

Welcome Address

Excellencies,
Permanent Secretary,
Honorary Permanent Secretaries,
Consœurs and *Confrères*,
Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In my capacity as president of the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, I warmly welcome you to the international conference 'Nutrition and Food Production in the Congo Basin'.

The Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, which is, together with the National Committee for Biological Sciences of the Royal Academies for Science and the Arts of Belgium, at the basis of today's event, was founded in 1928, albeit under another name. At that time, the area to which it devoted its attention was exclusively restricted to the Belgian Congo. Since then, it has greatly diversified its focus of interest to the whole of Africa and the rest of the overseas world. In this particular conference, the Academy concentrates on the Congo Basin rainforest, which is a broader geographical area than the one to which its name has traditionally been attached.

Basically, our Academy for Overseas Sciences is a learned society grouping scientists from diverse disciplines in the fields of human, natural, medical, and technical sciences. That does not mean, however, that this beautiful, early 19th-century palace in which you find yourself today, is an academic hiding-place and an ivory tower retreat where, remote from worldly and practical affairs, we solely engage in lofty, intellectual considerations and discussions. Contributing to the progress of scientific knowledge about overseas regions remains a prime objective of the Academy, but it is not the only one. The Academy also aims to serve as a meeting place for communication between the North and the South. Additionally, it wishes to promote research and the dissemination of knowledge concerning overseas countries within those overseas countries themselves. As such, the Academy duly strives to engage with the living world.

The present conference, focussing on various topics dealing with nutrition and food production in the Congo Basin, is a perfect example of the Academy's higher aspirations. Nutrition is a universal human right and, therefore, a problem at a global level. Focussing on a local environment, this conference will hopefully set standards and determine ways to approach this issue that will have relevance for other high biodiversity areas far beyond Central Africa.

Before officially opening the conference, I have the pleasure to introduce our *confrère* Jan Rammeloo to you. Jan's broad interests, both in the fields of botany and economy, are at the basis of this initiative. Jan studied botany and mycology at the University of Ghent and applied economic sciences at the Vrije Universiteit Brussels. His scientific career is centred on African mycology. Besides doing field research on the African mushroom flora, involving many trips in the Congo basin, he taught mycology as a visiting professor at several African universities. He is cofounder of the African Mycological Association. For more than 25 years he taught cryptogamic botany and mycology at the University of Antwerp; he has been director of the National Botanic Garden of Belgium for 20 years. As a biologist he always had a strong interest in biodiversity; serving as a civil servant (for 36 years) at the Belgian federal

ministry of agriculture, fuelled his interest in agronomy. He is an honorary fellow member of our Academy, president of the National Committee for Biological Sciences and director of the Foundation for the Promotion of Scientific Research in Africa.

Jan, I invite you to take the floor and I wish you all an entertaining and extremely productive conference!

Dirk Huyge
President of the Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences