

## The Forests Dialogue

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# **The Forests Dialogue**

## ENGAGE! EXPLORE! CHANGE!

# Understanding 'Deforestation-Free' Commitments in the Central African Context

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#### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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 have been created, such as the Tropical Forest Alliance 2020, The GEF-funded *Taking Deforestation out of Supply Chains* Program, the Cocoa and Forests Initiative, the Brazilian Soy Moratorium, and the Africa Palm Oil Initiative, 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.

While many of these deforestation-free supply chain initiatives are global in nature and cover several commodities others, like the High Carbon Stock Approach, have largely focused on the pulp and palm oil sectors in southeast Asia. As such, some of the definitions and tools used to implement the deforestation-free commitments were designed with a single-commodity focus, to be applied in heavily deforested regions by stakeholders living and/or operating in those places. While the HCS approach is intended to be globally relevant, there is a need for local stakeholders to customize and define such a tool for themselves in Central Africa.

Within Central Africa, after years of neglect, agriculture is once again seizing the attention of governments, business leaders, communities, and development donors, as a powerful driver of the region's relentless growth. Many countries in the region have plans to boost economic development through diversification of their economies with palm oil and other commodities at the center of the economic strategies. Several companies have already invested resources to develop agribusiness in Central Africa.

Applying a "deforestation-free" approach in a highly forested region such as Central Africa has the potential to clash with national economic development goals. Several issues, elaborated below, need to be clarified in order to reconcile global deforestation-free commitments with the development plans and aspirations of Central African countries.

The need for a regionally relevant framework of deforestation-free definitions, metrics, and approaches developed by local stakeholders, to facilitate effective implementation of deforestation-free policies that account for the local context. Actors from Central Africa need to be included in the creation of regionally relevant definitions and metrics of success in the broad context of all commodities associated with deforestation (not just palm oil, but also rubber, timber, cocoa, etc.). A related question is the degree to which sovereign governments should be involved in developing such norms and practices, given that these are driven by international commitments by private sector actors that are voluntary in nature.

- Policy and governance reforms that will support corporate deforestation-free policies with sovereign governments at the center of the debate. The government's strategy should set priorities for development with a shared vision for the place of agriculture in the national economic development plan and incorporate the socio-economic realities of the countries, develop a clear land use planning and rural tenure reform in key areas, and ensure long-term protection of important forests and natural ecosystems.
- MRV systems—a need to develop methodologies and tools with clear metrics and indicators to support decision making process in the context of all commodities associated with deforestation, and to build capacity and coordination to collect relevant data and implement independent and transparent monitoring and reporting mechanism.

This paper presents background on deforestation-free initiatives, definitions, implementation approaches, and some of the key conceptual and technical challenges and opportunities in applying these in the context of high forest cover countries and landscapes of Central Africa. These include challenges associated with forest and agricultural policies and governance, monitoring and verification, and the implications of actors affected by these commitments, taking recent developments in Gabon as a case study.

## **1.INTRODUCTION**

The negative impact that the expansion of agricultural production has had on tropical forests is widely recognized (Donofrio et al. 2017). The New York Declaration on Forests, building on earlier efforts to combat deforestation, catalyzed a wave of commitments to halt deforestation by 2020. While deforestation-free commitments, including the Consumer Goods Forum 2010 commitment, generally covered several commodities, much of the early efforts focused on halting deforestation in Southeast Asia for oil palm and pulp plantations (UN 2014). As such some of the implementation tools and methodologies to implement and measure progress on deforestation-free commitments were developed within the Asian palm oil context and have since been expanded to cover other sectors and geographies.<sup>1</sup>

While such commitments are a crucial step in halting deforestation, concerns have been raised that the commitments may inadvertently undermine the rights and access to resources and sustainable livelihoods of smallholder farmers and indigenous peoples; that deforestation commitments made by the private sector are subject to leakage, and may have unintended consequences such as driving land clearance into other (non-focus) commodities, from large international companies to less-accountable Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (SMEs), or from forest to other valuable natural ecosystems.<sup>2</sup> There are also questions about the potential impact such commitments might have on developing countries' economic trajectories where agriculture is a central part of the development pathway, and how to align forest protection goals with national poverty reduction goals.<sup>3</sup>

Clear terminology, and metrics for assessing performance on deforestation-free commitments have varied, making implementation effectiveness more difficult to track. Furthermore, the tools and metrics developed

to track deforestation-free commitments, many of which were developed in the context of heavily deforested regions for single commodities, might not be universally applicable. There is a need for a regionally relevant framework of deforestation-free definitions, metrics, and approaches developed by local stakeholders, to facilitate effective implementation of deforestation-free policies that account for the local context.<sup>4</sup>

A broader strategy for reaching deforestation-free production of agricultural and forest commodities must also consider all commodities associated with deforestation–not just rubber, timber, and cocoa, but also the subsistence crops which drive most forest clearance in Central Africa (Gillet et al. 2016). Additionally, forest degradation, usually a step preceding deforestation, needs to be better accounted for in the frameworks that address commodity driven deforestation.

The Central African countries are as generally characterized as high forest cover with low deforestation (HFLD). In these countries, the application of deforestation-free commitments using metrics developed in the context of heavily deforested regions, with little input from stakeholders in Central Africa, will have many challenges. The concept is relatively novel and there are still several outstanding questions regarding implementation that could have a significant impact on the extent and location of forest protection. In this paper, we will examine several of the key issues that need to be resolved:

- + Harmonized definitions of key terms in deforestation-free commitments and metrics;
- Where to produce commodities and food to meet future demands;
- Suitable Monitoring, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) approaches;
- Production and regional/sectoral approaches and partnerships to sustainable agricultural production and land use that might be applied in Central Africa;
- Equity and sovereignty issues;
- → National development plans and place of agriculture Central Africa development.

The paper's geographic focus is Central Africa and Gabon's TFD October 2017 dialogue. The relatively unbroken block of forest in Central Africa is a result of an historical lack of infrastructure, armed conflicts, and low foreign investment. However, increased stability has enabled governments and investors to accelerate development of infrastructure and large-scale agriculture. Unless it is well planned, such economic development could come at the cost of forests, biodiversity, and forest-dependent people. This paper examines the state of agribusiness expansion in Central Africa, with a focus on Gabon, considering the historical background, political economy, and realities on the ground. Special consideration is given to the industrial palm oil sector, responsible for recent deforestation in Central African countries.

The objectives of the TFD's Understanding Deforestation-Free field dialogue in Gabon include: (1) capture insights and develop shared understanding on key challenges using Gabon as a prototype to inform a general approach in highly-forested countries; (2) provide an understanding of the smallholder, company agriculture, livelihood context and land development dynamics in highly-forested African countries; (3) bring key local,

regional, and global actors together to define the expectations of and examine operational challenges associated with deforestation-free commitments and implementation; (4) begin to co-design potential solutions to address these commonly understood challenges; and finally (5) build on and inform other related processes such as TFA 2020, HCSA, HCVRN, CAFI, CFA and the Accountability Framework.

