

Annual Conference

Critical Forest Programmes
in the Congo Basin and
Guinean Forest

Organised by:



GUINEAN
FORESTS
INTEGRATED
PROGRAM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES	03
TABLE OF PHOTOS	03
ACRONYMS	05
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	06
INTRODUCTION	09
DAY 1 : 16 JUNE 2025- FIELD VISIT	10
DAY 2 : 17 JUNE 2025	11
<i>Opening Session</i>	11
<i>South-South Cooperation Perspectives Integrated Programmes in the Amazon, Congo Basin and Guinean Forest</i>	16
DAY 3 : 18 JUNE 2025	20
<i>Demonstration: Energy from plants</i>	20
<i>Congo Basin and Guinean Forest Integrated programs</i>	20
<i>Good Practices to inspire the implementation</i>	26
DAY 4 : 19 JUNE 2025	35
<i>Integrated Land use Management Planning (ILUMP)</i>	35
<i>Knowledge Platforms to advance science in the congo basin and Guinean forest</i>	37
DAY 5 : 20 JUNE 2025	44
<i>Communication on GEF8 Cogo Basin landscapes Initiative</i>	44
<i>Future plan for Congo Basin and Guinean Critical forest ecosystems</i>	44
<i>Addressing crime, illegal trafficking and killing of wildlife within the Critical Forest Landscapes</i>	46
<i>Engage Communities and the Private Sector for Effective Governance of Critical Forests through income generating activities and Public-Private Partnerships</i>	46
<i>Closing Remarks of the 2025 Annual Critical Forests Conference</i>	48
<i>Workshop Evaluation</i>	49
ANNEX	51

Table of figures

Figure 1. Visual harvest of Opening Remarks.	13
Figure 2. Catalyzing Change panel and South-South Cooperation for Forest Conservation Visual harvest	16
Figure 3 & 3b. Visual harvest GEF 8 integrated programmes.	21
Figure 4. Visual harvest GEF 7 Congo Basin Integrated Programme.	22
Figure 5. Digital harvest of group work	27
Figure 6. Knowledge Management Framework	38
Figure 7. Visual Recording of Planning the Future panel	45
Figure 8. Closing remarks	49
Figure 9a&b. Evaluation of the annual conference	50

Table of Photos

Photo 1: George Akwah in the opening session.	11
Photo 2: Facilitation team.	12
Photo 3: Integrants of the table - Opening Remarks.	12
Photo 4. Panel on Catalyzing Change.	14
Photo 5: Group photo	15
Photo 6. Interviews with local press with Jean Marc Sinassamy (GEF)	15
Photo 7. Mr. Mahmoud Kaneh (ECOWAS)	15
Photo 8. Mr. Pascal Martinez presenting GEF's perspective	16
Photo 9. Panel from left to right - Charity Nalyanya (Conservation International). Jean Marc Sinassamy (GEF), George Akwah (UNEP), Sandra Berman (World Bank)	17
Photo 10. Group work	18
Photo 11. Participants during check-in exercise	20
Photo 12. Mr. Vital Nzaka presents the experiment	20
Photo 13. Annie-Claude presenting the Congo Basin GEF programmes	22
Photo 14. Panel presenting the GEF 8 Guinean Forest Programme.	24
Photo 15. Renaud Baulleux (top) and Thomas Rabeil (bottom) from the EU-NaturAfrica program presenting about the project.	25

Photo 16. Dyadic echange	28
Photo 17. Peers exchange	29
Photo 18. Dyadic exchange	30
Photo 19. Group Work	31
Photo 20. peers exchange	33
Photo 21. Panelists from the Integrated Land Use Management Planning session	35
Photo 22. Participants follow the panel discussions	37
Photo 23. Knowledge Management Panel	39
Photo 24. André Toham, UNEP Consultant	39
Photo 25. Mr. Bonaventure Sonké from the Scientific Panel for the Congo Basin	40
Photo 26. Representative of the CBSI	41
Photo 27. Mr. Pierre Lacroix from GRID-Geneva	41
Photo 28. Participants during the check-in exercise	44
Photo 29. Rebecca Weaver presents C&V progress	44
Photo 30. Planning for the Future Panel	45
Photo 31. Exchange Panel on wildlife within the Critical Forest Landscapes	46
Photo 32. Exchange Panel on income generating activities	47
Photo 33. Representatives sharing the closing remarks	48
Photo 34. Event leadership and Team	49

Acronyms

ARRC	Avoid, Reduce, Restore and Conserve
C&V	Communication & Visibility
CBFP	Congo Basin Forest Partnership
CBSI	Congo Basin Science Initiative
CI	Conservation International
COMIFAC	Central Africa Forest Commission
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
ECCAS	Economic Community of Central Africa States
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GEF	Global Environment Facility
ILUMP	Integrated Land Use Management Planning
IPLCs/IPLC	Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities
IPs	Integrated Programmes
MRU	Mano River Union
NDCs	Nationally Determined Contributions
NTFPs	Non-Timber Forest Products
OFAC	Central Africa Forest Observatory
PES	Payments for Ecosystem Services
PPP	Public-Private Partnerships
REPALEAC	Indigenous Peoples Network
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SFM	Sustainable Forest Management
SSC	South-South Cooperation
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

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.

Introduction

Held from 15 to 20 June 2025 in Kribi, Cameroon, the 2025 Annual Conference of the GEF-Funded Critical Forests Integrated Programmes in the Congo Basin and the Guinean Forest Regions brought together representatives from governments, international organizations, and civil society to advance South-South exchange in the conservation of critical forest landscapes across Central and West Africa. The event marked a significant milestone in regional collaboration, serving as the first Africa-wide learning and knowledge exchange forum focused on the GEF-funded Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Programmes.

The conference built upon the legacy of the GEF-7 Congo Basin Impact Programme, which had been implemented since 2021 under UNEP's leadership, bringing together six national projects and one regional coordination project. It also celebrated the launch of the GEF-8 Congo Basin Integrated Programme and the GEF-8 Guinean Forests Integrated Programme, led by Conservation International. Together, these programmes represented a consolidated effort to catalyse transformational change in forest conservation, governance, and sustainable management across two of the world's most important tropical forest biomes.

Throughout the week, participants showcased progress and lessons learned from the GEF-7 Congo Basin Programme, highlighting its achievements, innovations, and remaining challenges. Discussions explored how these insights could inform and strengthen the implementation of GEF-8, ensuring a seamless transition between programme phases. The event also provided a platform to raise awareness of the Guinean Forests Integrated Programme, emphasizing its role in fostering collaboration among governments and regional institutions such as ECOWAS and the Mano River Union to enhance forest governance and sustainable financing.

Finally, the conference laid the foundation for future cooperation among the Critical Forests Integrated Programmes, defining modalities for South-South learning, joint knowledge management, and policy coherence between the Congo Basin, Guinean Forests, and other GEF-funded biomes such as the Amazon and Indo-Malay regions. By fostering shared frameworks for collaboration and capacity building, the Kribi Conference strengthened a collective vision for the sustainable management of Africa's critical forest ecosystems.



Field Visit

The week began with a field visit that brought together national focal points, regional partners, and donors for an on-the-ground experience at two sites near Kribi, Cameroon. The visit aimed to give participants a firsthand understanding of the conservation and community initiatives supported under the UNEP Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative, showcasing how field-level interventions are advancing biodiversity conservation and sustainable development across the region. Participants were divided into two groups: one visiting Ebodjé and Campo Ma'an National Park, and the other exploring Dipikar Island and the Campo Ma'an National Park headquarters.

The first group began the day with a visit to the Sea Turtle Museum and the TUBE AWU hatcheries in Ebodjé, where participants learned about the conservation and monitoring of marine turtles along Cameroon's Atlantic coast. The group witnessed the release of baby sea turtles, symbolizing the success of local conservation efforts and the strong partnerships among community organizations, such as TUBE AWU, park authorities, and international partners. Discussions with the head of the marine park and the TUBE AWU team focused on ecotourism initiatives, the protection of nesting beaches, and the integration of local livelihoods into conservation strategies.

From Ebodjé, the group continued to Campo, where they paid a courtesy visit to the Sub-Division Officer, followed by a session on conservation issues in the Campo Ma'an landscape. The discussion centered on challenges such as human-wildlife conflict, illegal hunting, and land-use pressures, as well as ongoing efforts to strengthen landscape governance. Participants also visited a veterinary laboratory supported by the project, which plays a key role in wildlife disease monitoring and ecosystem health. The field visit concluded with lunch at the Campo Ma'an National Park headquarters before returning to Kribi.

The second group visited Dipikar Island, traveling part of the way by speedboat along a branch of the Ntem River, followed by a short hike through the forest to Camp Couscous. After a briefing, participants discussed aspects related to transboundary conservation efforts between Campo Ma'an National Park in Cameroon and the Río Campo Nature Reserve in Equatorial Guinea. Exchanges at the site emphasized the importance of cross-border cooperation for wildlife management, habitat connectivity, and ecotourism development.

The group returned to Campo for lunch and exchanges at the park headquarters before heading back to Kribi in the afternoon.

The field visits provided participants with a vivid illustration of the Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative's integrated approach, where conservation, scientific research, and local community engagement intersect to safeguard critical species and habitats. Whether through the careful protection of marine turtles in Ebodjé or the monitoring of great apes in Campo Ma'an, the experiences underscored how collaborative, science-based interventions can enhance biodiversity conservation, support local livelihoods, and build resilience in the Congo Basin's unique ecosystems.

Opening Session

WELCOME & WORKSHOP OVERVIEW

The 2025 Annual Conference of the GEF-funded Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Programs in Africa—covering the Congo Basin and the Guinean Forests—opened with remarks from Mr. George Akwah, Team Leader for the Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative at the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), who set the tone by highlighting the conference's unique role as the first South-South learning and knowledge exchange focused on Africa's critical forest biomes.

Mr. Akwah outlined the key objectives of the conference, emphasizing the importance of showcasing the transformative results of the GEF-7 Congo Basin Impact Programme, launching the next phase of GEF-8 initiatives for both the Congo Basin and the Guinean Forests, and fostering cross-regional learning and cooperation.

He underscored the critical need to build on past achievements, facilitate knowledge sharing, and define future priorities to ensure the protection of intact forest landscapes. He reiterated UNEP's commitment to advancing collaborative action and shaping a coherent vision for the future of the region's ecosystems through strategic partnerships and programmatic integration.

The 2025 Annual Conference objectives were:

1. Showcase the transformational changes resulting from the GEF-7 Congo Integrated Programme (Phase 1) through case studies from the Congo Basin Regional Coordination Project and its country-level projects. Specifically:
 - Update on the implementation progress of the GEF-7 Congo Basin Programme;
 - Reflect on how the GEF-8 Congo Basin Programme transformation impacts pathways built on the achievements of the GEF-7 Congo Program's achievements and lessons;
 - Share lessons, emerging successes, best practices and challenges to enhance the implementation of Phase 2 of the Congo Integrated Programme.

2. Launch two GEF-funded Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Programmes targeting the Congo Basin and Guinean Intact Forest Landscapes: namely 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 (CI) in partnership with Birdlife International.

- Raise awareness and enhance understanding of the programmatic transition and integration across the different phases of the ongoing GEF-funded Congo Basin Integrated Programme (GEF-7 and GEF-8);
- Raise awareness and visibility of the Guinean Forests Integrated Programme and its country-level projects, highlighting their anticipated impact and importance for regional conservation efforts.

3. Establish frameworks to enhance knowledge exchange, collaboration and coordination among the Critical Forests Integrated Programmes.

- Draw from the GEF-7 Congo Basin experience, provide recommendations for the effective delivery of the flagship Guinean Forests Integrated Programme;
- Launch a framework for South-South cooperation between the Congo Forest IP, the Guinean Forest IP, and other GEF IPs: Define modalities/frameworks for enhanced knowledge exchange, collaboration, and coordination between the Congo Basin and Guinean Forests Integrated Programmes, as well as with other Critical Forests Biomes IPs such as the Amazon, Meso-America, and Indo-Malay regions and other relevant GEF IPs such as the Global Wildlife Programme.



Photo 1. George Akwah in the opening session

PARTICIPANT'S PRESENTATION AND CONNECTION

Mr. Akwah introduced the facilitation team, composed of Augusto Cuginotti, Maria Fernanda Araeas and Gloria Muthoka.

The 2025 Global Forests Conference, which focused on critical forest programs funded by the Global Environment Facility (GEF), was opened with an interactive session that included a language survey and a dynamic icebreaker, encouraging participants to connect and share their expectations for this event.



Photo 2. Facilitation team

The facilitators outlined plans for a participatory conference with simultaneous translation in French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese, emphasizing the purpose of active participation and knowledge sharing. They invited the participants for an introduction exercise calling all attendees from various countries and institutions, including regional organizations, government agencies, NGOs, and international cooperation bodies, to ensure complete representation.

OPENING REMARKS

Opening remarks were made by local authorities, key partners of the Congo Basin and Guinean Forest Integrated Programmes. The Cameroonian Minister of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development formally inaugurated the event.

- Mohamed Bakarr, GEF Secretariat
- Jimmiel Mandima, Senior Vice President and Chief Field Officer, Africa, Conservation International
- Fatou Ndoye Deputy Director of UNEP's Regional Office for Africa, UNEP
- Ambassador Simeon M-B. Moribah, Secretary General, MRU
- Hervé Maidou, COMIFAC
- Mahmoud Elimane Ndiaye Kane, ECOWAS
- Honoré Tabuna, Commissioner for the Environment, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Rural Development, ECCAS
- H.E Pierre Hele, Minister of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development, Cameroon.



Photo 3. Integrants of the table - Opening Remarks

The mayor of Kribi welcomed attendees by highlighting the city's environmental challenges and the crucial role of collaborative action in addressing them. The opening remarks, delivered by various high-level representatives, emphasized the interconnected goals of sustainable development, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. Speakers stressed the importance of integrated approaches, policy coherence, and regional cooperation, particularly within the Congo Basin and Guinean forests, where south-south exchanges were recognized as key approaches to advance sustainable forest management and conservation.

The GEF reaffirmed its commitment to supporting recipient countries in tackling pressing environmental challenges.

It emphasized the need for new governance models, innovative practices, and the full engagement of society in shaping shared visions for the future. A significant announcement during the session was the launch of new integrated programs for the Congo Basin and Guinean forests, designed to strengthen protection, improve governance, and promote long-term ecological and community benefits in these critical landscapes.

The conference proceeded with discussions centered on environmental challenges, sustainable development, and biodiversity conservation, with emphasis on integrated approaches and policy coherence.

Speakers acknowledged the importance of continued regional cooperation and called for stronger monitoring mechanisms to ensure the effective delivery of conservation goals. Throughout the session, there was a remarkable focus on the need for consistent funding for conservation projects, and broader development themes also emerged, including support for entrepreneurship, women's empowerment, and the promotion of inclusive and participatory processes that elevate diverse voices and local knowledge in decision-making.

Speakers highlighted the importance of turning strategies into action, urging a shift from planning to practical implementation. The conversations stressed the value of spatial planning tools, inclusive implementation approaches, and transparent beneficiary tracking to ensure that conservation efforts are both effective and equitable. Scientific data collection, participatory methods, and innovative financing mechanisms were underscored as essential components for achieving meaningful and lasting results. As the conference continued, participants expressed a shared commitment to overcoming challenges and advancing collective efforts to protect the world's forests while contributing to broader environmental and development goals.

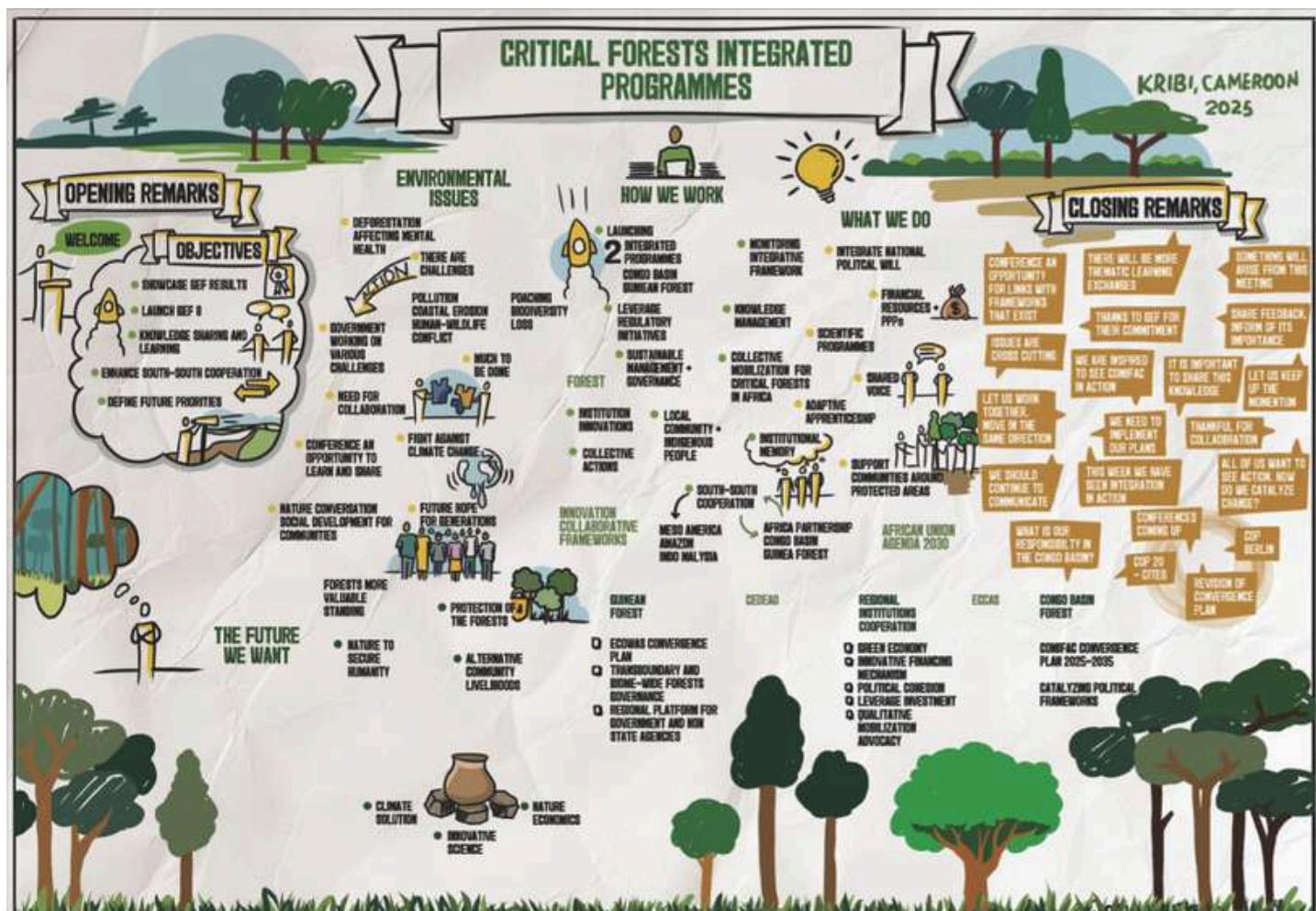


Figure 1: Visual harvest of Opening Remarks

HIGH-LEVEL DIALOGUE ON CATALYZING CHANGE: COHERENT POLICIES, INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT, AND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

A high-level panel was moderated by Juan Carlos Vasquez (UNEP), and had the participation of the following invitees:

- Adamou Saidou, on behalf of H.E Pierre Hele, Minister of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development, Cameroon
- Honoré Tabuna, Commissioner for the Environment, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Rural Development, ECCAS (Economic Community of Central Africa States)
- Chouaibou Nchoutpuen, COMIFAC (Central Africa Forest Commission)
- Mohamed Bakarr, Manager, Integration and Knowledge Management Division, GEF Secretariat
- Fatou Ndoye, Deputy Director of UNEP's Regional Office for Africa, UNEP
- Jimmiel Mandima, Senior Vice President and Chief Field Officer, Africa, Conservation International
- Mahmoud Elimane Ndiaye KANE, Coordinator of the Regional Integrated Program for the Fouta Djallon Highlands, ECOWAS
- Aurélie Flore Koumba Pambo, Co-Facilitator of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, Republic of Gabon
- Johan Robinson, Chief of Unit, Biodiversity and Land degradation Unit.

