Protecting the forests of the Congo Basin

Synthesis report of studies conducted during
the German Facilitation of the CBFP in 2021

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Client

German Facilitation to the Congo Basin Forest Partnership

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AFR100 ..... *African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative*
AUDA-NEPAD..... *African Union Development Agency*
BMZ ..... *German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development*
CAFI ..... *Central African Forest Initiative*
CAP–ECCAS... *Common Agricultural Policy of the Economic Community of Central African States*
CBD ..... *Convention on Biological Diversity*
CBFP..... *Congo Basin Forest Partnership*
CBO..... *Community-based organization*
COMIFAC ..... *Central African Forestry Commission*
COP ..... *Conference of the Parties*
DRC ..... *Democratic Republic of Congo*
ECCAS ..... *Economic Commission of Central Africa*
ERPA ..... *Emission Reductions Purchase Agreement*
FCPF..... *Forest Carbon Partnership Facility under the World Bank*
FLR ..... *Forest Landscape Restoration*
FSC..... *Forest Stewardship Council*
GCF ..... *Green Climate Fund*
GHGs..... *Greenhouse Gases*
REDD+..... *Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation and the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in developing countries*
RoC ..... *Republic of the Congo*
SDGs ..... *Sustainable Development Goals*
SNDI..... *Strategy Against Imported Deforestation*
UNFCCC ..... *United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*
UN-REDD ..... *Joint readiness support for REDD+ countries by UNDP, UNEP and FAO*

1 INTRODUCTION

Across the world, climate change is becoming visible and part of people's lived experience. This is particularly true for people exposed to local extreme weather events and whose livelihoods depend directly on land use, but also in places where slow and gradual climate trends are materializing, such as changing precipitation patterns and ecosystem compositions. Despite three decades of international attempts and negotiations to address climate change and degrading ecosystems, the problems of rising greenhouse gas (GHG) concentrations in the atmosphere and the loss of biodiversity and ecosystems remain unabated. In contrast, climate change is becoming a major driver of further human-induced change; for example, the increasing intensity and extent of forest fires across the globe significantly adds to direct human emissions and underlines the urgency for effective measures.

The need for, and co-benefits of, effectively protecting terrestrial carbon pools and making use of their function as carbon sinks is widely recognized. Supported by ambitious international and national policy targets and initiatives, many institutions from academia, civil society, governments, development cooperation and the private sector have developed approaches and are working towards achieving the agreed targets related to the protection of forests.

The Congo Basin, with its total forest cover of approximately 268 Mio. ha (in 2010, de Wasseige et al. 2012), harbors more than 90% of Africa's dense forests, at the beginning of this century representing 17% of the primary forest area worldwide (Turubanova et al. 2018). Thus, the forests of the Congo Basin represent the world's second largest remaining tropical forest cover. This "green lung" still has many large intact forest areas that provide vital ecosystem services – locally as well as globally. In contrast to other tropical forests and countries, especially in Latin America or Southeast Asia, the processes leading to forest frontiers and large-scale conversion according to the forest transition curve are still at a rather early stage. Or put more simply: there is still much to protect for the benefit of humans across the globe. However, the pressures are increasing, and the large intact forest areas of the Congo Basin are in urgent need of protection. Multiple pressures put these forests and the ecosystem services they provide locally and globally at risk.

The Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) was launched in 2002 and currently consists of 121 partner institutions. These include ten member countries of the Economic Commission of Central Africa (ECCAS) and Central African Forestry Commission (COMIFAC), and more than 100 affiliated partners. Partners include donor countries, civil society organizations and international NGOs, multilateral organizations, academic and training institutions, and private sector actors. In accordance with the COMIFAC Convergence Plan and the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the partners share the vision of protecting these unique forest ecosystems and thereby contribute significantly to the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable management, the fight against climate change and poverty reduction in the Central African member countries.

With this broad and inclusive composition, the CBPF provides a comprehensive and multi-faceted network and an international platform for promoting the protection and sustainable management of the Congo Basin´s forests. This is a widely recognized prerequisite and contribution to simultaneously address global climate change and biodiversity loss, while fostering poverty reduction and sustainable economic development in the region – in line with the COMIFAC Convergence Plan and the SDGs.