## 2.THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

## 2.1 Origins and commitments to deforestation-free

## 2.1.1 The New York Declaration on Forests

For years, various governments, organizations, and corporations have attempted to address deforestation through both unilateral policies and multi-stakeholder partnerships. Examples include a variety of commodity certification standards developed between 1994-2010; the Aichi targets in the Convention on Biological Diversity (2010); and the Consumer Goods Forum commitment (2010).



The New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF), building upon this foundation, galvanized action at global scale to stop wide-scale forest conversion driven largely by the production of agricultural commodities such as soy, palm oil, beef, and paper. Spurred on in part by the 2014 UN Climate Summit, the NYFD facilitated deforestation-free commitments among 37 governments, 20 sub-national governments, 53 multinational companies, 63 non-governmental organizations, and 16 groups representing indigenous people (UN 2014). This non-binding decree included a timeline to decrease natural forest loss by 50%

by 2020, and ultimately end forest loss by 2030. NYDF also called for the restoration of 150 million hectares of degraded landscapes and forestlands by 2020 and an additional 200 million hectares by 2030. The NYDF's Action Agenda identified specific actions governments and corporations should take to address the social, environmental, and economic issues associated with deforestation.

#### 2.1.2 Corporate commitments to deforestation-free

There has been much momentum in the deforestation-free movement: 447 of the 718 companies in relevant agri-commodity sectors have made deforestation-related commitments, amounting to a total of 760 commitments.<sup>5</sup> While these commitments vary, they generally include both environmental and social considerations – such as the "No Deforestation, No Peat, No Exploitation" policies of many palm oil buyers and growers sourcing from Southeast Asia (Pirard et al. 2015). Commitments largely focus on the company's own supply chain and include some actions on traceability to the plantation-level.

#### SUPPLY CHANGE 2017 REPORT KEY FINDINGS

- Reporting is on the rise: public information is available on progress on over 50% of commitments;
- Commitments on palm oil, timber and pulp outnumber those for beef and soy;
- Commitments by large, public companies outnumber those from smaller, private ones;
- Retailers have lower rates of commitments than other actors in the supply chain;
- One in five commitments is past due, or never had a delivery date;
- 95% of companies in coalitions to address deforestation have individual commitments;
- Many commitments have expanded to address specific impacts, such as wildlife and biodiversity, greenhouse gas emissions, and water.

Various NGOs have provided guidance, not always harmonized, on what they deem should be included in deforestation-free commitments. Greenpeace, for example, calls for:

- Long-term forest and peat protection;
- Protection for indigenous peoples, workers, and communities;
- Responsible agricultural practices;
- Full supply-chain compliance;
- Transparent reporting and good governance; and
- Partnerships to drive change.

CDP<sup>6</sup> reports that the strongest commitments reported to them include:

- Legal compliance;
- High carbon stock protection;
- High conservation value protection;

- ✤ No peatland clearance; and
- Social criteria.

Efforts, such as the CERES Palm Oil Scorecard, have been made to attempt to align NGO expectations around corporate deforestation-free policies, practices, and reporting (see section 2.3.5).

## 2.2 Deforestation-free definitions

The progress reporting of commitments has come under scrutiny due to the ambiguity of terms and the lack of agreed or verified certification systems and scorecards amongst commodities and regions.<sup>7</sup>



Several terms, outlined below, have been used to describe the different commitments to eradicate deforestation:<sup>8</sup>

- Zero Gross Deforestation no conversion of forestland. Questions arise such as: when does the baseline begins, what counts as forests (example: plantation, primary, secondary forests), and how should forests already degraded be treated.
- Zero Net Deforestation no change of total forest area within a given geography, allowing for new forests to offset forest loss. Questions arise such as: what quality or type of forest is required to compensate for the forest lost.
- Zero Illegal Deforestation no conversion of forest that violates relevant forest law. Questions arise such as: which laws are relevant.
- Zero Deforestation (or deforestation-free) this term is ambiguous as to which of the above definitions are included.

Additionally, there is a rising expectation among stakeholders that "deforestation-free" practices address specific impacts such as carbon and biodiversity loss. Several NGOs are attempting to harmonize these definitions through platforms such as the Accountability Framework Initiative (see section 2.3.5).

## 2.3 Deforestation free initiatives

There are numerous partnerships and initiatives around the world designed to support various aspects of implementing deforestation-free commitments. The list below, though not exhaustive, is intended to highlight what we believe are the 1) most influential global initiatives; 2) most relevant sectoral and regional initiatives to Central Africa; and 3) interesting models that might be explored in Central Africa.

## 2.3.1 International collaboration platforms

Examples of key global deforestation-free initiatives are described below.

- The Consumer Goods Forum (CGF)<sup>9</sup> is a group of more than 400 companies, mainly comprised of large manufacturers and retailers, with a resolution to help achieve zero net deforestation by 2020. CGF is notable for it is potential of scale: it mobilizes the resources of its members and works with governments and NGO's across the world (Mayer and Miller, 2015).
- The Tropical Forest Alliance 2020 (TFA 2020)<sup>10</sup> has brought together multinational corporations, governments, and environmental NGOs to work together to remove deforestation from the supply chains of beef, palm, pulp and paper, and soy by 2020 (Cole and Teebken, 2015). Partners voluntarily submit information to the TFA 2020 in order track the progress of various initiatives and stimulate further partnership.<sup>11</sup> TFA 2020 also runs several regional initiatives as well as the "Better Growth with Forests" and "Financial Sector Engagement" Initiatives.

#### 2.3.2 Regional and sectoral partnerships

Examples of key regional/sectoral deforestation-free initiatives are described below.

#### A. Palm sector

The Africa Palm Oil Initiative (APOI)<sup>12</sup> engages with ten West and Central African countries, consumers, producers, and local communities. The initiative is working with the governments of Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, République Centrafricaine, République du Congo, République Démocratique du Congo, and Sierra Leone to develop regionally relevant definitions and promote sustainable palm oil production while adding new jobs, ensuring food security, poverty alleviation, and effective implementation of national action plans. APOI conducted national and regional workshops throughout 2016 to negotiate a sustainable palm oil production pledge, known as the Marrakesh Declaration. APOI recently held a Gabon workshop in which national Principles and Actions were agreed upon (see Communique "Initiative pour l'huile de palme in Afrique de la TFA 2020, Sep 13, 2017).

