

Mediation resolves conflicts in sensitive areas

“Thanks to the support I’ve received I’ve been able to resolve several conflicts that could have led to violence between various groups and people here in Itombwe. By mediating and listening to both sides and to what witnesses have had to say, we’ve been able to find a solution to suit all parties.”

Hilaire Isombya Besana works for a youth organisation in the community Mwenga, Congo and is one of several mediators who received training through a WWF-project. Mwenga lies on the fringes of Itombwe Massif in Congo (Kinshasa), the country officially known as Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Itombwe is a forest region that stretches over 16,000 square kilometres and lies near the border with Burundi. It has mountain rainforest mixed with savannah forest and its altitude varies from 900 to 3,500 meters. It is also home to the legendary mountain gorillas. Large parts of Itombwe are today a nature reserve and the plan is to allow the local population to utilise the natural resources in the reserve at the same time as they help to protect the environment and the wildlife.

Itombwe is also on the outskirts of an area steeped in violence and poverty where military conflicts have been raging for decades. Over the years, armed groups have built bases in Itombwe from which they have terrorised the civilian population by plundering, killing and raping. The conflicts have also brought things to a head between ordinary people, particularly when limited resources are to be divided among them. WWF supports local organisations and village councils in their efforts to resolve the conflicts around the nature reserve.

Poverty is another enormous challenge. An estimated 70 per cent of the population live below the poverty line. Most survive on small-scale farming, breeding goats and pigs and hunting. For many years hunting was the only reliable source of protein. Itombwe is also rich in minerals and there are many small mines that are a risk to life and limb. Long-term sustainable development is dependent on local communities taking part in the care and management of nature reserves and showing good economic development. But how does it work in practice?

“People say ‘we have given the forest to the reserve and what do we get in return?’ If we are to protect the park and still give people a better life then we must work together with people and get the traditional leaders on board as well. This is one of our greatest challenges,” says Gentil Kavusa from WWF in Itombwe. “Regulations for mining operations and other activities must also be set together with people who live in the area. Putting a stop to illegal felling and poaching is equally important. Limited resources can also lead to conflicts, which is why conflict resolution is so important.”

Richard Minyota Kateke chairs one of the organisations in Mwenga.

“First and foremost we have to build trust so that people turn to us when a conflict flares up. To achieve this we’ve created a system whereby people get in touch as soon as a conflict arises, enabling us to step in before it gets out of hand. Then of course we have to understand the complexities of the situation and find a solution to suit both parties. The courses we attended have helped us resolve different types of conflicts. One of them was between two clans who both claimed the rights to some hunting grounds. We managed to identify the owner and this was accepted by the other clan.”

Hilaire Isombya Besana is for his part happy with the course he attended. It taught him to mediate in complex situations as well.

“One difficult issue concerned two clans that were in disagreement over fishing rights and farmland. We resolved it by giving the farmland to one clan and the fishing rights to

the other as compensation. We put the agreement on paper and it was approved by all concerned. Today the clans get on really well.”

The Itombwe project

The Itombwe project began in 2014 and has several components, including conflict resolution, land rights, income-generation in a sustainable manner and participation in the planning and utilisation of natural resources. The project enables WWF to help people develop their own local organisations to pursue environmental conservation.