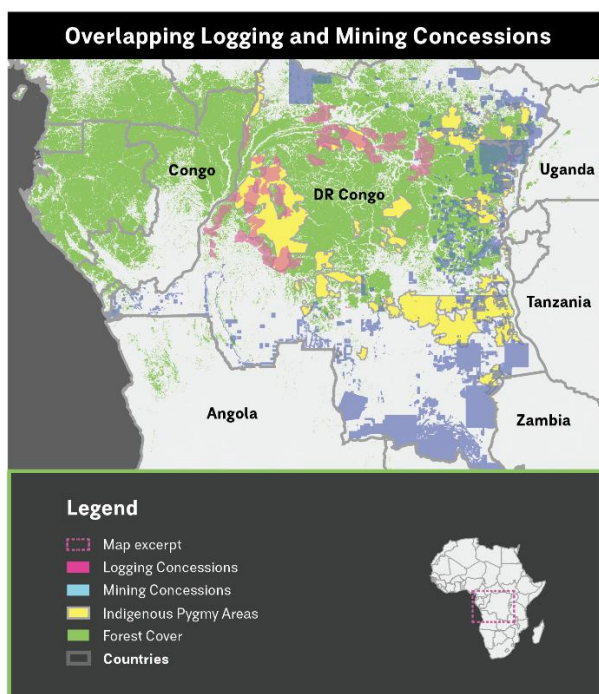
The comprehensive historical, anthropological, demographic, sociological, cartographic, political and legal information on IPPs also contained in the atlas is additional valuable guidance to both national, provincial and local authorities. The atlas describes IPPs' ancient and modern history, including dynamics in relationships with other communities and IPPs' traditional lifestyles, knowledge and practices. It also shows the IPPs' unique contribution to the preservation of forests and their biodiversity and provides insights into how challenges for the protection and implementation of IPPs' rights can be tackled.

In total, the atlas is an invaluable source that should actively be used by DRC authorities to inform the implementation both the IP law and the law on land use planning. With the knowledge contained in the atlas at hand, the government can better prevent land use conflicts and better plan for forest protection, climate change mitigation and sustainable development.

Identifying risks and opportunities for indigenous pygmy peoples and forests

In addition to maps showing where IPPs live, and where there are primary forests, the atlas shows a lot of thematic maps for each province (the 20 where these are IPPs) down to level of territory (DRC has 145). The thematic maps show where IPP presence overlaps with protected areas, and concessions for logging, mining and petroleum. Here, in this English excerpt, we only reproduce the maps for the extractive activities and only at national level.

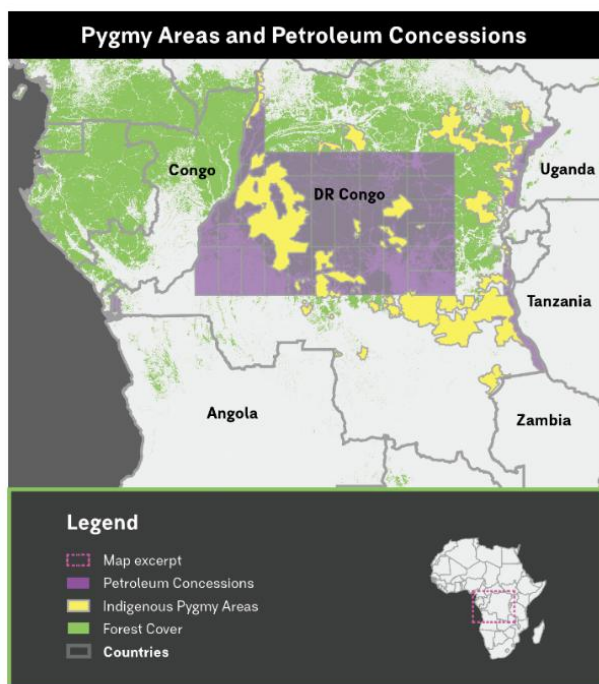
As can be seen in maps 2 and 3, there is a great threat for IPPs that many of their areas overlap with plans and concessions for resource extraction controlled by the government.