The High-Level Dialogue provided a dynamic and solutions-oriented platform for sharing ideas, challenges, and innovations around forest governance and policy.

Through rich discussion and visual recording, the panel reflected on the urgent need to move from fragmented approaches to coordinated, inclusive, and actionable strategies.

A recurring theme was the recognition that forest management and governance remain constrained by siloed work structures, insufficient institutional coordination, and the limited enforcement of existing frameworks. Panel members called for collective governance mechanisms, better use of spatial planning tools, and improved synergy among environmental, social, and economic actors.

As many have observed, the environmental sector is often "playing catch-up" to other policy areas, underscoring the need to integrate environmental considerations across all sectors.

The discussion on regional cohesion highlighted the value of harmonized policies and regional institutions such as ECCAS, which unites 11 member states around common challenges. Effective collaboration, sharing of success stories, and building institutional interfaces to update and align national and regional policies were seen as essential steps to translating policy into practice. Leadership, political will, and strong advocacy were identified as critical enablers, along with strategic capacity building and the understanding that planning must cut across all sectors. In the area of innovative finance, the speakers emphasized that funding remains a core challenge, especially for enforcement and long-term sustainability.



Photo 4. Panel on Catalyzing Change

There was a shared sense that multilateral funds are insufficient on their own, and that countries must actively mobilize and diversify financial sources. This includes engaging the private sector through public-private partnerships (PPP), promoting payment for ecosystem services (PES), leveraging philanthropy, and exploring structured finance mechanisms. Investment in seed capital, risk management policies, and equitable benefit-sharing were seen as key to catalyzing innovation and long-term impact. Engaging other sectors, such as finance and planning ministries, is necessary to embed environmental objectives into national development agendas.

The dialogue also explored the vital role of science and knowledge in shaping effective forest management. A strong call was made to integrate traditional and scientific knowledge systems, valorize Indigenous and local expertise, and improve communication and learning mechanisms. Accurate data, continuous monitoring, and adaptive implementation are essential for responding to emerging environmental threats. Participants stressed that illegal activities often point to broader governance and security issues, and that local communities must be recognized as true partners—not merely beneficiaries—in both policy and implementation.

Multi-stakeholder engagement emerged as another cornerstone of effective governance. There was widespread agreement that cooperation must extend beyond funding to include joint efforts aimed at improving efficiency and impact.

Current policies must better recognize and incorporate traditional knowledge and ensure the full participation of Indigenous peoples, women, youth, and local communities in decision-making. Countries are at different stages of addressing these issues, and peer learning remains a powerful tool.

The dialogue mentioned a range of environmental issues, including deforestation, coastal erosion, human-wildlife conflict, poaching, and biodiversity loss.

These challenges were linked not only to ecological decline but also to social well-being. In response, participants called for strengthened collaboration, shared learning, and an integrated vision that sees nature conservation and community development as mutually reinforcing goals. Protecting forests was described not only as a climate solution but as a foundation for hope and security for future generations.

Ultimately, the dialogue reinforced the idea that forests hold greater value standing than cleared, and that nature is central to securing the future of humanity. The path forward requires courageous leadership, inclusive policy shifts, innovative financing, and a deep respect for the knowledge and rights of local communities.

GROUP PHOTO & MEDIA ENGAGEMENT

The group photo was taken immediately before the coffee break, while invited regional media representatives engaged with the authorities, who had taken the opportunity to answer journalists' questions and provide additional insights about the event. The press release is available on the annex.



Photo 5: Group photo



Photo 6: Interview with local press with Jean Marc Sinassamy (GEF)



Photo 7: Interview with local press with Mr. Mahmoud Kaneh (ECOWAS)

SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION PERSPECTIVES FROM REGIONAL INTEGRATED PROGRAMMES IN THE AMAZON, CONGO BASIN AND GUINEAN FOREST

This session brought together key actors from the GEF and GEF-funded programs in the Amazon, Congo Basin, and Guinean Forests to reflect on opportunities and challenges in strengthening cooperation across these critical forest regions. Designed as a panel followed by group discussion, the session aimed to deepen understanding and dialogue around how South-South cooperation can be operationalized through knowledge exchange, shared learning, and coordinated action. It provided a unique space for participants to engage directly with the experiences and perspectives of those leading the implementation of the Critical Forests Integrated Programs.

The panel discussed experiences and perspectives from Regional Integrated Programmes – Amazon, Congo Basin, Guinean Forests in relation to the following aspects: Governance and Policy, Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues, Leveraging Financing, Innovation and Knowledge Sharing and Learning.

The session began with an overview of the GEF Integrated Programmes, presented by Pascal Martinez and Jean-Marc Sinnassamy of the GEF Secretariat, which offered context on the strategic vision and approach around which these Integrated programs are framed and being delivered.

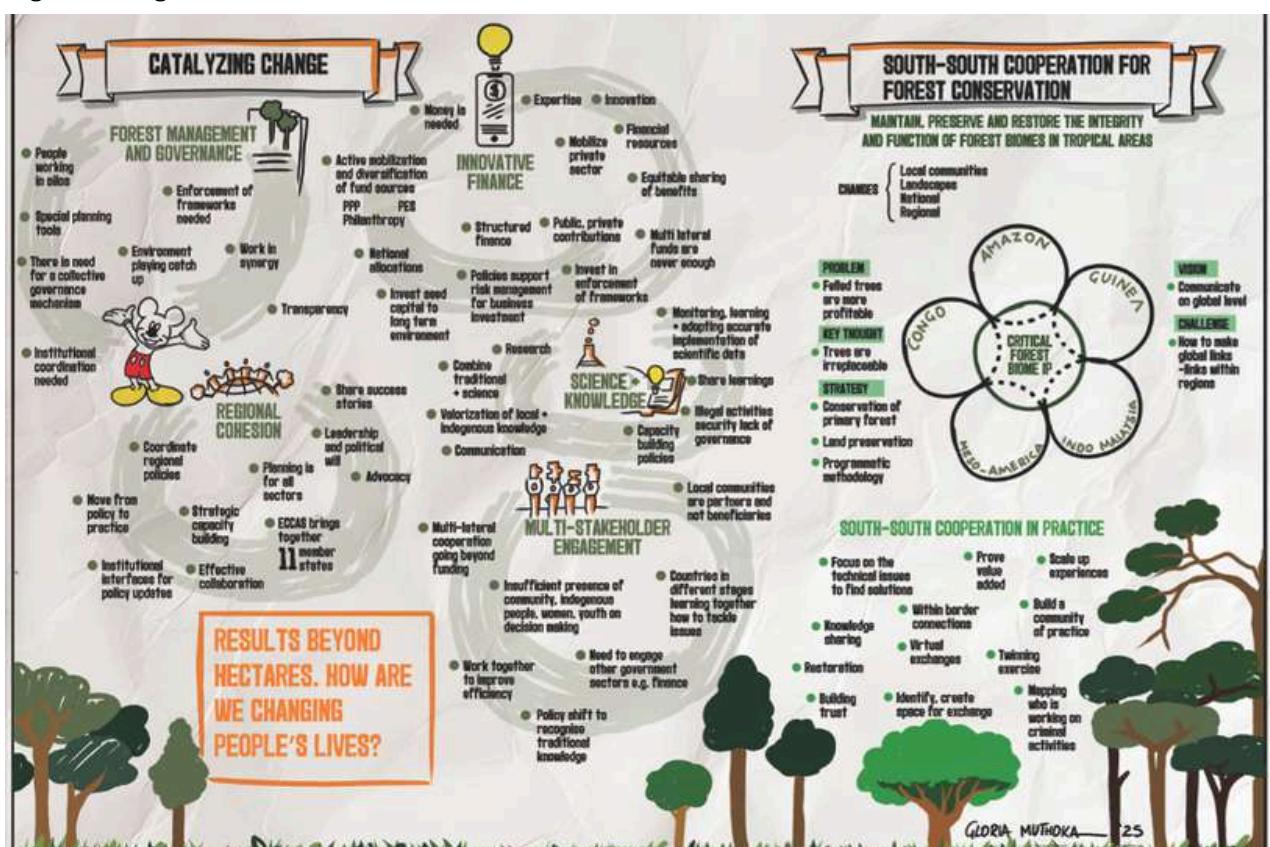


Figure 2: Catalyzing Change panel and South-South Cooperation for Forest Conservation Visual harvest



Photo 8. Mr. Pascal Martinez presenting GEF's perspective

The presentation outlines the status and programming strategy of the GEF-funded Critical Forests Integrated Programs, focusing on the "Amazon, Congo and Critical Forest Biomes" initiative.

The presentation highlighted the urgent threats to forests, including deforestation and degradation driven by agriculture, timber, mining, infrastructure, and wood energy, compounded by weak policy coherence, undervaluation of forests, and climate change. It underscored the irreplaceable value of primary forests for biodiversity, carbon, water cycles, and livelihoods, noting an alarming 80% rise in tropical primary forest loss between 2023 and 2024.

The GEF-8 strategy was presented as a systemic response, with the Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Program at its core, aimed at conserving globally important tropical forests such as the Amazon, Congo, and other critical biomes. Operating through landscape-level approaches across 28 countries and five regional initiatives, the program leverages \$306 million in GEF funding and \$1.5 billion in co-financing to align stakeholders, strengthen governance, and reduce pressures on forests. The Congo Basin Sustainable Landscapes Impact Program was showcased as a practical example, advancing integrated land-use planning, sustainable forest management, community empowerment, and regional cooperation to catalyze transformational change.



Photo 9. Panel from left to right - Charity Nalyanya (Conservation International). Jean Marc Sinassamy (GEF), George Akwah (UNEP), Sandra Berman (World Bank).

This was followed by a panel discussion that highlighted experiences from each region, with Amazon represented by Sandra Berman (World Bank), the Congo Basin represented by George Akwah (UNEP), and the Guinean Forests represented by Charity Nalyanya (Conservation International). Jean Marc Sinassamy provided an overall perspective of the Indo-Malayan Integrated Programme, this from the GEF point of view.

The session explored strategies, institutional frameworks, and collaborative mechanisms that underpin the implementation of the GEF 8 programs and how regional and national institutions can work in synergy to address shared forest governance challenges, and how lessons and innovations from one region can inform and enhance efforts in others specifically.

Strategic Frameworks for Long-Term Impact: An example from the Congo Basin showed how integrated programs build on existing initiatives to secure long-term impacts, such as the COMIFAC Convergence Plan 2025–2035 and the planned ECOWAS Forest Convergence Plan for West Africa. These frameworks provide strategic, biome-wide direction for transboundary forest governance and help align national interventions with regional goals in biodiversity conservation, sustainable forest management, and climate resilience. The programs also emphasize leveraging regulatory initiatives to ensure policies are coherent across borders and effectively enforced through strong institutional coordination.

Monitoring for Adaptive Management: Panelists highlighted monitoring and evaluation as a critical area for growth, calling for integrative systems capable of tracking biophysical, socioeconomic, and governance indicators in real time. Such systems would combine spatial planning tools, participatory monitoring, and inclusive data-sharing platforms that bridge scientific and traditional knowledge, reinforced by strong knowledge management to promote cross-regional learning and continuous feedback between practice and policy.

Capacity Building and Knowledge Exchange: Capacity building was also underscored as essential for sustainability. Through regional platforms and exchanges linking Africa with Mesoamerica, the Amazon, and Indo-Malaysia, the programs can enable horizontal learning, peer collaboration, and innovation sharing. In Africa, partnerships in the Congo Basin and Guinean Forests are aligned with the African Union's Agenda 2030, connecting forest conservation to economic growth, environmental security, and social well-being.

Inclusive Multi-Stakeholder Engagement: Finally, the programs put inclusive engagement at the center –ensuring women, youth, Indigenous peoples, and local communities have a voice in governance. By weaving together scientific knowledge, local perspectives, financial innovation, and coordinated

policies, the integrated programs aim to build resilient forest landscapes that deliver on climate action, biodiversity, and sustainable development across the Global South.

Group Discussion

By drawing on real-world insights from the field, the discussion laid the groundwork for group work that encouraged participants to explore how cooperation across these regions can be strengthened in practice.

Question - How can countries and partners operationalize this South-South cooperation to support the transformational change aimed by integrated forest programs?

The systematization of the answers from the groups is presented below as result of clustering of the post-it notes, grouping similar ideas and themes.



Photo 10. Group work

Countries and partners have a key role to play in operationalizing South-South cooperation to drive the transformational change envisioned by the GEF Integrated Forest Programmes. This shared vision requires not only political will and shared commitment but also concrete mechanisms that translate cooperation into measurable action on the ground.

Vision

Countries and partners have a key role to play in operationalizing South-South cooperation to drive the transformational change envisioned by the GEF Integrated Forest Programmes. This shared vision requires not only political will and shared commitment but also concrete mechanisms that translate cooperation into measurable action on the ground.

Establish the enabling environment

- Build trust through transparent stakeholder engagement and open communication, ensuring that the voices of rights holders are heard and respected.
- Ensure the meaningful engagement of local communities throughout programme design and implementation.
- Design interventions based on common needs, shared strategies, and a unifying vision.

Strengthen Coordination and Cooperation

- Establish coordination mechanisms that address interests and needs at all levels—local, national, regional, and global.
- Appoint a clear and credible actor/entity to facilitate South-South policy alignment and promote sustainable forest management and governance.

Institutionalize and sustain the cooperation between IPs

- Harmonize project-based platforms and institutionalize actions to ensure long-term sustainability, with the private sector playing a central role.
- Establish formal frameworks for South-South and inter-country/regional experience-sharing, with a focus on inclusive forest governance models that engage all key stakeholders.
- Leverage regional Centers of Excellence to enhance knowledge sharing between West and Central Africa.
- Secure commitments from member countries to contribute to knowledge exchange and learning processes, backed by dedicated budgets.

Promote knowledge exchange and integration

- Promote experience exchange between the Amazon, Meso America, and Indo-Malayan programmes and emerging integrated programmes in Africa, particularly around commodity non-timber value chains, governance structures, and sustainable management practices.

- Translate and disseminate locally grounded knowledge, practices, and skills across platforms and South-South networks.
- Integrate traditional knowledge into training programs on sustainable forest management and governance.

Highlight and empower women's and youth contributions

- Map and document success stories led by women in agricultural and non-timber forest product value chains across countries in the Global South.
- Strengthen practical knowledge-sharing platforms and lesson-exchange mechanisms specifically focused on women's and youth experiences.

Invest in leadership and long-term capacity

- Foster a network of landscape management leaders by establishing accredited training programmes that bring together emerging and active leaders from national administrations.

Collaborative Mechanisms and Joint Initiatives

- Adapt forest management approaches to local contexts, recognizing the specific governance, ecological, and socio-political realities of each forest basin.
- Develop and jointly implement cross-biome projects (Inter-Biome cooperation) to promote integrated, regionally adapted solutions.
- Harmonize transboundary forest policies to support coherent forest governance across national and regional boundaries.
- Establish platforms for exchange and experience-sharing between biomes and regions to foster collective learning and replication of best practices.
- Strengthen South-South public-private partnerships (PPPs) by deepening private sector engagement, particularly in forest conservation and restoration investments.

- Create and animate thematic communities of practice, hosted on digital platforms and focused on priority themes such as forest security, financing, and sustainable management.

Operationalize cooperation mechanisms for South-South collaboration, including:

- Joint scientific research programmes
- Knowledge and experience exchanges
- Cooperation agreements and MoUs
- Shared financial platforms
- Dissemination of good practices
- Strategic selection of priority areas for collaboration

Policy Alignment and Regional Integration Challenges

- Address misalignment between regional frameworks, such as those of ECOWAS and the Mano River Union (MRU), despite MRU being part of ECOWAS.
- Recognize the challenge of regional integration in the Congo Basin, where cooperation is often limited by political boundaries rather than ecological or management considerations.

Advocacy

- Strengthen the foundational pillars of South-South cooperation, including:
 - Scientific collaboration
 - Environmental diplomacy
 - Joint efforts to combat environmental crime
- Coordinate joint advocacy efforts at global platforms—such as the UNCCD and UNFCCC—to amplify the collective voice of countries engaged in integrated forest programmes.
- Promote a unified regional position by leveraging continental mechanisms such as the African Union to speak with one voice in international policy arenas.

