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# The Forests Dialogue

ENGAGE! EXPLORE! CHANGE!

## Understanding Deforestation Free Commitments in Central African Context, Mouila Gabon

October 14-18, 2017

### Co-Chairs' Summary

Rod Taylor, Quentin Meunier, Patrick Moungwengui and Edwige Eyang Effa

#### INTRODUCTION

The Forests Dialogue (TFD) convened a field dialogue on Understanding Deforestation-Free (UDF) in Gabon on 14 – 19 October in Mouila, the capital of Gabon's Ngounié Province. The dialogue brought together 58 stakeholders, including international and Gabon forest sector and commodity supply chain stakeholders from industry, civil society, Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, governments, and non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations (see Annex I for a complete participant list). Participants represented a broad diversity of professional expertise and experience relevant to the design and implementation of deforestation-free commitments in Gabon, West and Central Africa, and globally.

The UDF dialogue in Mouila was co-convened by Gabon's National Climate Council.

This was the second field dialogue under the TFD initiative on Understanding Deforestation-Free (UDF), which launched in October 2014 with a scoping dialogue at Yale University in the United States. The scoping exercise identified key questions confronting the implementation and upscaling of deforestation-free pledges, and the Gabon field dialogue sought to elaborate and begin answering these questions taking into account the Central African context with highly forested countries and landscapes. Through two days of field visits and two days of facilitated discussion, the field dialogue set out to:

- ➔ **Capture insights and develop a shared understanding of key challenges** to ensure deforestation-free initiatives deliver positive social and environmental outcomes in Gabon, using this as a prototype to inform a general approach in highly-forested countries;
- ➔ **Provide an understanding of the smallholder, company agriculture, livelihood context** (both challenges and opportunities) and land development dynamics in highly-forested African countries, using Gabon as an example;

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- ➔ **Bring key local, regional, and global actors together** to define the expectations of and examine operational challenges associated with deforestation-free commitments and implementation in the highly-forested context in Africa;
- ➔ **Begin to co-design potential solutions to address these commonly understood challenges**, particularly around incentivizing smallholders, companies, and partners to contribute to local and landscape-scale forest conservation and forest restoration in a way that ensures sustainable livelihoods;
- ➔ **Build on and inform other related processes** such as TFA 2020, HCSA, HCVRN, CAFI, CFA and the Accountability Framework.

This report summarizes the key issues and conclusions that emerged from the field dialogue and priorities for next steps identified by participants. The dialogue agenda, a background paper, presentations made during the dialogue, and other related materials are posted on the TFD website.

## FIELD VISITS (DAYS 1 AND 2)

**More than 50 dialogue participants visited six field sites throughout Ngounié Province over the course of two days. Learnings from the field directly informed the subsequent two days of formal dialogue.**

The landscape surrounding Mouila is composed of savanna-forest mosaic and crossed by the Ngounié river. Olam has secured oil palm concessions in the Mouila region with a total area of ~105,000ha. Of this area, 49,000 ha has been planted and harvesting started in January 2016. Olam followed the RSPO New Planting Procedure and expects to receive RSPO certification. Areas totaling 56,000 ha (55%) within the concessions that were assessed as having High Conservation Values (HCV) (social or ecological), as well as medium and high-density forests have been set aside for conservation purposes. The site visits are summarized below.

## DAY 1

Participants split into two groups: the first group visited HCV areas in riparian forest while the second group explored community HCV areas in savanna.

### Site #1: High Conservation Value in Riparian Forest

These forests were logged before and after French colonization in the 1960s. They comprise a patchwork of young secondary growth, logged but recovering forest, and some remaining mature forest. The visit was led by Olam's HCV assistant manager and

comprised a boat ride along the river and a walk through the forest. The visit allowed participants to learn about the management of the HCV areas and witness the abundance of wildlife in the riparian forest.

### **Site #2: High Conservation Value Community Savanna**

This visit was led by the community leader managing areas containing social HCVs 5 and 6. Participants visited several small lakes managed for fishing in the dry season. Villagers visited expressed their desire to secure and legalize community boundaries within and around palm oil concessions and their concerns that use of fertilizers could have negative impacts in streams used by local communities. This visit was physically challenging due to the long distance walked during the heat of the day.

## **DAY 2**

On the second day, participants visited several sites and interacted with managers, workers and local community groups.

