



2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE

**Critical Forest Programmes
in the Congo Basin and
Guinean Forest**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2025 Annual Conference on Critical Forest Biomes

INTRODUCTION

The 2025 Annual Conference served as the crucial gathering point for stakeholders involved in the GEF-funded Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Programs in Africa, focusing on the Congo Basin and the Guinean Forests. High-level representatives, including the Cameroonian Minister of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development, and key partners from UNEP, Conservation International, and regional bodies such as COMIFAC, ECCAS, and ECOWAS, formally inaugurated the event. The event was highlighted as the first South-South learning and knowledge exchange dedicated to Africa's critical forest biomes.

CONTEXT AND SCOPE

The conference addressed the urgent threats facing primary tropical forests, including deforestation and degradation driven by infrastructure, mining, agriculture, timber, and wood energy. These threats are compounded by climate change, policy incoherence, and the undervaluation of forests. The GEF-8 strategy was presented as a systemic response, aiming to conserve globally important tropical forests. The Integrated Program is framed around landscape-level approaches across 28 countries, leveraging \$306 million in GEF funding and \$1.5 billion in co-financing to strengthen governance, align stakeholders, and catalyze transformational change. Protecting these forests is seen not only as a climate solution but as a foundation for hope and security for future generations.

CONFERENCE OBJECTIVES

The event, which took place from June 17 to June 20, 2025, aimed to achieve three primary objectives:

- Showcase Transformational Change: To reflect on and showcase the transformative results, achievements, and lessons learned from the initial phase of the GEF-7 Congo Basin Impact Programme (Phase 1).
- Launch GEF-8 Initiatives: To formally launch the two successor GEF-funded Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Programmes: the GEF-8 Congo Basin Integrated Programme (Phase 2) (led by UNEP) and the flagship GEF-8 Guinean Forests Integrated Programme (led by Conservation International in partnership with Birdlife International).

- Establish Frameworks for Collaboration: To establish frameworks and define modalities for enhanced South-South knowledge exchange, coordination, and cooperation among the Congo Basin and Guinean Forests Integrated Programmes, as well as with other Critical Forests Biomes IPs, such as the Amazon and Indo-Malay regions.

APPROACH AND PARTICIPATION

The conference was characterized by a participatory approach, facilitated by a dedicated team. It featured several interactive sessions, including a language survey and icebreaker, encouraging participants to connect and share expectations.

To ensure broad understanding and inclusion, simultaneous translation was provided in French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Participants were drawn from various countries and institutions, including regional organizations (such as MRU, COMIFAC, ECCAS, and ECOWAS), government agencies, NGOs, and international cooperation bodies. The sessions included high-level dialogues, deep dives into themes, panel discussions, and group work to foster active participation and shared learning. The report structure itself provides for an introductory section that covers context, objectives and approach details. The event had a total of 91 participants, 27 women (30%) and 64 men (70%).

KEY ARTICULATION: STRENGTHENING REGIONAL COOPERATION AND POLICY COHERENCE

High-level dialogues, notably the session on "Catalyzing Change: Coherent Policies, Inclusive Engagement, and Innovative Solutions," stressed the interconnected nature of sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. A key articulation was the need to move beyond fragmented approaches, constrained by siloed work structures and insufficient institutional coordination, toward coordinated, inclusive, and actionable strategies. Speakers called for collective governance mechanisms, improved synergy among environmental, social, and economic actors, and the integration of environmental considerations across all policy sectors.

Policy Cohesion and Governance: The discussions reinforced that effective implementation relies on aligning national and regional policies and leveraging frameworks such as the COMIFAC Convergence Plan and the anticipated ECOWAS Forest Convergence Plan

to ensure regulatory coherence across borders. Leadership, political will, and strong advocacy were identified as critical enablers for translating policy into effective practice.

South-South Cooperation (SSC): SSC was confirmed as a key approach to advancing sustainable forest management. The need to formalize and institutionalize cooperation among Integrated Programmes (IPs) was emphasized, with a focus on promoting knowledge exchange on sustainable management practices, non-timber commodity value chains, and robust governance structures. This requires building trust through transparent stakeholder engagement and securing financial commitments from member countries to support dedicated learning processes.

PROGRAMMATIC OUTCOMES AND THEMATIC INTEGRATED APPROACHES

The conference officially transitioned the programmatic focus to GEF-8, which builds substantially on lessons learned from GEF-7 and adopts a holistic approach centered on community involvement, biodiversity conservation, alternative income generation, and improved governance.

Integrated Land Use Management Planning (ILUMP): Outcomes highlighted ongoing efforts to improve ILUMP methodologies, specifically by integrating natural capital accounting and climate change adaptation approaches into regional planning frameworks. This planning must be multi-sectoral,

Governance and Multi-Stakeholder Engagement: Successful implementation requires simultaneous action across intervention pathways, coordinated through Regional Coordination Projects that are critical to preventing fragmented efforts and ensuring synergistic impacts across diverse countries. Effective governance relies on transparency, accountability, and strong stakeholder involvement. Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues emerged as a cornerstone practice, requiring systematic mapping of actors, joint planning, and dedicated effort to minimize conflicts and ensure that Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) are engaged as true partners—not merely beneficiaries—in decision-making processes. The integration of IPLCs ensures that traditional knowledge and customary rights inform land-use decisions.

CRITICAL ENABLERS: FINANCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND SCIENCE

The necessity of long-term financial stability and a robust scientific foundation was a dominant theme throughout the discussions.