The Government of Germany has a long history of providing substantive technical and financial support to forest protection and sustainable use in general, and specifically to the countries of the Congo Basin. In line with these strong and lasting relationships, Germany has assumed responsibility for the facilitation of the CBFP in the current term. In December 2019, the facilitation was handed over from the Kingdom of Belgium, represented by Minister of State François-Xavier De Donnea, to the Federal Republic of Germany, represented by the new CBFP Facilitator Dr. Christian Ruck. On 14 February 2020, Dr. Gerd Müller – German Federal Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) – officially launched the German Facilitation in the presence of representatives from COMIFAC member countries and commenced the work of the German Facilitation for the period 2020–2021.

The focus of the German Facilitation of the CBFP in 2020 and 2021 was to use the global momentum for protecting forests in the context of addressing climate change and loss of biodiversity. Through intensive coordination efforts, one aim was to facilitate a joint declaration to be presented at the two key conferences scheduled for the end of 2021: the CBD COP 15 for the new strategic plan and post-2020 global biodiversity framework in Kunming / China, and UNFCCC COP 26 in Glasgow / United Kingdom.

In addition to this effort at the global policy level, the facilitation commissioned six thematic studies related to specific opportunities and challenges for the forests of the Congo Basin and the people who depend directly on the products, biodiversity and ecosystem services the forests provide. The six studies and a policy brief for each study were prepared between December 2020 and August 2021. They focus on the following topics:

- REDD+ by Dr. Johannes Pirker (UNIQUE forestry and land use GmbH) and Dr. Sophia Carodenuto, University of Victoria)
- China by Mr. Ren Peng and Ms. Jingwei Zhang (Global Environment Institute)
- Value Chains by Dr. Romain Pirard (ONF-International)
- Land Use Planning by James Acworth and Pascal Douard
- Transhumance by Mr. Leonard Usongo and Dr. Moussa Baschirou
- Ecotourism by Mr. Paul Telfer

The COVID-19 pandemic and related travel restrictions posed unexpected challenges to the German Facilitation and its planned contributions – conferences were postponed, physical meetings had to be canceled, and planned workshops and field visits to gather on-the-ground insights were only possible to a very limited extent. However, despite these difficulties and a greater need than ever to protect the remaining intact forests, the thematic inputs for the declaration and further work have been concluded successfully.

All studies and policy briefs will be made available through the CBFP. The objective of this study is to summarize the key findings and recommendations, and to synthesize a bigger picture on the needs and progress to protect the Congo Basin forests. It sheds light on shortcomings, needs and entry points for achieving the described objectives.

2 PROTECTING THE FORESTS OF THE CONGO BASIN

The Congo Basin forests are essential to local populations. They provide a livelihood for 60 million people who live in or near them. They also provide essential social and cultural functions for local and indigenous people, and contribute more indirectly to the livelihoods of the 40 million people who live in urban centers near these forest estates (Nasi et al., 2011).

Tropical forests are exceptional reservoirs of carbon and biodiversity. The Congo Basin is the second largest contiguous tropical forest area in the world after the Amazon. It is among the last large remaining forest carbon pools on the planet and currently remains a relatively stable carbon sink where ongoing forest losses are still outweighed by carbon sequestration of standing forests. This puts the Congo Basin forests in a unique position given that carbon pools of the tropical forest biomes in the Amazon and Southeast Asia are already declining (Harris et al., 2021).

The forests harbor extraordinary biodiversity with a very high level of endemism (Billand, 2012); The flora in the low-altitude forests is made up of more than 10,000 species of higher plants, of which 3,000 are endemic. Montane forests are home to 4,000 species, with at least 70% of them endemic. The Congo Basin forests house iconic species such as African elephants and buffalo alongside such endemic species as the okapi, the bongo, the bonobo, and the gorilla as well as many endemic species of birds.

The areas with the greatest variety of species are the forests of Lower Guinea in the west (Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon) and those of the Albertine Rift in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (Billand, 2012). However, unprecedented increases in poaching, population growth, infrastructure and forest fragmentation, mining, and the growing demand for agro-industrial production are further driving loss of species and habitats.

2.1 Drivers and underlying causes of deforestation and degradation in the Congo Basin

In contrast to other tropical forest biomes, the contemporary loss of forests in the Congo Basin is still mainly driven by subsistence and small-scale semi-commercial farmers. They often clear forest patches for food production (Tyukavina et al., n.d.) and to supply the residents of nearby towns and, to a small but growing extent, international commodity markets (Megevand et al., 2012).