Check-in

The check-in exercise at the start of the second day helped participants connect with each other, and create a positive tone for engaged participation.



Photo 11. Participants during the check-in exercise

DEMONSTRATION: ENERGY FROM PLANTS

Vitium: Electricity from Plants

Mr. Vital Nzaka presented an innovative technology called Vitium, which uses plants to generate electricity. He explained how the system works, its advantages over solar panels, and its potential to support electrification in rural areas. He highlighted the challenges related to obtaining authorization for commercialization and expressed his interest in creating test homes to demonstrate the technology's effectiveness. He mentioned that a full system could be installed in just one day, provided that the necessary sensors and an appropriate inverter are available.

After the demonstration, the discussion held with Mr Nzaka and participants – including representatives from ECCAS and COMIFAC was focused on the importance of this technology for rural electrification in Africa and the need to support it.



Photo 12. Mr. Vital Nzaka presents the experiment

It was proposed to include this topic on the agenda of the upcoming ECCAS Heads of State Summit on August 31 and to seek support from United Nations organizations to support and further develop the invention.

CONGO BASIN AND GUINEAN FOREST INTEGRATED PROGRAMS

In the first day of the conference, during the opening session, we had the official launch of two GEF-funded Critical Forest Biomes Integrated Programmes targeting the Congo Basin and Guinean Intact Forest Landscapes, namely 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 (CI) in partnership with Birdlife International.

In the second day, we had a session aimed to raise awareness and enhance understanding of the programmatic transition and integration across the different phases of the ongoing GEF-funded Congo Basin Integrated Programme (GEF-7 and GEF-8), and raise awareness and visibility of the Guinean Forests Integrated Programme and its country-level projects, highlighting their anticipated impact and importance for regional conservation efforts.

The session was organized in two blocks: the first one was a presentation of the Congo Basin Integrated Programme by the United Nations Environment Programme representative (UNEP), followed by interventions of country representatives from the national projects.

The second block was the presentation of the GEF 8 Guinean Forest Program at regional level by the Conservation International representative, with participation of implementing partners from the national project teams and other regional initiatives such as NaturAfrica funded by the European Commission.

The session made clear that both integrated programs for the Congo Basin and Guinean forests, funded by GEF, aim to strengthen protection, improve governance, and promote long-term ecological and community benefits in these critical landscapes.

The speakers covered several topics related to forest conservation and sustainable development in Africa, including challenges and opportunities associated with the conservation of critical forests emphasizing the importance of community engagement, inclusive governance, sustainable finances and transboundary cooperation in the Congo Basin and Guinean Forest.

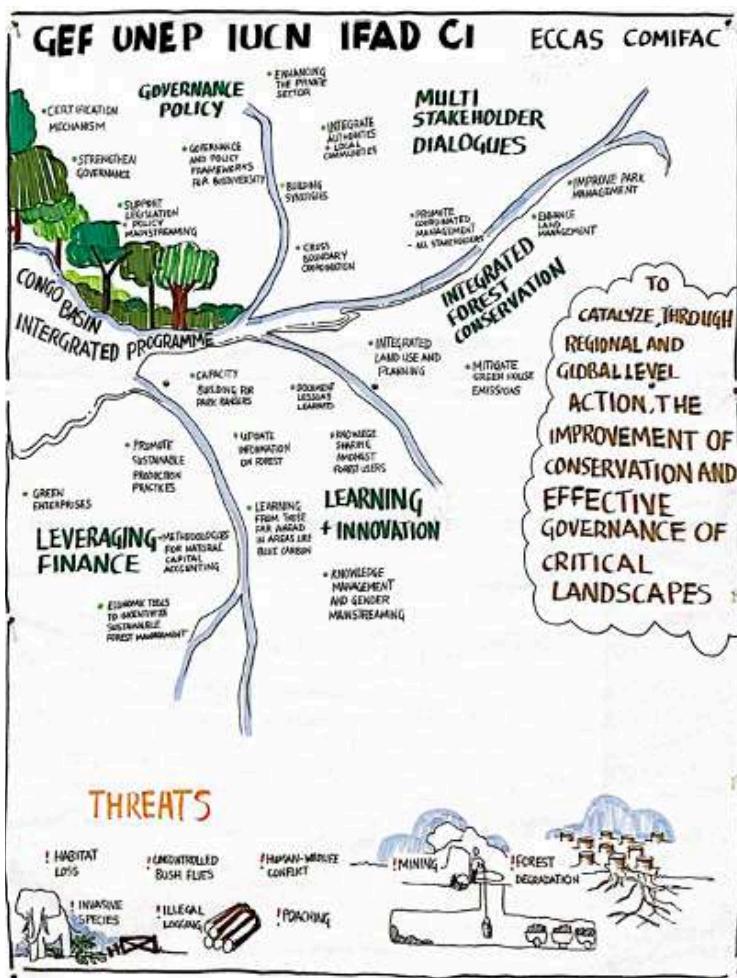


Figure 3: Visual harvest GEF 8 integrated programmes

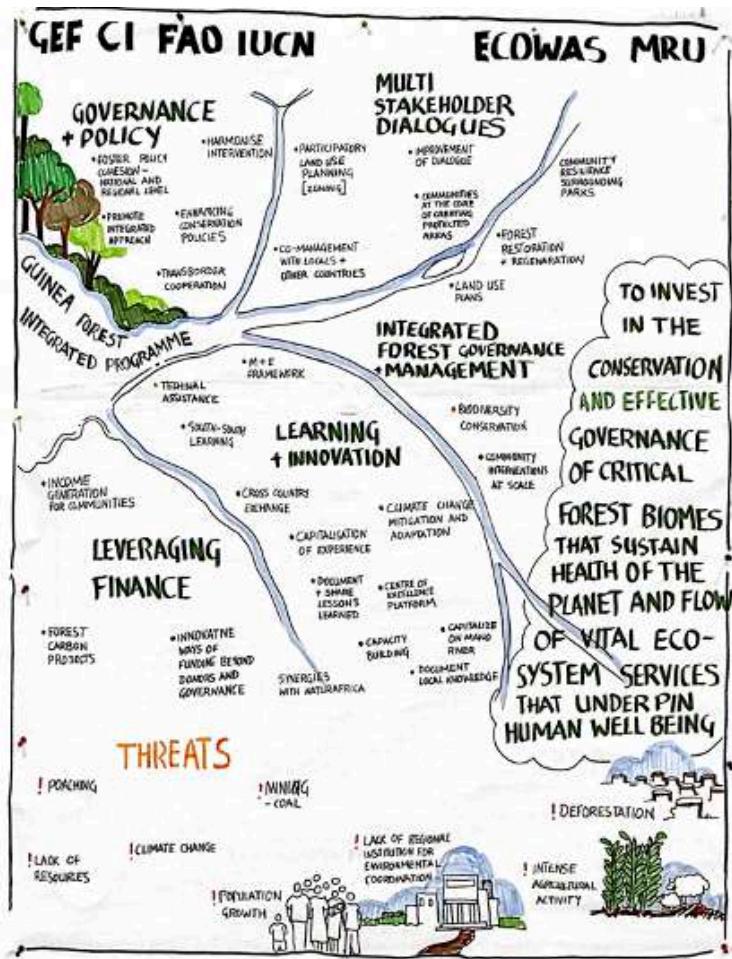


Figure 3b: Visual harvest GEF 8 integrated programmes

OVERVIEW OF CONGO BASIN LANDSCAPES INITIATIVE

The GEF-funded Congo Forest Integrated Programme consists of two sequential initiatives, the GEF-7 Congo Basin Impact Programme (2021-2026) and the GEF-8 Congo Critical Forest Biome Integrated Programme (2025-2032). Together, these programmes represent an investment of approximately USD100 million from the GEF.

The Congo Forest Integrated Programme supports forest conservation and sustainable management through a regional landscape approach that addresses deforestation and forest degradation. It promotes regional dialogue and collaboration while mobilizing climate finance to expand conservation efforts throughout the Congo Basin.

GEF 7: The regional Project of the Congo Basin Impact Programme entitled " Transformational Change in Sustainable Forest Management in Transboundary Landscapes of the Congo Basin", led by UNEP, involves six countries and several partners. George Akwah and Annie-Claude Zamo presented the progress made across different components of

the GEF 7 program – Congo Basin Impact Programme - including the development of a regional methodology for land-use planning, the establishment of a wildlife health monitoring system, and the strengthening of Indigenous peoples' capacities. They also highlighted key challenges, such as the ministerial validation of certain documents and the management of risks related to the accessibility of project intervention areas.



Photo 13. Annie-Claude presenting the Congo Basin GEF programmes.

Challenges faced by GEF 7 in the Congo Basin

A weak policy framework, degradation of forest peatlands, habitat loss due to agriculture, and expansion of large-scale production such as oil palm plantations. Additional threats include poaching, illegal wildlife trade, overexploitation of natural resources, human-wildlife conflict, and zoonotic diseases.

The programme also contends with insufficient project management capacity, weak land tenure rights for Indigenous peoples and local communities, climate change impacts, and a lack of alignment between countries on transboundary issues.

Furthermore, funding bottlenecks and finance management challenges, including cash flow constraints, hinder effective implementation.

Integrated programme strategies:

- Land use planning and natural accounting
- Wildlife conservation
- Empowerment & engagement of Indigenous people and local communities
- Learning and Knowledge Management
- Programme coordination, communication and monitoring & evaluation.

GEF-8: The Congo Basin Integrated Programme builds on the progress and lessons of GEF-7 in the Congo Basin. With a strong focus on community involvement, biodiversity conservation, alternative income generation, and improved governance, GEF-8 takes a holistic approach to sustainable forest management. The initiative works across multiple sectors and stakeholders – including youth, women, Indigenous people, and the private sector – to strengthen ecological resilience, enhance livelihoods, and safeguard vital forest and peatland ecosystems.

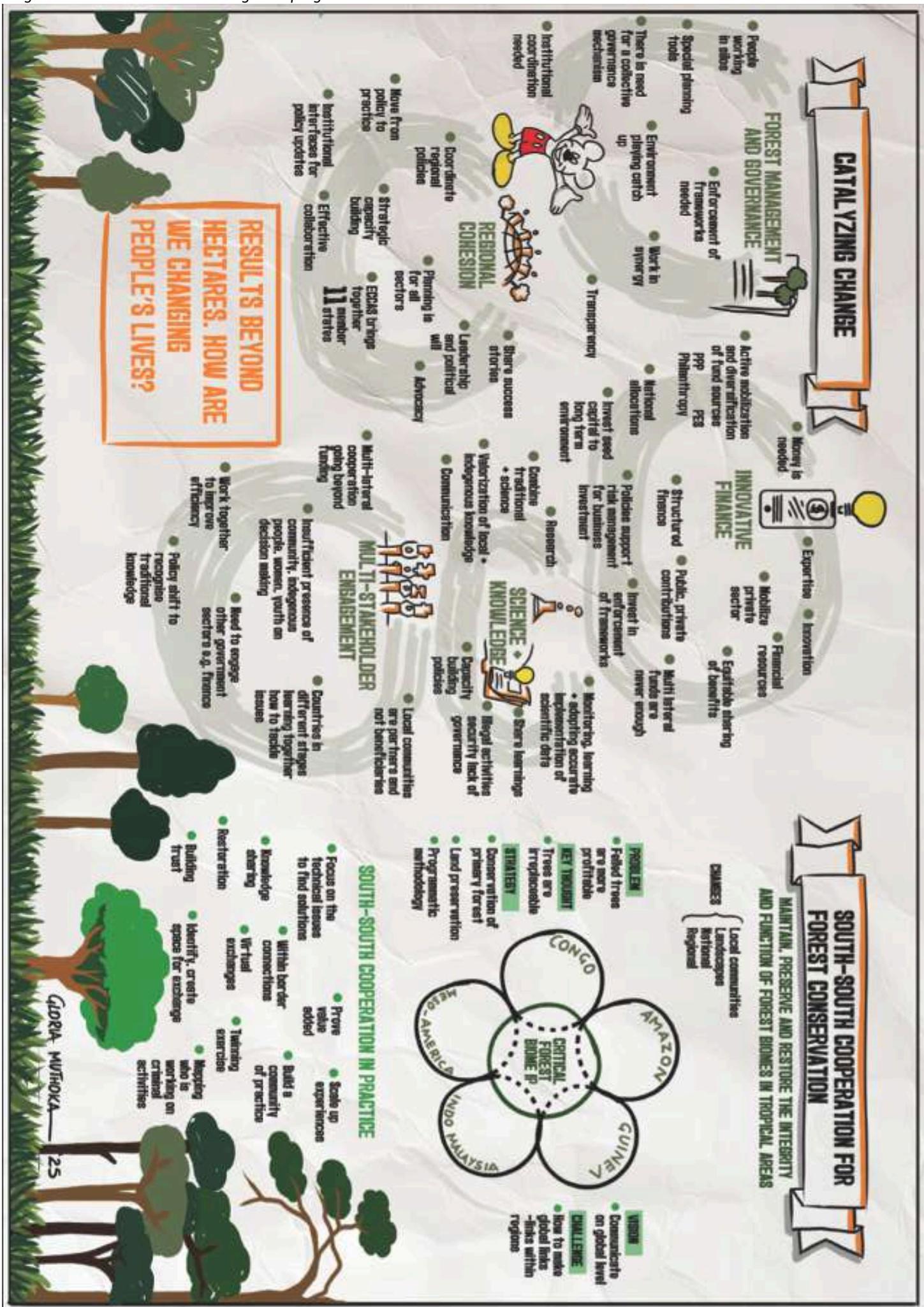
Key priorities include land use planning and natural capital accounting, biodiversity and peatland protection, ecosystem-based income alternatives, public-private partnerships, and comprehensive knowledge management. The programme also supports legal empowerment, climate modeling, value chain development, and enhanced coordination with institutions such as COMIFAC, ECOWAS, and national governments.

Protecting intact transboundary forest landscapes by creating an enabling environment: Together with ECCAS, COMIFAC, civil society networks, and technical partners, the Congo Forest Integrated Programme is strengthening policies and regulatory frameworks across Central Africa. This work to enhance conservation through transboundary initiatives focuses on three critical landscapes: Mayombe (with intact mangrove forests), Atlantic Coastal Forest Ecosystems (unique biodiversity in Sao Tome and Principe and Equatorial Guinea), and the Oubangui landscape (threatened by deforestation from displaced communities).

Successful approaches will be replicated throughout the Congo Basin to improve natural resource trade and governance.

The Programme is supporting strategic actions to reduce deforestation and restore ecosystem services across multiple landscapes, helping countries address competing land uses through transparent, inclusive decision-making processes. Payment for environmental services (PES) mechanisms are being explored to incentivize stakeholders to adopt sustainable practices, rewarding landowners and communities for biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration. Drawing from successful models, proven incentive mechanisms for sustainable forest management are being replicated and adapted to local contexts.

Figure 4: Visual harvest GEF 7 integrated programmes



Supporting community livelihoods

The programme recognizes that approximately 65-80 million people in the Congo Basin depend directly on forests for their survival and livelihoods. It empowers Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) to actively participate in sustainable forest management and benefit from conservation initiatives. The region currently lacks credible frameworks to provide direct financial support to these groups for securing land rights and forest governance, while sustainable value chains and private sector partnerships remain underdeveloped.

To address these gaps, the Programme implements empowerment activities through education, capacity building, and improved local governance, while promoting gender-transformative green enterprises and private sector collaborations that ensure conservation finance reaches those making decisions at the local level.

Developing and implementing innovative financing mechanisms:

To ensure long-term sustainability of conservation and sustainable forest management, the programme develops and implements innovative financing approaches. The Congo Forest Integrated Programme is developing innovative financing approaches for sustainable conservation and forest management in the Congo Basin. Working at the regional level, the programme mobilizes funding for forest conservation, sustainable management, and carbon sequestration through four key strategies: innovative financing frameworks, market-based incentives like biodiversity-positive carbon credits, strengthening Indigenous and local community climate finance readiness, and scaling proven sustainable forest management practices. These efforts help map and analyze existing initiatives while creating an international database to promote transparency.

This work takes a socially inclusive, gender-balanced approach, addressing the socio-economic needs of Indigenous peoples, women, and local communities and draws on successful models. By establishing strong partnerships with governments and integrating local, national, and global needs, the programme creates sustainable financing mechanisms that support long-term conservation efforts while benefiting local communities.

Capacity building, knowledge management, and regional cooperation: The Programme aims to ensure effective coordination and monitoring at

national, regional and inter-agency levels while increasing program visibility through knowledge sharing within the Congo Basin and with other GEF-funded Critical Forest Biomes initiatives. Through enhanced knowledge exchange and transparent management, this work will support the COMIFAC Convergence Plan (2015-2025) — the strategic framework guiding sustainable forest management across Central African countries — and help countries meet international environmental commitments including the Global Biodiversity Framework and the Bonn Challenge. Activities will be executed in collaboration with ECCAS, COMIFAC, and other regional partners.

OVERVIEW OF GUINEAN FOREST FLAGSHIP PROGRAMME

This session introduced the Guinean Forests Integrated Programme, which supports country-level initiatives aimed at conserving biodiversity, strengthening governance, and promoting sustainable development across the region. The discussion highlighted experiences and progress from national projects, with presentations from Richard Sagno (IUCN, Guinea), Jean Louis Sanka (IUCN, Guinea-Bissau), Nelson Jallah (Environmental Protection Agency of Liberia – EPA-L), Sheku Kaneh (Environmental Protection Agency of Sierra Leone – EPA-SL), and Henri Bouda (FAO, Togo), each sharing insights from their respective country contexts.



Photo 14: Panel presenting the GEF 8 Guinean Forest Programme.

The Guinean Forest Integrated Program directly supports implementation of the ECOWAS Forest Convergence Plan through coordinated regional action that addresses forest degradation across West Africa's critical ecosystems.

The program operates through a Regional Coordination Project that integrates five country-level initiatives in Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Togo, creating synergies that transcend national boundaries.

