

The Arrupe Centre for Integral Ecology

A partnership in the Congo Basin with the communities and the Jesuits, rooted in Congolese soil, in response to the crisis of our common home

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In the heart of Brazzaville, within the grounds of the Saint-Ignace Community, a new initiative has been born: the Arrupe Centre for Integral Ecology. Behind its inauguration on 5 June 2026 lie several years of commitment to understanding and applying local wisdom, journeys through the forests and farmland of the Congo Basin, encounters with village chiefs, sustained dialogue and field research, together with a deep discernment within the Society of Jesus. The Centre's vitality moves beyond a merely technical response to an ecological crisis: it is a commitment lived as an act of faith, of responsibility, and of love for our common home and our shared humanity.



Official inauguration of the Arrupe Centre, 5 June 2026, in Brazzaville, in the presence of Church, civil and diplomatic figures.

A Genesis in Africa Connected to Global Urgency

The initiative responds to a twofold call. On one side, the Church invites us to care for our common home. On the other, the Society of Jesus has placed this same concern at the heart of its mission through its Fourth

Universal Apostolic Preference, devoted to care for creation. It was at the crossroads of these two calls that Fr. Provincial Mathieu Ndomba, SJ, conceived this Congo Basin project, listening to the needs expressed on the ground by communities and local actors. To carry this intuition forward and give it shape, he set up a commission tasked with discerning, and then steering, the establishment of an ecological centre on Congolese soil, placed under the direction of Fr. Christopher Ngolele, SJ.

The choice of the Congo Basin is no accident. The world's second-largest tropical rainforest, it spans six Central African countries , Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea , and shelters exceptional biodiversity. Unlike countries that are already industrialized, now forced to correct decades of unsustainable growth, Central Africa still holds a unique window: the chance to invent, starting now, a development that is sustainable from the outset rather than one it must catch up to later. Acting now, pre-emptively, is how a crisis is prevented before it breaks out.

Accompaniment: Travelling Together

In this spirit of service to the mission of protecting our common home, Fr. Barwendé Médard Sané, SJ, was appointed Centre Director. Beginning in January 2026, he travelled the country for several months to deepen his connection to the people of the region and to nourish the Centre's vision from the ground up. The Provincial, Fr. Jean-Luc Enyegue, SJ, validated this commitment and carried it forward as discerned by the Jesuit Community.

In Ouessou, in northern Congo, Fr. Barwendé met communities living to the rhythm of the forest. In Moukouangondo and Péké, women and men who are guardians of ancestral knowledge about soils, plants and water. In Lango and the Mambili valley, village chiefs bearing a centuries-old relationship with the forest and the river. In Inoni, two hours from Brazzaville, land waiting to be farmed differently , sustainably, cooperatively, with communities as actors rather than spectators. In Pointe-Noire, finally, at the Lwango site, the reality of an industrial and port-based Congo, itself awaiting a Jesuit presence on land already acquired and secured for several years by Fr. Jean Roger Ndombi, SJ.



The headquarters of the Arrupe Centre, within the Saint-Ignace Community in Brazzaville.

This fieldwork gave rise to a simple conviction: the credibility of a future centre builds from the ground up toward the institution, not the other way around. Visibility should come from concrete transformation, not from communication about intentions made in advance. The institutional culmination of this genesis came on 8 May 2026, when the Episcopal Conference of Congo formally recognized the Centre as a Catholic mission initiated by the Society of Jesus, a gesture of trust that the Centre receives as both a blessing and a call to action.

A Centre for Action and Vigilance

The Centre bears the name of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, a Spanish Jesuit and Superior General of the Society of Jesus from 1965 to 1983. Present in Hiroshima on 6 August 1945, when the atomic bomb fell, he drew from that experience a conviction that remains at the heart of contemporary Ignatian spirituality: to find God in all things. As Superior General he described the Jesuit mission as forming “men and women for others”; as a leader, he made faith a commitment to justice and to the service of the most vulnerable. This same commitment to justice and service drives the creation of the Arrupe Centre for Study, Research and Action in Integral Ecology.