With a high volume of small-scale deforestation agents spread across the landscapes, deforestation and forest degradation trends are closely linked to domestic “megatrends” such as population growth and urbanization. Growing rates of urbanization stimulate the development of commercial agriculture for food supply as well as timber extraction to supply a growing construction sector and the expanding demand for energy among the urban population.

Deforestation and forest degradation are the end point of a causal chain of mechanisms. Exemplary for other Congo Basin countries, the national REDD+ strategy of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) names four underlying causes of deforestation, which, mediated through several (spatial) determinants constitute five main direct causes of forest loss: smallholder slash-and-

burn agriculture, artisanal logging, charcoal burning, mining and (man-made) wildfires (cf. Figure below).

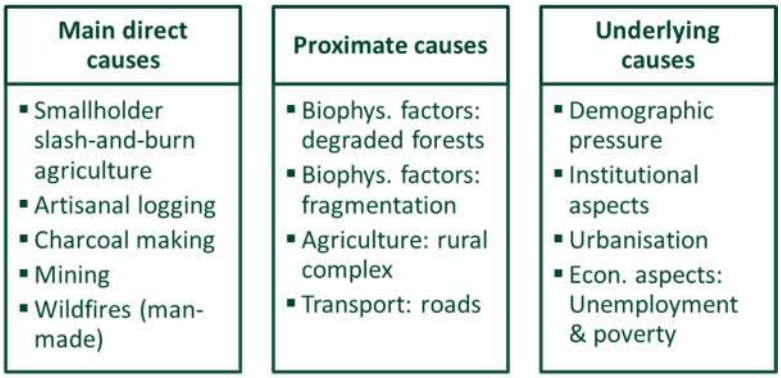

Figure 1: Drivers and underlying causes of deforestation and forest degradation (modified from République Démocratique du Congo (2012); terminology from Meyfroidt (2016))

According to Tchatchou *et al.* (2015), net deforestation rates in the Congo Basin have increased from 0.09% (1990–2000) to 0.17% between 2000 and 2005. In the DRC, where 62% of the Basin's forests are located, the rates are even higher and have been increasing further, especially during the last five years[1].

Agents, drivers and underlying causes vary over time and from country to country. Strategies to effectively address forest exploitation must therefore reflect national circumstances and align action plans with sustainable development agendas. However, despite many efforts, direct and indirect pressures on the forests are increasing, and new drivers of deforestation and forest degradation appear to be gaining prominence – next to the existing drivers that often correlate with rapidly growing populations in all countries in the Basin (e.g., subsistence agriculture, charcoal).

In the absence of effective conservation and sustainable production, there is a high risk that global demand for timber and other commodities will drive forest over-exploitation. For example, importing countries such as China and Vietnam report having significantly increased imports of logs and sawn timber from the Congo Basin (especially from Cameroon but also from DRC and Republic of the Congo (RoC)) following the imposition and enforcement of export restrictions by Laos PDR and Cambodia (To *et al.*, 2020). The same holds true for mining, oil and gas exploitation: a recent study by Grantham *et al.* (2021) shows that in Central Africa approximately 221,000 km^2 of intact forest landscapes are covered by corresponding exploitation contracts, 182,000 km^2 in the DRC alone and another 36,000 km^2 in RoC.

[1] https://www.globalforestwatch.org/dashboards/country/

2.2 Initiatives and efforts aimed at protecting the Congo Basin forests

Numerous bilateral or multi-lateral initiatives and partnerships share the common objective and vision of tackling the drivers and underlying causes of forest loss and halting the declining trend of Congo Basin forests – in line with the UNFCCC Paris Agreement, the strategic plan of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the land degradation neutrality targets of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification, the SDGs and the New York Declaration on forests of the United Nations.