### **Site #3: Palm Oil Nursery and Plantation**

Led by Olam's Sustainability team members, participants saw land preparation for the new planting cycle, nurseries, current palm plantations, and standing forest within the plantation (mostly protected riparian forests). Participants met with workers and received explanations regarding the operations and decisions made to comply with RSPO standards, including HCV and social-environmental responsibilities. Participants were able to interact with workers and learn their experiences working in such an environment. Questions emerged during the ride and stops regarding community access to their traditional lands and resources within such as lakes; the overall management including the role of different government ministries in agriculture land allocation, HCV assessments and monitoring; and land use history of the landscape and potential conflicts that have emerged.

### **Site #4: Forest Logging Concession (CFAD)**

Participants visited a sawmill within a logging concession operated by a Gabonese company. The concession manager provided an overview of the concession, different operations from production to transformation in the saw mill and reduced impact logging practices. Participants visited the saw mill, log yards and interacted with workers. Questions emerged in the interaction with the concession manager about the role of the government in ensuring that illegal activities are not occurring in the concession. He explained that he was required to limit operations to annual cutting blocks identified in the management plan. Participants also observed the burning of offcuts and saw mill residues on site due to apparent lack of commercial demand for this material.

### **Site #5: GRAINE Project**

In 2014, Olam helped to establish the "Gabonaise des Réalisations Agricoles et des Initiatives des Nationaux Engagés" (GRAINE) program, a smallholder program in a public-private partnership with the



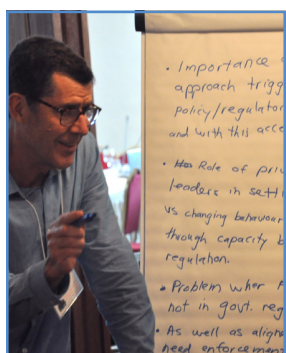
Peter Umunay presents details from the background paper.



Co-chair Patrick Mougwengui moderates discussion.



Co-chair Edwige Eyang Effa leads a small-group discussion.



Co-chair Rod Taylor consulting group members.

Gabonese Republic. Under this program, the Republic of Gabon provides land and financial resources for developing smallholder plantations and logistics infrastructure, while Olam leads the development and management of smallholder plantations. The scheme identifies, allocates and transfers parcels of land for plantation development to co-operatives of Gabonese citizens. These citizens are trained in plantation management and the production of palm and food crops such as bananas, cassavas, tomatoes and hot peppers. The ultimate goal is to increase food security and reduce import dependence.

The Participants visited a site where cooperative members grow staple food crops, and met cooperative members to discuss their livelihoods needs and how this project met their demands. The visit provided participants with a better understanding of the project's impacts on food security, community development and efforts to reduce deforestation in primary forest. Participants had the opportunity to talk to farmers regarding technical and financial support, and the outcomes in terms of production, transformation and commercialization. Both farmers and project managers shared their challenges and concerns regarding successful implementation of new planting practices. Participants noted the apparent lack of monitoring and evaluation of project activities and absence of strategies for transformation and commercialization.

## Site #6: Community Villages (1&2)

Participants were split into two groups to allow active interactions with people in two villages neighboring the palm oil concession. In discussions with the villages, participants heard how young people in the village had been hired to work in the plantations, that Olam had provided basic infrastructure for community development (school, hospital, public lighting, etc.); that villages had participated in participatory mapping and had a social contract with Olam, but are not always clear on community rights on lands and resources.

## DIALOGUE

The formal dialogue began on the third day and was prefaced by recaps of the field visits described above, and short presentations and interventions from a few stakeholders.

Rod Taylor from the World Resources Institute (WRI) presented on progress towards eliminating deforestation from supply chains. He noted that more and more companies were making commitments, but relatively few had concrete timebound plans for achieving them. He also provided an overview of emerging tools, approaches and standards to support implementation of these commitments.

Peter Umunay presented the background paper prepared with co-author, Jessica McGlyn.