By aligning its six core components with the Convergence Plan's strategic priorities, the program strengthens forest governance mechanisms, promotes transboundary ecosystem conservation, and fosters climate-smart agriculture across 600,000 square kilometers of forest landscapes. How can fragmented national efforts achieve the regional transformation needed without this coordinated approach?

The program's financial architecture and implementation strategy catalyze the Convergence Plan's vision of a resilient Guinean Forest biome supporting regional green growth. With USD 6.2 million in GEF funding leveraging USD 40.6 million in co-financing, the initiative develops sustainable forest value chains that empower Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities while establishing payment mechanisms for ecosystem services.

The Regional Coordination Project ensures that individual country efforts produce mutually reinforcing impacts through harmonized land use planning methodologies, shared monitoring systems, and coordinated capacity building programs. This integrated approach addresses the Plan's five strategic actions: enhancing forest law enforcement, strengthening transboundary cooperation, fostering sustainable livelihoods, supporting restoration efforts, and mobilizing green investments.

The transformative outcomes expected by 2031 demonstrate concrete progress toward the Convergence Plan's objectives. The program targets protection and improved management of 1.1 million hectares of forest areas, restoration of 44,433 hectares of degraded land, and implementation of sustainable practices across 479,941 hectares of production landscapes. These interventions will mitigate 30.8 million tons of CO₂ emissions while directly benefiting 186,267 people, with women comprising 48% of beneficiaries.

By establishing collaborative frameworks with ECOWAS, the Mano River Union, and other regional bodies, the program creates the institutional architecture necessary for long-term forest governance that the Convergence Plan envisions. What role will the proposed West African Forest Governance Body play in sustaining these achievements beyond the program's timeframe?

Guinean Forests Program and its country-level projects are interwoven with EU-NaturAfrica Program.

This session examined the Guinean Forests Program alongside the EU-NaturAfrica initiative, with insights from Charity (CI), Renaud Bailleux, and Thomas Rabeil.

Together, these complementary programs form a powerful framework for integrated conservation across West and Central Africa's critical forest landscapes.



Photo 15: Renaud Bailleux (top) and Thomas Rabeil (bottom) from the EU-NaturAfrica program presenting about the project.

Shared Geographic Focus - both programs converge in high-value transboundary ecosystems:

- Greater Gola Forest (Sierra Leone–Liberia)
- Ziamá–Wonegizi–Wologizi corridor (Guinea–Liberia)
- Mount Nimba ecosystem (Guinea–Ivory Coast–Liberia)

Distinct but Complementary Approaches

- The **GEF-funded Guinean Forests Program** targets five countries, focusing on governance, restoration, and conservation interventions.
- **NaturAfrica** operates across 11 landscapes through a three-pillar approach: conservation, green economy development, and inclusive governance.

Examples of Synergy in Action

In Liberia, NaturAfrica connects four EU-funded projects in Gola and the Tai–Grebo–Krahn–Sapo complex, while the Guinean Forests Program reinforces conservation governance in Northwest Liberia. In Mount Nimba, the Guinean Forests Program restores ecological corridors, while NaturAfrica addresses mining pressures and strengthens protected area management.

Mobilizing Significant Resources

- Guinean Forests Program: USD 6.2M GEF funding leveraged into USD 40.6M co-financing.
- NaturAfrica: €41M in Phase I for West Africa, with further investments planned for 2027–2030.

Four Dimensions of Complementarity

1. Governance & Policy Alignment – stronger institutional structures and enforcement on the ground.
2. Innovation & Knowledge Sharing – scaling success through regional observatories (OBAPAO in Senegal, OFAC in Cameroon).
3. Financial Complementarity – blending innovative mechanisms (biodiversity certificates, carbon credits) with EU's long-term public investment.
4. Inclusive Engagement – ensuring Indigenous Peoples, women, youth, and local communities are central to decision-making.

Looking ahead, the session raised an important question: How can these complementarities be formalized through joint platforms and shared monitoring systems to maximize conservation impact in future phases?

GOOD PRACTICES TO INSPIRE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTEGRATED PROGRAMS

Several good practices and lessons emerge from both the Congo Basin and Guinean Forests programs that can inspire effective implementation of integrated forest conservation initiatives.

The Regional Coordination Project approach stands out as a critical success factor, serving as the backbone that prevents fragmented efforts and ensures individual country projects create synergistic impacts. The Congo Basin program demonstrates how a well-structured coordination mechanism can integrate eight countries' efforts while maintaining flexibility for national contexts, allocating specific funding for coordination (U\$D 7.1 million) separate from country implementation budgets. This dedicated coordination function enables harmonized methodologies, shared learning platforms, and consistent monitoring across diverse political and ecological landscapes. How can programs balance standardization with the flexibility needed for local adaptation?

The programs reveal that successful integrated conservation requires simultaneous action across multiple intervention pathways rather than sequential approaches.

The Congo Basin's five causal pathways work in parallel: strengthening governance frameworks, coordinating landscape-scale actions, developing sustainable value chains, mobilizing financial resources, and facilitating inter-institutional coordination.

Each country adapts these pathways to specific contexts while maintaining program coherence. For instance, the Democratic Republic of Congo focuses on peatland governance with specific targets like 95% forest cover assessment accuracy, while Angola emphasizes transboundary cooperation for the Maiombe ecosystem. This parallel implementation approach, combined with specific, measurable targets and timelines for each component, creates accountability while allowing countries to address their unique challenges within a unified framework.

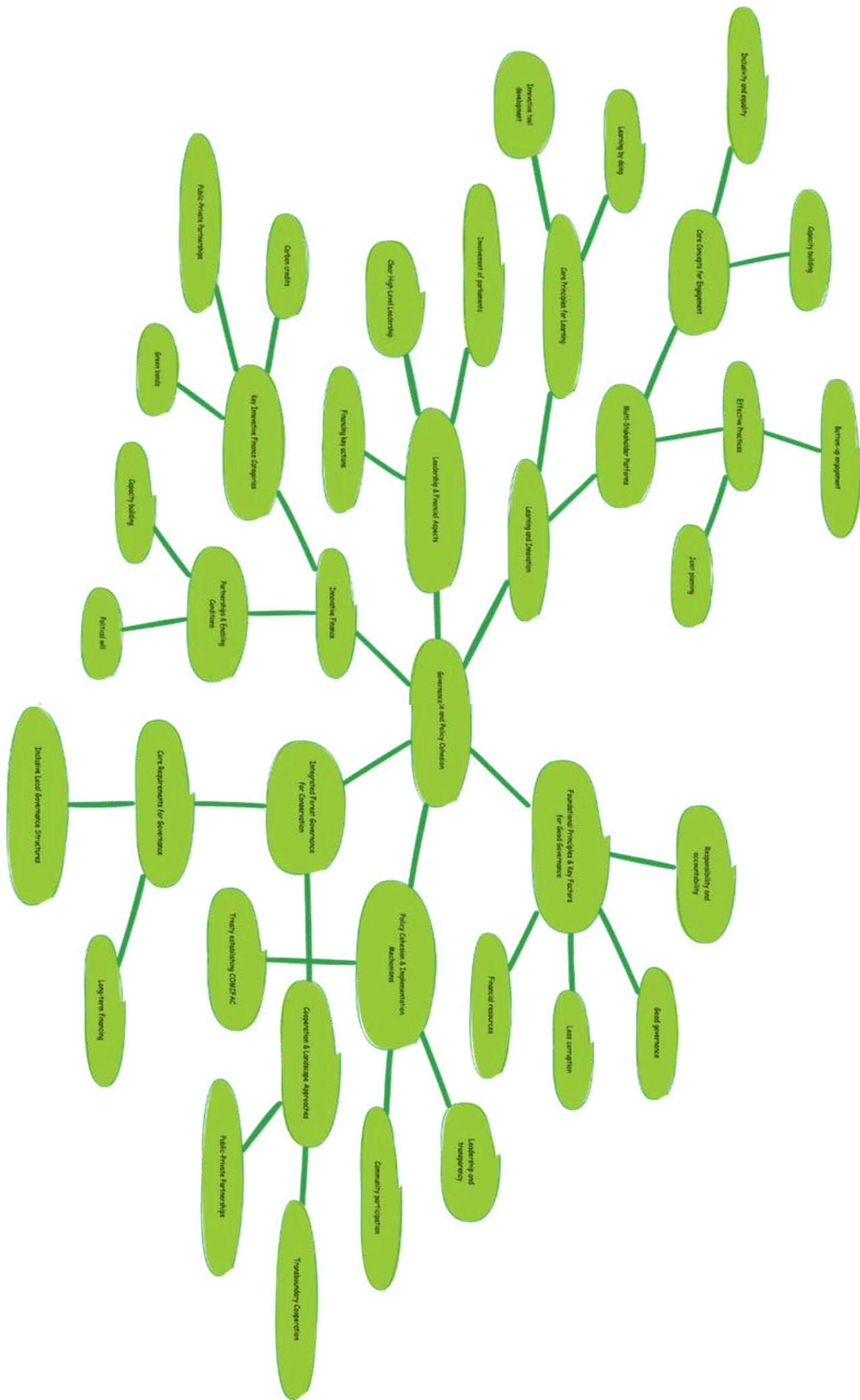
The integration of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities as central actors rather than beneficiaries represents a fundamental shift in conservation practice demonstrated by both programs. The initiatives explicitly design interventions that empower communities through formalized land tenure, co-management agreements, and direct participation in governance structures. The programs allocate substantial resources to capacity building, with targets like training 120 rangers in the DRC and establishing 50 ecotourism guides in Angola, ensuring local populations have the skills and authority to lead conservation efforts. Financial mechanisms move beyond traditional aid models by developing green value chains, payment for ecosystem services, and innovative financing instruments that create sustainable income streams. The complementarity between GEF and EU-NaturAfrica funding demonstrates how multiple donors can align investments without duplication, with each focusing on comparative advantages while sharing monitoring platforms and learning systems. What mechanisms ensure these community-centered approaches survive beyond project timeframes?

QUESTION:

Based on your experience, what practices have proven most effective in _____ that could inspire other colleagues? and what conditions made them successful?

Aspects covered: Governance and Policy, **Integrated Forest Governance, Learning and Innovation, Innovative Finance, and Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues.**

Figure 5. Digital harvest of group work



Governance and Policy

The Governance and Policy notes have a strong emphasis **on cohesion, participation, and effective implementation**. Key themes include the importance of clear leadership, the need for inclusive processes, and the challenges and requirements for successful policy execution.

Cluster 1: Foundational Principles & Key Factors for Good Governance

- **Top Title:** "GOVERNANCE AND POLICY COHESION"
- **Key Factors for Good Governance:**
 - Good governance and strong involvement of all stakeholders (citizens, organizations, governments, and leaders)
 - Financial resources
 - Broader Governance Aspects:
 - Responsibility and accountability.
 - Less corruption / More transparency
 - Transparency in the use of funds
 - Reduced illicit activities and corruption
 - Responsible
 - Inclusion / Representation of all stakeholders
 - Ensuring good governance at all level: (local, national, regional).

Cluster 2: Policy Cohesion & Implementation Mechanisms

- **Policy & Coordination:**
 - Existence of a treaty establishing COMIFAC and giving it political and governance bodies
 - Results: Financing, diplomacy, new efficiency, integration, development of regional public goods
 - "Formal engagement process" / "Reform of policies"
 - "Transparency of results"
 - Policies which embrace human rights
 - Policy will of local authorities
 - Leadership
 - Significance of the problem by the community
 - Participation of Indigenous stakeholders
 - Making a Local Human Partnership accountable
 - Good participation
 - Involvement of partners.
- **Convergence Plan & Stakeholder Engagement:**
 - Convergence plan involving all stakeholders
 - Policy coherence
 - Harmonization
 - Alignment that considers needs.

• **Frameworks for Consultation & Harmonization:**

- Operational consultation frameworks put in place
- Harmonized forestry policies via Sub-Regional Directives.

Cluster 3: Leadership & Financial Aspects

- **Clear High-Level Leadership:**
 - Clear high-level leadership: a champion
 - Intersectoral coordination mechanism
 - Involvement of parliaments
 - New public goods
 - Human resources, capacity
 - Goal: diminish / reduce incitation / perverse incentives/subsidies
 - Support / participation
 - Training, standardization
 - Adapted tools and methods.
- **Financial & Accountability Aspects:**
 - Successful decisions
 - Common commitments of 2020 national and regional policies
 - Financing key actions to meet commitments
 - Ability to account for leaders as well as effective community needs for their strong engagement.



Photo 16. Dyadic exchange

GROUP WORK

Overall Summary of Governance and Policy

The Governance and Policy notes underscored that effective governance and policy cohesion are paramount for achieving desired outcomes, particularly in areas like conservation and development.

This requires a multi-faceted approach encompassing: strong, clear leadership; active and inclusive participation of all stakeholders; transparent and accountable financial management; harmonized policies across different levels and sectors; and robust mechanisms for consultation, implementation, and monitoring. The emphasis is on building a collaborative and responsible framework that can address complex challenges and deliver tangible results.

Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues

The participants highlighted Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues' purpose, key elements for success, challenges, and practical implementation strategies. The core message emphasizes inclusivity, transparency, effective communication, and the critical role of understanding diverse interests to foster cooperation and achieve common goals.

Cluster 1: Core Concepts & Principles of Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues

- Top Title: "MULTI-STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES"
- Key Principles for Transparent Engagement:
 - Interest
 - Equality
 - Inclusivity (stakeholder mapping)
 - Legitimacy
 - Capacity building
 - Strategy & language
 - Autonomy.
- What makes it happen?
 - Capacity building / Awareness
 - Bottom-up
 - Given voice to all.
- Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue (General):
 - Participatory and inclusive management.
 - Establishment of consultation platforms.
 - Political willingness/engagement.
- Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue (General):
 - Participatory and inclusive management.
 - Establishment of consultation platforms.
 - Political willingness/engagement.

Cluster 2: Effective Practices & Implementation Strategies

- Most Effective Practices:
 - Multi-stakeholder exchange platform
 - Mapping of actors
 - Understanding the interests, needs, and dynamics between actors
 - Joint planning

The recurring ideas revolve around strong partnerships, inclusive approaches, practical implementation, and the vital role of political will.



Photo 17. Participants' exchanges

Cluster 3: Challenges, Conflict Resolution & Specific Approaches

- Identifying different stakeholders and their interests
- Working to minimize the challenges/conflicts
- Identifying the strengths of each stakeholder/institution & building on them for the common good – LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND!!!
- Role of Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues:
 - Favor cooperation to confirm actions
 - Resolve complex problems
 - Develop sustainable solutions taking into account diverse interests
- Instill a climate of trust between stakeholders
- Involving all stakeholders into decision-making processes
- Capacity building is a key element in multi-stakeholder dialogues
- Conflict Resolution
- Transparency is another form in Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues
- Equitability.

Cluster 4: Levels of Engagement & Dialogue Effectiveness

- Different Layers of Engagement:
 - Level one – separate processes.
 - Level two – joining them together.
- Having two layers of stakeholder dialogue – technical & political/policy dialogue
- The local level dialogue (impact level engagement) has also worked very well.

- What made it possible (for effective local dialogue):
 - Identifying the right stakeholders and their interests
 - Having two levels of dialogue:
 - Level 1: Separate engagement.
 - Level 2: Bringing them together in the same room.
 - Understanding the needs, interests, and value input.
 - Give voice to all
 - Gender consideration is key.

Cluster 5: Making Dialogues More Effective (L-G)

- Inclusive platforms (L-G) - L-G likely stands for Local Governance.
- Social agreements with communities.
- Policies and regulations built jointly with local people.

Overall Summary of Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues

The participants collectively highlight Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues as a cornerstone for effective governance and development, particularly in complex contexts. The success of these dialogues' hinges on inclusivity, transparency, and a deep understanding of the diverse interests of all participants.

Key practices include systematic stakeholder mapping, joint planning, and adapting communication to different groups.

The speakers stressed the importance of building trust and fostering cooperation to resolve complex problems and develop sustainable, mutually beneficial solutions. They emphasize that effective dialogues require a multi-layered approach (technical and political), with particular success noted at the local level due to direct engagement. Crucially, success factors include strong capacity building, political will, and dedicated efforts to minimize conflicts and ensure no one is left behind.

The ultimate goal is to empower local communities and integrate their needs and knowledge into jointly built policies and regulations, leading to more impactful and equitable outcomes.

Integrated Forest Governance for Conservation

The panel outlined key elements, challenges, and approaches necessary for effective and sustainable management of forest resources.

The recurring ideas revolve around strong partnerships, inclusive approaches, practical implementation, and the vital role of political will.



Photo 18. Dyadic exchange

Cluster 1: Foundational Elements & Enabling Factors for Integrated Forest Governance

- Top Title: "INTEGRATED FOREST GOVERNANCE FOR CONSERVATION"
- Core Requirements / Enablers:
 - Agreement between State and operationalization plan of the governance structures.
 - Inclusive Local Governance Structures for co-management.
 - Common institutional and Technical Capacity building
 - **Enabling** (a general category for what allows the above):
 - Long-term financing
 - Accountability
 - Effective dialogue
 - Benefit Sharing Mechanism
 - Collaborative design, implementation, and learning.

Cluster 2: Cooperation & Landscape Approaches

- Transboundary Cooperation:
 - Approach conservation and Sustainable Forest Management (SFM) through landscape and eco-regional approaches.
- Regional Cooperation:
 - Supported by common and aligned policy and governance frameworks.

- Public-Private Partnerships:
 - Between communities, government, and private sector.
- Livelihood Enhancement:
 - Livelihood enhancing conservation approaches.

Cluster 3: Practical Implementation & Legal Frameworks

- Management Plans & Programs (examples listed):
 - Local management framework
 - Sustainable management
 - Management plan
 - Common DRC programs - likely Democratic Republic of Congo
 - Indigenous Forests / Community Forests
 - Inventories / Development plan
- Application of Forest Law:
 - Strict application of forest law
 - Involvement/implication of local populations in the implementation of forest law
 - Consultation of all stakeholders.
- Formal Partnerships:
 - Formal partnerships with legal obligations between a forestry company, a conservation NGO, and the State.



