

New practical guidelines to promote more transparent, pro-poor forest concessions

Over 70% of forests in the tropics used for harvesting timber and other forest products are state-owned with most of the public forests managed through concessions that governments give to private entities or local communities. These forest concessions have existed in many of the world's poorest nations and for their benefit, FAO has launched its first [voluntary guidelines](#) for forest concessions in the tropics to make concessions more transparent, accountable and inclusive



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Forest concession contributions have not always been positive. While they have generated more jobs and better income for people in remote areas, in many cases, they have also left behind a trail of degraded forests and tenure conflicts, says the new [Making forest concessions in the tropics work to achieve the 2030 Agenda: Voluntary Guidelines](#).

Forest concessions can be poorly managed due to a lack of adequate skills in tropical forest management; weak governance; over-complicated rules and expectations; focus on short-term benefits, leading to overharvesting; inadequate benefit sharing, infringement and lack of recognition of local people's rights; no economic returns.

Most forest losses in the past two decades occurred in developing countries in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and Latin America, highlighting the need for a better management of public production forests in the tropics.

The new voluntary guidelines build on lessons learned to offer practical guidance for a more sustainable management of

public production forests in the tropics through concessions. "The guidelines are a reminder to all parties that along with rights, come responsibilities. They highlight the need for strengthened political commitment at national and subnational levels and clear and transparent legal and institutional frameworks," said Eva Muller, director of FAO's Forestry Policy and Resources Division, at the United Nations Forum on Forests in New York where the guidelines were launched.

"If well managed, forest concessions can have multiple socio-economic and environmental benefits and increase the value of standing forests for present and future generations. All in all, they can improve the lives of rural communities in some of the poorest and most isolated parts of the world," added Muller.

How can forest concessions be useful?

Forest concessions are legal instruments between the state and a private entity or a local community that confer rights to the latter to harvest timber or other forest products in the short-term or manage forest resources in the longer-term in exchange for payments or the provision of services.

When well-managed, forest concessions can:

- Curb deforestation and reduce forest degradation
- Enhance the provision of ecosystem services and reduce carbon footprint to combat climate change
- Ensure sustainable forest production and strengthened forest value chains
- Create employment opportunities and services
- Generate local and national revenues that can be invested in forest conservation, and better health and social services
- Bring, overall, substantial contributions to achieving the sustainable development goals

Practical guidelines for all

"Packed with practical recommendations, the voluntary guidelines offer a framework for planning, implementing and monitoring forest concessions to support sustainable forest management," said Thais Linhares Juvenal, FAO senior forestry officer and coordinator of the guidelines.

The guidelines provide a set of principles to be respected by all stakeholders during the full cycle of concessions, and tailored recommendations for specific stakeholders - governments, concession-holders, local communities, donors, non-governmental organisations.

The guidelines also include a self-assessment tool so that stakeholders can verify if enabling conditions for sustainable forest concessions are in place.

New perspectives

The voluntary guidelines offer suggestions on how to shift from short-term harvesting objectives, which can lead to forest degradation or even deforestation, to long-term forest management, building the case for truly sustainable forestry in the tropics.

For a longer-term, more comprehensive use of forests, the recommendations include: growing and harvesting agroforestry products (herbs, nut and fruit trees and shrubs) and agricultural crops alongside harvesting of timber and other wood products; replenishing of commercially important trees to avoid their extinction in the future; and more investment in silviculture - the active management of forest vegetation to make forests sustainable.

Building on best practices around the world

The guidelines build on best practices of forest concessions around the world and are based on consultations with more than 300 technical experts from the public and private sectors, and representatives of civil societies from Africa, Asia-Pacific and Latin America.

They were launched on the margins of the 13th session of the UN Forum on Forests, as part of Sustainable Wood for a Sustainable World - a new initiative of the [Collaborative Partnership on Forests](#) led by FAO and developed jointly with the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), the World Bank (WB) and the World Wildlife Fund (WWF).

Concessions at work

Reducing deforestation in Brazil: Brazil only introduced forest concessions in 2006 but has already had significant results, proving that concessions based on transparency and monitoring can conserve natural forests by developing markets for products and services from sustainably managed forests, which led to greater social welfare.

Better livelihoods for rural communities in Guatemala: Concessions for Guatemala's public forests are granted to communities and companies for timber and non-timber products. All 340 community members of one concession benefitted directly from the profits, which averaged to about \$410,000 per year, or over \$1,200 per family. The concessions also generated 16,000 jobs, bringing additional benefits to the community members.

Increased forest area - the Borneo Initiative: The Borneo Initiative is a foundation established in 2008 that promotes the sustainable management of forests in Indonesia. The initiative provides financial and technical assistance to concession-holders linking them to a professional network of experts to guide them through the process. It has already led to an increase of more than two million hectares of natural forest area.

The independent observer - guarding Cameroon's forests: In 2001, the Government of Cameroon appointed the first Independent Observer to monitor forest law violations, such as illegal logging, and uphold forest law compliance. This has improved forest governance, both in terms of transparency and public information disclosure. This, in turn, has heightened authorities' sense of accountability.

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