Its visual identity draws together three inseparable symbols into a single emblem: the leaf, standing for the living nature and biodiversity of the Congo Basin; the figure with the staff, the standing guardian who embodies at once the researcher, the pastor, and the local communities who have always watched over their

land; and the river, evoking the Congo Basin as the green lung of the planet. Remove any one of the three and the other two are weakened, illustrating the central lesson integral ecology teaches: everything is connected.



The visual identity and mission areas of the Arrupe Centre: monitoring, training, research and action, under the motto “Where Creation breathes, Humanity keeps watch.”

The Centre's motto, “Where Creation breathes, Humanity keeps watch,” names a twofold movement: naming the fragility of natural spaces that are still alive, while affirming the Centre's active presence alongside them, observing, seeking, forming, acting, with communities and for them. “Where Creation breathes” names the places where life remains possible and abundant, forests, rivers, farmland, communities, yet also vulnerable, threatened in their balance. “Humanity keeps watch” expresses, in response, an active, contemplative and responsible presence: a vigilance made of observation, study, research, advocacy, formation and community action in the service of safeguarding our common home.

The river in the emblem refers explicitly to the Congo Basin, but the spirit of the symbol, the standing guardian who watches over creation wherever it breathes, is offered as a model to other basins, other rivers, and other ecological fragilities across the region. The Centre's identity thus carries within it the mark of its provincial ambition: it is designed to be shared, under the same name, the same emblem and the same motto, with the thirteen other countries of the Jesuit Province of West Africa that face the shared crisis of our common home.

Reflective Tradition

The Centre draws upon a longstanding and contemporary intellectual and spiritual lineage: *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII's 1891 social encyclical, for its foundational vision of human dignity and the common good; Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'* (2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), for the link between integral ecology, poverty, justice and universal fraternity; Pope Francis's 2023 apostolic exhortation *Laudate Deum*, for its sense of climate urgency and its call to concrete alliances; and Pope Leo XIV's 2026 encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, for its reflection on artificial intelligence, the human person, and an ecology of communication.

To these magisterial sources is added a more contemplative inspiration: that of Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ (1881–1955), the Jesuit paleontologist and theologian for whom matter itself bears the trace of the Spirit, “matter is spirit moving slowly enough to be seen.” This insight of a spirituality embodied in matter, the forest, the river, the cultivated land, resonates deeply with the Arrupe Centre's calling: to see in the Congo Basin not merely natural scenery to be preserved, but a place where God allows himself to be encountered.

To this intuition is added another Jesuit voice, closer still to Congolese and Central African soil: that of Fr. Engelbert Mveng, SJ (1930–1995), the Cameroonian theologian, historian, artist and archaeologist who gave African theology one of its most enduring concepts, that of “anthropological poverty”, a poverty deeper than material want, one that strips a people of its history, its culture, and its capacity to shape its own future. For Mveng, no development imposed from outside could ever be authentic; it had to grow from the dignity, memory and self-understanding of African peoples themselves. This conviction runs through the Arrupe Centre's mission: to build, together with the communities of the Congo Basin, an integral ecology that is African in its roots and universal in its reach. Legally, the Centre is sponsored by the Association of Jesuits in Congo (AJECO).

A Presence Meant to Partner, Not to Compete

The Arrupe Centre does not claim to start from scratch. It sees itself as one more partner within an already rich ecosystem of committed actors, among them two major contributors. First, the Congolese State, in particular the Ministry of the Environment, the Congo Basin and Sustainable Development, whose diplomatic action has made Congo one of the recognized players in African environmental diplomacy. Second, the Catholic Church, through its dioceses, parishes and congregations, which was accompanying rural communities long before the word “ecology” became common, alongside the international organizations and NGOs already present on the ground.

What the Jesuits bring to this already fertile landscape can be summed up in three distinctive traits. First, a link between the spiritual and the human, between thought and action, with analytical tools that turn lived experience into shareable knowledge. Second, a global presence combined with an African anchor: the Jesuit network, one of the most extensive in the world, allows the Centre to remain in dialogue with comparable experiences elsewhere. Third, a properly spiritual approach to the ecological question: for the Jesuits, the crisis of our common home is not only a matter of public policy or technology, but a question of conversion. The Centre thus intends to be an interdisciplinary instrument of mediation between reflection and action, between the local and the global, between tradition and the future, a space where the world's great ideas about climate meet the realities of the river, the forest, and Congolese villages.

