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With generous funding provided by IRIS, I began my preliminary dissertation research in the eastern DRC, investigating the social and environmental effects of decentralized forest management. The national government launched this community approach to forest conservation with the passage of the 2014 Community Forest Law. While promising legal ownership, the Community Forest Law could undermine the ability of customary governance institutions to manage forest resources by imposing a formal management structure. The prominent role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in establishing formal institutions further complicates questions of customary legitimacy and authority.

During the first phase of my research (September- December 2023), funded in large part by IRIS, I visited community forests across eastern DRC in order to select nine community forests to include in my research throughout the “Petit Nord” region of the Maniema province. The Petit Nord was one of the main arenas for the Congo Wars (1996-2003) which engulfed the region for almost a decade. This region now enjoys relative stability, though ongoing volatility continues to plague isolated pockets of eastern DRC. Despite the relative stability of this region, I learned quickly through informal conversations with people in these communities, that they still vividly remember the violent conflict that swept through their villages a mere decade ago. Remnants of rebel groups living throughout the forested landscape, while not causing any serious security concerns for communities, serve as a daily reminder of the ongoing conflicts further east. Nearby national parks, such as Kahuzi-Biega and Maiko, are further physical, geographic reminders of the violence communities continue to face in the name of conservation. My preliminary research highlights that these shared memories intersect with decentralization efforts in important ways as many clans expressed they did not want to apply for community forest property rights for fear this was a ploy by the government or NGOs to convert their forest into a protected area. These fears were felt more strongly around community forests neighboring national parks.

Initial interviews with customary authorities and forest management committees also offered insights into how forest management has shifted the role of customary institutions. While forest use rules themselves are relatively simple, I learned the customary land tenure system is complex. Instead of local institutions based on communal land tenure as commonly portrayed, the land is made up of a mix of sacred forests, clan owned primary forests (engambe), secondary forests (sacola), and private property for agriculture. There is also land set aside for artisanal mining in several of the community forests included in my project. The traditional chief, or Mwami, oversees how this matrix of different rights is regulated. Underneath the Mwami, clan leaders are charged with enforcing the rules that the Mwami sets forth. Together, these clan, or family-owned forests in the eastern DRC manage a landscape bursting with primary, intact forests. In a country where deforestation rates are rapidly increasing, this is an anomaly that conservationists are keen to protect as stability returns to the region and mining and other extractive industries expand.

Spending four months living in villages around these community forests also provided a first-hand perspective on the interactions between communities and NGOs and solidified my interests in combining ethnographic methods with semi-structured and household interviews. During my four

months, I was able to join several meetings between NGOs and the larger community. This helped me understand who facilitates meetings related to community forest management, making me curious about whether communities ever hold meetings about the community forest without direct involvement of the NGO. I will explore this further in my dissertation. My interest in accountability was also piqued when I learned that several committee members had been replaced.

These initial findings from my preliminary research will be instrumental in designing my final interview questions and household surveys. As I move into the next phase of my dissertation research, I am particularly interested in further grounding my research in the broader social and historical context. This will make it possible for me to use my research to craft recommendations for external stakeholders on how to best support community driven forest conservation efforts, and in turn, lead to improved forest conservation outcomes.