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'Mapping for Rights'; A new tool for assessing community tenure, livelihoods and forest dependence, and resolving forest-use conflicts

Geospatial technologies have been used to provide invaluable insights into the customary tenure, rights and livelihoods of millions of forest-dependent people in the Congo Basin, providing a new tool for resolution of conflict over forest use and resources. For the last 15 years, Rainforest Foundation UK (RFUK) has been supporting and undertaking participatory mapping with local and indigenous communities in numerous locations in the Congo Basin. Using GPS mapping techniques, and so far involving over 500 communities, 100 GIS technicians, and 4,500 local mappers, the maps now cover around 3 million hectares, increasing to around 5 million hectares in the next few years. As well as being provided to communities, the maps are also loaded on the interactive online mapping platform www.MappingForRights.org. On this platform, as well as showing customary tenure down to the clan level, and important areas for livelihoods activities and basic socio-economic data such as availability of health care and education, it is also possible to overlay other forest user rights, such as commercial timber extraction, strict nature protection, REDD projects etc. All countries in the Congo Basin face challenges in implementing planned forest land use. All forests are owned by the state, and are leased to other users such as timber companies or conservation interests. However, as RFUK's extensive participatory mapping work is showing, most or possibly all forest areas are also under customary tenure claims which, though never formally recorded, are still actively defended by the relevant communities. The superimposition of other forest uses onto customary areas has caused and continues to cause conflict. The tool developed by RFUK can potentially help to avoid and resolve such conflicts, and points to possibilities for a more inclusive and participatory approach to forestry in the region in the future. Our work has shown that there is an extensive, contiguous and well-defined matrix of clan-based customary tenure units in various parts of the Congo Basin. There are reasons to believe that such a pattern may pertain over the entire region. Using an innovative online mapping platform, we have shown the extensive multiple superimposition onto these customary tenure patterns of other forest uses.

This work is the first time customary forest tenure units have been recorded, mapped and made available in the Congo Basin. It could provide a significant input into forest-use planning, designation and allocation in the region. It could assist in the planning and management of specific forest management units, from timber concessions to community forests to strictly protected areas and REDD projects. It could help resolve conflicts between different forest users. It could help assess the socio-economic impacts of various interventions and land-use options by providing baseline data on various socio-economic indicators.

As the Congo Basin region comes under increasing pressure for resource extraction, and initiatives such as REDD are simultaneously implemented at scale, the tool and methodology developed by RFUK could help improve the planning and implementation of forest management, and avert major conflict. The www.MappingForRights.org tool is also currently being assessed through extensive consultation for assessed through extensive consultation for development in other countries or sub-regions.