

Mainstreaming the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into Forest Management in Central Africa: current status, challenges and improvement options

Coordinators: Jeremie Mbairamadji,¹ Gervais Itsoua Madzous²

Authors: Jean-Claude Nguinguiri,¹ Valérie Tchuente,² Donald Djossi³

Contributors: Sédric Edmond Tiobo'o,⁴ Tata-Ngome Precillia⁵



¹FAO, ²COMIFAC, ³OFAC, ⁴National Institute of Statistics of Cameroon, ⁵IRAD

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Introduction

The forests of the Congo Basin play a crucial role in regulating the climate system of not just Africa, but the entire world. These forests also provide a livelihood for the 60 million people who live in them or nearby; perform essential social and cultural functions for local and indigenous populations; and, more indirectly, help feed the 40 million people living in nearby urban centres, as pointed out by Marquant et al. (2015). When these forests are managed sustainably, they have the potential to provide “sustainable nature-based solutions” to many issues related to water, energy, food and nutritional security, poverty alleviation and others. In this way, they contribute to achieving several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Nonetheless, the question of how to harness this huge potential remains.

In September 2015, the 193 member states of the United Nations (UN) adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This programme, known as “Agenda 2030,” consists of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets. It is a people-centred development agenda that seeks to eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions, preserve the environment and ensure more peaceful and inclusive societies.

Agenda 2030 recognizes the following: *“Targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances. Each government will also decide how these aspirational and global targets should be incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies.”*

The Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) Convergence Plan for the conservation and sustainable management of Central African forest ecosystems comprises six priority action areas and three cross-cutting areas. It serves as a reference framework for actions in the forestry and environmental sector in Central Africa.

To better guide Central African countries in implementing Agenda 2030, it is crucial to ensure that the Convergence Plan aligns with the SDGs. The nine action areas of the Convergence Plan and the 17 SDGs of the UN Agenda 2030 will serve as a framework for the analyses to be carried out. The mainstreaming of the SDGs into sustainable forest management in Central Africa will consist of reviewing the ways in which the COMIFAC Convergence Plan action areas are linked to the SDGs. This mainstreaming will make it possible to monitor the contribution of Central African forests to the SDGs, via reviews of the voluntary national reports produced by countries and of the efforts made by these countries and the challenges encountered. This review will also facilitate exploration of options for better mainstreaming of the SDGs into the sustainable management of forests in Central Africa.

The first part of this chapter deals with the alignment of the COMIFAC Convergence Plan with the SDGs. It provides an overview of the SDGs and targets that can be prioritized in light of the expected results of the priority action areas of the Convergence Plan. The second part focuses on national ownership of the SDGs through voluntary national reviews (VNRs) and the inclusion of forest contribution to the SDGs in national reports. Contrary to the findings on the Convergence Plan's alignment with the SDGs, the contribution of efforts to the SDGs – as reflected in the country ownership exercises – is still limited to one or two forest-related SDGs. This practice does not sufficiently take into account the range of forest contributions to the SDGs. The third and last part of this chapter presents the options for improving SDGs mainstreaming into the sustainable management of forests in Central Africa.

6.1 COMIFAC Convergence Plan: a reference framework for SDG alignment

Application of the SDGs to sustainable forest management is not yet a common practice. Up to now, focus has been on analyses that show that forests and their related policies contribute to achieving many of the goals and targets of Agenda 2030 in addition to SDG 15, which specifically addresses the sustainability of forest ecosystems (De Jong et al. 2018; Baumgartner 2019; FAO 2018). Generally speaking, application of the goals and targets to local circumstances and priorities involves mainstreaming the SDGs into national agendas.¹ In recent years, other levels of SDG ownership have emerged, at both the territorial and theme-based levels.

Cities and regions in particular are viewed as the most suitable level for grassroots work to achieve the SDGs. Having cities and regions mainstream the SDGs has thus become a major concern of urban governance (UN-HABITAT 2018) and of local development (Thibault 2017).

In contrast, the theme-based approach to SDG ownership has been explored mainly at the global level, as evidenced by the discussions at the High-Level Political Forum for Sustainable Development (HLPF) held in July 2018. With regard to forests, this approach is key to the global objectives on forests of the United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests (2017-2030). The 6 goals and 26 related targets of this Strategic Plan were adopted by the General Assembly in 2017. Their aim is to contribute to achieving the SDGs, the Aichi Biodiversity Targets and the Paris Agreement reached as part of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.²

The Congo Basin forests provide many ecosystem goods and services. For this reason, it is important to provide the resources needed to monitor and enhance the contribution of these forests to the SDGs. However, it should be noted that aligning the SDGs with the cross-border governance of a forest ecosystem as important as the Congo Basin is a painstaking exercise and that the lack of a joint reference framework for sustainable forest management is very often the first obstacle to be removed. It is for these reasons that the COMIFAC Convergence Plan is essential.

1 This is stipulated in UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1 of 25 September 2015, paragraph 55.

2 <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Global-Forest-Goals-booklet-Apr-2019.pdf>

6.1.1 Convergence Plan priority action areas

The Central African countries have agreed to the SDGs and have undertaken monitoring of the progress made towards achieving them. These countries have also signed a treaty³ committing them to the conservation and sustainable management of Central African forest ecosystems and establishing COMIFAC as the subregional reference institution for the harmonization of forest and environmental policies. COMIFAC has a Convergence Plan which defines the action strategies of the subregion's countries and of other stakeholders in the conservation and sustainable management of forest ecosystems in Central Africa.