In the context of readiness and piloting REDD+ implementation, countries in the Congo Basin have begun to streamline their institutions and national efforts to reduce emissions from deforestation and forest degradation. For multilateral coordination, the following key institutions promote forest protection at scale in the Congo Basin. They are often linked to bi- and multilateral sources of funding for forest conservation and restoration efforts (Etat des forêts 2020, forthcoming). Key institutions include:

- **Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI)**. CAFI is a collaborative partnership that brings together six Central African high forest cover countries and a coalition of donor countries. CAFI also serves as an operational vehicle for bilateral agreements for results-based payments between individual countries of the Congo Basin and donor countries; the recent agreement between Gabon and Norway is an example of this.
- **Commission of Central African Forests (COMIFAC)**. Founded in 1999, it consists of 10 governments within and neighboring the Congo Basin, with the main aim to coordinate measures for the protection of its forests.
- **Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF)** under the administration of the World Bank. It supports many Congo Basin countries through the Readiness Fund to meet UNFCCC requirements of the Warsaw framework of REDD+; in addition, the FCPF Carbon Fund provides funding for jurisdictional REDD+ programs, so-called Emissions Reduction Purchase Agreements (ERPA). The FCPF has signed ERPAs with two countries in the Basin: DRC and RoC.
- **UN-REDD** program, which also supports country-led processes for REDD+ readiness.
- **Green Climate Fund (GCF)**. The GCF provides climate-related funding (in the context of the land use sector for mitigation, adaptation and cross-cutting programs), including REDD+ and Ecosystem-based Adaptation.
- **African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100).** The AFR100 is a country-led effort coordinated by NEPAD to contribute to the restoration targets of the Bonn Challenge, the African Resilient Landscapes Initiative, the African Union Agenda 2063 and other targets. It does so by bringing 100 million hectares of land in Africa into restoration by 2030. It aims to accelerate restoration to enhance food security, increase climate change resilience and mitigation, and combat rural poverty.

3 KEY FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDIES

The following section provides a very brief overview of the six studies commissioned by the CBFP Facilitation. These treat the topics (i) REDD+, (ii) transhumance, (iii) the role of China, (iv) value chains, (iv) land use planning and (v) ecotourism. For more detailed information the reader is referred to the full study reports available from the CBFP homepage.

3.1 REDD+ in selected Congo Basin countries

In 2005, when REDD+ negotiations began in the context of a global climate agreement under the UNFCCC, many countries supported the idea of a results-based payment mechanism for reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation – including most Congo Basin countries who had high expectations for significant payments. While the rules were concluded and the countries received different levels of support (for readiness, implementation and pilot programs), a mechanism was not institutionalized under the Paris Agreement.

The study conducted assessed the status-quo of REDD+ implementation in the DRC, Gabon and Cameroon. The findings reveal that countries remain formally engaged in REDD+ but still have not fully completed the readiness phase (phase 1). Hence, they struggle to receive investments and funding for implementation (phase 2), let alone to access results-based payments (phase 3) if respective funding windows are created under the GCF. There is renewed interest from countries and donors to revive REDD+ efforts, especially in those countries and provinces harboring large areas of stable forests combined with yet low rates of deforestation.

The analysis has also shown that results-based payments as conceptualized under REDD+ alone are not the “silver bullet” solution to counter all forest loss in the Congo Basin, as many had hoped for in the early stages of the REDD+ negotiations. Rather, results-based approaches to remunerate the ecosystem services provided to the world by the region´s forests need to be context-specific, straightforward, and innovative. Protecting Congo Basin forests requires tailor-made, realistic, and ambitious approaches with incentives to pursue REDD+ at multiple stages.

The ongoing revision of the rules for international funding sources (CAFI, FCPF Carbon Fund, GCF) opens a window of opportunity to elevate standing forests on funders’ agendas and to close the financing gap for standing forests. Question marks remain for some countries regarding their technical and implementation capacities and varying degrees of willingness on the part of governments to preserve standing forests.

3.2 Transhumance and the N´Djamena Declaration

Livestock farming is a key economic activity for the whole of Central Africa and transhumance is a traditional form of living. As a result of population growth and urbanization, the demand for animal products is increasing rapidly throughout the region. This represents an economic opportunity for all animal production sectors, including mobile production systems like transhumance.

