



IMPACT STORIES

From Dialogue to Action

THE SHAPING OF DEFORESTATION-FREE COMMITMENTS

Deforestation-free commitments emerged as strategies to combat the alarming rate of global forest loss, driven largely by agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, and timber extraction. These commitments are intended to curb deforestation by integrating sustainable practices within supply chains, especially for commodities like palm oil, soy, and beef. The concept gained momentum with governmental and corporate commitments to “zero deforestation” or “deforestation-free” policies. However, the path to structure what a deforestation-free commitment actually entails was fraught with definitional, conceptual, and implementation challenges.

Addressing the Lack of Clear Definitions

The Forest Dialogues held a Scoping Dialogue in 2014 on “Understanding Deforestation-Free” (UDF) to gather together key stakeholders working on the issue, discuss various approaches being advocated for, and understand the range of perspectives. At that time many stakeholders agreed generally on the value of commitments to be deforestation-free, yet there were major disagreements within the specifics.



UNDERSTANDING DEFORESTATION-FREE

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Field discussion at the Understanding Deforestation Free Dialogue in Mouila, Gabon

Across companies and governments making the commitments, as well as NGOs, Indigenous Peoples, and communities advising or waging campaigns against them, stakeholders had different definitions of “forest” and “deforestation.” For instance, some initiatives included managed plantations within the forest category, while others excluded them.

Another major point of contention was the ambiguity between “zero deforestation,” “zero gross deforestation,” “zero net deforestation,” and “zero illegal deforestation.” These terms were widely used, but their meanings and the distinctions among them were not always clear. They ranged from absolute cessation of forest conversion to offsetting forest losses through restoration efforts. **Kerry Cesareo**, Senior Vice President, Forests and Freshwater at WWF, recalled this tension, describing how different NGOs approached these terms. One NGO

pushed for a bold “zero deforestation” headline with caveats—such as allowances for essential projects like schools or hospitals—delegated to the fine print. In contrast, another NGO advocated for embedding these exceptions into the main narrative. This approach emphasized “zero net deforestation and degradation” (ZNDD), where forest restoration could offset deforestation within strict parameters, ensuring that ecosystems like primary forests were not sacrificed for trivial purposes.

The Scoping Dialogue on Understanding Deforestation Free

Rod Taylor, Global Director of Forests at the World Resources Institute and former Steering Committee member and Accountability Framework Initiative (AFi) lead for WWF, reflected on motivations for the dialogue explaining:



UDF Field Dialogue in Pekanbaru, Riau, Indonesia

“We could see that this whole movement was just confusing companies, and companies were using the confusion to do nothing. Nobody could understand or articulate the relationship between certification and deforestation.”

– Rod Taylor, Global Director of Forests at WRI

Cesareo also mentioned that before the dialogue, discussions around deforestation-free commitments were fragmented, happening in small, isolated conversations. “I remember when those dialogues were happening. They were important and timely in bringing people together to consolidate all the various conversations that were emerging,” she reflected. She stressed the

value of the dialogue in creating a space where diverse stakeholders could align on foundational questions: “Are we on the same page? Are we talking about the same things? Do we understand what the fracture lines are? What are the areas of agreement?” The dialogue provided a platform to map these contours, enabling participants to recognize shared goals and address points of contention within the varying commitments.

The dialogue brought together stakeholders from various sectors, including NGOs, governments, and corporations, to address these definitional challenges and forge common ground. Participants discussed the implications of differing definitions, the feasibility of commitments in diverse socio-economic contexts, and the metrics to measure progress effectively. The dialogue created a [Summary Report](#) of the next steps needed for transparent and flexible frameworks

that balance conservation with development needs, advocating for practical, scalable solutions to achieve deforestation-free goals.

Dialogues Exploring Unique Deforestation-Free Contexts

Dialogue participants emphasized the need to get out into the field to better understand the challenges to implementing deforestation-free commitments, as well as possible solutions. As the initiative moved to field dialogues, visiting sites in Indonesia and Gabon, the conversation became more multi-dimensional. Taylor described the importance of these field dialogues, “When the notion of deforestation-free first emerged, it was one-dimensional. It was silent on other sustainability issues such as resource and labor rights. - one issue trumped all.” He noted the perception at the time that “if a company gets that one right, they’re off the hook for everything else.”