A Method Committed to Listening and Dialogue

This commitment to reflection and action translates into particular attention to the Indigenous peoples of the Congo Basin , the Aka, Baka, Mbendjele and other groups, guardians of ancestral knowledge about living in balance with the forest. The guiding principle is to partner with these communities, not to impose ideas on them: their voice and insight must shape the institution, not merely benefit from it. This commitment finds concrete expression in ongoing travel to each community, and in the governance envisioned for the Centre, whose Board of Directors will include representatives of Indigenous peoples.

A distinctive mark of the Arrupe Centre's approach is a deliberate choice to let presence deepen understanding. True to the Ignatian tradition of “contemplation in action,” the Centre favours a four-step method , see, judge, act, institutionalize , that begins with listening to communities. In this approach, authentic accounts from Indigenous communities speak for themselves, deepening understanding in ways that inform more effective research, teaching and programming.

A Territorial Presence Rooted in Brazzaville, Extending Across the Country

The Centre's initial premises are located in Brazzaville, within the Saint-Ignace Community, where the ground floor has been fitted out to host a conference hall seating up to fifty participants, along with offices. Pointe-Noire, with its industrial, port and extractive sector, is envisioned as a likely next site of expansion; discussions are already under way with the Institut Ucac-Icam , the engineering institute jointly run by the Université Catholique d'Afrique Centrale (UCAC) and the Institut Catholique d'Arts et Métiers (ICAM) , on engineering training. In the north of the country, missions to Ouessou, Odzala National Park and the villages of the Sangha are set to continue, with further trips planned to Nkayi and Kinkala. In Inoni, two hours from Brazzaville, roughly ten hectares belonging to the Province will host the Centre's agroecological pilot project.

Service Beyond Congo: Connecting to the Entire West Africa Province

While the Centre is born in Brazzaville and takes root first in the Congo Basin, its commitment to service does not stop at Congo's borders. From the outset it conceives of itself as a centre for the entire Jesuit Province of West Africa , spanning fourteen countries , rather than a purely regional work. The Centre's vision is one of a future recognized internationally for protecting the Congo Basin and, more broadly, for responding to Africa's ecological challenges, by promoting sustainable and just development models rooted in local knowledge and the principles of integral ecology.

This commitment to service throughout West Africa translates concretely into the Centre's strategic plan, which identifies a set of regional challenges to which the listening, research and action begun in the Congo Basin are meant to extend:

- Lake Chad, whose dramatic shrinking directly affects the livelihoods of millions of people;
- Desertification in the Sahel, where the advancing desert threatens the living conditions of populations a little more each year;

- Coastal erosion, with rising waters and a retreating shoreline weakening entire communities along the Atlantic coast;
- Urban pollution, through the crises of air, water and waste management faced by the region's major cities.

The Congo Basin remains the anchor point and the preferred learning ground, this is where the Centre builds its method, its first pilots, and its credibility. But this experience is designed to be adapted to contexts beyond Congo. As with the research of Nobel laureate Elinor Ostrom (1933–2012) on the collective management of shared resources, the Centre's findings and practices are intended to be transferable: what is learned in Ouesso, Inoni or the Sangha about accompanying communities, practising agroecology, or documenting Indigenous knowledge is meant to feed, tomorrow, similar action in the Sahel, around Lake Chad, or along coastlines threatened by erosion.

This provincial dimension also finds expression in the advocacy strand of the Centre's work, which explicitly links the protection of Congo Basin ecosystems to the restoration of Lake Chad, the Great Green Wall initiative in the Sahel, and coastal protection, with action conceived at several scales: national; regional, through bodies such as COMIFAC (the Central African Forests Commission), ECCAS (the Economic Community of Central African States), and REBAC (the Ecclesial Network for the Congo River Basin); and international, through major climate conferences and financial institutions. In time, the Centre intends to become a point of convergence for the ecological initiatives carried by the Society of Jesus in West Africa, a place where the Congolese experience is in dialogue with that of other countries facing, each in its own way, the same crisis of our common home.