The final version of the paper can be found at <http://theforestsdialogue.org/sites/default/files/backgroundgabonenglish.pdf>. The paper recounts how in recent years, a growing number of countries, companies, and organizations have made commitments to eliminate deforestation driven by production of commodities such as soy, beef, pulp and timber, and palm oil (see for example, Consumer Goods Forum forest initiative, New York Declaration on Forests, SDG 15). Global, regional and sectoral platforms such as the Tropical Forest Alliance 2020, The GEF-funded Good Growth Partnership, the Cocoa and Forests Initiative, the Brazilian Soy Moratorium and the Africa Palm Oil Initiative, have been created to help stakeholders collaboratively define and implement those commitments. Additionally, many tools, approaches, and methodologies such as the High Carbon Stock Approach, Global Forest Watch and RSPO certification have been created or adapted to help implement, monitor, verify, and report on progress. These mechanisms have achieved some success, though each approach has relative strengths and weaknesses.

Applying a “deforestation-free” approach in a highly forested region such as Central Africa has the potential to clash with national economic development goals, or to enhance them. The paper notes potential measures that could help reconcile global deforestation-free commitments with these goals:

- **Regionally relevant deforestation-free definitions, metrics, and approaches** developed by local stakeholders, with a question over the degree to which sovereign governments should be involved in developing these, so far as the international commitments by private sector actors are voluntary in nature.
- **Policy and governance reforms related to land use planning, rural tenure and forest protection** that would enable implementation of corporate deforestation-free policies.
- **Harmonised monitoring reporting and verification systems.**

The paper presents relevant policy and context in Gabon, and associated challenges of implementing deforestation-free commitments in a high forest cover developing country.

- During the evening sessions stakeholder presentations included: stakeholders the Gabon government’s vision on sustainable development presented by the President of National Climate Council,
- The Africa Palm Oil Initiative under TFA 2020 presented by ProForest
- Olam International on their vision towards transforming the palm production system
- the Accountability Framework Initiative on developing tools for monitoring activities related to zero deforestation commitments throughout companies supply chain.

## KEY THEMES AND CONCLUSIONS FROM THE DIALOGUE

The field visits and stakeholder presentations informed a rich discussion on the implementation of deforestation-free initiatives and tools within the West/Central African context. During the dialogue,





Co-chair Quentin Meunier at a HCV site.



Participants in the savanna



Dr. Lee White in discussion.



Pascal Mathieu explaining HCV system.

participants broke out into working groups on four themes: (1) Adapting Concepts to Regional and National levels; (2) Government and Private Sector; (3) Implication for Local Communities; and (4) Capacity Building. In the first breakout session, each working group developed a list of challenges associated with each theme, while in the second they worked on potential solutions to address these challenges. In the last session, using “world café” technique, participants focused on several concrete actions as next steps.

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS FROM THE DIALOGUE

National forest policies often predate deforestation-free concepts and are either silent on enabling conditions for deforestation-free production, or propose criteria for land-use zoning and permitting that contradict global voluntary deforestation-free standards and tools. This lack of alignment is further compounded by the ongoing and rapid evolution of global tools and standards. Even where there is alignment between global standards and national legislation, the lack of capacity to implement and enforce the legislation can be a major barrier to alignment in practice. Tools requiring free, prior and informed consent of communities; maintenance of high conservation values or conservation of high carbon stock areas are more difficult to apply without support in national regulations and administrative systems.

Voluntary deforestation-free approaches have a role in triggering policy change, regulatory reform and improved access to justice. Dialogue participants saw a dual role for progressive private sector actors in “pushing the envelope” on best practices, while also changing the behavior of laggard companies through capacity building or advocating for improved regulation.

Many participants expressed opposition to rigid application of international deforestation-free standards and tools without an understanding of their fit within the national context or the aspirations of local communities. Because countries have varied agricultural histories and development objectives, any international principles can only be effective with national interpretation and adaptation to the local context. Participants also cautioned against assuming all countries in Central Africa, or communities within a country, would face the same challenges in complying with these international standards.

Some participants observed that it would be impossible to achieve the ambitions in Gabon’s agricultural policies without conversion of some forest with high carbon stocks as defined in the HCS Approach Toolkit (v2.0, May 2017). They noted that this toolkit was developed primarily for application in landscapes with highly-fragmented forests, and questioned its applicability, without adjustment, to Gabon’s high forest cover context (86% of the country).