Unsustainable forms of transhumance and neo-pastoralism often generate conflicts between pastoralists and farmers, between different herder communities, and lately between herders and protected area managers. Moreover, transhumance is being increasingly militarized under the control of absentee herdowners. This *neo-pastoralism* is rapidly gaining ground in most parts of West and Central Africa. The fragile political situation in most countries – particularly the Sahel region, with increased operations and control of large territories by extremist groups – has contributed to the expansion of investments in neo-pastoralism. This phenomenon is characterized by the control and trafficking of large herds of livestock by influential leaders, warlords and even established businessmen and politicians and is often intertwined with illegal activities such as drug and arms trafficking. With growing populations and demand, livestock increases the pressures on dry forests and savannahs in the region. Addressing this driver and its agents is particularly challenging as it is a transboundary phenomenon that requires coordinated action.

The study has shown that cross-border transhumance still needs to be better understood to derive policies and action plans to minimize the impact on forests. Potential policy options include strengthening the regulation of pastoralism and putting this issue on the agenda of Central African governments. Regional efforts such as the N´Djamena Declaration should be followed to address the cross-border phenomenon. Future studies should (i) focus on the characterization and mapping of transhumance-related conflicts, (ii) assess the impact of neo-pastoralism on the socio-economic realm and biodiversity and (iii) analyze the role of actors in cross-border transhumance and local diplomacy.

The fragile political situation in the Sahel region, with increased operations and control of large territories by extremist groups is contributing to the expansion of investments in neo-pastoralism. The ongoing reformulation of the Common Agricultural Policy of the Economic Community of Central African States offers a key opportunity to elevate transhumance on the political agenda.

3.3 The role of China in conserving the forests of the Congo Basin

The Congo Basin´s economic relations with China, though having emerged more recently than those with the Western hemisphere, are growing at a fast pace. This is particularly the case for the forest and infrastructure construction sectors, both of which have a potentially high impact on forests. Timber sourced from the Congo Basin countries represents a large and growing proportion of China's African timber import – both directly, and via countries with a large timber processing industry such as Vietnam.

The study underlines the importance of China for the future of the Basin's forests. The value of Chinese foreign direct investment stock and flows into the Congo Basin shows an upward trend, which is growing even faster than Chinese investments in other African regions.

A whole supply chain approach with trilateral cooperation between China, the Congo Basin, the EU and other international partners has been identified as a possible way forward. Stakeholders along the global timber trade supply chain could support each other in overcoming constraints of sustainable value chain management and proactively exchange best practice experiences.

Linkages and potential synergies between the EU Timber Regulation and China's 2020 Forest Law Article 65, as well as legislation and regulations in the Congo Basin countries on timber trade

legality verification, merit further exploration, as does a mechanism to increase demand for legal and sustainable certified timber in China.

Existing frameworks could be utilized to realize bilateral cooperation between China and other consumer markets such as the EU and Germany, and to foster joint programs in the Congo Basin countries. For example, the existing Sino-German Center for Sustainable Development could serve as a platform for trilateral collaboration in the Congo Basin.

3.4 The role of key value chains for conservation and sustainable use

Even though conversion for industrial or export-oriented agriculture or timber extraction is still less dominant in the Congo Basin than in Southeast Asia or Latin America, the trend is obvious, and key export commodities responsible for forest conversion are increasing, most notably in the Central African region.

Gabon recently announced its intention to make FSC timber certification mandatory from 2022 onwards for all concessionaires willing to keep operating in the country. This form of hybrid governance (i.e., harnessing complementarity between government objectives and products and private sector strategies) is relatively advanced in Gabon and this unprecedented policy stands as an intriguing and promising example in the region. The effects of this policy on the ground are yet to be seen; this fiscal arrangement deserves to be given time to unfold and succeed.

Zero-deforestation commitments for palm oil have been made in Cameroon. However, the expected impacts of these are limited, primarily due to the very structure and dynamics of this sector where informal actors and artisanal mills proliferate, are outside the control of both the authorities and private industries, are associated with large-scale deforestation, and are not in the least concerned by foreign markets or consumer pressure. We contend that Cameroon's approach to zero-forestation commitments could serve as a source of inspiration for other Congo Basin countries and they could retain its positive aspects (e.g., national strategy, ambitious industrial players) while avoiding its negative ones (e.g., limited scope, public companies not leading by example).