Photo 19. Group Work

Cluster 4: Integrated Monitoring, Political Will & Territorial Approaches

- Integrated Approach:
 - Integrated approach to actions with common monitoring indicators between different landscape actors (e.g., measuring the well-being of populations living in the area).
- Political Will:
 - Political will.
 - Formal guarantees.
 - Strong political deployed at the territorial level and mobilization of all with involvement of all stakeholders.
- Territorial Approach & Sustainable Management:
 - A territorial approach to forest management with strong involvement of local actors.
 - This implies a strong knowledge of the issues, mobilization of local communities, and support for the sustainability of initiatives and conservation measures.
- Capacity Building & Extractive Industries:
 - Capacity building for field actors.
 - Autonomous implications of extractive industries.
 - Management plan.

Overall Summary of Integrated Forest Governance for Conservation

The Integrated Forest Governance for Conservation collectively painted a picture of a comprehensive strategy for integrated forest governance. It highlights that successful conservation hinges on more than just policy; it requires a strong foundation of formal agreements, inclusive local governance, and robust capacity building. Critical success factors include long-term financing, accountability, and effective dialogue. The participants emphasize the importance of collaborative, transboundary, and regional cooperation, particularly through public-private partnerships.

On the ground, this translates to strict application of forest law, the development of comprehensive management plans, and integrated monitoring. Ultimately, strong political will, deep local involvement, and a territorial approach are seen as

indispensable for achieving sustainable forest management and conservation, even while acknowledging the complex implications of extractive industries.

Innovative Finance

The notes emphasized mechanisms, partnerships, and enabling conditions required to mobilize resources for conservation and sustainable development. Key themes include diverse financial instruments, the importance of strong partnerships (public-private, international), and the need for a supportive policy environment and collective will.

Cluster 1: Core Concepts & Mechanisms of Innovative Finance

- Top Titles: "INNOVATIVE FINANCE" /
- Key Innovative Finance Categories/Types:
 - Carbon credit
 - Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)
 - Payments for Environmental Services (PES)
 - Biodiversity credit
 - Private return commitment
 - Fiduciary funds (Trust Funds)
 - Debt-for-nature swaps
 - Country package
 - Blended finance
 - Carbon/biodiversity finance
 - Green bonds / Blue bonds
 - Debt conversion

Cluster 2: Partnerships & Enabling Conditions

- Committed Partnerships with Financial Resources:
 - Public
 - Private
 - Partnerships: International, Bilateral, Multilateral.
- What allows this to happen?
 - Political will
 - Technical expertise
 - Capacity building
- Many different mechanisms & Best practices:
 - Those creating the enabling environment (institutional reform, creation of platforms with relevant stakeholders, governance...).
- Effective practices in innovative finance include:
 - Climate finance mechanisms (FEN, FVC, FAQ...) - likely references to specific funds like Green Climate Fund (GCF)
 - Involvement of banks in climate finance
 - Collective awareness
 - Political will of institutions
 - Engagement of technical partners.

Cluster 3: Implementation & Success Factors

- *What approaches are most effective in Innovative Finance? What are the conditions that make them possible?*
 - Develop policies/conditions.
 - Access to markets.
 - Understanding national priorities for sustainable development with concrete results.
 - Partnerships with countries.
- *What is already happening/known in the market?*
 - Carbon credit / Rosewood in Sierra Leone.
 - Public-Private Partnerships / Virunga in the Democratic Republic of Congo
 - Fiduciary funds / TNS Foundation (Congo Basin).
- *Success Factors:*
 - Interest of conservation NGOs.

Cluster 4: Specific Examples & Contexts

- Partnerships with Public (Entities):
E.g., GEF with the IFC for green climate fund and regional development banks in sustainable agriculture and renewable energy projects.
- Sierra Leone:
 - FTNS Trust Fund
 - Sustainable Carbon Finance
 - Gola National Park
 - Support from BSPB (BirdLife Sierra Leone Partner) since 1993.

Overall Summary of Innovative Finance

The participants' notes thoroughly explore Innovative Finance as a critical component for conservation and sustainable development. They highlight a diverse portfolio of financial instruments, from carbon and biodiversity credits to green/blue bonds, debt-for-nature swaps, and fiduciary funds. A central theme is the absolute necessity of strong, committed partnerships – public, private, international, bilateral, and multilateral – to mobilize these resources effectively.

Success in innovative finance is shown to depend heavily on an enabling environment, characterized by clear political will, technical expertise, capacity building, and supportive policies that facilitate market access. The group also points to the importance of institutional reforms and platforms for stakeholder engagement. Real-world examples from Sierra Leone, DRC (Virunga), and the Congo Basin demonstrate the practical application of these financing mechanisms. Ultimately, the emphasis is on a collective and collaborative effort to leverage diverse financial tools for impactful conservation outcomes.



Photo 20. Peers exchange

Learning and Innovation

The group highlighted the importance of experience, adaptation, capacity building, and collaborative approaches to drive progress in conservation and development. They emphasized the need for continuous learning, data-driven decisions, and the integration of new technologies and partnerships.

Cluster 1: Core Principles & Mindset for Learning and Innovation

- **Top Title:** "Learning + Innovation"
- **Response (Individual):** What experiences, what good practices have been shared? What works and what could be improved? What good practice should be changed?
- **Theme:** Learning and Innovation.
- **Response:** The demonstration of innovation is seeing before experimenting, and learning from experience what works.
- **Learning by doing:** We learn better from mistakes, and experience is the fuel of the learning vehicle.

Cluster 2: Enabling Factors & Capacities for Innovation

- **Development of Innovative Tools:**
 - The development of innovative tools – such as a number of tracers – that are exploited, which allows understanding their essences
 - What works easily.

- **Political Will:**

- The political will of the country to fight against forest criminality, exploitation, abuse, and illegality – which implies involvement in innovative processes.
- Availability of funding (e.g., from MAAP – likely an acronym).
- For diffusing processes.
- Capacity Reinforcement:

- **Capacity reinforcement in common regions.**

- The conditions that facilitate this process are: fund availability and intellectual capacity of people to train.

- **Best Practices for Private Sector Leverage:**

- Private sector being leveraged for conservation tech. (Partnerships with the Private Sector)
- What has made it possible: Enabling environments for Public-Private Sector partnerships (policies and donors providing incentives to promote PPP).

Cluster 3: Strategic Approaches & Implementation for Learning

- **Integrated Landscape Approach:**

- Development and adoption of a landscape approach to biodiversity conservation that has resulted in different levels (e.g., National Committee, Forest, Agricultural Law, Forest Concessions, Hunting, Concession, etc.).

- **Ministry of Forestry:**

- The Ministry of Forestry gains access to IPLC-LC to NPF (likely Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities to National Forest Policy Framework) in NPD (National Planning Document) for the needs of Indigenous communities and data.

- **Capitalization & Data:**

- Capitalization of knowledge and data
- Implication of actors
- Sufficient resources for capitalization
- Planning of capitalization.

- **Landscape approach**

- **Indigenous Knowledge:**

- Memorandum of understanding with Indigenous peoples (conservation for the valorization of indigenous knowledge).
-

Cluster 4: Partnerships, Technology & Monitoring

- **Capacity Building:**

- Capacity building for actors through training (short or long term), E-learning, Communities of Practice.
- Factors: financing/technology, flexibility in training.
- Engagement plan with different actors .
- Continuous learning.

- **Clear Definition & Engagement:**

- A clear definition of objectives, results, success indicators (log frame) at the beginning of projects
- Implementation of a solid learning, monitoring, and evaluation plan
- Engagement of all stakeholders.

- **Participatory Communication:**

- Participatory communication or active tools that can be used (webinars, brown bags, etc.).

- **AI/Integration:**

- Integration of Artificial Intelligence to promote innovative initiatives.
- Knowledge management, visualization of results, etc.

- **Community Involvement:**

- The involvement/commitment of the communities (IPLG - likely Indigenous Peoples and Local Governments) during the implementation of activities (capacity building, training).
- Their concerns are taken into account at each consultation.
- Follow-up on recommendations during field visits (learning!).

- **Effective Practice (from experience):**

- Engaging academic and research institutions in promoting learning and innovation.
- Staff research, monitoring, curriculum development.
- Students – training, data collection.
- Providing funds is key to making the work successful.

- **PPP for Management:**

- Long-term communal (bottom-up approach).
- NGO + University (research center) -> wildlife monitoring using the latest and most appropriate technologies, science-based approach.
- Developing curricula for wildlife college.

Cluster 5: Multi-Stakeholder Platforms

- **Purpose:** To create multi-stakeholder spaces/platforms where country representatives can share their voices, listen to each other about their experiences and needs on the territory/nature and their impacts – find ways to maximize synergies, minimize conflicts, and co-create a vision that balances all interests.

- Enabling Factors for Multi-Stakeholder Platforms:

- Hosted by a "neutral" organization.
- Have all on board (representatives of governments, scientists, IPLC voices, private sector).
- Integrated, biodiversity-inclusive spatial planning.
- National Ecosystem Assessment initiatives.

Overall Summary of Learning and Innovation

The speakers underscored that Learning and Innovation are crucial for driving progress in forest governance and conservation. This involves a dynamic process of "learning by doing" and adapting based on experience and mistakes. Key to this is robust capacity building across all levels, supported by adequate financing and flexible training methods. The importance of data and capitalization of knowledge was highlighted, along with the need for strong political will to combat illegal activities and foster innovative solutions.

The group also emphasized the critical role of diverse partnerships, including public-private collaborations, engagement with academic institutions, and especially the active involvement and commitment of local communities and Indigenous peoples, whose traditional knowledge is invaluable. Furthermore, the integration of new technologies like AI for knowledge management and monitoring is seen as a way to enhance effectiveness. Finally, the creation of neutral, multi-stakeholder platforms is presented as a vital mechanism for fostering dialogue, resolving conflicts, and co-creating shared visions for sustainable management.

INTEGRATED LAND USE MANAGEMENT PLANNING (ILUMP)

The session, focused on “Successes, Challenges, and Future Transformative Pathways for Integrated Forest Management in Critical Forest Landscapes”, brought together key regional and technical voices to explore how integrating natural capital and climate change considerations can enhance Integrated Land Use Management Planning (ILUMP) in Central Africa and Guinean Forest.

The first panel featured Valerie Tchuante, from COMIFAC, who presented regional progress and methodological updates, and Joseph Itongwa, from REPALEAC, who emphasized the vital role of Indigenous people in promoting inclusive forest governance. Raquel Agra, from UNEP-WCMC, contributed technical insights by explaining the concept of natural capital and introducing the recently developed guidelines that provide practical orientation on how to integrate natural capital accounting with climate change adaptation approaches.

The second panel brought together representatives from Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone to discuss watershed management and the collaborative efforts taking place at the community, national, and regional levels within the Mano River Union (MRU).

Together, the two panels laid the groundwork for a rich discussion on strengthening transboundary cooperation, embedding ecological and socio-economic values into planning tools, and advancing data-driven and inclusive landscape management across the Congo Basin and Guinean Forest.

Panel 1 – Central Africa

Successes, Challenges, and Future Transformative Pathways for Integrated Forest Management in critical forest landscapes + Integrating natural capital and climate change considerations to enhance Integrated Land Use Management Planning.

This panel features Valerie Tchuante (COMIFAC), Raquel Agra (UNEP/WCMC) and Joseph Itongwa (REPALEAC).

Valerie Tchuante (COMIFAC) and Joseph Itongwa (REPALEAC) presented on their collaborative work implementing GEF 7 Congo Basin Impact Program components, highlighting the development of enhanced integrated land use planning methodology (ILUMP) that incorporates climate change and natural capital accounting, alongside efforts to strengthen Indigenous and local community participation in forest governance through mid-term evaluations and capacity building initiatives.

OFAC (Observatoire des Forêts d'Afrique Centrale) demonstrated their role as a regional data collection and analysis hub, showcasing how they gather forest-related information from 11 Central African countries through national coordinators and partnerships to produce policy briefs, reports, and analytical tools that support evidence-based decision-making for forest conservation and climate action.

A central point of discussion was the ongoing work to improve integrated land-use planning (ILUMP) as a tool for sustainable landscape management. COMIFAC presented progress made in updating regional planning guides and highlighted efforts to revitalize cross-border cooperation, such as the renewed agreement between Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea for the Campement landscape.



Photo 21. Panelists from the Integrated Land Use Management Planning session

These actions aim to foster more coherent, climate-responsive planning at both national and transboundary levels, with an emphasis on biodiversity-rich and ecologically sensitive areas.

Raquel Agra (UNEP-WCMC) outlined the technical development of supplemental guidance for integrating natural capital accounting and climate vulnerability assessments into COMIFAC's existing land use planning framework, detailing the multi-year consultative process, capacity building workshops, and the methodology's validation through regional stakeholder engagement.

These presentations collectively illustrate a comprehensive regional approach to forest conservation in Central Africa, where technical methodology development (UNEP-WCMC), data systems and knowledge management (OFAC), and on-ground implementation with community engagement (COMIFAC-REPALEAC) work together to advance integrated landscape management and support international commitments on biodiversity and climate change.

The inclusion of Indigenous people and local communities was another critical topic. The Indigenous Peoples Network (Repaleac) stressed the need to fully involve Indigenous communities in both the planning process and project implementation. Ongoing activities to assess land tenure and track progress on the Indigenous peoples' strategic framework were presented as important steps toward ensuring that traditional knowledge, customary rights, and community priorities are integrated into land-use decisions.

Finally, the session highlighted forward-looking initiatives, including the launch of a scholarship programme to support environmental research in the region. Participants also reflected on the need to further refine the COMIFAC methodology by incorporating climate change, natural capital accounting, and local participation more explicitly. By bringing together diverse stakeholders and perspectives, the ILUMP session contributed to strengthening coordination, improving policy tools, and setting the foundation for more resilient and inclusive landscape governance across Central Africa.

Panel 2 – Guinean Forest

The second panel focused on the Mano River Union (MRU) experience in watershed management and the collaborative efforts taking place at the community, national, and regional levels.

The session was dedicated to sharing the experience of MRU and served as a platform for regional stakeholders to share updates, explore methodological improvements, and discuss collaborative approaches to watershed management.

A strong emphasis was placed on aligning environmental planning with local priorities and regional coordination frameworks.

The session also explored knowledge management and information systems, including the creation of a regional platform for environmental data and monitoring. This platform is envisioned as a key instrument to support decision-making, policy alignment, and long-term research on natural capital. Panelists discussed the importance of accurate, accessible, and harmonized data across countries, while also recognizing the persistent gaps in land-use information and the need to account for existing national planning frameworks.

Group Work – What good practices from your country or organization's experience have led to good results and what key lessons could you share with others?

Successes, Challenges, and Future Transformative Pathways for Integrated Forest Management in critical forest landscapes + Integrating natural capital and climate change considerations to enhance Integrated Land Use Management Planning.

Lessons and Practices

Planning & Design Principles for Land Use and Restoration Projects

This cluster focuses on the foundational steps and guiding principles for effective land use and restoration initiatives, emphasizing community involvement, data-driven decisions, and clear objectives.

- Analyze the needs and costs of community participation and take them into account in program development and implementation.
- Also take into account that projects involving participatory processes take a lot of time to be accomplished.
- Define clear and precise indicators that allow measuring program success. For example, for landscape restoration, what is the tree density per hectare from which we can say that the landscape is restored?!

When the project has time to demonstrate that innovations work, there is a high chance of having them adopted by communities.

Summary:

1. Map current land use
2. Proposed land use Scenarios
3. Cost, Benefit & risk analysis for each scenario
4. Dialogue process to converge on one scenario
5. Legislate & Enforce



Photo 22. Participants follow the panel discussions

- Need for national land-use plans, beyond sub-national plans including all sectors (mining is important)
 - B = baseline – map current land use
- proposed land use scenarios
 - Cost-benefit assessment of different possible land uses
 - Who will benefit?
 - not only CBA but risks (resettlement...)
- Engage territorial planning processes from the start of projects to ensure implementation begins before projects end and to capitalize on implementation approaches.
- Good practices.
 - Develop and implement a national land allocation scheme.
 - Application of texts and involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making.
 - Existence of land-use planning policies in some countries.
 - Availability of data from flora and fauna inventories.
 - Better coordination between different actors.
- Updating knowledge before project start.
- Adapt procedures to the realities of target areas.
- Choice of actors and competencies that lead the planning process.
- Make the right diagnosis to provide appropriate and realistic answers.
- Integrated territorial development approach at the municipal level.
 - Alignment with the national scheme.
 - Consideration of sectoral policies.
 - Engagement of stakeholders and establishment of village and communal development committees.

Cross-cutting Considerations & Challenges

This cluster addresses overarching issues that impact the success and sustainability of land use and restoration efforts, including multi-sectoral coordination, limitations, and social dimensions.

- Include restoration issues in school programs and involve young people from an early age.

LIMITATIONS

- Overlap / superposition of sectors on the territory
- Lack of coherence between sectoral policies)
- Planning without control of existing resources (forest, mining, soil...)
- Maps based on scientific information to inform area designation (Forest, mining, agriculture...), discussed with local communities.
- Harmonization between high-level, transboundary, landscape and bottom-up land uses from communities.
- Bring Ministries from different sectors together to agree on what land use will happen where.
- Take into account transgenerational concerns in planning scenarios.
- Planning must take into account conflict management (Farmers/Herdsman, Mining operators/Local communities, Preservation of sensitive cultural sites)
- Gender approach to forest restoration. / Sexist approach to species selection for reforestation.
- Choice of community sites to remove constraints on women's access to land.

KNOWLEDGE PLATFORMS TO ADVANCE SCIENCE IN THE CONGO BASIN AND GUINEA FOREST

Knowledge management framework

The facilitator Maria Fernanda Arraes shared a comprehensive knowledge management framework for the Congo Basin, structured around four interconnected components: Information Management, Learning and Innovation, Innovation and Experimentation, and Internal Communication systems.

The circular design emphasizes the cyclical nature of knowledge flow, from data collection and management through to decision-making and back to information gathering. The framework addresses key operational needs including local, national, and regional data requirements, with specific attention to sustainability challenges, investment strategies, and the integration of local and regional knowledge systems.

