ON THE LINE OF THE EQUATEUR

NEWSLETTER

The Woods Hole Research Center and the Projet Equateur team present their third newsletter on the state of their REDD+ pilot project’s activities in Equateur Province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This newsletter covers the activities and work done between April and June 2015.

Updates from Mbandaka

For a few months Projet Equateur has met challenges in its implementation due to delays in disbursement and the partner organizations, which are in charge of implementing the project activities and are also the main beneficiaries of capacity building. In April 2015, the project finally received some funds, and this advance allowed for the resumption of part of the project’s development activities.

In May 2015, the Projet Equateur team also underwent an independent audit and a joint supervision mission conducted by the DRC National REDD coordination (CN-REDD) and the Congo Basin Forest Fund (CBFF).

Despite financial challenges and the absence of a partner organization for implementing activities in the field, the Projet Equateur team continued their work with both students and provincial experts in the environmental sector. In this edition, we will cover the key advances made in the field, as well as in the areas of education, awareness, and capacity building in Mbandaka.
1. Activities in the pilot village of Buya I

In June 2015, the director of Projet Equateur, Dr Glenn Bush, visited Mbandaka to monitor the ongoing projects taking place and engage in the project’s supervision mission. The trips into the field in Buya I have allowed a follow up of the evolution of the project's activities:

Agroforestry plots had previously been cleared and prepared to receive plants, which had been growing in the nursery since the second semester of 2014. In the month of May 2015, some of those plants (150 ramboutans, 129 avocatiers, 90 safoutiers, 21 arbres à pain, 18 jacquiers and 12 arbres à chenilles) were transplanted in the plots, and are now well established.

Three manioc dryers were built in the village of Buya I. Now we must wait for the next harvest in September/October inorder to train the villagers in in the use of this innovative system. In the meantime, improve stoves have been in use by the first beneficiaries and other community members have already expressed their eagerness to receive their own. Through these early trial, we have been able to identify weaknesses with the use and design of this new technology, which ha sled to adaptatoins I nstove design and follow up training with beneficiaries.

To the Left: After 6 months in the tree nursery, it is time to transplant the seedlings in the holes, which were made beforehand and filled with plant debris to enrich the soil in organic matter. The first few weeks following the transplanting are crucial to the establishment of the seedlings. With sufficient rain and by managing occasional risks, such as wandering goats, those seedlings will rapidly grow to fruit producing trees in the next 3 to 5 years for the benefit of the community.
“Mucuna”: a solution for rehabilitating degraded land

A key driver of deforestation in Equateur, and in the DRC more generally, is the practice of itinerant ‘slash-and-burn’ agriculture. This practice facilitates the clearing of fields, and the ashes also fertilize the soil. Unfortunately repeated burning, along with the absence of crop rotation practices, eventually impoverishes the soil, which forces the population to move more regularly and clear more forest.

Projet Equateur is testing the use of Mucuna (puriens and bracteata) for the rehabilitation of degraded land. This extremely hardy legume suffocates weeds and bad shrubs, facilitating land restoration enriches the soil with organic matter and by fixing nitrogen.

In the context of Equateur, this plant could rehabilitate plots of degraded land close to the villages, which had previously been overexploited. The power of mucuna as a cover crop can even reduce the labor required for clearing. Being a liana (creep), mucuna does not need to be outrooted as trees or shrub do. It can even be used as a cover crop in an orchard or tree plantation (such as fruit or palm oil).

Above: After about 6 months, we already observe a large quantity of organic matter, deposited on this degraded land, loosening the soil and giving it a rich and dark color. Under the leaves, the soil is kept moist and cool. Many beneficial insects and other micro-organisms are helping degrade the dead leaves, naturally releasing nutrients essential to the growth of future crops.
Three plots were set up in the village of Buya I to demonstrate the use of the mucuna plant as well as to produce seeds. In just 6 months the plots were covered, and the plant has already attracted the attention of the local population. Next, the mucuna will be planted in the three agroforestry plots as a cover crop, to reduce the need for weeding and enrich the soil in order to improve the production of the fruit trees there.

![Image](image_url)

*Above: Launching of World Environment Day at the Higher Institute for Rural Development (ISDR) in Mbandaka in presence of the provincial authorities, expert from the environment realm and students.*

### 2. World Environment Day

June 5th was the date of the World Environment Day. This year, with the encouragement of the provincial government of Equateur, we worked to organize events to celebrate the day and also took the celebrations as an opportunity to raise awareness of the local population about the environmental issues faced by Equateur.

In collaboration with the Environmental Commissioner, the Provincial REDD Coordination, the Botanical Garden of Eala and the “Network of Communication Journalist Friends of the Environment”, four television and radio broadcasts were produced and broadcasted over 6 local radio stations and 2 local television stations between June 1st and 5th 2015. They focused on the international theme of consumption, addressing problems of water, energy, and food.

As last year, a conference was organized at the Higher Institute for Rural Development (ISDR) with the patronage of the Provincial Governor and with the support of the University of Mbandaka (UniMba). This event brought together more than 300 participants: students and members of faculty, environmental experts, as well as local political figures and representatives of the Provincial government, the army, and the police.
After the official commencement of this day of celebration by the provincial authorities and a theatrical performance of the “Champions” theatre troupe, there were presentations and debates on the themes of rural/traditional forest use, payments for ecosystems services, REDD+ and sustainable development. The day ended with an outdoor screening in Joseph Kabila Park in Mbandaka of Al Gore's film “An Inconvenient Truth” about climate change, and a question-and-answer session afterward.