- The Palm Oil Innovation Group (POIG) is a multi-stakeholder initiative that builds on the RSPO to ensure credible and verifiable benchmarking of company policies toward sustainable palm oil production. In March 2016, the POIG launched the second version of their verification indicators which outline the current leading standards. POIG indicators include HCS/HCV areas, humane repatriation, integrated pest management, and food security.<sup>13</sup>
- Singapore Alliance for Sustainable Palm Oil was founded in 2016 by Unilever, Danone, Ayam Brand, IKEA, and the Wildlife Reserves of Singapore.<sup>14</sup> The alliance was prompted by a large campaign against transboundary haze pollution in Southeast Asia.<sup>15</sup>

#### B. Cocoa sector

The World Cocoa Forum's Cocoa and Forests Initiative brings together 34 of the world's leading cocoa and chocolate companies to end deforestation and forest degradation in the global cocoa supply chain, with an initial focus on Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. The agreement commits the participating companies to engage in a planning and consultation process with governments, farmer organizations, NGOs, and other relevant stakeholders to build the joint framework to be unveiled at COP 23.<sup>16</sup>

#### C. Soy/Beef sectors

- The Collaboration for Forests and Agriculture (CFA),<sup>17</sup> a partnership of NGOs, aims to define standards and outline incentives to produce zero-deforestation beef and soy in the Amazon and Cerrado regions in Brazil, and in the Gran Chaco region of Argentina and Paraguay.<sup>18</sup>
- The Amazon Soy Moratorium is a voluntary agreement initiated in 2006 in which NGOs, global companies, and soy producers agreed to ban soy from conversion of forests within the Amazon. The subsequent significant decrease in soy-driven forest loss, although several issues have been raised about its overall effectiveness in protecting critical ecosystems.<sup>19</sup>

#### 2.3.3 Other key landscape-level initiatives

- The Forest Landscape Restoration (FLR) led by International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) spans 30 countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. It works with governments, academic and research institutions, non-governmental organizations and civil society to accelerate the restoration of degraded and deforested landscapes. The FLR focuses on building political commitment, and fostering collaboration for restoration, as well as assessing national restoration potential and building local capacity. FLR also supports the growth of small and large businesses and aims to revive national economies through revenue and job creation, decreasing risks in other productive sectors and driving a transition towards a low-carbon and green economy.<sup>20</sup>
- The African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR 100) connects African governments with technical and financial support to restore 100 million hectares of degraded and deforested landscapes in Africa by 2030.<sup>21</sup>

## 2.3.4 Funding partnerships

- The andgreen.fund, recently launched by the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IdH), aims to invest up to \$400 million by 2020 in increased intensified agricultural production and economic growth, combined with forest conservation.<sup>22</sup>
- The Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI) is a partnership of countries and donors that support developing and implementing National Investment Frameworks for REDD+ and low emission development pathways in Central Africa.<sup>23</sup>
- Partnerships for Forests, funded by DFID and operating throughout African and Southeast Asia, creates market--ready sustainable forest projects to attract private investment.<sup>24</sup>

## 2.3.5 Monitoring and framing initiatives

#### A. Scorecards

Several NGOs including WWF, Global Canopy Program (Forest 500), Union of Concerned Scientists, and Ceres have created scorecards to assess companies on their deforestation-free commitments. These scorecards vary, sometimes widely, with respect to performance indicators and criteria. How an individual company fares against these various scorecards may also vary? Ceres' "Reporting Guidance for Responsible Palm" was developed by a multi-stakeholder group of NGOs to provide some convergence on the key metrics expected of companies with respect to their deforestation-free commitments.<sup>25</sup>

#### B. Remote sensing tools to monitor deforestation

There are many remote sensing tools that can be used to track deforestation.<sup>26</sup> One example is World Resources Institute's Global Forest Watch (GFW). This is a free, interactive online forest monitoring tool that can provide near-real-time alerts of suspected forest loss using satellite imagery and crowd-sourcing. It allows the user to create custom maps and analyze forest trends.<sup>27</sup>

#### C. Accountability Framework Initiative

To remedy the lack of common definitions, monitoring tools, and outcome reporting metrics, the Accountability Framework Initiative (AFI) was recently created to help companies deliver on their public commitments. AFI addresses the "implementation gap" by establishing common definitions, norms, and good practices for deforestation-free commitments. Ultimately, the framework will be localized and tailored to specific commodities and regions. The aim is to

## AFI PRINCIPLES: FOR TOPICS THAT SHOULD BE ADDRESSED IN SUPPLY CHAIN COMMITMENTS:

- Scope and specification of commitments;
- Business and supply chain management systems;
- Protection of forests and other natural ecosystems;
- Protection of land rights, labor rights and other human rights;
- Responsible land use planning and management;
- Monitoring, verification, reporting and claims;
- Remediation and access to remedy;
- Stakeholder engagement and external relations.

avoid the need to build systems from the ground-up and facilitate harmonization, providing clear and comparable reporting data to create more accurate reporting of progress at the level of companies, jurisdictions, and global targets. Using the indicators and guidance created by AFI, stakeholders can better identify strengths and weaknesses in forest governance and develop reforms that benefit their region.<sup>28</sup>

## 2.3.6 Production-level initiatives

#### A. Certification

Companies have adopted a variety of voluntary measures to buy and/or supply sustainably produced palm oil, cocoa, sugar, rubber, and more agri-commodities that can cause deforestation. Due to the significance of potential palm oil in Gabon, we focus on its certification in this paper, recognizing that other commodities such as rubber and cocoa are important.

Since 2007, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO), a voluntary standard organization with 3,500 members, has had a set of principles and criteria as a system to certify sustainable palm oil. To date, 19% of global palm oil is RSPO certified.<sup>29</sup> For some companies, achieving RSPO's supply chain requirements are the primary way they meet their commitments.<sup>30</sup>

The RSPO standard does not entirely prohibit deforestation. Rather, it prohibits conversion of High Conservation Value (HCV) areas and requires due consideration to carbon emissions from land use change. While RSPO explicitly recognizes that secondary forests may contain HCVs, some stakeholders question the rigor with which certified companies apply this standard and do not believe HCVs alone are enough to protect all of the important values within forests. For this reason, NGOs and companies developed the 'High Carbon Stock' concept as a zero-deforestation tool.

Some civil society groups have raised concerns that RSPO fails to address worker and human rights (De Fries 2017). In addition to accusations of ineffectiveness, lax implementation, and competing interests, critics claim that RSPO memberships can be obtained without serious commitments to sustainable palm oil production.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, smallholders usually lack organization that RSPO certification demands. Researchers have identified compliance challenges for independent smallholders in relation to land titles, seedlings, pesticide usage, fertilization, and documentation.<sup>32</sup>

To address these issues, RSPO created RSPO NEXT, a voluntary program where members are required to meet additional requirements and standards and are audited accordingly.<sup>33</sup> Companies cannot participate until at least 60% of all mills in their control are certified with the RSPO Principles and Criteria. In addition, companies must have a policy and public commitment to no deforestation through a landscape level assessment, and act to prevent fire, avoid peatlands, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, respect human rights, and assure transparency. The Colombian-based agribusiness, DAABON Group, was the first to become certified under RSPO NEXT in April of 2017.<sup>34</sup> There does not seem to be a significant pipeline of other companies ready to follow in their footsteps however.