Box 6.1 presents the priority action areas, the cross-cutting action areas and the main impacts expected from the Convergence Plan.

6.1.2 Alignment of the Convergence Plan with the SDGs

An exercise was carried out to see how the Convergence Plan aligns with the SDG targets; this work made it possible to prioritize 31 targets of 10 SDGs.⁴ The main findings from this analysis are presented below.

- SDG 1 “End poverty in all its forms everywhere” is closely linked to the concerns addressed in priority action area 5 “Socioeconomic development and multistakeholder participation” of the Convergence Plan. Through its operational objective 5.1.3. “Fostering the development of job- and income-generating activities in forest environments,” the Convergence Plan seeks to increase the incomes of forest dependent populations and the number of jobs for men, women and young people in the forest sector. Forests offer income-generating opportunities via collection and sale of wood and non-wood forest products, as well as through the sharing of logging benefits with nearby communities (see operational objective 5.1.2). *In the Central African Republic (CAR) and Gabon, the forestry sector is the country's largest private employer and the second-largest employer after the State. In Cameroon, nearly 8,000 jobs are provided by the formal forestry sector. However, women are poorly represented in the sector: 281 out of 8,047 workers in 2008* (Eba’u Atyi 2013). Sustainable forest management is helping to alleviate poverty by creating wealth and protecting the essential functions of forests that underpin the livelihoods of poor people.
- SDG 2 “End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” is consistent with the Convergence Plan’s priority action areas 5 “Socioeconomic development and multistakeholder participation” and 3 “Conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.” The forests of Central Africa offer a wide range of food products of plant and animal origin (Ndoye 2016; Tata-Ngome 2016). In some places, hunting meat accounts for up to 80 percent of people’s protein intake; about 5 million tonnes of bushmeat are harvested each year (Van Vliet et al. 2012). Forest foods contribute to household resilience by providing a safety net in times of crisis (Tata-Ngome 2016). According to COMIFAC’s strategic orientations,⁵

3 The treaty is available online: https://comifac.org/images/documents/traitecomifac_français.pdf

4 The prioritized SDGs: SDG 1, SDG 2, SDG 5, SDG 6, SDG 7, SDG 8, SDG 12, SDG 13, SDG 15 and SDG 16.

5 These guidelines are spelled out in the Subregional Guidelines on the sustainable management of non-wood forest products (NWFPs) of plant origin in Central Africa (<http://www.fao.org/3/ak414f/ak414f.pdf>), the toolkit on integrating the Right to Adequate Food (RAF) in plant-based NWFPs in Central Africa (<http://www.fao.org/forestry/42451-0dea893d3253a87ad78abcad1833ff739.pdf>), the subregional strategy for the sustainable use of wildlife by indigenous and local communities in COMIFAC countries, the COMIFAC strategy on access to biological and genetic resources and fair and equitable access and benefit sharing (ABS) arising from their utilization, and the sub-regional programme on forests for food security and nutrition in Central Africa, etc.

Box 6.1: COMIFAC Convergence Plan for the sustainable management of Central African forest ecosystems (2015–2025)

The revised Convergence Plan is divided into six priority action areas and three cross-cutting action areas. The priority action areas:

1. Harmonization of forest and environmental policies
2. Sustainable management and exploitation of forest resources
3. Conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity
4. Combating the effects of climate change and desertification
5. Socio-economic development and multistakeholder participation
6. Sustainable financing

The cross-cutting action areas:

- Training and capacity building
- Research and Development
- Communication, awareness, information and education

The expected impacts of the revised Convergence Plan:

- The deforestation and forest degradation rate is stable compared to the current level within each country of the COMIFAC area.
- The integrity of protected areas and transboundary protected areas is maintained.
- The living conditions of the local populations are improved.

The Convergence Plan also clearly states the values on which efficient implementation of the priority actions should be based, as well as basic assumptions for ensuring that the framework conditions for success are met.

COMIFAC Convergence Plan 2015–2025

three priorities can be considered in the SDG 2 indicators. The first relates to access to forest foods (SDG target 2.1). The second relates to improving the productivity and income of small-scale food producers (SDG target 2.3), and the third relates to the conservation of forest genetic resources (SDG target 2.5).

- SDG 5 “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” is aligned with the core values to be respected during the implementation of the Convergence Plan. In addition to good governance, the other three values are respect for human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples; gender mainstreaming; and cooperation, partnership and solidarity. This SDG is also related to the concerns addressed in priority action area 1 “Harmonization of forest and environmental policies” of the Convergence Plan. Even though the laws in force often grant equal rights to men and women, there are still gender-based differences that are rooted in traditional norms and practices. A subregional strategy for mainstreaming gender into the sustainable management of natural resources in Central Africa has been adopted by COMIFAC

member countries.⁶ It especially focuses on gender equity in the distribution of social roles and responsibilities, as well as on gender mainstreaming into national policies and subregional programmes (in line with target 5.5). It also deals with securing rights and access to forest resources for women (in line with target 5.a).