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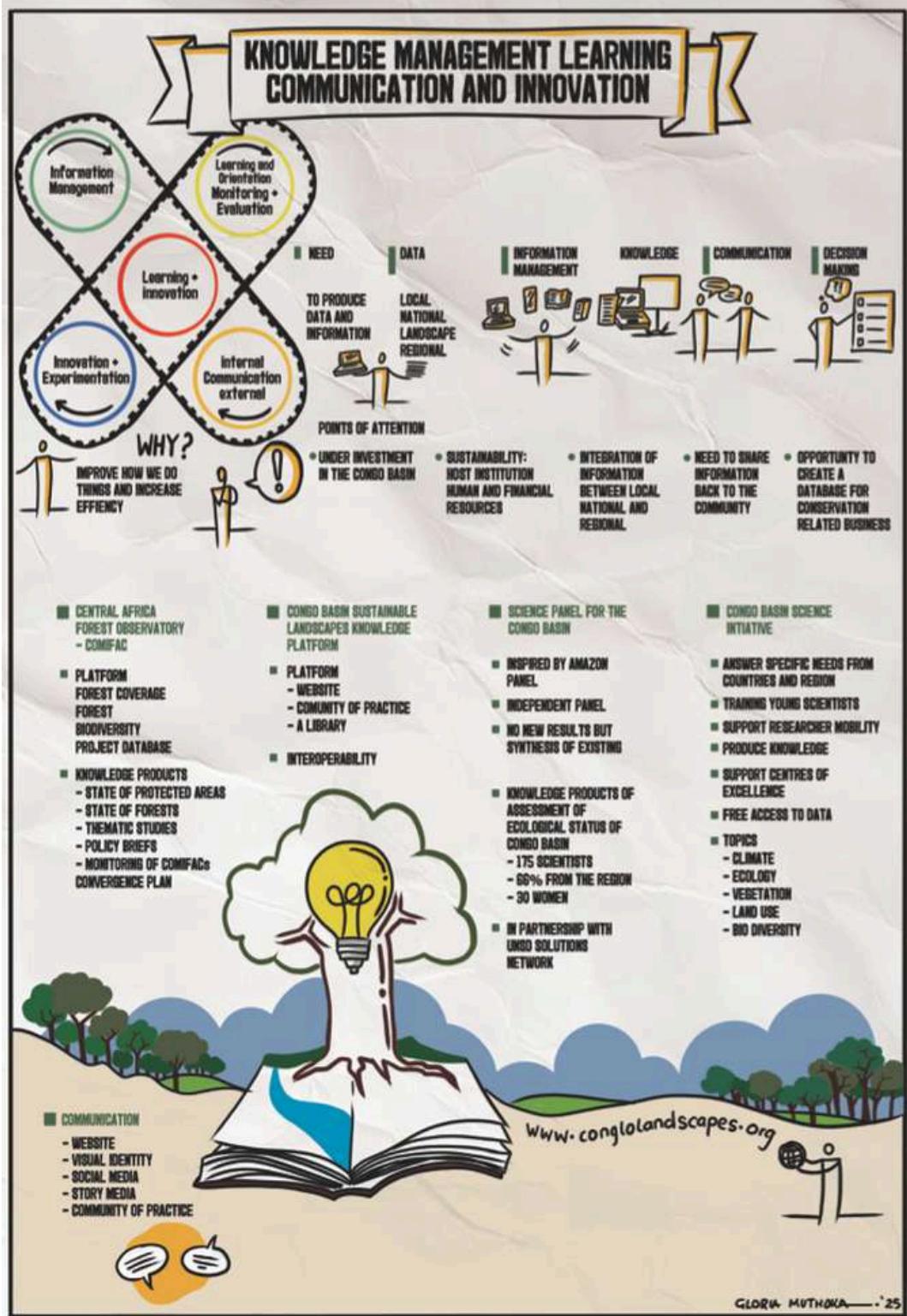


Figure 6: Knowledge management framework

The circular design emphasizes the cyclical nature of knowledge flow, from data collection and management through to decision-making and back to information gathering. The framework addresses key operational needs including local, national, and regional data requirements, with specific attention to sustainability challenges, investment strategies, and the integration of local and regional knowledge systems. The implementation strategy reveals an ambitious scope spanning multiple institutional levels and geographic scales.

Central components include the COMIFAC, Congo Basin Sustainable Landscape Knowledge Platform, and various specialized panels such as a Science Panel for the Congo Basin inspired by the Amazon model. The framework emphasizes interoperability between different knowledge systems, from local community practices to regional scientific databases, while incorporating modern digital tools and traditional knowledge preservation methods.

Notable features include provisions for researcher mobility, free data access policies, and comprehensive coverage of topics from ecology and vegetation to land use and biodiversity.



Photo 23. Knowledge Management Panel

The presentation of this knowledge ecosystem raises important questions about implementation feasibility and sustainability. While the comprehensive scope demonstrates recognition of the complex, interconnected nature of Congo Basin conservation challenges, the sheer breadth of proposed activities and stakeholders suggests potential coordination and resource allocation challenges.

The framework's success would depend heavily on sustained institutional commitment, adequate funding mechanisms, and effective governance structures to manage the diverse array of platforms, databases, and communication channels proposed. The emphasis on both digital innovation and community engagement represents a thoughtful approach, though the practical integration of these sometimes-competing priorities remains to be demonstrated.

Knowledge gaps

This presentation by Andre Toham from UNEP traces the evolution of Congo Basin Forest conservation from early scientific foundations to current systemic transformation approaches. The presentation begins by highlighting the Libreville Landmark Ecoregional Planning Workshop as a pivotal moment that established science-driven biodiversity conservation principles in the region.

These principles focus on representing all species and habitats, maintaining ecological processes, sustaining viable populations, and conserving large blocks of natural habitat resilient to disturbances.

The scientific approach involved mapping biodiversity hotspots through expert knowledge and field data, considering multiple targets including species richness, endemism, complementarity, ecological phenomena, and evolutionary processes. A key emphasis was placed on preserving large tracts of intact forests as a globally important phenomenon. This scientific foundation directly informed policy development, leading to the creation of COMIFAC, the Plan de Convergence regional biodiversity action plan, and major international partnerships like the Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP) that catalyzed large-scale investments in the region.



Photo 24. André Toham, UNEP Consultant

The presentation outlined how current GEF-7 and GEF-8 programs build on these institutional frameworks through four transformation levers addressing systemic forest threats. These threats include unsustainable logging, bushmeat trade, slash-and-burn agriculture, and external market pressures. The four levers are: governance and policy reform using science-based decision-making; multi-stakeholder platforms engaging all actors from communities to policymakers; innovation and learning through cutting-edge tools and participatory approaches; and financial leverage aligning capital with nature-positive outcomes through mechanisms like carbon credits and ecosystem service payments.

The presentation concluded by emphasizing that fragmented efforts cannot address systemic threats, requiring integrated transformation approaches. Examples from Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Central African Republic demonstrate practical applications including landscape management bodies, fintech solutions for nature-based incentives, and tech-enabled restoration programs. The overarching message stresses that knowledge rooted in science and grounded in practice must catalyze systems change, representing a strategic evolution from early biodiversity mapping to comprehensive landscape-scale transformation addressing the interconnected challenges of biodiversity, climate, governance, and livelihoods.

Central Africa Forest Observatory and its platforms

The session was presented by Valerie Tchuante. The Central Africa Forest Observatory (OFAC) is a regional knowledge hub that provides reliable, up-to-date, and accessible data on the state of forests and natural resources in Central Africa. Established under the mandate of the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), OFAC plays a crucial role in monitoring forest ecosystems, biodiversity, and land use change, while also informing policy decisions at both national and regional levels. By producing assessments, reports, and maps, OFAC strengthens transparency and accountability, enabling stakeholders to better understand and address the challenges facing Central Africa's forests.

A cornerstone of OFAC's work is the development of interactive platforms and databases that consolidate data from multiple sources into user-friendly tools. These platforms provide decision-makers, researchers, and practitioners with access to information on deforestation trends, protected areas, wildlife habitats, and socio-economic factors affecting forest landscapes. By centralizing and harmonizing data, OFAC helps overcome fragmentation, ensuring that policies and interventions are grounded in solid evidence.

Two of OFAC's flagship platforms are the State of the Forest (SOF) report, published regularly to provide a comprehensive overview of forest resources, governance frameworks, and conservation initiatives across Central Africa, and the State of Protected Areas (SOPACA) report. Complementing this, OFAC also manages geportals and interactive dashboards that allow users to visualize and analyze spatial data in real time. These tools are vital for governments, NGOs, and local communities seeking to monitor progress towards regional and international commitments such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement.

Through these platforms, OFAC not only strengthens data-driven decision-making but also fosters regional cooperation and capacity building.

By engaging governments, civil society, and research institutions, OFAC ensures that its tools respond to the needs of diverse stakeholders. Training and technical support are provided to enhance local expertise in data collection, analysis, and use, thereby empowering Central African countries to take ownership of their forest monitoring systems. In this way, OFAC serves as both a data provider and a catalyst for sustainable

forest management in one of the world's most critical biodiversity hotspots.

The Science Panel for the Congo Basin

Bonaventure Sonké presented the 2025 Congo Basin Assessment Report initiative, which emerged from a 2021 Nature article by Minister Lee White and colleagues calling for a USD150 million investment in Congo Basin Forest science. Drawing inspiration from the successful Amazon Science Panel model that produced over 2,280 scientific publications and trained hundreds of researchers, the Science Panel for the Congo Basin was officially launched at COP 28 in December 2023 under the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network, now involving over 175 scientists with 66% from the region and 30% women.

The assessment report will synthesize existing peer-reviewed scientific knowledge across four main sections: how Congo Basin ecosystems function regionally and influence global systems; impacts of human activities on the basin's ecosystems; prospective biodiversity and climate scenarios; and how scientific data can inform climate-resilient sustainable land use to address poverty and development goals. Rather than generating new research, the report will undergo rigorous four-layer peer review and include predictive analysis beyond just documenting current status, covering topics from geology and biodiversity to economic drivers, mining, agriculture, and conservation strategies.



Photo 25. Mr. Bonaventure Sonké from the Scientific Panel for the Congo Basin

The panel aims to complete the first-of-its-kind interdisciplinary assessment by late 2025, with plans to present findings at UNFCCC COP 30 in Brazil.

Sonké emphasized that while the Science Panel synthesizes existing knowledge and identifies research gaps, a sister initiative called the Congo Basin for Science Initiative has been established to address the actual capacity-building and research needs identified through this assessment process.

Congo Basin Science Initiative



Photo 26. Representative of the CBSI

The Congo Basin Science Initiative represents a critical response to chronic underinvestment in African forest science, following a Nature publication calling for USD 150 million in scientific funding for the region. The initiative, formally launched at the Summit of the Three Basins in October 2023, brings together scientists primarily from Central Africa to develop an integrated understanding of the Congo Basin's role in the changing Earth system.

The program addresses four key scientific questions: how the Congo Basin functions as a regional physical entity, how its ecosystems and climate have changed over time, how these systems interact with human activity, and how scientific data can inform sustainable land use and development goals across the region.

The initiative's implementation strategy centers on establishing a Congo Basin Regional Observatory with six interconnected monitoring systems covering climate and meteorology, hydrology and freshwater, vegetation and biogeochemistry, biodiversity, land cover change, and socio-ecological dimensions. This observatory will integrate extensive measurements across the basin with intensive study sites that provide mechanistic understanding, all connected through modeling and remote sensing capabilities. The capacity building plan focuses on three core objectives: enhancing partnerships, enabling long-term investment in

The capacity building plan focuses on three core objectives: enhancing partnerships, enabling long-term investment in institutional capacity for regional scientists, and addressing the region's unique research needs. This systematic approach aims to bridge the gap between local observations and regional-scale understanding while training the next generation of African scientists.

The CRAFT-Sustainable Development program, funded by UK International Development, provides concrete support for the initiative's capacity building goals through a five-year program offering 21 PhD and 12 Master's scholarships. The program supports 12 research groups across Cameroon, DRC, Gabon, and Republic of Congo, with each observatory supported by leading UK institutions including Leeds, Oxford, Stirling, and University College London. Students receive monthly stipends of USD 1,000 for PhD candidates and USD 700 for Master's students in Central Africa, with all university fees covered. This investment enables the initiative to begin systematic monitoring of the integrated Congo Basin climate-forest-water-society system for the first time, while building local scientific capacity essential for informing policy and achieving sustainable development goals. What mechanisms will ensure these trained scientists can establish sustainable careers within the region after completing their programs?



Photo 27. Mr. Pierre Lacroix from GRID-Geneva

CONGO BASIN KNOWLEDGE PLATFORM, COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AND PUBLIC FACING WEB PAGE

Pierre Lacroix from GRID-Geneva presented their comprehensive Knowledge Management Platform being developed for the Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative, which integrates data and knowledge from the IKI-funded Congo Basin Peatlands project, GEF7, and GEF8 programs. The platform, launched in April 2025 at congolandscapes.org, consists of three interconnected components: a public-facing website with knowledge repositories and search functions, a Community of Practice tool that builds

upon existing thematic COMIFAC working groups, and an information visualization tool featuring over 120 geospatial layers, statistical dashboards, and story maps.

GRID-Geneva brings four decades of experience as a UNEP analytics center, leveraging their partnership with Swiss institutions and their expertise in geospatial platforms like MapX to support data-driven conservation efforts across the Congo Basin.

The platform's architecture demonstrates sophisticated integration of technical capabilities with community engagement needs. The public website provides structured access to program information, news, and knowledge resources, while the Community of Practice enables restricted collaboration spaces for different stakeholder groups including biodiversity experts, climate change specialists, forest governance practitioners, and finance professionals.

Members can share documents, organize events, post opportunities, and participate in thematic discussions aligned with COMIFAC working groups. The visualization component transforms complex environmental data into accessible formats through interactive maps, charts, and country-specific story maps, with continuous capacity building planned to ensure partners can effectively utilize these tools.

The development roadmap emphasizes co-design processes and capacity building to ensure platform sustainability beyond project timelines. Next steps include expanding content through collaborative input from partners, developing additional story maps for each participating country, synchronizing Community of Practice content with public-facing materials, and integrating more geospatial layers based on partner scenarios.

The platform will initially operate in English and French, with capacity building programs planned for content management, platform maintenance, and visualization tool usage. How will the platform ensure continuity of data standards and interoperability as it interfaces with other regional platforms like SEPAL, GeoServer, and the Open Geospatial Consortium frameworks?

Examples of knowledge produced in the Congo Basin (GEF-7)

Climate Modelling to enhance the protection of the Congo Basin wildlife by Woodwell Climate Research Center (video recording)

Alex Nagley, a research scientist at the Woodwell Climate Research Center, outlined a climate research project supporting the GEF 7 Congo Basin Sustainable Landscapes Program.

The project focuses on downscaling climate projections for four transboundary landscapes in the Congo Basin (Campo Ma'an-Rio Campo, Monte Alen-Monte de Cristal, TNS [Sangha Trinational], and Lac Télé-Lac Tumba) and developing recommendations for incorporating climate change considerations into integrated land use management plans.

The technical approach involves using 19 general circulation models from CMIP 6, downscaled to 10km resolution under the SSP5-8.5 emissions scenario. The analysis will examine changes in precipitation patterns and temperature across two time periods: 2020-2040 (present/near-term) and 2040-2060 (mid-century). The project will culminate in a final report with climate analysis findings, maps, and policy recommendations for decision makers to integrate climate considerations into land use management plans, drawing from both their analysis and external research while aligning with national adaptation plans and NDCs.

Habitat suitability analysis for forest elephants under climate change - (video recording)

Melina Beckman from Sapienza University of Rome presented on the climate change impacts facing African forest elephants in the Congo Basin. The African forest elephant, recognized as a distinct species from savannah elephants only in 2021, serves as a critical keystone species in Congo Basin rainforests. Known as "forest gardeners", these elephants create forest corridors and clearings, influence biogeochemical cycling, facilitate seed dispersal for 335 plant species, and enhance carbon storage capacity. Despite their ecological importance and cultural significance to Indigenous communities, forest elephants have been classified as critically endangered since their recognition, with populations declining by over 60% between 2002 and 2011 due to illegal wildlife trade, habitat loss, and deforestation.

The study employed bioclimatic envelope modeling to assess how climate change will affect forest elephant habitat suitability by the end of the century. Using ensemble forecasting with multiple algorithms and both low and high greenhouse gas emission scenarios, researchers analyzed two contrasting datasets: actual but geographically biased presence records and a hypothetical distribution assuming elephant presence across their entire known range. The modeling approach aimed to address key questions about whether forest elephants will retain climatic suitability within their current range and whether protected areas will continue providing favorable habitats.

The results reveal concerning projections for forest elephant conservation, showing consistent signals of climatic suitability loss across all datasets and scenarios, particularly in the central Congo Basin under higher emission scenarios. Protected areas, which serve as critical refugia for remaining populations, are projected to experience close to 50% contraction in climatically suitable space by century's end.

Additionally, approximately 13% of areas expected to maintain favorable climatic conditions coincide with high deforestation risk zones.

The study emphasizes the urgent need to incorporate climate considerations into long-term conservation planning, including new protected area designations under frameworks like 30 by 30, while recognizing the species' keystone role in maintaining Congo Basin rainforest resilience under ongoing global changes.

CHECK-IN

The facilitation team opened the final day of the workshop by asking participants to choose a photo that represented their feelings about the experience so far. Participants formed a circle with their chosen photos and were invited to briefly share their impressions of the learning and exchange process. Maria Fernanda encouraged an open and reflective discussion on their journey throughout the workshop.



Photo 28. Participants during the check-in exercise

COMMUNICATION ON GEF 8 CONGO BASIN SUSTAINABLE LANDSCAPES INITIATIVE

Rebecca Weaver presented the Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative's communication and visibility strategy. She showed a developed unified visual identity to connect three major programs: the Congo Basin Impact Program (GEF 7), the Congo Basin Peatlands Project (IKI), and the Congo Forest Integrated Program (GEF 8). Through their website congolandscapes.org, social media channels, and community of practice platform, they're building a comprehensive knowledge-sharing ecosystem that bridges local and global perspectives.

The visual identity features symbolic elements representing forests (green), peatlands and earth (brown), water (blue), and hands symbolizing global alliance and community support, with lines representing the rivers and forest patterns across the Congo Basin.