#### B. High Conservation Value Areas

The High Conservation Value (HCV) methodology was initially created as a compliment to Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification of forest products, to identify areas within forests of exceptional value meriting conservation. The HCV approach uses best science and stakeholder input to identify the values and threats within the management unit in question and where and how to manage these values.

#### THE 6 HIGH CONSERVATION VALUES:

- 1. Species diversity;
- 2. Landscape-level ecosystems and mosaics;
- 3. Ecosystems and habitats;
- 4. Ecosystem services;
- 5. Community needs;
- 6. Cultural values.

The approach, originally designed for forest management, has since been expanded to other land uses such as agriculture. The HCV approach does not explicitly prohibit deforestation – forest areas which are not a high priority for their biodiversity, landscape, ecosystem service, cultural or social values can be converted to agriculture. Because the HCV approach was developed for forests, which even when heavily logged can retain biodiversity, some have questioned whether it adequately measures the potential risks to ecosystems associated with large-scale conversion.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, several agri-commodity standards such as RSPO and the Roundtable for Responsible Soy require HCV protection.<sup>36</sup> The High Conservation Value Resource Network provides guidance on how to identify, manage and monitor HCVs. It also runs an Assessor Licensing Scheme to improve the quality of HCV assessments, including those integrated with the HCS approach (see below).<sup>37</sup>



#### C. High Carbon Stock Approach

The High Carbon Stock Approach (HCSA) is a methodology to identify areas of land suitable for plantation development and forest areas that must be protected in the long term.<sup>38</sup> Initially developed for Indonesia, HCSA focused on areas where palm oil production has caused massive deforestation and fragmented landscapes in moist tropical forests. The approach uses vegetation classifications to delineate forests from non-forest land and defines 'viable forest areas' that should be maintained and conserved based on size, connectivity, and quality.<sup>39</sup>

Under this methodology, primary, logged, and secondary forests are conserved and young regenerating forests are assessed for their patch viability. The approach uses an integration framework to assess and protect HCVs and to assure Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) of local communities. The HCS approach is in the process of developing guidance on some key issues including how to apply the methodology in High Forest Cover Landscapes.<sup>40</sup>

#### D. Jurisdictional Level Approaches

Going beyond individual supply chain efforts, stakeholders have been piloting jurisdictional approaches to drive an end to deforestation, integrating landscape planning initiatives with political jurisdictions to facilitate government leadership and address the inability of certification to incorporate smallholders effectively. The Brazilian state of Acre, for example, has been using this approach for almost 20 years.<sup>41</sup> As a result, from 2002 to 2010, Acre reduced deforestation by 60% while still increasing its real GDP by 62%, according to the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). In Peru, the San Martin region is working toward being able to market coffee as deforestation-free across the district.<sup>42</sup>

Ghana proposed the Cocoa Forest Mosaic Landscape in 2014, a program to reduce emissions driven by expansion of cocoa into areas such as the Guinean Forest. With the goal to include both increased farmer output and reduced deforestation, the program will also require landscape activity including a multi-stake-holder and multi-sector approach that engages cocoa and forestry as well as external supply chain demand.<sup>43</sup>

In 2015, the State of Sabah, Malaysia, began their plan to achieve full jurisdictional RSPO certification of its palm oil producers. The plan called for government agencies to collaborate with the RSPO, Forever Sabah, civil society, community organizations, Malaysian and international private sectors actors, and international philanthropic foundations.<sup>44</sup>

The important and promising element of jurisdictional approaches is the opportunity to drive dialogue and convergence of common goals between business, government, and community stakeholders. It embeds sustainable landscape approaches in a legal and institutional framework, bringing in multiple sectors and smallholders. According to WWF, the higher-level engagement and investment from the private sector relative to other stakeholders brings a strategic challenge – the definition of success and who decides. National and local governments have also been reluctant to engage. Although the approach is in its early stages for many governments, it is clear that each initiative is unique to the particular governments, commodities, communities, and challenges of a jurisdiction.<sup>45</sup>

#### 3. UNDERSTANDING THE CENTRAL AFRICA CONTEXT

The Central African region is home to the Congo basin forest, the second largest tropical rainforest after the Amazon, covered by 2,870,000 km<sup>2</sup> of relatively unbroken forest, spanning across the Gulf of Guinea to the Rift Albertine Valley, in the east.<sup>46</sup> Armed conflict and low foreign and domestic investment in agriculture and infrastructure have prevented large scale forest conversion in most areas. Because of this, deforestation has remained relatively low in most countries of the Congo basin, estimated between 0.19% (2000-2010) and 0.14% (2000-2010) (de Wasseige et al. 2015, Abernethy et al. 2016).

However, current and future economic development threatens many forest areas. With increased stability, governments and investors are planning infrastructure, large scale agriculture and development (Megevand et al. 2013). At the same time, conservation NGOs, donors, and local governments are working to improve forest governance, strengthen forest monitoring and protected areas, and implement legality and conservation programs (e.g. FSC, RSPO, FLEGT, TFA2020, REDD+, etc.).

Governments in the region have the opportunity to commit to zero deforestation at local jurisdictional levels, address governance challenges through bilateral agreements, use REDD+ and nationally determined contributions (NDCs) as an opportunity to incentives policies and measures in line with Paris Agreement on climate change and the SDGs, embrace innovative public-private partmerships, and explore jurisdictional landscape approaches.

## 3.1 Role and function of forests in Central Africa

**Biodiversity**—the Congo basin rainforest is known for its high levels of biodiversity, including more than 8000 tree species, 10,000 animal species and more than 1,000 bird species (de Wasseige et al. 2013). Some of its most famous residents include forest elephants, mountain and lowland gorillas, chimpanzees, okapi, leopards, and hippos. Some of these species have a significant role in shaping the character of their forest home through seeds dispersal and predation (de Wasseige et al. 2012, Abernethy et al. 2016). The interest to protect those emblematic species has led to different initiatives to increase number and size of protected areas across the region (e.g. PARAP initiative in DRC).<sup>47</sup>

**Climate**—forests play a major role in the regulation of the climate through physical, chemical and biological processes that have an effect on planetary energetics, the hydrological cycle, and atmospheric composition. Old-growth forests in Central Africa store huge volumes of carbon in their vegetation and tree trunks (39 billion tons, according to a recent study by Sullivan et al. 2017), serving as an important buffer against climate change. Tropical forests are intrinsically linked to carbon, water, and nutrient cycles. For example, 40% of terrestrial vegetation carbon stocks are contained within tropical forests, making this land cover an important source of carbon sequestering. Thus, changes in the composition and number of plant species within tropical forests will likely lead to changes in carbon storage. Local climate regulation is also critical for many millions of local people who depend on rain-fed subsistence agriculture.