- SDG 6 “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all” (in particular target 6.6 “By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes”) partially overlaps with priority action areas 2 “Sustainable management and development of forest resources” and 3 “Conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.” In addition to forests, the Congo Basin is also characterized by its wealth of water resources. The Congo River Basin, for example, accounts for about 30 percent of Africa’s water resources and covers an area of about 4 million km², 85.3 percent of which is covered by tropical rainforests in Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Congo. The relationship between forests and the watercourse system that criss-crosses them is both complex and highly interdependent. Not only is water fundamental to the life of trees and therefore of forests, but forests also play a crucial role in maintaining the quality and quantity of water (Betti 2011).
- SDG 7 “Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all” (in particular targets 7.1 “By 2030, ensure universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services” and 7.2 “By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix”) is synonymous with the strategic guidelines of priority action area 4 “Combating the effects of climate change and desertification.” Even today, millions of people in rural areas and large cities depend on firewood and charcoal to cook their food. Woodfuel is the main source of energy for 90 percent of Kinshasa’s population (Schure et al. 2013). The turnover of the woodfuel sector is estimated at more than 186 billion CFA francs per year in Cameroon (Eba’a Atyi et al. 2016), where nearly 16 million people depend on this energy for cooking. Because of its great economic importance, supply of woodfuel to large cities is one of the main drivers of deforestation. The Convergence Plan seeks to better deal with this threat via guidelines to establish the conditions needed to make woodfuel a clean and renewable source of energy. Several initiatives have been taken in recent years to take up this challenge. One example is the “Sustainable Management of Woodfuel Resources in Central Africa” project (Marien et al. 2013). Another that can be mentioned is the PREFOREST Initiative, which aims to reduce greenhouse gases (GHGs). It was recently financed by the Green Climate Fund (GCF) and receives co-financing from the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) to overcome the barriers and constraints to the sustainable production and consumption of woodfuel in five administrative divisions (départements) of the Congo. See <https://www.greenclimate.fund/project/fp159> for PREFOREST and <https://mptf.undp.org/factsheet/project/00130492> for PROREP Bois-Energie (project to enhance sustainable woodfuel potential in the Republic of Congo).
- SDG 8 “Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” is in line with the values pursued in the Convergence Plan, including respect for human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples, and operational objective 2.2.3 “Enhance legality and promote certification.” This objective contributes to the fight against forced labour and child labour in all its forms at forestry sites (in line with target 8.7), and it aims to promote safety in the workplace and protection for all workers (in line with target 8.8). Forest certification programmes launched more than a decade ago are already making a

⁶ <https://www.comifac.org/documents/directives-strategies-accords>

remarkable contribution to improving working conditions in the formal forestry sector (Cerutti et al. 2017). At the policy level, the national industrialization strategies for greater processing of forest products and the strategies for the development of ecotourism as part of the economic enhancement of protected areas and the wildlife sector are promoted in operational objectives 2.2.2 and 3.1.3 respectively. They contribute to targets 8.3 and 8.9.

- SDG 12 “Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns” has a number of targets that are fully aligned with the Convergence Plan. This is the case of target 12.2 “By 2030, achieve sustainable management and sustainable use of natural resources,” which is largely in line with priority action areas 2 “Sustainable management and development of forest resources” and 3 “Conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity.” Another example is target 12.5 “By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse,” which addresses similar aspects to those addressed in the national industrialization strategies for more advanced processing of forest products promoted by the Convergence Plan. In the forest industry, measures have already been taken to ensure reduced-impact logging, improve raw-material productivity in wood processing, and recover waste and other residues from forestry, etc. Perhaps the most significant variation of the circular economy concept is the adoption of cogeneration in wood processing industries (Crehay 2012). Operational objective 2.2.3 “Enhance legality and promote certification” also contributes to target 12.7 “Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities.” Making legal timber an obligation in public procurement in Central Africa is already making headway (Eba’u Atyi et al. 2018) and has even become a reality in Cameroon.
- SDG 13 “Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts” corresponds in general terms to priority action area 4 “Combating the effects of climate change and desertification” of the Convergence Plan. Nature-based and especially forest-based solutions for climate-change mitigation and adaptation are those that have been explored the most in Central Africa. Over the past decade, emphasis has been placed on combating deforestation in order to reverse the trend of emissions from forests. Several countries have developed national strategies and REDD+⁷ investment plans and are committed to establishing national systems for forest monitoring. Most of these countries are conscious of the fact that climate change affects Central Africa,⁸ and they have developed both national plans and investment plans to promote adaptation to climate change. All these measures are provided for in the Convergence Plan, in particular in operational objective 4.1.1, which is to develop and implement national strategies for adaptation to climate change, and operational objective 4.1.2 “Develop and implement measures to mitigate the effects of climate change.” While the former is linked to target 13.1 “Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries,” the latter fits in well with target 13.2 “Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning” and target 13.3 “Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.”
- SDG 15 “Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss” cross-cuts all the Convergence Plan priority action areas. The Central African countries have been committed to sustainable forest management for nearly 30 years (Nasi et al. 2006). They have made remarkable progress: the surface area of natural forests with a management plan has more than quadrupled between 2005 and 2010, reaching more than

7 Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation.

8 See State of the Forest 2015 (<https://www.cifor.org/knowledge/publication/5884>), in particular chapter 4, devoted to the vulnerability and adaptation of forests and communities.

31 million ha, including 10.2 million with certification (OFAC⁹ 2019). Further, at least 11 percent on average of the surface area of each Central African country has been made protected areas, thereby allowing for the establishment of networks of protected areas that cover biodiversity better in each country (Doumenge et al. 2019).