A Vision Moving in Two Directions

The Centre's ambition rests on one conviction: the ecological crisis is also a human, social, spiritual and cultural crisis, one that will not be resolved by technology or funding alone, but through a transformation of mindsets, practices and alliances. The Centre intends to make Congo a reference point where faith, integral ecology and social justice meet to produce responses to the global climate crisis that are rooted, credible and shareable. This vision unfolds in two complementary directions. Toward the world, it means carrying the voice of Congo Basin communities, so that they are recognized not as folklore, but as living resources for a deeper understanding that drives more effective action for the region and for the planet's future. Toward Congo, conversely, it means translating the world's dialogues and research on climate, biodiversity and economic transition into language that is accessible and directly useful to Congolese actors and decision-makers.

Four Programs of Action

This vision translates into four programs of action, conceived as complementary initiatives. The first, *Mémoire Vivante*, is a partnership of listening to living memory. Rather than observing communities from the outside, the Centre aspires to build with them a place of shared memory, through joint work of observation, archiving, and the documentation of the ecological heritage of Congo, documentary films, sound archives, field accounts, portraits of communities told by those who live them. In a context where much intangible

knowledge risks disappearing under economic and environmental pressure, this work of memory is conceived as a strategic instrument in the service of awareness-raising, research and environmental diplomacy. In this spirit, a parish might organize an evening of testimonies, a Jesuit university might fund a documentation project, and a community might itself become the producer of its own story.

The second program, training and capacity-building, is *Écoconscience*. It aims at a cultural transformation of organizations, to be rolled out from Brazzaville to Pointe-Noire, particularly within the extractive and port sector, in partnership with the Institut Ucac-Icam. Its central intuition: sustaining the environment also means sustaining the economy. Training here is not conceived as one-directional: the Centre also intends to recognize community intellectuals and elders as full-fledged educators, whose word engages as an equal with academic knowledge.

The third program, research and intellectual production, is *Congo Vert*. It seeks to bring forward Congolese and African voices in dialogue on the ecological crisis, rooted in the experience of communities. The Centre wants to be a bridge between the ancestral guardians of African wisdom and university structures, not as objects of study, but as partners in thought leadership, contributing in particular to the affirmation of an Afrocentered epistemology in environmental matters and linking integral ecology to the challenges of the digital revolution and artificial intelligence. In this initiative, the Centre extends the insight of Fr. Engelbert Mveng, that African theology and African thought more broadly must begin with the concrete cries and hopes of peoples confronting anthropological poverty: to call communities “guardians of the forest” is to affirm that they are also authors of meaning, capable of articulating, in their own terms, a spiritual reading of creation and development.

The fourth program advances fieldwork and agroecology through *the Inoni pilot project*, roughly ten hectares run in cooperation with local cooperatives. It is conceived as a living laboratory: soil management, crop rotation, diversification of production, the empowerment of women and rural youth, and experimentation with cooperative models suited to Congolese realities. The Centre will invite experienced farmers to become trainers in their own right, placing their empirical knowledge in dialogue with the contributions of scientific agroecology.

This choice of small-scale agroecology reflects a broader finding shared by economists of African development: unlike Asia or the United States, the continent's soils are, for the most part, not suited to the same model of large-scale industrial agriculture. Local farming, carried by families and cooperatives, constitutes the true engine of African economic development. This finding aligns with Fr. Barwendé's own research on Indigenous knowledge and ecological protection, which shows that local communities are not merely the beneficiaries of development, they are, quite often, its most effective agents. This same conviction informs a strategy in which Africa will not advance by imitating other continents' large-scale industrial agriculture, but by rehabilitating popular farming, reforestation and self-reliance rooted in local realities, a conviction the Centre translates into practice each time it backs a cooperative, trains a young farmer, or helps regenerate a plot of soil.

Together, these four flagship programs embody the Centre's spirit: *Mémoire Vivante* for documenting Indigenous knowledge, *Congo Vert* for Congo's contribution to regional and international climate debates, *Écoconscience* for organizations, and *Inoni* for agroecology and empowerment. Through documentary

productions, broadcasts and publications, these initiatives intend to connect a credible Congolese voice to bodies such as the Congo Basin Climate Commission and the Blue Fund.