The presentation outlined their progressive communication journey from establishing program



Photo 29. Rebecca Weaver presents C&V progress identity to demonstrating thought leadership and raising awareness.

Current products include knowledge briefs on wildlife trafficking and palm oil mapping, while upcoming initiatives feature story maps showcasing program impacts, particularly highlighting public-private partnerships in southern Cameroon.

The community of practice serves as a hub for stakeholders including development practitioners, academics, donor communities, civil society organizations, and women and youth groups to exchange lessons learned and best practices. Their media strategy starts locally with coverage from Kribi's Wave FM, Cameroon Tribune, and Canal 2 International, while expanding globally through platforms like Le Monde.

This multi-tiered approach ensures that complex conservation information reaches diverse audiences through accessible formats while facilitating collaboration across the Congo Basin landscape.

FUTURE PLAN FOR CONGO BASIN AND GUINEAN CRITICAL FOREST ECOSYSTEMS

The panel discussed around two main questions: Question 1: What is your vision for the Congo Basin and Guinean critical forest ecosystems over the next decade, particularly regarding strategic priorities, key challenges, and comprehensive approaches for their sustainable management?

Question 2: What role do you see innovative financing mechanisms playing in advancing the sustainable management and long-term conservation of these critical forest ecosystems?



Photo 30. Planning for the Future Panel

The panel on Planning for the Future of the Congo Basin and Guinean Critical Forest Ecosystems offered a rich and forward-looking discussion on how to safeguard two of Africa's most vital forest regions over the next decade. Guided by moderator Annie-Claude, the conversation brought together voices from across the conservation and development spectrum, including COMIFAC (Chouaibou Nchoutpouen), Nature Africa (Renaux Bailleux), UNEP (Fatou Ndoye), CAFI Partnership (Zhengzheng Qu), CBFM (Dany Pokem), REFADD (Monique Yigbedek), GEF Sec (Jean-Marc Sinnassamy), and CI (Charity Nalyanya and Amos Thiongo).

Each speaker shared perspectives on the vision, priorities, and pathways needed to reconcile conservation and development while keeping people and ecosystems at the center.

A common thread running through the dialogue was the urgency of fighting deforestation as the foundation for any long-term vision. Speakers stressed the importance of advocacy, honest dialogue, and multi-actor cooperation to chart a sustainable path forward. The creation of transboundary protected areas was presented not only as a way to preserve biodiversity but also as a tool for peacebuilding across borders. Participants also emphasized nature-based solutions, ecosystem service preservation, and multi-sectoral planning as cornerstones of integrated management, underpinned by a spirit of South-South cooperation that prioritizes practical, results-driven partnerships.

Equally strong was the call to place people at the heart of all strategies. Panelists highlighted that conservation cannot succeed without women, local communities, and Indigenous peoples meaningfully engaged and benefiting from solutions.

They noted the pressure posed by agribusiness expansion and infrastructure development, and the

need for intellectual honesty in acknowledging the scale of the challenge.

At the same time, speakers underscored the opportunity to learn from and scale up successful initiatives, ensure the right expertise is involved, and avoid investments that undermine progress. Community-owned ecological models and the potential of blue economies were presented as promising approaches to generate sustainable revenue and livelihoods.

On financing, the panel painted a sobering picture of the current gap: while US\$900 billion is needed annually, only US\$120 billion is reaching forests and climate-related initiatives. To address this, participants emphasized the role of innovative financing mechanisms, domestic resource mobilization, and investment approaches that are both sustainable and tailored to local realities. They called for projects that "make sense" for communities and ecosystems, while creating investable opportunities that attract and retain funding. The discussion closed with a shared understanding that the future of the Congo Basin and Guinean forests depends on integrated, people-centered approaches, supported by partnerships and financing models that can deliver impact at scale.

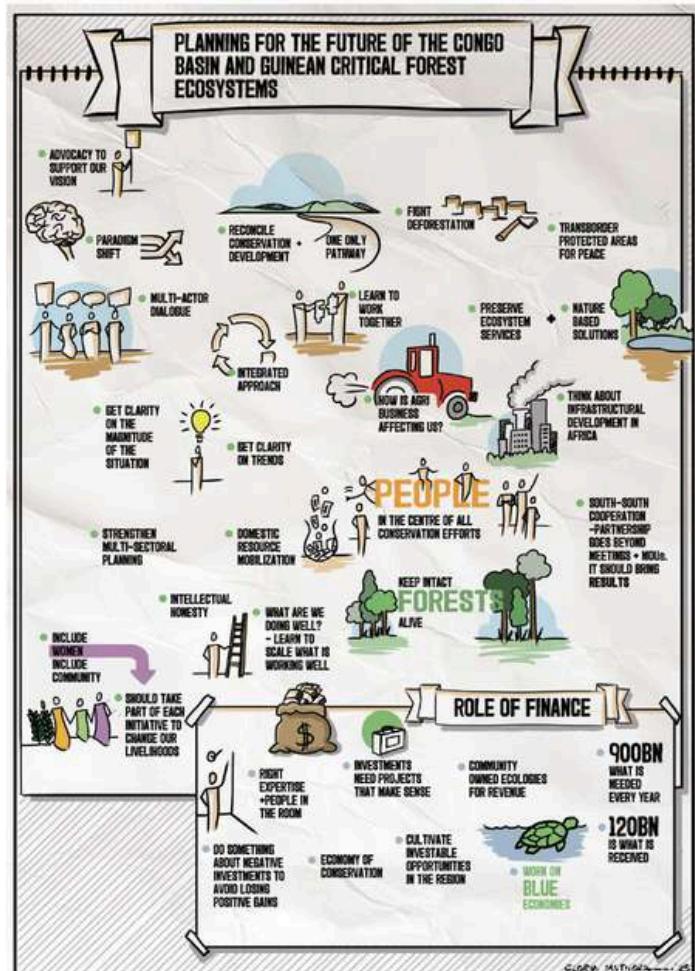


Figure 7: Visual Recording of Planning the Future panel

ADDRESSING CRIME, ILLEGAL TRAFFICKING AND KILLING OF WILDLIFE WITHIN THE CRITICAL FOREST LANDSCAPES

The session on Addressing Crime, Illegal Trafficking and Killing of Wildlife within the Critical Forest Landscapes highlighted the urgent need to strengthen strategies, solutions, and capacities to protect biodiversity.

Presentations and discussions emphasized the interconnectedness of wildlife protection, human health, and sustainable development, underlining that tackling wildlife crime goes beyond enforcement and must also address drivers such as land use, food systems, and governance gaps. By bringing together a wide range of perspectives, the panel created space to exchange experiences and innovative approaches that could be scaled up at both national and regional levels.



Photo 31. Exchange Panel on wildlife within the Critical Forest Landscapes

Challenges in Wildlife Conservation

The meeting addressed key challenges to wildlife conservation in Central Africa, including human-wildlife conflict, subsistence hunting, and zoonotic risks.

Morgane Cournarie (WCS in Congo) opened the panel by presenting the challenges to wildlife and the importance of generating and integrating zoonotic disease knowledge into landscape planning and management. She highlighted how improved understanding of the links between wildlife, ecosystems, and human health can not only enhance coexistence but also prevent future disease outbreaks.

The session then shifted to the role of building networks and capacities to combat wildlife crime, with Assane Drame (UNODC) and Constant Ndjassi (MIKE-CITES) sharing insights on efforts to strengthen enforcement, coordination, and monitoring across the Congo Basin. Complementing this, TRAFFIC presented its TWIX platform and ECOWAS collaboration, showcasing tools that improve information sharing and cross-border cooperation against illegal wildlife trade.

The academic contributions brought an additional dimension by linking conservation with land-use pressures. Researchers from Liverpool John Moore University presented online their work on apes and agriculture, exploring ways to align sustainable food systems with great ape conservation in the Congo Basin.

They also shared research on mapping oil palm plantations and their implications for forest loss and great ape habitats in Central Africa. These insights reinforced the idea that addressing wildlife crime requires not only stronger enforcement but also integrated approaches to agriculture, land planning, and livelihoods. The session concluded with a lively exchange of questions and comments, reflecting the participants' shared commitment to tackling the drivers of wildlife crime and advancing solutions that secure both biodiversity and human well-being.

ENGAGE COMMUNITIES AND THE PRIVATE SECTOR FOR EFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE OF CRITICAL FORESTS THROUGH INCOME GENERATING ACTIVITIES AND PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS

Panel

Papiny Brice Kuefouet Tsafack, REJEFAC
Morgane Cournarie, WCS in Congo – Community development through Cocoa Value Chain
William Maia, Rainforest Alliance
Nadege Nzoyem, Rainforest Alliance
The ARRC (Avoid, Reduce, Restore and Conserve) Task Force (video recording).

The session highlighted the central role of agriculture as one of the main drivers of deforestation in Central Africa, stressing the urgency of integrating this sector into forest conservation and sustainable management strategies. Speakers emphasized that any approach to forest protection that ignores agriculture would be incomplete and ineffective. In this context, WCS and Rainforest Alliance presented their commitment to improving agricultural production systems, particularly involving local communities.

The discussion covered experiences with the cocoa value chain. Cocoa remains the dominant cash crop in the Congo Basin, but most plantations are old – often 50 to 60 years – and productivity is steadily declining. Faced with falling yields, younger generations inheriting these plantations often prefer to clear nearby forests, which are more fertile, rather than rehabilitate aging plots. Panelists stressed that demonstrating the potential to rejuvenate old plantations through better agricultural practices is essential to breaking this cycle.



Photo 32. Exchange Panel on income generating activities

By doubling or tripling yields within existing plots, producers can improve incomes without expanding cultivation into forests. This creates an entry point for private sector engagement, as companies are assured of both quality and volume.

The second entry point into the cocoa value chain is through direct engagement with global buyers, particularly large chocolate manufacturers and international traders. Increasingly, these companies face consumer and regulatory pressure, including European Union requirements for deforestation-free and fully traceable supply chains. They are therefore motivated to support more sustainable production systems in Central Africa. By aligning producer-level improvements with buyer-level commitments, organizations facilitate systemic change that links farm-level practices to international market demands. In this way, the cocoa value chain becomes a strategic lever for combining agricultural productivity with forest protection.

At the same time, participants emphasized that conservation strategies cannot rely exclusively on cocoa. Diversification of income streams is equally important for resilience and sustainability. Promising alternatives include cassava processing into flour, tapioca, or chips, which has proven particularly transformative for women's cooperatives in areas such as Minton, Cameroon. Honey from Congo Basin forests, moabi oil with high cosmetic value, and edible caterpillars as a protein source were also cited as viable value chains that combine cultural relevance with market potential. In some cases, women-led cooperatives engaged in cassava transformation have already received regional recognition and awards, showing how small-scale initiatives can scale up into stronger community enterprises.

Debates were rich and interactive. Several participants questioned the reliance on cocoa, pointing out its vulnerability to price volatility and its historical links to deforestation. Some suggested

exploring savanna areas or underutilized lands as potential sites for cocoa expansion instead of focusing solely on forest areas. Others stressed the need for stronger investment in non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and alternative crops that can provide more stable, localized sources of income for communities. Participants also underlined the importance of building equitable partnerships between producers and buyers, and of recognizing Indigenous communities' rights and capacities.

Beyond production, the session also pointed to structural challenges in the value chains, including dependence on intermediaries that capture much of the profit margin, limited access to credit for smallholders, and the lack of infrastructure for storage and transport.

Addressing these bottlenecks was seen as essential to ensuring that producers truly benefit from sustainable practices. Incentives such as quality premiums for higher-grade cocoa and certification bonuses were noted as first steps, but participants stressed the need for more direct and equitable financing mechanisms for producers, especially Indigenous and local communities.

Successful experiences were shared, such as the inclusive conservation initiative in the DRC that directly provided USD10,000 grants to Indigenous women's committees, generating concrete and immediate results. Civil society representatives also underlined the importance of deconstructing traditional conservation approaches often perceived as disconnected from local realities, in favor of simpler, more inclusive solutions centered on community needs. This included proposals to streamline financing mechanisms for women and youth groups, recognizing their key role in local conservation and development.

The session also touched on new initiatives. A cocoa farming project in the Lake Télé Community Reserve in Congo was presented, designed to provide alternative income for local communities during the high-water season, when fishing becomes difficult. In parallel, the role of youth was highlighted through the activities of a regional youth network active in 11 Central African countries. This network works on advocacy, concrete solutions, and communication, and participants recognized the need to strengthen exchanges between the Congo Basin and the Guinean Forest regions to share lessons learned.

In conclusion, the session reaffirmed that forest conservation in the Congo Basin cannot be dissociated from agricultural issues, particularly the cocoa value chain.

Improving productivity, structuring sustainable value chains, engaging the private sector, and diversifying community economies were identified as essential conditions for reducing pressure on forests. Discussions also highlighted the importance of accessible financial mechanisms, clear incentives, and stronger support for women and youth. Together, these elements form the basis of an integrated and inclusive approach to sustainable landscape management in Central Africa and Guinean Forest.

CLOSING REMARKS OF THE 2025 ANNUAL CRITICAL FORESTS CONFERENCE

To conclude the 2025 Annual Critical Forests Conference, a distinguished panel of experts and leaders shared their final reflections during the Panel Closing Remarks, moderated by George Akwah.

This session brought together key voices from global, regional, and national institutions, including Mohamed Bakarr from the GEF Secretariat, Charity Nalyanya of Conservation International, and Johan Robinson, head of the Biodiversity and Land Branch at UNEP. Also joining were Chouaibou Nchoutpouen of COMIFAC, Honoré Tabuna, Commissioner at ECCAS, and Mr. Adama, representing Cameroon's Ministry of Environment. Together, they synthesized insights from the conference, reflected on progress and persistent challenges, and outlined priorities for action in advancing forest conservation and sustainable land use across critical regions.

The final session of the 2025 Annual Critical Forests Conference brought together high-level representatives from international, regional, and national institutions to reflect on the outcomes of the week-long event and provide guidance for future actions.

Panelists emphasized the value of integration and collaboration observed throughout the conference. Participants noted with appreciation the visible engagement of COMIFAC and highlighted it as a strong example of regional cooperation in action.

The presence of COMIFAC was described as inspiring, demonstrating practical steps being taken in forest governance.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of assigning economic value to nature and advancing a transition toward a conservation economy, with an announcement that preparations are underway for a high-level technical meeting on the future of sustainable forest development in the Congo Basin, in collaboration with the Republic of Cameroon and ECCAS.

There was consensus on the importance of thematic learning exchanges as ongoing mechanisms to share experiences, build capacity, and reinforce coordinated efforts in forest and land use management.

The role of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) was acknowledged with gratitude, particularly for its continued support in convening platforms that bring together a diversity of stakeholders.

One of the central takeaways from the session was the need to move from planning to implementation. While the conference showcased strong alignment and momentum among actors, panelists stressed that operationalizing existing strategies must now be prioritized. In this regard, participants were encouraged to reflect on their individual and institutional responsibilities.

Panelists also underlined the importance of sharing feedback from the conference and communicating its outcomes to a broader audience. This knowledge sharing is seen as a key part of ensuring that insights gained are translated into tangible action across countries and organizations. Looking ahead, upcoming conferences and thematic exchanges were identified as important milestones to sustain engagement and deepen the impact of the dialogues initiated at this event. The session concluded with a shared commitment to maintaining the momentum, enhancing regional collaboration, and ensuring that the work initiated during the conference continues with purpose and direction.



Photo 33. Representatives sharing the closing remarks

Moderator:George Akwah | Panel:
 ·Mohamed Bakarr, GEF Secretariat
 ·Charity Nalyanya, Conservation International
 ·Johan Robinson, head of Biodiversity and Land Branch, Ecosystems Division, UNEP
 ·Chouaibou Nchoutpouen, COMIFAC
 ·Honoré Tabuna, commissioner for the Environment, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Rural Development, ECCAS
 ·Mr. Adama, representant of Minister of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development, Cameroon.

GALLERY WALK – REVIEW OF THE WORKSHOP VISUAL NOTES

Regional Collaboration for Conservation

The conference, which brought together participants from the Congo Basin and the Guinean Forest, highlighted the importance of regional collaboration in forest conservation. George Akwah and Charity Nalyanya emphasized the progress made in the Congo Basin, especially through the role of COMIFAC, and expressed a desire to strengthen exchanges between the two regions.

The organizers thanked all leadership and teams involved in making the event a success. And made a special mention to Michael Wasile, Nadege Chiragarula, and Laureen Cheruiyot for their coordination work, as well as to the facilitation team- Maria Fernanda Arraes, Augusto Cuginotti and Gloria Muthoka.