**People**—approximately 100 million people inhabit the region with an annual growth rate of about 2.5%, including more than 150 distinct ethic groups<sup>48</sup>. Sixty-two percent of the total population on average live in rural areas in or around the forests. They directly depend on forests for food and nutrition, to regenerate soils exhausted by slash and burn agriculture, for shelter and livelihoods, and during periods of crop failures due to climate variability or disease infestation, forests often act as a safety net for these rural people (de Wasseige et al. 2015, Abernethy et al. 2016). In addition, number of religions, faiths and spiritual traditions have links to trees, plants, forests and animals. Traditional forest-related knowledge accumulated over thousands of years is deeply linked with the cultures of indigenous and forest-dependent peoples (Olivero et al. 2016). Strategies to enhance the contributions of the world's forests to social development, livelihoods and poverty eradication in Africa are vital at a time when unsustainable practices and economic crises continue to threaten healthy forests and the people who depend upon them (Tchatchou et al. 2015).

## 3.2 Regional vision on forest Governance

The Congo basin countries have implemented various policies and governance and multilateral cooperation treaties that aim to improve forest management, biodiversity conservation and livelihoods. The most important regional body to support forest management and biodiversity conservation in the region is the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC). COMIFAC was established in 2005 to act as a regional forum for the conservation and sustainable joint management of forest ecosystems in Central Africa. The Declaration/treaty recognizes the protection of the Congo Basin's ecosystems as an integral component of the development process and reaffirms the signatories' commitments to work cooperatively to promote the sustainable use of the Congo ecosystem. COMIFAC is the primary authority for decision-making and coordination of sub-regional activities, made up of forestry ministers of participating Central African countries.<sup>49</sup>

## 3.3 Other past and current initiatives

Several initiatives have been implemented in the region to support the needs for sustainable forest management, biodiversity conservation and livelihoods, including the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP), the Central Africa Regional Program for the Environment (CARPE), Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT). New initiatives have been put in place to support the implementation of country-led, holistic low emissions development investment frameworks that include national policy reforms and measures addressing drivers of deforestation (CAFI).<sup>50</sup> The Tropical Forest Alliance 2020 (TFA2020) and Marrakesh Declaration for Sustainable Development of the Oil Palm Sector in Africa (APOI) bring new perspectives that allow governments to take the lead in sustainability alongside with private sector and civil society.

## 3.4 Agribusiness: Current and future trends in Central Africa

The history of commodity plantations in Central Africa goes back to the colonial period with international exports of rubber, coffee, sugar cane and oil palm from Central Africa to Europe. Such agribusiness played a vital role in economic development, contributing a major portion of GDP, employment, and foreign exchange

earnings during the colonial era. The sector was neglected decade after colonial period following by boom observed in oil and mining sectors. Some countries have experienced GDP contribution drop by more than half from agricultural sector. For example, the contribution of agriculture to the GDP of the Republic of Congo has dropped by about two thirds, from nearly 20% in 1965 to 6.2% in 2005 since only 40% of the population derive their income from agriculture as compared to 80% in 1960.<sup>51</sup>

After years of neglect, agriculture is once again seizing the attention of governments, business leaders, communities, and development donors, as a powerful driver of the region's relentless growth. A case in point is Cameroon, where at least six companies are reported to be trying to secure more than 1 million ha of land for the production of palm oil (Hoyle and Levang 2012). In 2010, Cameroon produced 230,000 tons of crude palm oil across an estate of 190,000 ha with 100,000 ha from independent smallholders and 90,000 ha supervised smallholder plantations and agro-industrial. Because of its potential in terms of growth, employment, and poverty reduction, industrial palm oil production is a national priority, with plans to increase production to 450,000 tons by 2020 (Megevand et al. 2013). Some of the proposed plantation sites pre-identified in emerging land deals could be problematic because they appear to be in high conservation value forests or near biodiversity hotspots.

Palm oil, rubber, coffee and cocoa plantations in various countries across the region have been identified as a key threat to Central African forests. The GLOBIOM<sup>52</sup> model developed by International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) for the Congo basin region indicates that nearly 200 million people will live in the region by 2030 which will increase foods consumption and cultivated lands. 9.2 millions of hectares could be deforested between 2021-2030 as compared to 6.1 million hectares deforested from 2000-2010. A cumulative deforestation of 16.8 million hectares from 2010-2030 is expected in the entire COMIFAC region, representing a total of 6% of COMIFAC forest area and an annual deforestation of 0.8 millions of hectares per year, a 40% increase as compared to historical deforestation period 2000-2010 (Mosnier et al. 2017).

As shown in Fig.1 below, two-thirds of deforestation comes from annual crops expansion (cassava, corn and peanut) while 15% of deforestation is associated with palm oil expansion (Mosnier et al. 2017). According to the CongoBIOM, an increase in meat production worldwide would reduce the production of other crops traditionally imported by the Congo Basin countries (e.g. corn) and trigger a substitution of imports by more locally grown products. Similarly, population increase, infrastructure development and the governments agenda for food security will potentially lead to increased deforestation in the Congo Basin (Mosnier et al. 2012; Megevand et al. 2013).

The concern of achieving sustainable palm oil in high forest cover countries in Central African is that industrial oil palm plantations are rapidly expanding in suitable areas that overlap with high conservation value forests and biodiversity hotspots, ecoregions with high carbon stocks, and regions characterized by exceptionally high plant and animal endemic species richness (see oil palm suitability map from Mosnier et al. 2017). Developing policies and enabling conditions that support the implementation of deforestation free commitments and compliance with agri-commodity standards<sup>53</sup> such RSPO, HCV, HCS and AFI

could help companies operating in agribusiness include traceability in both their supply chain and to the plantation-level. The TFA2020 initiative following the Marrakesh declaration in synergy with other initiatives (e.g. APOI) could lead to the efforts of encouraging private sector interested in commodities in Central Africa to fulfil their corporate responsibility and sustainability function which drives sustainable practices while achieving biodiversity conservation and livelihoods goals.



Figure 1: Cumulative deforestation 2011-2030 by country and by cause in million hectares (left) and country deforestation by cause in % (right). Source: Mosnier et al. 2017.