Innovative Finance: Innovative finance mechanisms are vital, as multilateral funds alone are deemed insufficient to meet conservation needs. Mechanisms promoted include Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), carbon/biodiversity credits, fiduciary funds, blended finance, and green bonds. Mobilizing these diverse resources requires political will, technical expertise, and supportive policies that embed environmental objectives into national development agendas and facilitate market access. Investment in seed capital and risk management policies was highlighted as necessary to catalyze innovation and long-term impact.

Knowledge Management and Scientific Capacity: The conference showcased significant advancements in knowledge infrastructure. The Central Africa Forest Observatory (OFAC) was confirmed as a regional knowledge hub, providing reliable, up-to-date data to inform policy and monitoring. The new comprehensive Congo Basin Knowledge Platform (congolandscapes.org) was launched, serving as a public-facing website, knowledge repository, and Community of Practice platform, integrating over 120 eospatial layers and emphasizing co-design and capacity building. To bolster scientific capacity, the Science Panel for the Congo Basin was established to synthesize existing scientific knowledge, and the Congo Basin Science Initiative was launched to address research gaps and build long-term regional capacity, including through PhD and Master's scholarship programmes.

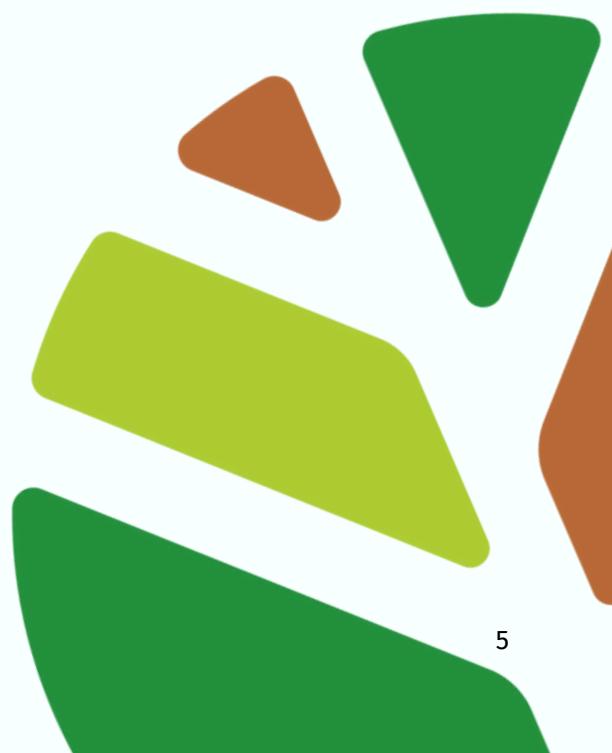
Key messages for future action

The conference explored common understandings of the critical steps required to advance conservation and sustainable development in the Congo Basin and the Guinean Forests. The overarching messages for future action include:

- **Necessity of Immediate Implementation:** There was a strong consensus on the need to move decisively from planning and strategies to the practical implementation of existing strategies. Operationalizing aligned frameworks must now be prioritized to maintain the positive momentum achieved.
- **Adopting Integrated and Simultaneous Approaches:** Successful conservation requires simultaneous action across multiple intervention pathways (e.g., governance, value chains, financing) rather than sequential, fragmented efforts. This integrated approach must address all competing land uses, including agriculture and mining.
- **Prioritizing Policy Coherence and Governance:** Effective governance necessitates overcoming

- siloed work structures and addressing insufficient institutional coordination. Policy coherence, harmonization, and alignment across national and regional levels (e.g., aligning with COMIFAC and ECOWAS convergence plans) are essential for successful transboundary cooperation and enforcement.
- Ensuring People-Centered Strategies: All strategies must place people at the heart of conservation, ensuring that women, youth, and Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) are meaningfully engaged and benefit from solutions. IPLCs must be recognized as true partners, rather than merely beneficiaries, in both policy and implementation.
- Mobilizing Innovative and Diversified Finance: Multilateral funds are insufficient to meet conservation needs. Countries must actively mobilize and diversify financial sources through mechanisms such as Public-Private Partnerships (PPP), Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES), carbon/biodiversity credits, blended finance, and fiduciary funds. This requires political will and technical expertise to create supportive, enabling environments for investment.
- Integrating Knowledge and Science: Effective, adaptive management requires the continuous collection and synthesis of scientific data, combined with the valorization and integration of traditional and local knowledge systems. Dedicated platforms (such as the Congo Basin Knowledge Platform and OFAC) are vital for transparent knowledge exchange and monitoring.
- Bolstering Scientific Capacity: There is a critical need for long-term investment in institutional capacity and regional scientific initiatives, exemplified by the launch of the Science Panel for the Congo Basin and the Congo Basin Science Initiative (CBSI), to bridge research gaps and train the next generation of African scientists.
- Addressing Systemic Threats: Forest conservation cannot be isolated from agricultural issues. Strategies must focus on improving agricultural productivity within existing lands (e.g., cocoa) and diversifying community income streams (e.g., NTFPs) to reduce pressure on forests.
- Combating Environmental Crime: Addressing crime, illegal trafficking, and killing of wildlife requires strategies that go beyond enforcement, tackling underlying drivers linked to land use, food systems, and governance gaps.

- Sustaining Momentum Through Collaboration: The visible and inspiring engagement of regional bodies like COMIFAC demonstrates the strength of regional cooperation. Thematic learning exchanges and strong regional partnerships must be sustained to ensure that lessons learned are translated into tangible action across countries and organizations.
- Recognizing Nature's Economic Value: The foundational conclusion is that forests hold greater value standing than cleared. Efforts must focus on assigning economic value to nature and advancing the transition toward a conservation economy.





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