TFD has a long track record of successful outcomes from such field-based processes. The first UDF field dialogue took place in Indonesia, a critical site for the dialogue due to its status as a major agricultural producer with one of the highest deforestation rates globally, driven by palm oil and pulp production. Gabon was selected for its unique position as a high forest cover, low deforestation country, offering a valuable case study on balancing national economic development with forest conservation goals. The field visits provided context to local realities that reports alone could not convey.

He described how such field visits allowed participants to gather insights and test their thinking on an issue against field realities. Upon return to their organizations this can

leave them better equipped to query opinions of others by asking, “Well, have you thought about this?” This sentiment reflects how these visits can be a precursor to discussion outside of the dialogue that can shape more informed policies for an organization.

“Visiting a plantation in Gabon gave me a whole lot of context that I would never have gotten from written reports.”

– Rod Taylor, Global Director of Forests at WRI

Building on Dialogue: Accountability Framework Initiative

TFD dialogues are designed to foster ownership of the outcomes for stakeholders involved so that they can each pick up a piece and put it into action. Cesareo described this in how the UDF initiative and conversations happening at that time informed the creation of the Accountability Framework Initiative, as the founders saw an opportunity to “pick up the mantle and go forward.” AFi represented a significant advancement in global guidance for responsible sourcing, specifically targeting deforestation-free supply chains and protecting human rights. Still to this day, it provides comprehensive principles and guidelines for ethical procurement across agriculture, forestry, and related sectors.

Akiva Fishman, WWF Director of Nature-Based Solutions, supported TFD’s UDF initiative as a YSE student and went on to work for WWF as lead on AFi. He remarked on the importance of these



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initial dialogue conversations: “Smart people at TFD and the advisors to TFD are noticing that these topics are starting to get discussed in different spaces, and it would be helpful to bring

that conversation together.” He noted that the issues explored during the dialogue were instrumental in consolidating various discussions, mapping out areas of agreement and disagreement, and aligning on



foundational questions about deforestation-free commitments.

Drawing on the diverse viewpoints shared during the dialogues, AFi established an NGO platform to

provide comprehensive principles and guidelines. Taylor explained how “AFi is kind of an evolution, in some ways, of the deforestation free dialogue.” AFi was able to draw on lessons learned from the TFD approach to dialogue, adopting principles such as the Chatham House Rule to foster open and honest debate. Yet, it differs substantially in that AFi focused on gaining consensus

“Many of the key players who convened AFi and built the coalition were at the TFD dialogue on Understanding Deforestation-free, and the issues that we discussed really emerged out of the discussions at the TFD dialogues.”

– Akiva Fishman, WWF Director of Nature-Based Solutions

within the NGO community. Taylor said, “We thought, if we could get the NGOs on one page, we’d be in a much better position to engage companies.” Fishman explained the coalition’s approach: “There was a lot of political figuring out too, deciding that we are an NGO coalition trying to create harmonized NGO guidance for the corporate sector, as opposed to bringing in companies at the outset to work with us on key definitions and principles. We wanted the guidance to have the highest degree of credibility, so we kept companies at arm’s length as advisors without decision-making authority.” AFI’s framework is structured around international best practices and establishes guidance for ethical production, environmental conservation, and community rights, ensuring companies can align their practices with globally recognized sustainability commitments.”

Cesareo further elaborated on this saying, “Developing guidance on implementing deforestation-free was a logical next step from the dialogues, but not necessarily TFD’s role

to play. But AFI was able to pick up from the dialogue process and build on what it had achieved in terms of clarity, understanding, and areas of commonality as the basis for promulgating guidance. It was a really nice handoff.”

AFi exemplifies how consensus built through dialogue can be transformed into widely adopted tools for action. Its [Common Methodology for Assessment of Progress Towards Deforestation- and Conversion-Free Supply Chains](#) metrics have been utilized for major sustainability reporting efforts, including those by CDP Forests, the Global Reporting Initiative’s Agriculture, Aquaculture, and Fishing Sector Standard, Forest 500, and the Key Performance Indicators of the Consumer Goods Forum’s Forest Positive Coalition. In 2024, 64 companies reported achieving deforestation- and conversion-free status in at least one commodity supply chain—representing how collaborative dialogue can lay the foundation for meaningful, measurable progress.



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