## 4. KEY ISSUES ON THE PATH TO REALIZING DEFORESTATION-FREE IN THE REGION

#### 4.1 Forest definition—area of clarification

The first challenge for achieving deforestation free is the definition of forest in the context of high forest cover countries and landscapes. The estimation of deforestation is affected by the definitions of 'forest' versus 'non- forest' land that vary widely in terms of tree size, area, and canopy density (GOFC-GOLD 2013). Countries like Cameroon, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea have adopted FAO<sup>54</sup> definition in their Readiness Preparation Plan (REDD+ R-PP), while RoC and DRC both define forest as a space represented by trees having a minimum height of 3 m over a minimum area of 0.50 ha with a crown cover rate of 30%.<sup>55</sup> These different definitions, conservative or not enough, have implications on how countries will use the term "forest" to eradicate deforestation. The underlying question relates to how stakeholders determine forests that need 100% protection, degraded forest to be used for multiple purposes, and which methodologies, approaches are acceptable to make a decision.

## **4.2 Forest governance**



Deforestation drivers such as agricultural expansion, logging and extractives in combination with land tenure and safeguard issues are often symptoms of a larger failure of governance (Megevand et al. 2013; Tchatchou et al. 2015). In Central Africa, some key governance failures include:

 lack of participatory land use planning which should be used to maximize economic and environmental objectives and reduce problems resulting from overlapping usage titles and potentially conflicting land uses;

- ineffective systems of land use, access rights, and property rights, which are key elements to improve the management of natural resources;
- weak institutions all across—without strong institutions able to enforce rules and build alliances within a complex political economy, neither land use planning nor will tenure reform yield real change;
- Finally, a poor coordination between ministerial agencies regarding natural resources management also leads to a lack of law enforcement and conflicts between land uses allocations by different government agencies.

To successfully implement deforestation free commitments in Central Africa, governments will need to upgrade their governance and policies support to support corporate deforestation-free policies. There is a need for strong government capable for building synergy among stakeholders in order to align private-sector commitments, local stakeholders' needs, wants, and public policy to mutual effectiveness of meeting deforestation commitments while improving livelihoods for local population.

Elements of a successful strategy will include (for example):

- A shared vision for the place of agriculture in the national economic development plan;
- Alignment of shared norms for good practice in agri development (e.g. RSPO and other standards);
- Land use planning and rural tenure reform in key areas. Increased efforts for securing land rigts are needed in order to enable investment in zero-deforestation commodities and forest protection;
- Effective mechanisms to ensure long-term protection of important forests and natural ecosystems such as REDD+ at jurisdictional or landscape level;

- Alignment of laws with emergent threats and opportunities (i.e. agribusiness expansion);
- Capacity building at all levels;
- Smallholder programmes to address livelihoods, poverty, unsustainable agriculture practices;
- Incentives for good corporate performance on environmental and social outcomes.

## **4.3 Forest monitoring and verification systems**



One of the key challenges implementing Deforestation-free commitments is the degree to which there are robust MRV frameworks and systems in place in the jurisdiction. Deforestation-free commitments have been developed on company-by-company basis lacking an agreed deforestation-free standard— some commitments include indicators while others do not, and some indicators are more specific than others. More standardized key performance indicators that apply across sectors taking into account countries economic and social context are required. This will require companies to set clear targets to make deforestation-free commitments and to facilitate implementation, which targets will be verified and monitored by investors, certification schemes and civil society using clear metrics and indicators. However, there is trade-off between simple and low-cost versus sophisticated and comprehensive (high-cost) tools when it comes to verifying progress toward meeting deforestation-free standards—the ability of actors along commodity supply chain to provide information necessary for effective monitoring is still a matter of reflection (Pirard et al. 2015).

In the context of Central Africa, there are some key gaps that will need careful review in order to establish strong MRV systems:

- Limited technical expertise to support the implementation of the sustainable development plan, including factors such as MRV systems and land certification;
- Lack of appropriate tools, methodologies and approaches to systematically collect and analyze deforestation driver data in order to provide a better understanding of extractives and their social and environment impacts (Ochieng et al. 2016);
- + Absence of data to allow better analysis of grievances to strengthen transparency and accountability;
- A successful MRV systems will require a strong leadership with the governments at the center of the debate to (1) develop of clear metrics and indicators in the context of all commodities associated with deforestation taking into account socio-economic realities; and (2) to build capacity and coordination in data collection and the implementation of independent and transparent monitoring and reporting mechanism.

#### 5. GABON: VISION, APPROACH AND EXPERIENCE

## 5.1 Why Gabon?

Listed as HFLD country, Gabon is one of the smallest and least populous, and most highly-forested countries of Central Africa. It has recently embarked on a strategy of oil palm and agri development. Gabon is an economic outlier in the region, a relatively wealthy country that is in urgent need of diversifying its economy. We have chosen Gabon to launch the UDF Initiative in Africa, as an important focal point for private and public-sector initiatives aiming to reduce or eliminate deforestation from supply chains, investments and jurisdictional boundaries, and to discuss how these fit into the social and political context of Central Africa. Gabon's current development and experience in commodities allow us to assess whether goals of poverty reduction and economic growth cancan be reconciled with sustainable management and the protection of forests in countries with high proportion of forest cover.<sup>56</sup>

## **5.2 National context**

## 5.2.1 Economical context

The Republic of Gabon extends over an area of 268,000 km<sup>2</sup> with an estimated population of 1.3 million inhabitants representing a population density of 4.8 inhabitants per square kilometer. The average growth rate of the Gabonese population is estimated at 1.48% each year (Republic of Gabon 2012).

Gabon has commodity-based economy based largely on oil and mining, with forestry distant third. In total, oil, wood and manganese represent 96% of the exports of Gabon. The World Bank estimates that Gabon's fossil fuels account for 80% of exports, contribute 45% of GDP, and 60% of government revenue. Forestry was traditionally an important industry in Gabon and has been supplying European

markets with Okoumé logs for centuries, but the industry has struggled recently and supplies only 9% of exports. Agriculture contributes < 5% of GDP and includes food crops, rubber, and palm oil (Tchatchou et al. 2015). Gabon relies heavily on food imports, which account for the majority of domestic food consumption. Imported foodstuffs come mainly from France, South Africa, and Cameroon. The mining sector, excluding oil, represents 1.7% of GDP and 6.2% of the total exports from Gabon (Tchatchou et al. 2015).