Present Needs and the Path Toward a Home of Its Own

For the moment, the Centre is warmly hosted by the Jesuit Community of Saint-Ignace in Brazzaville, whose premises have given it a first roof, a conference hall, and offices from which to begin its mission without delay. This hospitality has been decisive, and the Centre remains deeply grateful for it. Yet its ambition already extends beyond what a shared, temporary space can offer: the Centre intends, in the years ahead, to seek the funding needed to acquire and develop infrastructure of its own, suited to its provincial ambition, while remaining, in spirit, close to the community that gave it its first home.

Several concrete needs accompany this stage of growth. The Centre needs ongoing operational support to sustain its small team and to expand its fieldwork across the Congo Basin. It requires basic equipment , computers, and audiovisual and recording material for the Mémoire Vivante program , as well as tools suited to agroecological work at Inoni. Given the frequent power interruptions affecting both Brazzaville and the more remote sites, the Centre also calls for solar panels and reliable renewable-energy systems, so that research, communication and community work can continue uninterrupted. And because so much of its mission depends on presence in the field , regular visits to Ouessou, the Sangha, Inoni, Nkayi and Kinkala, and eventually to Pointe-Noire , the Centre needs vehicles capable of reaching these communities safely and consistently, together with the logistical support that sustained travel requires.

Beyond these immediate needs, the Centre will also require support to grow its programs, train its staff, and, over time, build the premises that will allow it to stand as a lasting institution in its own right , a concrete way in which partners, within the Society of Jesus and beyond, can accompany the Centre's mission from its earliest days.

A Collective Work, Turned Toward the Future

What the Arrupe Centre is inaugurating in Brazzaville is not a finish line, but a starting point. Born within the Saint-Ignace Community, it is called to build connections with villages and local knowledge, deepen its programs, and strengthen its organizational partnerships. Over the longer term, the Arrupe Centre thinks of itself less as a structure to be run alone than as a platform to be grown together with others , a way of becoming what might be called a “university of knowledge and action for the Congo Basin,” connected to a network of partners worldwide. In the years ahead, this vision calls for dialogue with Jesuit universities in Africa, Asia, the United States and Europe.



Fr. Barwendé Médard Sané, SJ, director of the Arrupe Centre, speaking at the inauguration ceremony, 5 June 2026.

Carried by a small team gathered around Fr. Barwendé Médard Sané, director, with Fr. Yannick Essengue, SJ, in communications, Fr. William Boutchang, SJ, in production and logistics, scholastic Blaise Allaramadji, SJ, in stewardship, and Professor Richard Callahan from The University of San Francisco, as advisor for strategy and partnerships, the Centre presents itself not as a finished apparatus, but as a dynamic still in motion, a way, in its own words, of serving “wherever our common home needs us most.” Around the Arrupe Centre thus gathers a constellation of witnesses. Pedro Arrupe teaches that faith must become justice. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin invites patience in seeing and realizing the potential of the Congo Basin:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God. We are, quite naturally, impatient in everything to reach the end without delay. We should like to skip the intermediate stages. We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability, and that it may take a very long time...

Engelbert Mveng names the anthropological poverty born of slavery and colonialism, and calls African peoples to be its healers rather than its victims. Nelson Mandela reminds us that it lies in our hands to build a more just world. Pedro Arrupe and Popes Leo XIV and Francis alike call for action in accompanying the most vulnerable, in partnership for our common home. Different as their paths were, their voices converge on a single horizon: an Africa that becomes, through the care of its common home, a source of spiritual, ecological and political renewal for the whole planet.

As in the Gospel, where Jesus calls his disciples to walk on the deep water rather than remain cautiously on the shore, the Arrupe Centre invites all of us to leave the safety of the bank. It calls on everyone, Church, State, universities, communities, dioceses, people of good will, to step into the boat on the deep water, to fear not, to embrace the uncertainty of a work still unfolding, and to move forward together, in trust, in the Congo Basin, where creation needs someone to keep watch over it.