- SDG 16 “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” touches on aspects that are core to forest governance in Central Africa. These include the fight against corruption, participation and gender-based discrimination. The first aspect is addressed in priority action area 1 “Harmonization of forest and environmental policies” of the Convergence Plan. Nearly all the Central African countries have made the fight against corruption in the forest sector one of their priorities, by creating specific units or services to tackle this scourge. The fight against corruption in the forest sector is part of target 16.5 “Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.” The second aspect, in this case participation and inclusive forest management, occupies a prominent place in priority action areas 1 and 5. Subregional Guidelines on the “Participation of Local and Indigenous Peoples and NGOs in the Sustainable Management of Forests in Central Africa” have been adopted¹⁰ and contribute to target 16.7 “Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.” The third aspect is related to the fight against gender-based discrimination in the forestry sector. Indigenous peoples in particular are quite often victims of discriminatory practices, as recent reports on human rights violations in biodiversity conservation projects show.¹¹ Measures have been taken in some countries to protect these vulnerable groups. This is the case, for example, of (1) the CAR, which on 30 August 2010 ratified the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of the International Labour Organization (ILO No. 169); (2) the Congo, which promulgated Law No. 5/2011 of 25 February 2011 on the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples; and (3) the DRC, where on 7 April 2021 the National Assembly adopted the law on the protection and promotion of the rights of indigenous Pygmy peoples. These measures are in line with target 16.b “Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development.”

Of the 10 SDGs considered in FAO’s *State of the World’s Forests 2018* report, only SDG 11 “Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable” has not been prioritized and mainstreamed in this analysis focused on Central Africa. Concerns related to urban forestry, to trees in the city and to green spaces are indeed not specifically addressed in the COMIFAC Convergence Plan 2015–2025. However, this observation should not diminish the efforts made in certain COMIFAC countries to maintain, for example, the integrity of the Raponda Walker arboretum and the Sibang forest reserve in Libreville (Gabon), the Patte d’Oie forest reserve in Brazzaville (Congo), and green spaces in Kigali (Rwanda). Conversely, SDG 16, which is prioritized in this analysis, was not included among the 10 SDGs considered in FAO’s *State of the World’s Forests 2018* report. The implementation of the SDGs in forest governance in Central Africa has made it possible to obtain a subregional package of 31 prioritized targets (see Annex 6.1).

⁹ The Central Africa Forest Observatory

¹⁰ See: <http://extwprlegsl.fao.org/docs/pdf/Ecc189705.pdf>

¹¹ See, for example, the documents available at <https://www.survivalinternational.fr/actu/12540>; <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/collection/wwfsecretwar>; https://wwf.panda.org/wwf_news/wwf_independent_review_/droits_humains_en_matiere_de_conservation/

6.2 National ownership of the SDGs

6.2.1 Production of voluntary national reviews

The countries produce voluntary national reviews (VNRs) as part of the monitoring and review of the 2030 Development Agenda (Agenda 2030). Preparation of the VNRs by the countries is governed by a manual¹² which sets out the different steps to be followed. These VNRs make it possible to monitor the progress made by countries in their Agenda 2030 implementation and in the challenges and lessons that emerge from it. Emphasis will be put on (1) monitoring the contribution of forests to the SDGs through the analysis of national voluntary reports produced in 2019 and/or 2020 and (2) ongoing subregional efforts and initiatives to address the challenges encountered.

6.2.2 Mainstreaming forest contribution into the national voluntary reports on SDG monitoring

The Central African countries have undertaken to mainstream the SDGs into their national agendas.¹³ The approach adopted by these countries is very often inspired by the guidelines circulated by the UNDP (2016) for mainstreaming Agenda 2030. Three main outcomes are expected from this approach: analysis of how to put the SDGs into context, the prioritized targets and indicators, and the resource mobilization strategy for the implementation of Agenda 2030. The targets and indicators from the prioritized SDGs guide national SDG ownership efforts to integrate them into global and sectoral strategies. They also act to monitor the progress made towards achieving the SDGs and to prepare the national voluntary reports.¹⁴

The forest-related indicators are an integral part of nationally prioritized SDG targets and indicators. To this effect, review of the mainstreaming of forest contribution will focus on the national voluntary reports of the following seven Central African countries¹⁵: Burundi, Cameroon, Congo, Rwanda, DRC, CAR and Chad.

It should be kept in mind that each country chooses its own targets according to its priorities and their relevance to the achievement of the SDGs. For example, Cameroon has selected 153 targets and 52 priority targets to reduce poverty, catch up in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and improve the resilience of its population. In the DRC, the awareness and outreach process targeting stakeholders has helped the country's commitment to achieving the 17 SDGs take on concrete shape and led to the selection of 38 priority targets and 59 indicators. Congo adopted 14 objectives, 74 targets and 113 indicators. The CAR has prioritized 37 targets and 245 indicators, and Chad has prioritized 70 out of the 169 targets identified. It should be noted that the national reports of the Central African countries have focused more on progress in monitoring the achievement of SDG 15 and secondarily on SDG 13.