## 5.2.2 Land use

Approximately 88% of the country's 27 million ha land area remains under forest cover with approximately 20% covered by ancient savanna. Recent deforestation rates are around 0.1% annually.<sup>57</sup> Of the 22-23 million hectares of forests, 12 million hectares are production forests, 4 million hectares are allocated as conservation forests (National Parks and reserves) and 6 million hectares are forest that belong to local people and referred as rural areas forests. The current land use allocation shows that 0.8% of total forest is allocated to agribusiness (oil palm, rubber and sugar) and 57% to logging concessions.<sup>58</sup>

In 2002 Gabon set aside 11% of its territory as protected areas in the form of thirteen national parks and in the process cancelled 800,000 ha of timber concessions. As well as protecting the environment there was also the objective of creating high end tourism as a way to diversify the economy.<sup>59</sup>

#### 5.2.3 Land tenure right in Gabon

Around 95% of land belongs to the state even though customary tenure may be informally recognized. Gabon's legal framework promotes the registry of individual private property to the exclusion of customary rights (Alden Wily 2012). The majority of land, however, continues to be held and managed through communally based tenure systems in the rural areas. Since Gabon is sparsely populated and heavily urbanized, land legislation has not been a national priority. The most pressing tenure issue facing the country today is the ownership and management of Gabon's extensive rainforests.

Local land ownership and customary rights remain unclear. A study by Alden Wily 2012 shows that despite the concession allocation, the State retains ultimate ownership of the land and charges rent, royalties and taxes; concessionaires own the timber, minerals or products they extract, under terms which are renewable. The study was unable to find laws which bind the State to return a percentage of revenue to affected communities. The study also established that the lack of clear demarcation of boundaries allows concessions and National Parks to impinge upon local areas.

With a significant share of State Land being allocated to mainly global enterprises, including to mining, logging and recently, agribusiness companies, a more explicit and detailed legislation is required to clarify the rights and responsibilities of individuals, groups, and the state before these forests are exploited or destroyed.

## 5.2.4 Agricultural sector

Gabon has a stated aim to allocate 5 million ha of land to agriculture in years to come, with a clear push for long cycle crops such as oil palm and rubber production in the near term. To materialize this agenda, the government of Gabon has signed in 2010 a joint venture with Olam International to develop up to 100,000 ha of industrial palm oil plantations, 30,000 ha of smallholder palm and 50,000 ha of rubber plantations (Stewart 2016). Nowadays, there exist two joint venture subsidiaries, including Olam Palm Gabon and Olam Rubber Gabon that are responsible for the management of the plantation businesses. Olam is also a minority shareholder in SOTRADER, a company set up to incentivize small-holder agriculture including staple food crops and palm oil out-grower schemes. In addition, SIAT (Société d'Investissement pour l'Agriculture Tropicale) owns about 150,000 ha, including 12 000 ha of active rubber plantations and around 100,000 ha of cattle ranch.

In addition to the industrial agriculture, Gabon launched an agriculture initiative known as Gabonese Agricultural Achievements and Initiatives of Committed Citizens program (Gabonaise des Réalisations Agricoles et des Initiatives des Nationaux Engagés / GRAINE). The program is a public-private partnership to expand domestic agricultural production supported by government-provided technical trainings and land grants. Olam is the government's main shareholder in SOTRADER/GRAINE, a company set up to incentivize small-holder agriculture including staple food crops and palm oil out grower schemes.

Subsistence agriculture is not developed and commercializing agriculture remains unimportant. Rural population is low and population of landless migrant agricultural labourers are rare or inexistent. So unlike the situation in other places, newly built roads have not yet attracted a mass in-migration of people looking for potential agricultural land.

## 5.3 Emergent and Green Gabon: vision and approach

Eager to reduce the economic risk associated with its dependence on oil, in 2009 the government of Gabon set in motion a broad economic strategy that seeks to stimulate activity in new sectors and industries, to better foster job creation, cultivate revenues and improve socioeconomic development.<sup>60</sup> Under the Emerging Gabon Strategic Plan (PSGE), which targets emerging market status for Gabon by 2025, the country hopes to expand activity outside of its core area of commodities production to foster growth in secondary and tertiary segments. The PSGE relies on three pillars – Industrial Gabon, Services Gabon and Green Gabon – which seek to channel investment into related sectors, including manufacturing, telecoms and agriculture.<sup>61</sup>

The Green Gabon component focuses on developing value-added industries in the wood, agriculture and tourism sectors. The goals of Green Gabon include: improving food security, creating sustainable fisheries, and instituting sustainable forest management practices. Massive state-led infrastructure investment – with the IMF estimating the total spending envelope for the associated projects at \$12bn – serves as the enabling platform for these three pillars.

Gabon's green development agenda, "Gabon Emergent", attempts to tread a careful line between development and deforestation with palm oil and rubber as key factor in Gabon's economic growth strategy. The plan aims to increase palm oil production, developing a further 300,000 hectares to become Africa's top palm oil producer, while also prioritizing emission reductions from deforestation and sustainable forest management. Expected growth in global demand for palm oil, most notably in Africa, will provide a new source of revenue and job creation. Olam Palm Gabon and Olam Rubber Gabon are projected to increase sector GDP by 47%, or \$172m, by 2022 and create an estimated 23,000 jobs, including national and foreign workers (Stewart 2016). According to Olam, around 75% of Gabon's palm oil production will be exported with the plan to reduce economic risk associated with oil dependency.

Gabon is among the countries that have given priority to forests and the environment in their strategy or vision document. The Gabonese government has placed the environment at the center of economic development and the improvement of the living conditions of the populations. It is clearly stated in the Emerging Gabon Strategic Document that all actions will be undertaken in a framework of respect for the environment and protection of the forest. For example, the National Nature Conservation Agency (ANPN) policy is in charge of managing the environmental and social impacts of palm oil production in Gabon: sites selection, monitoring, environmental management for development in the buffer zones, carry out participatory mappings for the integration of the rights of use of the communities, and participate in promoting the HVC tool. If the Strategic plan is implemented as announced, Gabon will be at the forefront of the protection of its forests and may bring its net rate of deforestation, which is currently zero, to a negative figure. However, it is not clear however, how government and private companies involve local stakeholders in the process.

In addition, Gabon is currently formulating a REDD+ Readiness Proposal and drafting a National Land Use Plan to reduce the impact of agriculture on deforestation, climate and biodiversity hotspots. As stated in their National Investment Framework, Gabon will do this by ensuring that intact forest landscapes and areas identified as permanent forest areas are not allocated for agriculture development. Gabon's National Investment Framework include two programs to improve land use planning and forest monitoring, which together with aligned forest governance activities aim to address major and current drivers of deforestation and forest degradation—altogether will make significant contribution towards the implementation of country's INDC and Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).<sup>62</sup>

## 5.4 Oil Palm in Gabon: opportunities, challenges and questions

## 5.4.1 Opportunities

Gabon's ambitious plan is to become the third oil palm producer of African continent with a production target of 425,000 tons by 2025. The government and its partners intend to meet this target by applying sustainability measures based on RSPO standards.<sup>63</sup> The industrial oil palm sector in Gabon is currently represented a single international company: Olam, which develops new plantations within the framework of a joint venture with the Gabonese government. Olam Since April 2016 Olam has planted 36,254 hectares

all over the Gabon. Olam is committed to achieving RSPO certification. Olam Palm Gabon has completed four ESIA, HCV and FPIC processes for its palm plantations, totaling about 1050 km2 (105,000 ha), and done the same for 58,000 ha managed by SOTRADER/GRAINE. Olam Palm Gabon expects to develop 500 km2 (50,000 ha), or 45%, of this total land area by 2018, having planted 460 km2 (46,000 ha) of palm between 2011 and 2015;<sup>64</sup> the remaining area is permanently set aside for conservation (as HCV areas) or for village use.