Map 2 Logging (pink) and mining (blue) concessions overlap with indigenous pygmy areas and tropical forest

Sources: Ministère de l'Environnement et Développement Durable [Atlas Forestier Interactif de la RDC](https://cod.forest-atlas.org/), <https://cod.forest-atlas.org/> for mining and logging. DGPA for IPP areas and GLAD for forest cover 2023, see footnote 4

Logging concessions overlap with areas where IPPs live in the western and north-eastern parts of the DRC, and the destruction of these forests will have detrimental impacts on the IPPs' rights and livelihoods, in addition to impacts on carbon storage and biodiversity. In several provinces in the east and towards the south, plus in some areas of two central provinces (Sankura and Kasai-central), **mining concessions pose a major threat**.



Map 3 Oil blocks overlapping indigenous pygmy areas and tropical forest

Source: Ministère de l'Environnement et Développement Durable, <https://cod.forest-atlas.org/> download in 2019

The **oil blocks** are the largest threat, just in terms of the areas they cover. The maps in the atlas are based on earlier downloads of the announced oil blocks and since then, the DRC government has revised the blocks (in 2025 tender), subtracting some protected areas like Virunga, but not all, and also added new blocks⁸. Should the now 55 blocks come to development without recognition of IPPs territorial rights, it will be detrimental to both the peoples and the forest they protect.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While not exhaustive, the DGPA's atlas on the IPPs in the DRC is a policy- and decision-making tool that should support rights-based spatial planning operations and forest protection.

In 2021 President Tshisekedi committed to "*legally securing the ancestral lands and territories of the indigenous Pygmies in the form of vast natural, ecological, and community reserves, according to the will and under the control of these peoples*".

⁸ <https://earth-insight.org/insight/drc-map-story-2025/>

The DRC has great opportunities to do this under the IP law from 2022, and from 2025 also through using the new law on land-use planning. As rights-based judicial frameworks are in place, and the atlas provides knowledge of IPPs presence and practices, time is ripe for implementation of rights-based forest management to excel.

In addition to the two laws the DRC has the most progressive community forest management framework in the region with the Local Communities' Forest Concessions (CFCLs). Also, with the 2022 Global Biodiversity Framework (under the UN convention on biological diversity), tracks for defining Other Effective Area-based Conservation Measures (OECMs) are ready to be explored. More focus has recently also been given to Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs). These are all options that can be used to secure IPPs' land and resource rights in practice, with political will and financial means.

DRC's government should:

SECURE INDIGENOUS PYGMY PEOPLES' LAND AND RESOURCE RIGHTS...

- ...When elaborating national, provincial, interprovincial and local spatial plans – including ambitious forest protection project such as the Kivu-Kinshasa Green Corridor, or other protected areas. IPPs must be seen as invaluable partners in designing and implementing forest and resource management.
- ...By moving the IP law from paper to implementation by establishing mechanisms or procedures for establishing territorial rights, and by supporting the IPPs territorial management.

The maps in the atlas are valuable to identify where the IPPs have customary rights, and they show the correlation between the presence of IPPs and primary forests. The atlas can help prioritize areas that should urgently be preserved and not left open for extractive industries, through securing the IPPs' land and resource rights, so that the IPPs can exert their traditional role as forest guardians.

International donors should:

SUBSTANTIALLY AND SUSTAINABLY SUPPORT...

- ... mechanisms providing direct financing to indigenous peoples and local communities, such as the Community Fund for Forests (CFF), the REPALEAC Fund or similar funding mechanisms.
- ... The government's initiatives aimed at securing both IPPs' rights and forest management.

Now, decision-makers and donors must act decisively to secure IPPs' land and resource rights, so that they can continue to play their crucial role in safeguarding the forests. By securing these rights for the IPPs', we are not only upholding justice but also taking critical steps towards protecting our planet's future. International support combined with national will, can make a profound difference in preserving the world's second-largest rainforest, combating climate change, and promoting sustainable development. Together, we can make a lasting impact.

Back page?: *Please visit DGPA's website to get the latest on the Atlas of Indigenous Pygmy Peoples (link and QR-code).*