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Common Ground

## CONFLICT MONITORING REPORT SEPTEMBER 2022

### Msitu wetu, Umilele wetu (Our Forest, Our Future)

#### Background

*Our Forest, Our Future*, in partnership with World Conservation Society, Village Enterprise and FECONDE, aims to **strengthen community resilience to violence in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve**. This goal is being carried out through two objectives:

- *Strengthening opportunities for diverse community stakeholders in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve for constructive dialogue towards peace, inclusion and social cohesion.*
- *Improving horizontal and vertical collaboration in the Okapi Wildlife Reserve based on common visions and shared responsibilities*

As part of its activities, the project carries out periodic conflict snapshots, gauging issues, tensions, and opportunities in order to provide sensitive recommendations for good programmatic adaptation. Data was collected through individual interviews with key actors, following a purely qualitative approach.

#### Evolution of Conflict

The security situation is relatively calm in several of the project's intervention localities. However, in the northeastern part of the reserve, the presence of alleged ADF rebels, who commit atrocities against members of the community, has been reported. Conflict dynamics in and around the RFO were characterized during this quarter by tensions related to poor communication on the part of consortium members, which creates frustration among some young people with regard to project activities. Other sources of tension recorded during the period were: access to natural resources, crop destruction by animals in the reserve, and the issue of land boundaries in the western part of the reserve.

In Epulu, Babukeli, and Eboyo localities, **divergence over the project implementation approach and poor communication about the project activities** by the staff implementing the activities remain the main sources of tension between community members and the staff of the organizations working in the reserve. Conflicts are manifested through physical confrontations, refusal to participate in certain project activities as well as verbal arguments, which remain a recurrent phenomenon in these localities.<sup>1</sup> Several actors are involved in these conflicts, including opinion leaders, certain officials of youth structures (local youth council and youth parliament), certain outsourced politicians, and the staff from organisations working in the reserve. In Mambasa centre, Nia-Nia and Ekulungu, the frustrations of young people are seen in the difficult relations between some youth leaders and international organisations. These young people complain about the importation of labour from outside the territory of Mambasa, the lack of visible impact of certain projects and of a community and participatory approach, poor communication in terms of support for participants during project activities, the late payment of certain invoices from suppliers of various services, the lack of a strategy for the sustainability of project activities, the failure to respect the timetable of activities and the administrative burden in the processing of certain files. All these causes have a negative impact on the confidence of the communities towards the organisations. Rumours about the embezzlement of funds and the collaboration of

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<sup>1</sup> This violence has led to several acts of destruction of community property and the breakdown of peaceful cohabitation between the various communities in the project area.

certain organisations with armed groups, negatively influence the perception of young people towards international organisations and further reinforce these conflictual dynamics.<sup>2</sup> Suspicion remains the common attitude in relations between the staff of organisations and young people in Mambasa territory.

In the western part of the reserve, tensions related to **access to natural resources** seem to be recurrent and manifest themselves in human rights violations, mistrust and arrests, the eviction of communities in certain villages. Several actors involved in this conflict were cited, notably the eco-guards, the Congolese mining cooperative (MCCR), and the artisanal diggers. Mining, non-compliance with the terms of reference, corruption, and the lack of an exact demarcation of the reserve's boundaries are at the root of these conflicts. The granting of exploitation permits to mining cooperatives aggravates the tensions between the actors and the lack of transparency in the management of the monthly royalties paid by the mining companies often creates tensions between the rights holders within the ruling families. This exploitation of mining resources remains the trigger for conflicts due to the interests generated by these resources. Indeed, community members, particularly civil society, state that the exploitation of mines in their entities does not promote economic development, since this exploitation is perceived as illegal and the minerals exploited do not enter into the chain of traceability recognised by Congolese law.

In the localities of Babesua, Ebiane, Banana, Mabukusi, Tuonana, Babukeli, Eboyo, Koki, Babama, Molokayi and Babika, the **destruction of crops by reserve animals** in farmers' fields is frequently reported. This remains one of the triggers of conflicts that reduce the motivation of communities to engage in environmental protection activities. The abundance of animals in the reserve, the absence of a campaign to repel animals by eco-guards, and the non-practice of alley-ways, push animals from the reserve to invade farmers' fields. Since much of the local economy in the area is primary, this conflict affects the majority of communities, as crop raiding affects the household economy. Each time there is pest damage there is a drop in production and households are faced with a number of survival problems that prompt them to develop other alternatives, as their livelihoods are at risk.

