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COP27: DRC's forest, its carbon and its investors

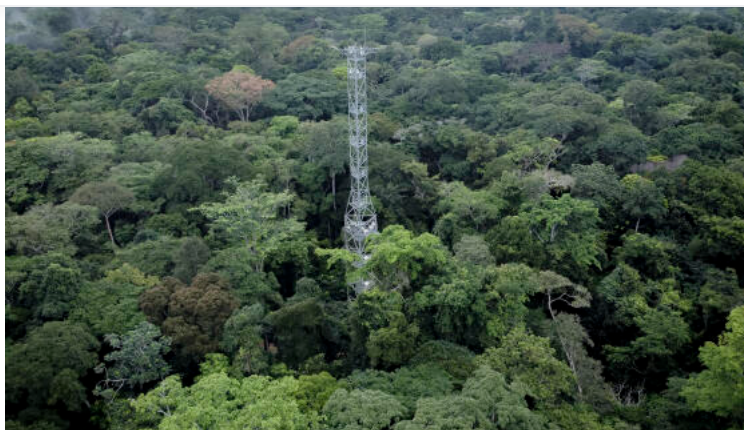
Thirteen years after its launch, an American company's project promising to fight against deforestation in DRC by selling carbon credits has been halted.

By Coralie Pierret (Bukavu (Democratic Republic of Congo) correspondent)

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The Yangambi forest with the flux tower, 100 kilometers from the city of Kisangani in Tshopo province, northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, September 2, 2022. GUERCHOM NDEBO/AFP

The overgrown forestry machines have not been used for a long time and the rusty containers have been left to rot. In the yard, the company's name – Jadora – has been painted in green on a tiny, rickety sign above a hand-drawn tree leaf.

"It used to be our company headquarters, but now it's just a liaison office," said Jacques Likakambula Okongo, the site manager in Yafunga, a village in the Tshopo province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). This American company's Congolese employees are not used to receiving visitors. The nearest commune is two hours away by motorcycle. "Here, we are fighting against the destruction of the Congo Basin forest," said one of them.

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the local population is questioning the company's intentions, as it had promised generous returns if they stopped clearing land for cultivation. The concession encompasses the land in some 30 villages.

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Reforestation programs

Jadora was one of the first foreign companies to invest in the forest carbon market in the DRC in the late 2000s. They arrived just as the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) mechanism, developed as part of the climate negotiations, was being put in place and the country imagined that it would be able to generate significant revenue from it. The Congo Basin forest covers more than 160 million hectares, of which more than 60% is in the DRC.

The American company, whose mission is "to mitigate climate change, protect biodiversity and improve the living conditions of communities," then contracted the forestry company Safbois to transform 60% of its concession, or 187,000 hectares, into a conservation unit.

reforestation programs, it promised to avoid the release of more than 20 million tons of carbon over a 30 year period. It was an effort that would be rewarded by the sale of as many credits on the voluntary market to companies, institutions or individuals willing to offset their CO₂ emissions.

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Daniel Blattner, the director of Safbois and president of Congo Emissions Management, the joint venture created with Jadora, is well known in Congolese business circles. The American is also the head of the Compagnie Africaine d'Aviation (CAA), one of the country's leading air transport companies. The conditions under which he obtained his forest concessions in the Tshopo in 2003 and 2004, despite a moratorium on the allocation of new titles, have been condemned by environmental NGOs including Greenpeace.

But no matter, the project was set up and the first credits were sold in 2015 to the American university Williams College, in Massachusetts, a few months after being certified "compliant" with international standards by the American NGO Rainforest Alliance.

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The American company Delta Air Lines and the Italian oil and gas company Eni are among its largest customers. A total of nearly 780,000 carbon credits were sold on the voluntary market up until 2020 but nothing since, according to the REDD project tracking database managed by the Center for International Forestry Research (Cifor). "The volume of carbon sequestered has gone down in our plot. We did not pass the certification stage during the second audit in 2019," said Jacques Ipoma, the project leader.

Now "we are trying to better explain our objectives to the communities and to accelerate reforestation." So far, only about 40 hectares have been reforested. This effort is "largely insufficient to compensate for the pressure on the forest exerted by local communities, who practice slash-and-burn agriculture," said Paolo Cerutti, head of CIFOR's Congolese unit.

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'Are they coming to exploit us or to protect us?'

The meager profits have all been plowed back into the project, said Mr. Ipoma. "\$500 in

said Moïse Balumbo, president of a group of local associations. Rice, peanut and cowpea seeds have also been distributed, but for the villagers, it is not enough. "It's a distraction to keep us quiet," said one farmer.

"We were promised significant benefits, but so far we have received almost nothing," said a teacher from Yafunga, in front of a school site abandoned by Jadora, "for lack of funding." The locals also blame Jadora for not playing fair. "We don't understand anything. Are they coming to exploit us or to protect us?" said an angry village chief.

At Yafunga, activities have almost come to a halt, even though the program officially runs until 2039. Mr. Ipoma hopes to restart them as soon as the project is "approved." Since 2018, no company can invest in the Congolese forest carbon market without government authorization.

The DRC, which has proclaimed itself a "solution country" to the climate crisis thanks to the carbon sink represented by its forests, is trying to regain control of what it still considers a potential financial windfall.

encourage it to establish a solid and reliable framework for combating deforestation. In this context, will there still be room for the private initiative Jadora, which has not kept any of its promises?

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