3. Meeting with his Excellence the Governor of the Province, and the Provincial Commissioner of Environment’s field visit

The goal of WHRC's work is to use the results of field research to influence the implementation of public policy, in order to ensure responsible management of natural resources, sustainable development, mitigation and adaptation to the negative effects of climate change.

Capacity building in government for a better implementation of public policy is a key goal of Projet Equateur's. It is therefore important to facilitate provincial authorities’ participation, which through the process of decentralization play an increasingly important role in the sustainable development of the province.

In order to ensure the transparency of Projet Equateur's activities, the project team took the Commissioner of the Environment and his advisor to pilot site of Buya I. This was an opportunity to present some achievements of the project, discuss early results and their implications for the province’s environmental policy.
Dr. Glenn BUSH, director of the project, its manager, Melaine KERMARC, and the provincial REDD+ focal point, Joseph ZAMBO were introduced by the Provincial Commissioner for the Environment to the Governor of the Province. This provided us the opportunity to present the initial results of the project, as well as discussing potential additional issues related to green development. The Governor and the Commissioner both expressed their support for WHRC as well as their wish to accelerate the REDD+ process in Equateur to ensure the conservation of the forest and to improve the quality of life for rural communities.

4. Audit et Mission de Supervision du Projet

During the month of May 2015, Projet Equateur received a financial audit from Deloitte who reviewed the project’s 2014 expenditures.

We then received a joint supervision mission by the Congo Basin Forest Fund (CBFF) and the government through the experts of the National REDD Coordination (CN-REDD), which we welcomed in Projet Equateur's Mbandaka offices in June 2015. This mission evaluated the performance of the project since its mid-term review in November 2014. That delegation was able to visit the project’s pilot site of Buya I to evaluate the progress made.

This mission transpired in a collegial atmosphere and permitted us to discuss openly the difficulties the project has encountered thus far. It was also an opportunity for the team to meet the project’s new Task Manager, M. Cyrille EKOUMOU, with whom we hope to collaborate closely to ensure its ongoing success. Projet Equateur obtained highly satisfactory results and several critical issues raised in the project’s mid-term review have been resolved.
6. Designated Consultants and Capacity Building

An essential part of Projet Equateur is working with local actors to implement field activities, as well as developing their capacities in promoting sustainable development and the responsible management of natural resources.

After poor performances by some project partners, efforts are underway to find replacements for these partnerships. A competitive selection process has been launched and new partners should be mobilized during the second semester of 2015.

These difficulties in finding competent local partners are for us an indicator of the importance of investing in building capacity locally. Equateur, and the DRC in general, suffers from a lack of technical, administrative, and managerial capacities, which not only affects the environmental sector, but public institutions and the private sector as well. Our experience demonstrates the importance of supporting higher education and the training of future agents in the environmental sector to make sustainable development a reality.
**Main Challenges**

The implementation of a pilot project like Projet Equateur is an opportunity to confront theories with reality on the ground, to identify operational challenges and to get on the right track to finding solutions.

- The government of the DRC has recently revived the **process of decentralization**, which will finalize the fragmentation of the Equateur province into 5 new provinces. This means that the project's activities will now take place in two different provinces. This new arrangement could have consequences for the implementation of our activities in case of changes in roles and responsibility of government entities at provincial level;

- **Political instability** in Equateur province is a challenge that we have encountered since the project's commencement in 2013. Indeed, since its launch, the province has twice changed governors and new elections are again forecasted in July and October 2015. These changes make it difficult for us to work on the long term with provincial authorities to ensure coherence in economic and environmental policy;

- **Delays in the implementation** of Projet Equateur have meant that to date we have only drawn on one third of available funds, and the execution period of the project leaves us with only one more year to achieve our goals. An extension will probably be necessary to give WHRC enough time to have the desired impact in Equateur.
Postscript: Dr. Glenn BUSH, Director, Projet Equateur

A critical concern for Projet Equateur is working on the province level framework for implementing environmental policy. It is a critical focus, as whatever national policies are established in any development sector; it is at the level of the province where policy is turned in to practice. Nationally the provinces are currently being redefined, with large jurisdictional areas being subdivided into smaller more manageable areas. Equateur Province as originally conceived has now been divided in to 5 separate provinces, each needing their own province government, legislature and civil service.

This poses some interesting practical challenges moving forward with the national REDD+ strategy, 5 times the provinces might well mean 5 x the costs of program implementation e.g. 5 times as many provincial environment focal points, program running costs etc. The key entry point for Projet Equateur is to support the national processes to think critically and examine the economic and social costs and benefits and logistical challenges of implementation to find efficient cost effective ways of continuing the momentum with REDD+ and other environmental management policy roll out. This is timely, as DRC’s accession to the Green Climate Fund has been approved and GCF will be an important source of funding, not just for REDD+, but a wide variety of programs aimed at stimulating low carbon development. A revitalized focus on developing the implementation capacity and roll out of decentralized operational services for green development will be the leading edge of change.

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” Barack OBAMA

“Zamba Malmu – The Forest is Good”

Projet Equateur aims to regenerate forests, improve livelihoods and promote economic development in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Named after the DRC province where it is located, the project utilizes novel community-based approaches to combat deforestation to develop and test models for a “Green Economy”.

Projet Equateur is a program of the Woods Hole Research Center, MA, USA

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