National interpretations could help to reconcile international principles with local context. Examples include national interpretations of global certification standards, and national toolkits for the identification and monitoring of high conservation values and high carbon stocks. Participants cautioned against an exclusive focus on prescriptive technical definitions in national interpretations and urged that more attention be given to inclusive decision-making procedures, agreeing desired outcomes and tools to measure results. Geospatial analysis could help understand the implications of applying international tools in different contexts and landscapes. Some expressed concern that national interpretations could water down international safeguards.

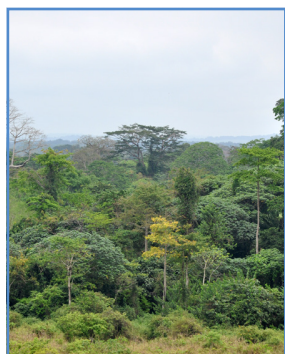
Participants noted that deforestation-free supply chain concepts were new to most stakeholders in Central African countries, and people could not be expected to understand the complexity of issues without a lot more outreach and dissemination of the concepts. They stressed that local understanding was key to the effective adaptation of the international standards and tools. In the words of one participant, proponents of these concepts “need to talk to communities, and not just rely on satellites.”

Participants first highlighted the lack of involvement of Governments in establishing international voluntary standards, leading to failure in recognition of those standards in the countries in which they apply, and later on implementation in their countries. This would require efforts on both sides, first from the Governments to appoint more resources and dedicated focal points, and second from international NGOs and companies to invite Government to participate and/or review their proposals.

In debates around the forest, definitions should differentiate between definitions based on biophysical attributes, definitions for statistical purposes and designation of areas for land zoning purposes. To facilitate dialogue on forests, forest definitions should be transparent and, while focusing on meeting national needs, allow consistent reporting for international processes and conventions.

Questions were raised about whether shifting cultivation in forested landscapes should be regarded as a form of deforestation. This question is compounded when forestry concessions or protected areas, such as High Conservation Value areas in agri-concessions, restrict the land that communities can cultivate, undermining the viability of these systems. This reduced space for traditional shifting cultivation, combined with growing populations, is associated with a rise in more permanent conversion of forests to smallholder production of cash-crops. Participants expressed the need to have an increased understanding of the traditional agricultural practices and propose best practices that can meet both the need for food security and agricultural income, and protection of forests.

Many stakeholders in Central African countries perceive the “no deforestation” notion as something that is imposed from afar, and that is fundamentally a negative prohibition rather than a positive aspiration. The notion might be more readily accepted if it is turned on its head and presented as the pursuit of sustainable, inclusive, rural economic development. In order to qualify as deforestation free, such an approach would need to consider the following requirements:



HCV forest



Dr. Mavoungou, logging concession owner, talking with participants.



Vincent Edzang



Dialogue in Mouila

- A clearly articulated political vision for deforestation-free development, considering the existing quality and distribution of forest ecosystems, forest resources, and actual forest use (e.g. legal classifications, attributions and concessions, protected areas, traditional use patterns etc)
- Integration of climate, biodiversity, and social goals within the national forest governance framework, complementing the normal (economic) considerations
- A land use plan and/or zoning approach with clearly defined areas or land classes attributed to conservation, sustainable forestry, traditional uses, and agriculture, based on suitability and value.
- A national framework of laws and institutions capable of upholding deforestation-free programmes and initiatives (generally at a jurisdictional or landscape level)
- A framework for recognizing traditional land tenure and rights, resolving conflicts, and compensations
- A platform for civil society organizations, economic operators and government representatives to communicate and resolve deforestation challenges.

Participants recognized the potential of the jurisdictional approach in delivering more sustainable models of rural development, while addressing direct and underlying causes of forest loss. However, successful pilot projects were needed to show governments and supply chain actors that a jurisdictional approach can work.

In recognizing communities and increasing their interactions and involvement in these debates, participants proposed improving rural population direct benefits through a recognized revenue sharing system. This would allow an improved consideration of people most directly affected, positively or negatively, by the implementation of concepts like zero-deforestation.

## KEY TAKE-AWAYS SPECIFIC TO GABON

Participants recognized the need for finalizing the national land use plan through transparent data collection and validation, as well as open and thorough consultations. This land-use plan should maximize the use of savannas with low conservation value for any large-scale agricultural activities, and the existing 'halo' of degraded forests for cooperative or small-scale farming. Civil society participants expressed willingness to contribute their expertise and data to support government-led processes. Development and implementation of the national land-use plan would require greater coordination between government agencies and harmonization of laws that currently conflict with one another.