Photo 34. Event leadership and Team

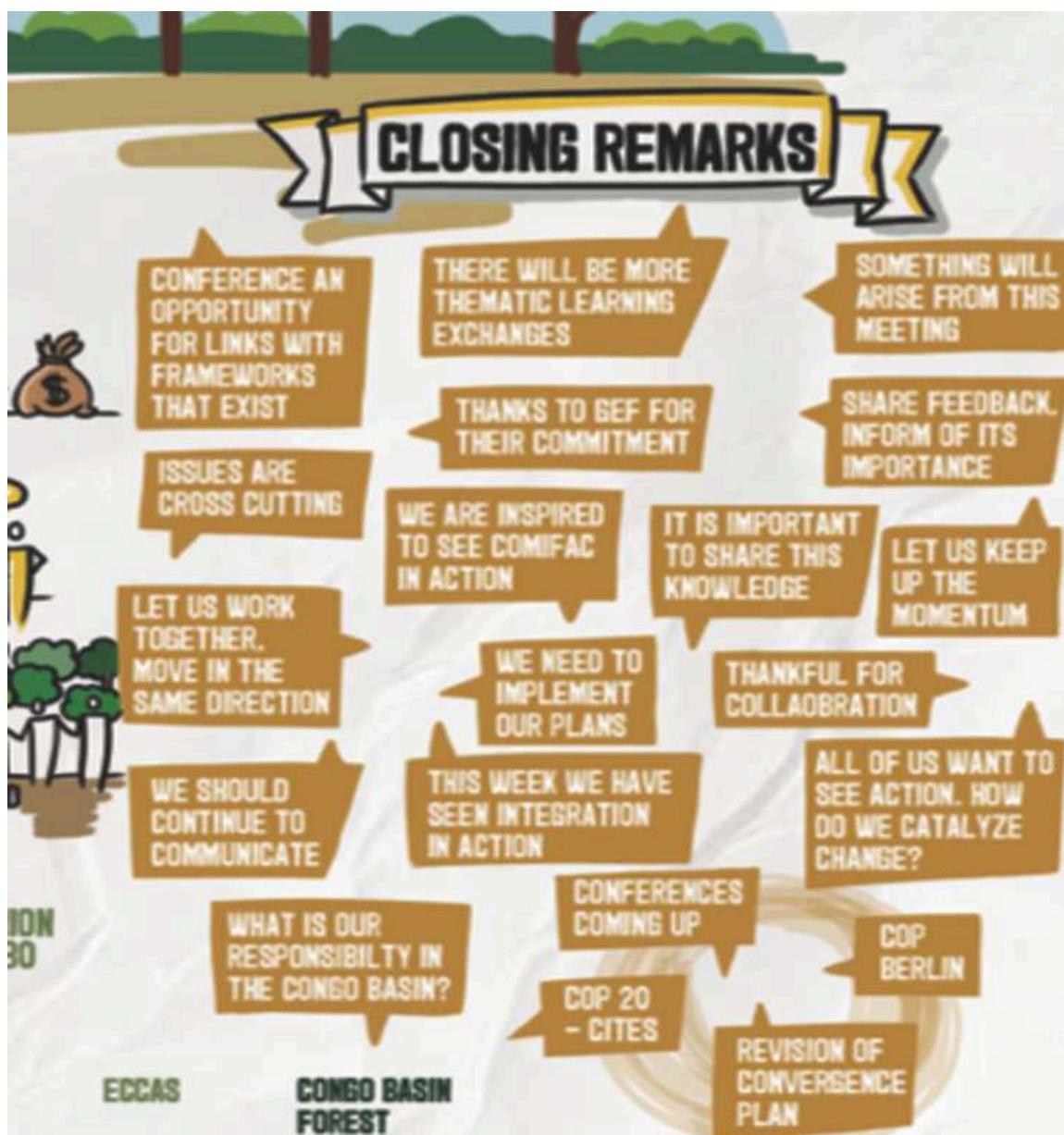


Figure 8. Closing remarks

WORKSHOP EVALUATION

As part of the workshop evaluation process, a visual feedback session was conducted using visual templates to capture participants' impressions, takeaways, and suggestions.

Attendees were invited to respond to prompts through visual tools such as sticky notes and labels, representing levels of satisfaction. This approach encouraged informal and open reflection, allowing everyone to feel comfortable with less formal evaluations. The visual feedback revealed high engagement with the workshop content, appreciation for the interactive formats, and enthusiasm for cross-border collaboration, especially in the context of shared forest governance.

Participants highlighted several positive aspects of the workshop, including the diversity of voices, richness of thematic sessions, and the opportunity for regional networking. Feedbacks also indicated areas for improvement, such as the need for more practical case studies, follow-up mechanisms to continue the conversation, and more time for the deep discussions.

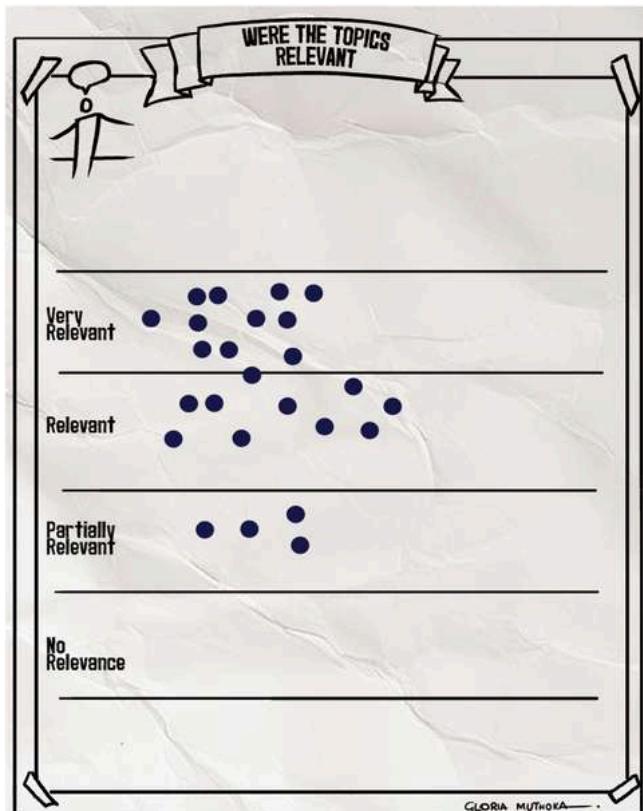


Figure 9a : Evaluation of the annual conference

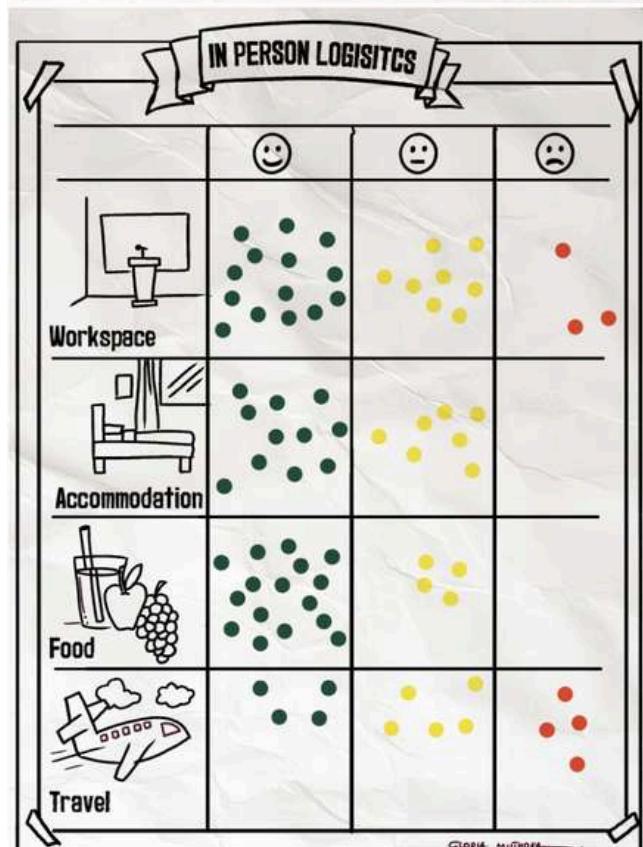
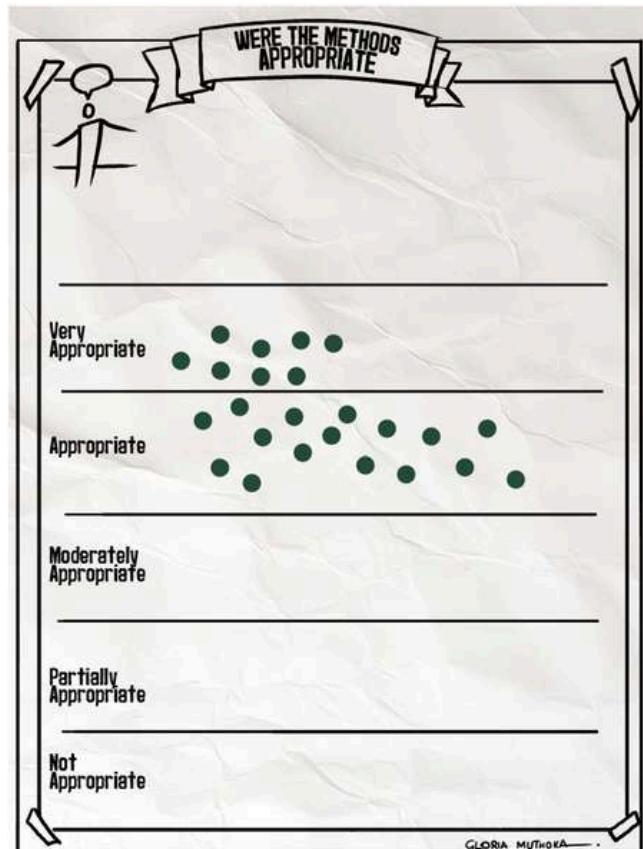


Figure 9 b: Evaluation of the annual conference

ANNEX

LINKS TO PRESENTATIONS AND PHOTOS

- [Presentations](#)
- [Photos](#)

PRESS RELEASES

- [Opening press release](#)
- [closing press release](#)

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- [Presentations](#)
- [Photos](#)

PRESS RELEASES

- [Opening press release](#)
- [closing press release](#)

AGENDA

Saturday 14th June	
Time	Activity
10.00 -14.00	Regional Technical Committee meeting of the GEF Congo Basin IP
Sunday 15th June	
16.00 -17.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcome and registration• Guiding session on the field trip of Monday 16 June
Monday 16th June	
10.00-14.00	Field Visit
Tuesday 17th June	
08.00-08.30	Registration
08.30-09.00	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcome Remarks + Overview of the Annual Conference objectives + agenda - UNEP – George Akwah• Participant's introduction - Maria Fernanda Arraes/ Augusto Cuginotti (facilitation team)
09.00-10.00	<p>Opening remarks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mohamed Bakarr, GEF Secretariat• Jimmiel Mandima, Senior Vice President and Chief Field Officer, Africa, Conservation International• Johan Robinson, Head of Biodiversity and Land Branch, Ecosystems Division, UNEP• Ambassador Simeon M-B. Moribah, Secretary General, MRU• Hervé Maidou, COMIFAC• Mahmoud Elimane Ndiaye Kane, ECOWAS• Honoré Tabuna, Commissioner for the Environment, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Rural Development, ECCAS• H.E Pierre Hele, Minister of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development, Cameroon

10.30-13.30	<p>High level session Catalysing Change: Coherent Policies, Inclusive Engagement, and Innovative Solutions Moderator Juan Carlos Vasquez</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • H.E Pierre Hele, Minister of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development, Cameroon • Honoré Tabuna, Commissioner for the Environment, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Rural Development, ECCAS (Economic Community of Central Africa States) • Chouaibou Nchoutpuen, COMIFAC (Central Africa Forest Commission) • Mohamed Bakarr, Manager, Integration and Knowledge Management Division, GEF Secretariat • Johan Robinson, Head of Biodiversity and Land Branch, Ecosystems Division, UNEP • Jimmiel Mandima, Senior Vice President and Chief Field Officer, Africa, Conservation International • Mahmoud Elimane Ndiaye KANE, Coordinator of the Regional Integrated Program for the Fouta Djallon Highlands, ECOWAS • Aurélie Flore Koumba Pambo, Co-Facilitator of the Congo Basin Forest Partnership, Republic of Gabon
13.30-14.30	Lunch
14.30-17.00	<p>South-south cooperation Share and reflect on experiences and perspectives for building fostering knowledge exchange, collaboration and coordination within and across Critical Forests Integrated Programmes. Overview of the Integrated Programmes – Pascal Martinez, GEF Secretariat Panel: Experiences, reflections and perspectives from Regional IPs – Amazon, Congo Basin, Guinean Forests in relation to the following aspects: Governance and Policy, Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues, Leveraging Financing and Innovation and Knowledge Sharing and Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pascal Martinez (GEF) • Charity Nalyanya (CI- Guinean Forest) • George Akwah (UNEP – Congo Basin) • Jean- Marc Sinnassamy (GEF) • Sandra Berman (World Bank. Amazon Basin) <p>Group work- How can countries and partners operationalize this South-South cooperation to support the transformational change aimed by integrated forest programmes?</p>
17	End of the first day

Wednesday 18th June	
08.30-09.00	Check in - Facilitation Team
09.00-09.45	Demo: Energy generation from plants - Vital Nzaka + Question & Comments
09.45-11.10	<p>Overview Congo Forest Integrated Programme and partnerships (GEF-7 & GEF-8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome & Framing Remarks • Overview of the GEF-7 Congo Basin IP • Country Spotlights: National Progress & Transformation [MFAT1] • Question & Comments
11.10-11.40	Coffee Break
11.40-14.00	<p>Overview Guinean Forests Integrated Programme and Partnerships (GEF 8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • About the Guinean Forests Integrated Programme and its Country Level Projects[MFAT2]
14.00-15.30	Lunch
15.30-16.45	<p>Overview Guinean Forests Integrated Programme and Partnerships (GEF 8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How the Guinean Forests Integrated Programme will contribute to the delivery of the ECOWAS West Africa Forest Convergence Plan • Demonstration of partnership for sustainable Impact: Guinean Forests Program and its country-level projects interwoven with EU-NaturAfrica Program[MFAT3]
16.45-17.30	<p><i>Group Work</i> <i>Based on your experience, what practices have proven most effective in _____ that could inspire other colleagues? and what conditions made them successful?</i></p> <p><i>Aspects covered: Governance and Policy, Multi-Stakeholder Dialogues, Leveraging Financing and Innovation and Knowledge Sharing and Learning</i></p>
17.30	End of the day
Thursday 19th June	
08.30-09.00	Check in - Facilitation Team
09.30-11.00	<p>Integrated Land Use Management Planning (ILUMP) Successes, Challenges, and Future Transformative Pathways for Integrated Forest Management in critical forest landscapes +</p> <p>Integrating natural capital and climate change considerations to enhance Integrated Land Use Management Planning</p> <p>Panel 1 – Central Africa</p> <p>COMIFAC – Valerie Tchuante</p> <p>REPALEAC – Joseph Itongwa</p> <p>UNEP/WCMC – Raquel Agra</p> <p>Questions & Comments</p>

11.00-11.30	Coffee Break
11.30-13.00	<p>Panel 2 – West Africa</p> <p>MRU – Representatives from Liberia, Guinee, Sierra leone – Watershed management with groups at different levels – community/ national/ regional</p> <p>Questions & Comments</p> <p>Group Work - From your country or organization's experience, what are the good practices that allowed to reach good results and what key lessons could you share with others?</p>
13.00-14.30	Lunch
14.30-15.00	Map of Actors
15.00-17.00	<p>Knowledge Management - Platforms to advance science and knowledge in the Congo Basin and Guinea Forest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Knowledge management framework – Maria Fernanda Arraes · Knowledge gaps – Andre Toham (UNEP) <p>Panel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Central Africa Forest Observatory and its platforms - Valerie Tchuante · The Science Panel for the Congo Basin · Congo Basin Science Initiative[MFAT4] · Congo Basin Sustainable Landscapes Knowledge Platform, Community of Practice and Public Facing web page – Pierre Lacorix GRID Geneva
17.00- 17.20	<p>Example of knowledge produced in the Congo Basin GEF 8 programme</p> <p>Climate Modelling to enhance the protection of the Congo Basin wildlife by Woodwell Climate Research Center (video recording)</p>
17.30	End of the day
Friday, 20th June	
08.30-09.00	Check in - Facilitation Team
09.00-09.30	Communication & Visibility on GEF 8 Congo Basin Sustainable Landscapes Initiative - branding, website, social media
09.30-09.45	<p>Example of knowledge produced in the Congo Basin GEF 8 programme</p> <p>Habitat suitability analysis for forest elephants under climate change – (video recording)</p>
09.45- 11.15	<p>Panel - Planning for the future of Congo Basin and Guinean critical forest ecosystems</p> <p>Question 1: What is your vision for the Congo Basin and Guinean critical forest ecosystems over the next decade, particularly regarding strategic priorities, key challenges, and comprehensive approaches for their sustainable management?</p> <p>Question 2: What role do you envision innovative financing mechanisms playing in advancing the sustainable management and long-term conservation of these critical forest ecosystems?</p> <p>Moderator: Annie- Claude</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · COMIFAC, Chouaibou Nchoutpouen · Nature Africa, Renaux Bailleux · UNEP, Fatou Ndoye · CAFI partnership, Zhengzheng Qu

09.45- 11.15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CBFP, Dany Pokem • REFADD, Monique Yigbedek • GEF Sec, Jean-Marc Sinnassamy • CI, Charity Nalyanya • CI, Amos Thiongo
11.15-11.45	Coffee break
11.45-13.00	<p>Addressing crime, illegal trafficking and killing of wildlife within the Critical Forest Landscapes</p> <p>Strategies, solutions and capacities to address crime, illegal trafficking and killing of wildlife in the critical Forest Biomes</p> <p>Panel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morgane Cournarie, WCS in Congo - Generating and integrating zoonotic diseases knowledge in integrated landscape planning and management to enhance human-wildlife co-habitation and prevent disease outbreak in the Congo Basin • Building networks and capacities to address wildlife crime and illegal killing trafficking of wildlife in the Congo Basin, by Assene Drame (UNODC) and Constant Ndjassi / MIKE CITES • TRAFFIC TWIX and ECOWAS • Apes and Agriculture: Aligning Sustainable Food Systems with Great Ape Conservation in the Congo Basin, by the Liverpool John Moore's University (online) • Mapping oil palm plantations and their implications on forest and great ape habitat loss in Central Africa, by the Liverpool John Moore's University (online) • Questions & Comments
13.30-14.30	Lunch
14.30-15.30	<p>Engage Communities and the Private Sector for Effective Governance of Critical Forests through income generating activities and Public-Private Partnerships</p> <p>Panel</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Papiny Brice Kuefouet Tsafack, REJEFAC • Morgane Cournarie, WCS in Congo – Community development through Cocoa Value Chain • William Maia, Rainforest Alliance • Nadege Nzoyem, Rainforest Alliance • The ARRC (Avoid, Reduce, Restore and Conserve) Task Force (video recording) <p>Questions & Comments</p>
15.30-16.30	Gallery Walk – review of the workshop visual notes and event evaluation
16.00-17.00	<p>Closing Remarks of the 2025 Annual Critical Forests Conference</p> <p>Panel</p> <p>Moderator: George Akwah</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mohamed Bakarr, GEF Secretariat • Charity Nalyanya, Conservation International • Johan Robinson, Head of Biodiversity and Land Branch, Ecosystems Division, UNEP • Chouaibou Nchoutpouen, COMIFAC • Honoré Tabuna, Commissioner for the Environment, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Rural Development, ECCAS • Mr. Adama, Representant of Minister of Environment, Protection of Nature and Sustainable Development, Cameroon
17.00	End of the day/ End of the 2025 Annual Conference



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