



Mr. Guido Gryseels, Director Royal Museum of Central Africa

**His Royal Highness Prince Philippe of Belgium,
Mr Armand De Decker, Federal Minister for Development Cooperation,
Mr Didier Pembe Bokiaga, Minister for the Environment, Nature Conservation,
Water and Forests in the Democratic Republic of Congo,
Mr Bruno Tobback, Federal Minister for the Environment,
Mr Gareth Thomas, Minister for International Development, United Kingdom,
Mr Jan Grauls, Chairman of the Executive Committee of the FPS Foreign Affairs,
Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation,
Mr Stephan Lintner, World Bank Representative,
Mr Carl Michiels, Chairman of the Management Committee of Belgian Technical
Cooperation,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,**

It is a great honour for me to welcome you to this International Conference on the Sustainable Management of the Forests in the Democratic Republic of Congo today.

This conference brings together politicians, policy makers, scientists, NGOs and the private sector with the objective of raising awareness among the partners concerned and calling them into action for sustainable management of the Congolese forests.

Congo's tropical rain forest is the second largest in the world after the Amazon forest. As such, it is our planet's second lung and of crucial importance when it comes to maintaining biodiversity. However, this forest is also of huge economic and social value for the people of DRC. Following the successful elections and formation of a government, DRC has now reached a turning point and the way in which its forests are managed in the future will be crucial for macro-economic development and social changes in the country.

Recent evidence about global climate change reinforces the need to act urgently and in consultation. Failure to do so could lead to an ecological catastrophe and human tragedy.

I would therefore like to thank our Minister for Development Cooperation not only for taking the initiative in organising this conference but also for the strong messages he has put across about this topic. And the presence today of HRH, Prince Philippe, who is also Honorary President of the Federal Council for Sustainable Development is of enormous symbolic importance in supporting the goals of the conference and I wish to express my appreciation to you, Your Highness, for your presence here today.

I also welcome the presence of partners from so many sectors (representatives from private sector, civil society, high ranking policymakers as well as scientists) and institutions: Congo's forests constitute a strong rallying point of international commitment (I specifically mention the WB, EU, DfID and France as supporters of the conference).



While we may sometimes hold different perspectives or approaches we share a common goal.

We urge the private sector to work closely with the Congolese authorities and NGOs: their presence at this conference is proof of their interest in sustainable forest management and willingness to work together as responsible partners.

I would like to emphasise that this conference is not a one-off event: it is part of a process that will result in an international effort to support our Congolese partners to implement the priority agenda.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the task force that made this conference possible in a relatively short period of time - very special thanks to Carl Michiels of Belgian Technical Cooperation for coordinating this task force and for his step-by-step involvement. Special thanks also go out to our partners in DGDC, the Cabinet of our Minister, and the staff of RMCA and BTC. Paola Vallejo, in particular, deserves an enormous bouquet of flowers and a well stocked fruit basket.

I am confident that this conference will be a crossroad of scientific debates aimed at strengthening policy actions for the benefit of the sustainable management of DRC forests.

I would now like to invite Mr Armand De Decker, Federal Minister for Development cooperation, to deliver the opening speech.

Thank you