Switching perspective and looking at the demand side, France has recently adopted its National Strategy Against Imported Deforestation (SNDI). Although it is still nascent and does not yet present effective and conclusive responses to all technical or political challenges, the SNDI provides a good source of lessons learnt for similar policies in other countries. One point of convergence for all debated issues within the SNDI relates to the means of discriminating between sustainably and unsustainably produced commodities. Here, discussions revolve around the reliance on existing standards, zero-deforestation commitments by companies, jurisdictional certification, or the creation of new ad-hoc labels to serve this objective.

The verve of corporate zero-deforestation commitments can catalyze change in the oil palm and other sectors in Central Africa. Yet an inconvenient truth seems to be that the bulk of deforestation is happening outside of concessions and is thus beyond the responsibility of industrial actors, with the implication that the corporate zero-deforestation commitments lack teeth. In the industrial logging sector, Gabon has set a precedent for a tax scheme incentivizing sustainable and certified production and the tax reforms carried out could serve as a blueprint for other Congo Basin countries, notably Cameroon.

Despite the generally high degree of consistency of measures adopted by Gabon, open questions persist regarding including misalignment between processing capacities and domestic timber supplies, possible disruption if mandatory certification is enforced as stated, and rigor in monitoring the stated objectives.

3.5 Improving land use planning for better forest governance

Land use planning has been heralded as an essential foundation for better land governance, more coherent development planning and reconciling competing pressures on land from different land use sectors in fast growing Central African economies. Commercial forestry, industrial agriculture, and infrastructural expansion compete for rural land (and political support) with small- to medium-scale agriculture and conservation.

One of the overall challenges is that different actors have substantially different understandings of the purpose and scope of land use planning. The model of "*Aménagement du Territoire*" rooted in colonial times, is primarily conducted to 'balance social and economic development throughout the national territory'.

Carefully executed and facilitated land use planning at the relevant scale offers a means to explore options and reach consensus on optimal land use outcomes. There are always trade-offs between sources of revenue (timber, oil palm or other commodities) and who benefits. The increasing interest in payments for environmental services and carbon finance can tip the balance in favor of green economy options (more, better quality forest) but the negotiations must be done case by case and the results fed back into policy making.

Participatory local land use planning that has secured free prior informed consent of affected stakeholders should become a legal requirement and prerequisite for all significant land allocations. Land use plans must be spatially explicit development plans that trigger immediate funding if stakeholders are expected to invest time and effort to participate in their preparation.

3.6 Opportunities and challenges related to promoting eco-tourism in the Congo Basin

For many African countries, tourism revenue is an important source of income and helps create jobs, promote entrepreneurship, and develop local economies. There are at least three prerequisites for tourism development – quality attractions, good accommodation, and easy access – and these are often referred to as the "three A's". Over that last decade, there have been several private investors that have taken tentative steps toward pioneering professional ecotourism in Gabon, RoC, and CAR.

It is important to recognize that these private businesses are key for sustainable economic development, creating the nascent hospitality industry and marketing the tourism products to compete with other destinations in the world. Nevertheless, in the Congo Basin they often act without financial support from government or other donors and their investments are at risk due to many bureaucratic and logistical hurdles. It can be concluded that, to date, ecotourism development in the Congo Basin has not been a priority, and that the necessary enabling conditions have not yet been created.

Governments should play a stronger role in accelerating ecotourism development by putting in place necessary enabling conditions. Recommendations to overcome key challenges include holding a subject-related presidential summit, easing access to visas, and removing travel barriers. If implemented, such steps could greatly improve the competitiveness of the region and accelerate the development of ecotourism as a viable eco-nomic sector even in challenging political contexts.

4 OUTLOOK: OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES

Globally, there is a broad consensus that the remaining intact tropical and subtropical forests must be effectively preserved. The pressures remain unabated, and if the remaining large forests and their carbon reservoirs turn into sources of GHGs it will not be possible to achieve the climate goals as agreed in the UNFCCC Paris Agreement. On the contrary, to reach the 1.5°C target, cost-effective nature-based solutions will have to provide an estimated 37% of the necessary mitigation of GHG emissions by 2030; globally, forest conservation and forest landscape restoration (FLR) can contribute about 69% of this potential (own calculation based on Griscom et al. (2020).

In many African countries, nature-based solutions are among the most cost-effective options to protect the climate and achieve other sustainable development goals (Fuss et al. 2021). The environmental services provided by tropical forests are regionally and globally relevant as public goods, but so far, they have not been adequately remunerated: only about 3% of public international climate finance has been earmarked for tropical forest protection to date (Haupt et al., 2020). While international governance approaches and financing instruments for sustainable forest use and rehabilitation have been created, aside from REDD+, no instrument or mechanism exists for compensating the protection of standing forests.