Over 202,000 ha is currently allocated for oil palm plantations, of which around 66,775 ha palm oil concessions are operating under RSPO's new planting procedure. The synergy between government agencies (e.g. ANPN), conservation NGOs (WWF, WCS and local NGOs), Olam and civil society have been invaluable towards achieving voluntary certification framework for these new palm plantations. ANPN produced both a palm oil suitability map and developed a High Carbon Stock (HCS) map using aerial LiDAR and biomass assessment, while High Conservation Value (HCV) assessments were conducted by independent consultants. In March 2017, the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil approved an interpretation of the RSPO standard for the production of socially and environmentally responsible palm oil for Gabon.<sup>65</sup>

	AWALA	MAKOUKÉ	MOUILA	TOTAL
Total Plantation areas (ha)	20,030	18,708	163,374	202,112
Planted areas (ha)	6,822	2 752	46,522	56 ,96
To be replanted	0	3,177	0	3,177
To be planted	0	2,602	4,900	7,502
Plantation target (ha)	6,822	8,531	51,422	66,775
Plantation target (%)	34%	46%	31%	33%
Conservation zone/ Buffer zone (ha)	12,852	NA	27,278.5	40,137.5

#### TABLE 1: OIL PALM PLANTATIONS IN GABON

Source: WWF Gabon Report (2017) & Olam Gabon

The upside of agribusiness in Gabon has positive impacts in country's economy and job creation. The government has the opportunity to learn more and build upon existing national strategic plan to develop policies that incorporate new tools such as Deforestation-free commitment, AFI, HCS and TF2020 to maintain its negative figure of deforestation net rate. With the government's plan to allocate 5 million ha more land on all kind of agriculture, the new schemes and tools could help the country meet their economic demand and access to international market while protecting HCV and HCS areas and improving population's livelihood. The government could use the ongoing land use planning activities as an opportunity to avoid HCV and HCS areas from concessions allocation. Concerns, suggestions and recommendations from the deforestation free dialogue can serve as a road map to shed light on areas of ambiguity and clear the pathways towards sustainable agribusiness in Gabon.

## 5.4.2 Challenges

Despite different milestones associated with RSPO in Gabon, the country still has many challenges to embrace zero-deforestation commitments for agriculture.

The first challenge is whether industrial plantations are sustainable within the national context. Some national and international NGOs consider that industrial palm plantations have no place in Gabon and have campaigned against Olam, despite its compliance with RSPO (Mighty Earth 2016). On the other hand, many national actors see zero-deforestation (as defined by international stakeholders) as a curb on economic development opportunities. The government has made clear that it has a sovereign right and duty to develop profitable export crops as part of its development strategy.

Clarifying land ownership and customary rights—the issue is gaining sharper pertinence as the government engages in a renewed surge of large-scale land and resource allocation to private and international enterprise. A lack of detailed and explicit legislation to clarify the rights and responsibilities of individuals, groups, and the state has a risk of driving elite capture, which is a problem for community forests and benefit sharing.

The challenge of managing smallholder farming while preventing uncontrolled expansion into forests and local deforestation. As more jobs and people move to plantations, the question on how will the work force (national and international) will be housed and fed constitutes a big future challenge. Although, rural areas are less populated in Gabon and agriculture remains for subsistence, this could bring up issues of local deforestation and other threats to wildlife as the work force tries to feed itself with subsistence plantations and bushmeats.

The shareholder public-private partnership can be a challenge for communities and indigenous peoples while companies operating in Gabon have agreed to implement sustainability measures in their operations, the scale of deforestation problem suggests a strong need for government involvement. There are number of important issues such as clarifying land tenure and conflict resolutions which cannot be led by companies operating with shareholder government-issued licenses. The needs, challenges, and aspirations of smallholders, communities and indigenous require a neutral platform for discussions.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In recent years a growing number of countries, companies, and organizations have made commitments to eliminate deforestation associated with the production of commodities such as soy, beef, pulp and timber, and palm oil. Initial commitments were largely focused on regions of Asia heavily deforested due to conversion to palm oil. The definitions, approaches, and tools used to implement these commitments, though potentially globally applicable, were created in large part by the stakeholders living and/or operating in those places. As such, the approaches used to date to implement and measure progress on deforestation-free commitments needs to be customized and adapted to local context by relevant stakeholders.

Within Central Africa, a highly forested region, agriculture is re-emerging on government agendas as a key vehicle for economic growth and poverty reduction. Several countries in this region have ambitious targets for increasing production in commodities such as palm oil. In Cameroon and Gabon for example, industrial palm oil production is an integral element in the government's growth, employment and poverty reduction policies and strategies. Balancing this growth with forest protection will require relevant stakeholders to commit to zero deforestation at local jurisdictional levels, address governance challenges through bilateral agreements, use REDD+ and nationally determined contributions (NDCs) as an opportunity to incentivize policies and measures, and embrace innovative public-private partmerships at the jurisdictional or landscape level.

Major challenges can be overcome through common understanding of needs and priorities, as well as a stronger alliance among stakeholders. As we think through solutions, we recommend stakeholders to explore some potential solutions including:

- Development of common terminology and methodologies to define what qualifies as deforestation-free production in Gabon, and other Central African countries;
- Development and implementation of national land use plans that sets priorities for forest protection and restoration and creates approaches and mechanism to protect those forests;
- Alignment of agriculture ambitions in national development plans with market demands for deforestation-free commodities;
- Collaborative landscape planning for designating where commodities and food will be produced to meet future demands;
- Definition of voluntary sectoral and production-level approaches, tools, and methodologies that might be used to implement deforestation-free commitments, and customization of these to fit into the regional context;
- Understanding of the needs, wants, and aspirations of local communities and indigenous peoples with respect to forests and land-use;
- An evaluation and upgrading of existing forest laws and governance structures;
- Addressing the increase of subsistence agriculture and leakages as the workforce occupies forested areas and demand for foods increases;
- An evaluation and customization of existing monitoring, reporting, and verification (MRV) approaches and tools to be used to measure progress on commitments.

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