The western part of the reserve is still characterized by **disputes over land boundaries** between the chiefdoms of Bandaka, Bombo, the MMB sector and the reserve. These are manifested in the eviction of people and arrests. Mining and boundary confusion remain the main motivations for this conflict and the stakes are high. The main actors involved in this conflict are traditional chiefs, artisanal miners and eco guards. In several project intervention localities, conflicts related to land boundaries have been reported more. These types of conflicts are latent, but they contribute to the weakening of relations between communities with the risk of leading to violent manifestations in the future.

## **Risk Analysis**

The main risk for the project and other stakeholders in the reserve remains poor communication about the project's approach by the teams involved in its implementation, which often leads to community resistance to project activities. Moreover, the failure to respect the timetable of activities due to procedural slowness is at the origin of many rumours about the misappropriation of funds, which creates frustration within the community and has a negative impact on the confidence of the communities towards the organizations that intervene in and around the reserve. This situation leads the community to develop attitudes of resistance to the activities of certain organizations.

The delay in the implementation of livelihood activities on behalf of the *Our Forest, Our Future* project by the partners WCS and Village Enterprise is another risk factor that could exacerbate tensions at the community level in the future, as community members, especially some traditional chiefs, keep asking for the start of this activity in accordance with what the project had communicated at the official launch. According to their positions, it is the non-respect of the planning of the activities that incites them to disengage in the activities of certain organizations.

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<sup>2</sup> On 20 August 2022, there was an uprising by a group of young people in Nia-Nia, who opposed the landing of a plane at the Nia-Nia airstrip without the authorised State services being informed, as they suspected ADF infiltration in their area. In May of the same year, another rumour circulated in Nia-Nia about the presence of MONUSCO in some of the surrounding villages, which led to the burning of a vehicle and three rooms in a local hotel, as well as to the death of a young man.

Another risk factor is the disregard of recommendations made by communities, especially during the Mambasa mini-roundtable of 14-15 October 2015, which reinforces the resistance of communities to the reserve's activities.

The precarious security situation, which remains unstable in certain localities of the Mambasa territory, constitutes another risk for social cohesion between the communities and the organisations working in and around the reserve.<sup>3</sup> The perception of suspicion of collaboration between organisations and armed groups, reinforced by the lack of communication and the manipulative rhetoric of certain politicians seeking political positioning for the upcoming elections, remains another major risk for the project and can have a negative impact on the implementation of project activities.

Tensions over access to natural resources and non-compliance with the DARN<sup>4</sup> by local communities on the one hand and some reserve agents on the other, are likely to exacerbate tensions. Community members note that their forest is more beneficial to the reserve agents, who beyond being paid as employers, exploit large tracts of land outside the norms. This situation causes several tensions in the area and leads to all forms of resistance from the communities to the conservation policy. Another risk of this practice is the destruction of the environment.

## **Recommendations**

1. Regarding the poor communication around the project's approach, which creates community resistance to the organizations' activities, and negatively impacts on trust between the communities and the organizations, the consortium should develop a clear and coherent communication plan, relying on Search's various communication tools such as participatory theatre and radio broadcasts. This strategy will help to combat the misperceptions that are at the root of the various tensions.
2. Develop a community-based and participatory approach by putting in place an effective accountability strategy in the different villages. This strategy will allow communities to raise their grievances in order to address the various claims of the communities by providing a solution that could significantly reduce tensions and perceptions of communities in relation to the reserve's activities.
3. Concerning the failure to take into account the recommendations made during past dialogue. The reserve should consult with the various partners currently working in the reserve to see if it is possible to respond to some of the communities' recommendations, which could reduce the various tensions in the area.
4. Develop a good coordination system to strengthen the synergy of the organizations working in and around the reserve in order to pool efforts so that the various projects have a visible and considerable impact on the ground.
5. Carry out awareness raising on the respect of the ARD through participatory theatre and radio broadcasts, to influence the perceptions of the different actors in a direct way.
6. To consolidate relations between conflicting actors in order to re-establish community confidence in the organizations. Rapprochement is necessary through community solidarity activities and the forum for popular expression to improve the understanding of key actors on all stages of the project, as well as key activities.

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<sup>3</sup> Suspicion of complicity of international organizations with armed groups sometimes leads to retaliatory actions by FARDC elements and constitutes a risk for the project, inter-community tensions between these actors may lead to violence

<sup>4</sup> DARN, guidelines for access to natural resources is a document that aims to inform all stakeholders the modalities on access to natural resources that can accompany the conservation of biodiversity and the proper management of substance areas.