Alignment of the SDGs with national agendas provides an overview of the forest-sector contribution, which very often remains focused on the natural characteristics of the forest. This approach hides

12 See: https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/documents/20872VNR_hanbook_2019_Edition_v4.pdf

13 Under UN General Assembly Resolution 70/1 of 25 September 2015, paragraph 55.

14 These reports are presented to the High-Level Political Forum of the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

15 The national voluntary reports of the countries not mentioned (Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and Sao Tome and Principe) had not yet been published on the United Nations website at the time of writing of this chapter.

the many benefits that other sectors derive from sustainable forest management without bearing the costs. In fact, in the national reports that have been analysed, the multiple strengths and potentialities of forests are not sufficiently highlighted when monitoring achievement of the SDGs. Indeed, the countries of the subregion are making huge efforts in the conservation and sustainable management of their forests. These efforts should be capitalized so that they contribute to the achievement of most of the targets and indicators of all the SDGs. This capitalization should focus on taking into account the efforts made by these countries, particularly in achieving the following goals: combating poverty (SDG 1); combating hunger and food security (SDG 2); gender equality (SDG 5); clean water and sanitation (SDG 6); decent work and economic growth (SDG 8); and peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16). The positive externalities of forest management are as important as the health of the forest.

At the subregional level, OFAC is currently compiling information to monitor the implementation of the COMIFAC Convergence Plan.

6.3 Options to enhance the monitoring of forest contribution to the SDGs in Central Africa

6.3.1 Towards subregional guidelines for monitoring forest contribution to the SDGs

The synergies between the SDGs and the COMIFAC Convergence Plan clearly show that forests contribute to achieving most of the SDGs by providing various social, economic and environmental benefits. If we focus primarily on SDG 15 indicators and somewhat on SDG 13 (as can be seen in the targets and indicators prioritized by countries), we gain only a partial picture of the range of the forest contributions to the SDGs. In fact, a sector as important as the forests of the Congo Basin contributes to resolving a wide range of development problems and, in turn, contributes to several SDGs. It is against this backdrop that COMIFAC has initiated an inclusive process to develop subregional guidelines to monitor forest contribution to the SDGs. This process, which FAO is facilitating with technical assistance,¹⁶ has shed new light on forests and their contribution to the SDGs. It has also made it possible to provide Central African countries with guidance on how to achieve harmonious tracking and reporting on 31 targets of the prioritized SDGs.

The Subregional Guidelines¹⁷ are formed by 5 principles, 12 guidelines and the priority action areas associated with them. The principles are derived from the four areas of action common to the Convergence Plan and the SDGs: forest governance, inclusive and responsible economic growth, sustainable livelihoods of forest-dependent populations, and the biophysical results of forest management and its externalities. Figure 6.1 presents the four areas of action common to the SDGs and the priority action areas concerned.

¹⁶ <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9261fr/CA9261FR.pdf> (consulted on 14/06/21).

¹⁷ These Guidelines were reviewed and approved during a subregional workshop held in Libreville on 26 and 27 November 2019. They will be submitted to the COMIFAC Council of Ministers for adoption.

The first draft of the Guidelines was reviewed and approved from a technical angle during a subregional workshop held in November 2019 in Libreville, Gabon. These Guidelines will be submitted for adoption by the COMIFAC Council of Ministers, prior to the launch of outreach activities and support for country ownership.

To facilitate the implementation of these Guidelines, a set of indicators has been identified as a directory of “thematic actions” associated with each indicator. With these new Guidelines, countries will be better equipped to fill the above-mentioned reporting gaps and to monitor progress towards achieving the SDGs, particularly with regard to forest contribution. A better assessment of the contribution of forests to the SDGs will provide policymakers, technical and financial partners, and the general public with new insights into the value and importance of Central African forests to the SDGs.

The Subregional Guidelines can also be used for awareness-raising, ownership and mainstreaming of “forest-based solutions” into sectoral policies and programmes on water, energy, food, employment, poverty alleviation and other issues. For example, by highlighting, SDG 6 target 6 on the protection and restoration of water-related ecosystems, the Subregional Guidelines draw attention to the role of forests as a regulator of fresh water and also as an alternative to the “grey infrastructure” on which countries are still heavily dependent. Moreover, by prioritizing targets 7.1 and 7.2 of SDG 7, the Subregional Guidelines also highlight the solutions that forests can provide in the energy transition.

The alignment of these Guidelines with the global objectives on forests of the United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests (2017–2030) can serve as a harmonized framework for the monitoring of the contribution of Central African countries to these global objectives and of forest contribution to the SDGs.

Finally, taking into account the wide range of forest functions, as set out in the Subregional Guidelines for monitoring the SDGs, also offers an opportunity to explore and consider emerging issues such as internationalizing the concept of “nature-based solutions.”