After a decade of readiness support, only few countries in the world already meet all requirements to fully implement REDD+ as foreseen by the Warsaw Framework on REDD+, concluded at UNFCCC COP19 in 2013. REDD+ implementation as envisioned by the Warsaw Framework and organizations such as FCPF and GCF has been particularly challenging for African countries and has so far fallen short of the high expectations. Many REDD+ countries perceive the technical and political hurdles to implementing REDD+ across sectors to be too high – and access to finance unclear and insufficient.

As drivers of deforestation and forest degradation are cross-sectoral in nature, saving standing forests requires the involvement of a range of sectors. Land use planning is one of the most important cross-cutting actions to be carried out by governments to achieve climate change mitigation and adaptation commitments such as those made in the Nationally Determined Contributions or National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plans. Notably transhumance, the future expansion of agricultural land into forests or mining concessions on forest land require sound planning and regulation at multiple levels – also in terms of credibility for donors and impact investors. Effective land use planning will balance the economic needs of the population with the countries' commitments to protect the climate. Countries' capacities to harmonize sectoral planning and effectively implement policies remain limited. Land use planning will also be key to integrating the three common but separated approaches to saving forests into one coherent approach: protection, management and restoration of forests.

Due to the lengthy process of specifying the Paris agreement of 2015, the inherent funding promise for REDD+ is still pending: except for bilateral agreements with Norway, results-based REDD+ funding to selected countries is mainly provided through the FCPF Carbon Fund or through the GCF. Hence, the financing gap for the protection of intact forest areas in the Congo Basin persists.

Even though with DRC and RoC two jurisdictional pilot programs were agreed and are being implemented under the FCPF Carbon Fund (plus a bilateral agreement between Gabon and

Norway), the provided funding is far from sufficient to effectively protect the forests of the region. Thus, the overall amounts are significantly less than what has been expected or would be needed in terms of providing economically viable alternatives to unsustainable forest uses.

The ex-post nature of results-based payments creates another often discussed challenge: successful implementation requires significant upfront investments. Different ways of involving private sector investment could and should play a bigger role, for example through FLR programs which provide livelihood alternatives and reduce the pressure on forests, sustainable commodity production and voluntary carbon markets. However, especially with regards to conservation and accounting, this approach presents its own challenges and it depends what role these markets will play in the context of the UNFCCC negotiations on article 6.

Public and international funding remains limited but has an important catalytic role for leveraging available finance. Supportive legal and fiduciary frameworks in consumer countries create pressure for urgent action. Next to European countries, China as major importer of goods from the Congo Basin and the wood processing industry in Vietnam merit specific attention in this context. In the Congo Basin countries, regulatory frameworks can create a climate that is favorable to investments in green supply chains and forest restoration. Similarly, provided that the necessary infrastructure can be established, ecotourism is more than a niche option for the rural economy – where the circumstances render it a viable opportunity to value nature.

It can be expected that the modalities for international climate finance are being revised and further developed. One option is a robust milestone approach for scheduling reliable payments based on results, e.g., agreeing on and implementing a needed sectoral reform or revising old concessions. Compared to results-based payments as understood in the context of REDD+, such a milestone approach allows grant countries liquidity early on, thus maintaining motivation for the often thorny and lengthy policy implementation processes.

Further, successful forest policies require assignment and coordination of relevant initiatives, organizations, and instruments. This includes, amongst others, key institutions such as the World Bank, regional development banks, specialized funds, bilateral donors, UN organizations, and NGOs. A sensible allocation of private and public funds and meaningful combination of the various financing instruments (e.g., sectoral reforms in a milestones approach, subsidies, loans, emissions trade) and initiatives (e.g., bilateral development organizations, LEAF coalition, Tropical Forest Alliance, CAFI) holds the most potential to achieve positive results.

Despite all the opportunities to tap into different public and private funding sources, the governments involved – donors and beneficiaries – have to be aware of the pressures and that without concerted efforts on all sides, the Congo Basin forests are likely to face a similar fate as other now largely destroyed forest areas.

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