Participants noted the lack of national laws and systems to formally recognize traditional land rights and secure community tenure, via a rural cadaster for example. A practical short-term measure could be to replicate OLAM's model of formalizing village boundaries via participatory mapping and creating a buffer zone around each village. These village zones could be recognized in the national land-use plan. This could serve as a holding pattern until a national law is enacted for formal recognition of community tenure. They also highlighted the lack of clarity on what counts as a "community" and the need for this to be better defined.

Participants discussed the potential implementation of Local Management Plans in villages. This would provide a more accurate understanding of people's traditional land uses and improve rural development coordination. This would require a legal framework and both governmental and non-governmental organizations to participate in establishing a standardized methodology (including legal recognition of the participatory mapping tool). It was noted that Gabon's government recently launched a programme to map all 2 500 Gabonese villages.

Participants discussed ways to consider Gabonese forests in the context of a high forested country, based on a national classification rather than aligning on international thresholds (e.g. carbon) or definitions (e.g. Young Regenerating Forest), which could prevent any recognition of sustainable agriculture in Gabon. The notion that Gabon may not develop any of its least-valuable forest areas to contribute to national development was rejected by national participants, who claimed that Gabon has a right to responsible development. Possible solutions presented to the groups included jurisdictional approaches and approaches based around planning for measurable positive benefits for climate, people and biodiversity.

Some participants stressed the need for Gabonese society to have an "honest debate" around the country's development options as precursor to positioning on the deforestation-free concept. However, they recognized the challenges inherent in setting up such a process to enable participation, representation and consultation in the different layers of decision making. The process would require significant resources and would need to provide local experts and stakeholders with the tools to participate effectively (and not rely on foreign consultants).

## PRIORITIES FOR NEXT STEPS

### Participants called for several concrete actions as next steps:

International companies and NGO actors are well-placed to facilitate further dialogue and develop mechanisms in Central African countries for: a) financing the implementation of deforestation-free commitments and b) facilitating participatory planning processes. Participants proposed setting up a long-term consultation process in Central Africa to bring together all actors (businesses, civil society and Governments) to understand the deforestation-free language, initiatives and concepts and create context-specific protocols, funding, legislation and implementation action. This could build on the Africa Palm Oil Initiative and extend to other sectors. It would involve identifying clear contact points who



Gary Dunning opening the dialogue.

could offer advice or coaching during the process of adaptation of international norms to country-specific contexts. These processes should not exclude local communities, and local media outlets could play a role in disseminating relevant information to such communities.

Participants involved in international initiatives and standards (e.g. TFA2020, HCS, HCV, RSPO, Accountability Framework) agreed to support efforts within these platforms to create regional and national interpretations for Central Africa. In Gabon, specifically, stakeholders saw an urgent need to formalize a process to validate the draft national guidelines for oil palm (ANPN) by linking the Government to actors who manage related international platforms.



Oil palm nursery visit.

Participants saw an opportunity for Gabon to play a leading role in shaping international deforestation-free tools and approaches under development or under review (e.g. the jurisdictional approach, The Accountability Framework, adaptation of the High Carbon Stock approach to different contexts). In particular, Gabon can feed-in perspectives and experiences from a high forest cover developing country. This would first require discussion of how deforestation-free commitments could be leveraged and adapted to support Gabon's own priorities. Participants at the meeting agreed follow-up actions to enable action on these issues in Gabon – included enhanced discourse on these issues between civil society, the private sector and the government, and between different agencies within government. There was also an opportunity for the government of Gabon to elevate these issues with Central Africa (e.g. via COMIFAC, the Central Africa Forests Initiative, the TFA Africa Palm Oil Initiative).

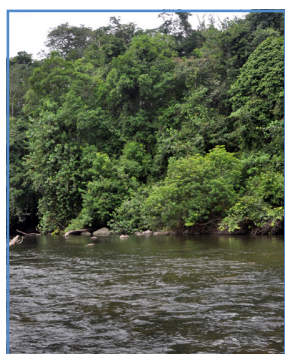


Community village group.

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Peter M. Umunay (The Forests Dialogue/Yale University) provided the first draft and coordinated editing of this summary.



Riparian forest

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