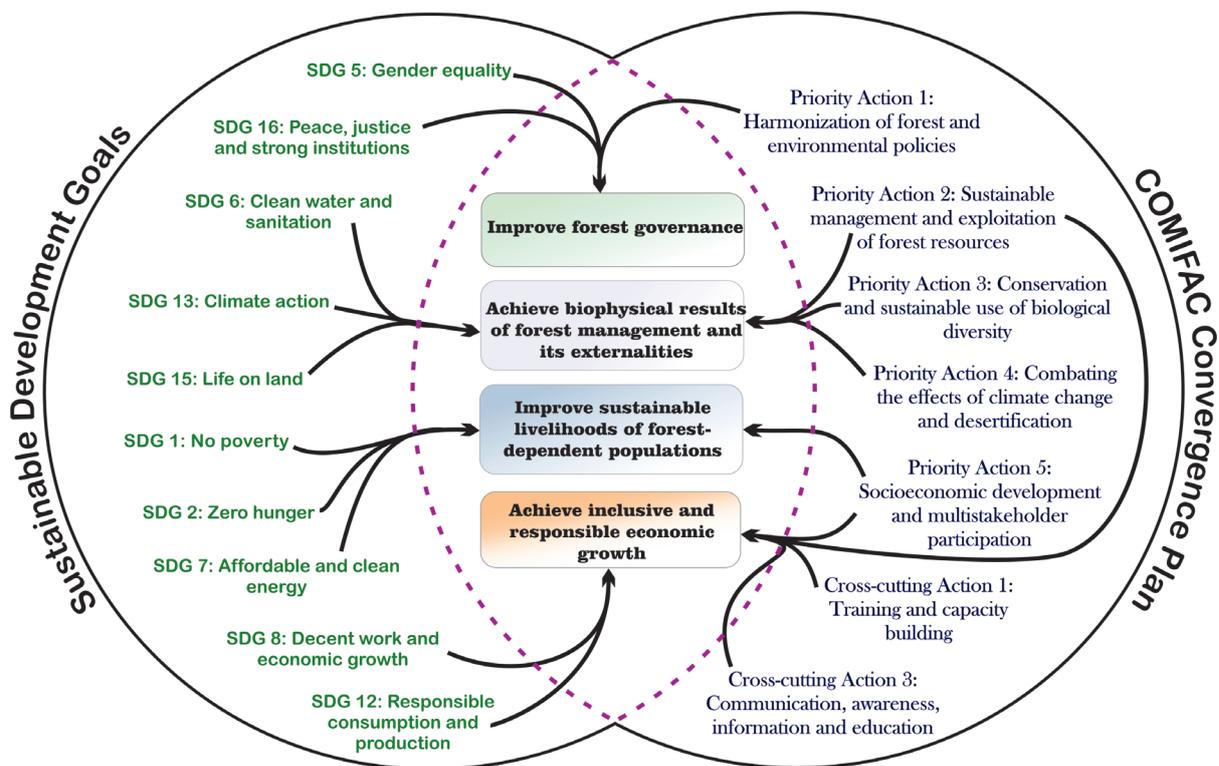


Figure 6.1: Fields of action common to the Convergence Plan and the SDGs

6.3.2 Facilitating enhanced monitoring of the forest contribution to the SDGs

Ownership of the SDG themes makes it possible to monitor the forest contribution from the various angles, such as economic, social and environmental. However, in doing so, various types of barriers are encountered: insufficient coordination between sectors, administrative red tape that hampers periodic review of public policies, and weak statistics systems, etc.

a) Insufficient coordination between sectors

Forests affect a number of other sectors and vice versa, in particular agriculture, energy, infrastructure and extractive industries (Pouakouyou and Mayers 2015; Buttoud and Nguinguiri 2016). Stakeholder involvement in forest management is a recurrent concern in forestry. Coordination among stakeholders in different sectors is crucial.

Lack of coordination between sectors thus appears to be a major obstacle to proper monitoring of forest contribution to the SDGs in Central Africa. Some countries in the subregion are trying to find solutions to this problem by setting up bodies to promote coordination between sectors. One

Table 6.1: Principles and guidelines for reporting the forest contribution to the SDGs in Central African countries

Principles	Reporting guidelines
Principle 1: Availability of sufficient good-quality, up-to-date and accessible statistical data that meet SDG monitoring needs	<i>Guideline 1:</i> Consistency, reliability and credibility of the national statistics system
	<i>Guideline 2:</i> Adaptation of the institutional framework for forest statistics management to new demands, including the monitoring of forest contribution to the SDGs
Principle 2: Biophysical results of sustainable forest management	<i>Guideline 3:</i> Highlighting the role of forests in maintaining water quality and watercourse systems as part of monitoring SDG 6
	<i>Guideline 4:</i> Outreach on climate change mitigation and adaptation efforts and their impact on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and on strengthening the resilience of forest-dependent populations as part of the follow-up to SDG 13
	<i>Guideline 5:</i> Highlighting the biophysical results of sustainable forest management, biodiversity conservation, and the fight against desertification and land degradation in national SDG 15 monitoring reports
Principle 3: Sustainable livelihoods of forest-dependent populations	<i>Guideline 6:</i> Highlighting the forest contribution to the eradication of poverty, especially among local and indigenous communities, within the framework of monitoring SDG 1
	<i>Guideline 7:</i> Highlighting the role of forest-derived foods in ensuring food security and in improving nutrition within the framework of monitoring SDG 2
	<i>Guideline 8:</i> Quantifying and disseminating the results of efforts to make woodfuel clean and renewable, within the framework of monitoring SDG 7
Principle 4: More inclusive and responsible economic growth	<i>Guideline 9:</i> Assessing and disseminating the impact of measures taken to promote decent employment in the forest sector within the framework of monitoring SDG 8
	<i>Guideline 10:</i> Highlighting the impact of actions taken to improve productive use of forest resources, within the framework of monitoring SDG 12
Principle 5: Forest governance	<i>Guideline 11:</i> The values system based on ethics, equity and social justice that underpins forest governance should be periodically evaluated, and these results should be highlighted in monitoring SDG 16.
	<i>Guideline 12:</i> Efforts to make forest policies and programmes gender-responsive should be made as part of monitoring SDG 5.

example is the Congolese Observatory for Sustainable Development (OCDD) in the DRC. It was created within the Ministry of Planning and is working towards an inclusive process of ownership, implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.

b) Insufficient mainstreaming of forest multifunctionality

A silo approach is unsuitable for the multifunctional nature of forests. Responses by individual sectors to forest degradation or biodiversity loss have shown their limitations. It is largely because of pressures from other sectors of activity that forests are threatened by degradation and deforestation in Central Africa (Tchatchou et al. 2015). From this angle, enhancing the monitoring of forest contribution to the SDGs cannot be done in isolation by forest-sector stakeholders alone. It is thus clear that work with other sectors on joint projects is necessary.

There are several issues raised in the COMIFAC Subregional Guidelines that should not be addressed from a forestry perspective alone. For example, woodfuel is the main source of energy for 90 percent of Kinshasa's population (Schure et al. 2013), and responses to woodfuel supply problems should not be compartmentalized into activities by individual sectors. Rather, these problems should be addressed as an integral part of a coordinated energy policy that takes into account the main players in the biomass energy sector.

c) Lack of an adaptive management culture

In the countries of the subregion, most of the public administrations involved in development sectors (agriculture, forestry, fisheries, livestock, economy, etc.) use traditional management approaches rather than ones that are more flexible and that adapt to various circumstances (e.g., results-based management, ecosystem approach, nature-based solutions). Moreover, these countries lack an organizational culture in which periodic review of policies and strategies is carried out so that they can be updated and adapted to new situations and requirements. It is highly likely that the targets prioritized by Central African countries in their voluntary national reports will not be revised by their 2030 deadline, as is the case of several of their forest and environmental policies.

Box 6.2: Monitoring SDG implementation in the DRC

Since 2016, the DRC has been implementing Agenda 2030 via a participatory, transparent and in-depth approach at the provincial, national, regional and international levels.

The creation of the Congolese Observatory for Sustainable Development (OCDD) within the Ministry of Planning has enabled not only ownership, but also steering and monitoring of the Agenda 2030 SDGs. For this reason, the awareness-raising and dissemination process targeting all stakeholders was launched in 2016, with 38 priority targets and 59 priority indicators from among 105 targets and 159 indicators.

The DRC's VNR report assessed the progress made in achieving the SDGs and the impact of the policies and strategies that had been implemented. However, this report did not address the details of each sector's contribution to achieving the SDGs nationally. Indeed, the report on the forest sector did not present specific data on forest contribution to the SDGs in the DRC.

d) Weaknesses in statistics systems

To implement the Subregional Guidelines to monitor forest contribution to the SDGs, reliable data is required to establish baselines for the identified indicators and to report on progress made in reaching the priority targets. However, in the Central African countries, national statistics systems lack sufficient capacity to produce forest data that are timely, systematic, accurate, relevant and comparable. Lack of reliable data is one of the risks of failure in SDG implementation, as pointed out in the Africa Sustainable Development Report (2017).¹⁸ In nearly all the countries of the subregion, national statistics institutes face a shortage of financial and human resources. Given this situation, the task of monitoring the SDGs seems out of proportion compared to their capacities (Roca and Letouzé 2016). These difficulties can be explained primarily by differences in methodologies, lack of coordination within the national statistics system, lack of funding and human resources, inadequate infrastructure and somewhat of a lag in data technology (CEA et al. 2017).

Several countries in the subregion recognize that it is urgent to meet the growing need for harmonized and good-quality data for monitoring the SDGs and the African Union's Agenda 2063. Chad, for example, in its 2019 VNR report on SDG implementation, announced launch of reforms to enhance statistics production. In Cameroon, meanwhile, work is under way to develop the third generation of its National Strategy for the Development of Statistics.

6.3.3 Recommendations for enhancing the monitoring of forest contribution to the SDGs

a) Strengthen capacities of national statistics units

The units in charge of statistics in the countries of the subregion face both a shortage of suitable work equipment for analysing and processing statistical data and a lack of qualified personnel to produce reliable statistical data, this despite the existence of several large statistical training schools in the subregion. To deal with this situation, functional and operational capacity building for the countries' statistics units is a prerequisite, as is capacity building (1) for the staff of those units, for mastering the tools, software, approaches and techniques currently in use for data collection, analysis and processing; and (2) for identification and coding of indicators and targets related to the SDGs. These two types of capacity building for national statistics units are needed to enable the countries in the subregion to produce reliable statistical data and to facilitate the monitoring of the contribution of forests and other development sectors to the SDGs.

b) Strengthen the countries' capacity to implement the Subregional Guidelines for monitoring forest contribution to the SDGs

The disparities observed in the voluntary national reports of the countries analysed in this research have highlighted the shortcomings in identification of indicators and targets and in reporting on the contribution of forests and other development sectors to the SDGs. These shortcomings justify the need in the countries of the subregion for capacity building in proper use of the Subregional Guidelines for monitoring forest contribution to the SDGs. This capacity-building work can be carried out once the Subregional Guidelines are adopted by the COMIFAC Council of Ministers.

¹⁸ A joint publication of the African Union, the Economic Commission for Africa, the African Development Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.

c) Improve institutional coordination

Because forest-related SDGs cut across several development sectors that fall under the responsibility of several government ministries, the production of voluntary national reports on forest contribution to the SDGs requires good coordination between the different sectors involved. Coordination via the establishment of an inter-sector platform will allow contribution by the various sectors to the SDGs to be better taken into account in the national reports. Such a platform can be facilitated by a government ministry in charge of planning or development issues. Lack of good institutional coordination leads to the production of national reports that do not necessarily reflect all the contributions of the different sectors to the SDGs. Furthermore, institutional coordination will make it possible to better harmonize approaches to data collection, analysis and monitoring of forest contribution to the SDGs in national reports and thereby facilitate comparisons between countries. To achieve this, strategic policy guidelines for sectoral ministries are crucial for guiding the choices of the ministries in charge of institutional coordination, so that they will not be challenged by other ministries.

d) Strengthen the capacities in the assessment of forest ecosystem services, among technical staff in the ministries responsible for forests and the environment

The sectoral ministries in charge of forests and the environment in the countries of the subregion lack expertise in assessing forest ecosystem services. However, this expertise is essential for assessing the range of the contributions of forests and their ecosystem services to the SDGs. Capacity building in this area of expertise will equip the technical staff of these ministries to better assess forest contributions to the SDGs in Central Africa and to produce national reports that will better reflect these contributions.

e) Strengthen the capacities of OFAC

OFAC is already compiling information to help monitor the implementation of the COMIFAC Convergence Plan. It would be useful to strengthen OFAC's capacities so that it can process data on the SDGs in addition to the data which the countries are collecting to inform the indicators of the COMIFAC Convergence Plan that OFAC is already processing.

Conclusions

Our research shows that the COMIFAC Convergence Plan can serve as a frame of reference for assessing the contribution of Central African forests to the SDGs. It highlights fields of action common between the Convergence Plan and the SDGs.

The exercise of aligning the COMIFAC Convergence Plan with the SDGs has once again highlighted the multiple functions performed by the forests of the Congo Basin and the many services they provide to humans and the planet.

Our research also shows that the range of forest contributions to the SDGs has not been sufficiently understood or reflected in the voluntary national reports produced by the countries of the subregion. Indeed, few of the countries provided detailed information on forest contribution to the SDGs, and the national voluntary reports which were analysed did not highlight forest contribution to SDGs

other than SDG 15 and SDG 13. In fact, nearly all the countries tracked forest contribution only to these 2 SDGs out of the 10 prioritized SDGs.

The multifunctional approach employed by COMIFAC in monitoring forest contribution to the SDGs goes beyond just an environmental function. This approach pays as much attention to the economic and social functions of forests as to their environmental function. The multifunctional approach should be used more, in order to identify the range of services that forest ecosystems provide to achieve the SDGs.

Our research also explored options for enhancing the monitoring of forest contribution to the SDGs and has made recommendations for improving the monitoring of forest contribution.

As for future prospects, the production of the Subregional Guidelines for monitoring forest contribution to the SDGs in the COMIFAC countries is a significant step towards improving the reporting of forest contribution to the SDGs. Once these Guidelines are adopted by the COMIFAC Council of Ministers, they can be adopted internally by the countries. To this end, the capacities of the countries of the subregion should be strengthened, in order to help them obtain better ownership and implementation of the principles, guidelines and priority actions needed to improve their reporting on the SDGs and on forest contributions to the latter.

Annex

Annex 6.1: Subregional package of prioritized targets to enhance forest contribution to the SDGs

SDGs	TARGETS
SDG 1. No poverty	1.1 By 2030, completely eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere.
	1.4 By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance.
SDG 2. Zero hunger	2.1 By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.
	2.3 By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.
	2.5 By 2020, maintain the genetic diversity of seeds, cultivated plants and farmed and domesticated animals and their related wild species, including through soundly managed and diversified seed and plant banks at the national, regional and international levels, and promote access to and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge, as internationally agreed.
SDG 5. Gender equality	5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life.
	5.a. Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.
SDG 6. Clean water and sanitation	6.6 By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.
SDG 7. Clean and affordable energy	7.1 By 2030, ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.
	7.2 By 2030, increase substantially the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix.
SDG 8. Decent work and economic growth	8.3 Promote development-oriented policies that support productive activities, decent job creation, entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation, and encourage the formalization and growth of micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, including through access to financial services.
	8.7 Take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms.
	8.9 By 2030, devise and implement policies to promote sustainable tourism that creates jobs and promotes local culture and products.
SDG 12. Responsible consumption and production	12.2 By 2030, achieve sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources.
	12.5 By 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse.
	12.7 Promote public procurement practices that are sustainable, in accordance with national policies and priorities.

SDGs	TARGETS
SDG 13. Measures to combat climate change	13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries.
	13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning.
	13.3 Improve education, awareness-raising and human and institutional capacity on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.
SDG 15. Life on earth	15.1 By 2020, ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands, in line with obligations under international agreements.
	15.2 By 2020, promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally.
	15.3 By 2030, combat desertification, restore degraded land and soil, including land affected by desertification, drought and floods, and strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world.
	15.5 Take urgent and significant action to reduce the degradation of natural habitats, halt the loss of biodiversity and, by 2020, protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species.
	15.6 Promote fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and promote appropriate access to such resources, as internationally agreed.
	15.7 Take urgent action to end poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna and address both demand and supply of illegal wildlife products.
	15.8 By 2020, introduce measures to prevent the introduction and significantly reduce the impact of invasive alien species on land and water ecosystems and control or eradicate the priority species.
	15.9 By 2020, integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts.
	15.a Mobilize and significantly increase financial resources from all sources to conserve and sustainably use biodiversity and ecosystems.
SDG 16. Peace, justice and strong institutions	16.5 Substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms.
	16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels.
	16.b Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development.