

Congo Forest Integrated Programme

MAY 2025

The Congo Basin: A Global Biodiversity Hub and Climate Regulator

The Congo Basin harbours the world's second-largest tropical rainforest after the Amazon, representing 70% of Africa's forest cover. With approximately 200 million hectares of evergreen and semi-deciduous forests, including 184.7 million hectares of undisturbed forest as of January 2020, it stands as one of our planet's most vital ecological treasures.



A Critical Carbon Sink

The Congo Basin is currently considered the largest potential carbon sink worldwide. The Cuvette Centrale region alone, an area of 3.4 million square kilometres spanning the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Republic of the Congo contains the world's largest tropical peatland complex. This peatland complex, measured at some 167,600 km², stores an estimated 30 gigatons of carbon, equivalent to three years of global fossil fuel emissions. Unlike the Amazon and Southeast Asia's forests, the Congo Basin still has relatively intact forest landscapes that function as a strong net carbon sink.

Rich Biodiversity

With more than 10,000 species of plants, over 400 mammal species and 1,000 bird species, the region is distinguished by its outstanding biodiversity, exceptional natural heritage, and high level of endemism. It provides habitat for iconic species including forest elephants, western lowland gorillas, and giant pangolins, many of which are endangered and emblematic worldwide.

Supporting Communities

An estimated 65-80 million people depend directly on these forests for survival. Indigenous peoples, women, and local communities have traditionally relied on forest resources for food, shelter, and healthcare. These forests also play a vital role in national and local economies, enabling job creation and supporting livelihoods throughout various value chains including timber and non timber forest products, agriculture and fisheries.

The Challenge

Despite its importance, the Congo Basin faces significant threats. Annual disturbance rates in Central Africa's tropical moist forests have increased considerably, reaching 1.79 million hectares per year during 2015-2020, compared to 1.36 million hectares per year during the previous decade.

Nearly 9% of Central Africa's tropical moist forest area (18 million hectares) has disappeared since 2000. Without intervention, the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone could lose 22% of its moist forests by 2050 and 33% of its undisturbed moist forests in the same timeframe.



The Congo Forest Integrated Programme

Executed by UNEP and funded by The GEF through the GEF 7 Congo Basin Impact Programme and the GEF 8 Congo Critical Forest Biome Integrated Programme

The Congo Forest Integrated Programme (IP) is a collaborative initiative designed to address the complex challenges facing the Congo Basin through coordinated action across multiple countries. Funded through GEF 7 and GEF 8, the programme includes national level projects in six countries in Central Africa and a Regional Coordination Project (RCP) that ensures coherence and maximizes impact.

The GEF8 Regional project serves as the unifying platform for both generations of projects—bringing together not only the seven GEF8 Congo Forest IP projects but also integrating the six GEF7 Congo Basin IP country projects until their completion in 2028.

The Congo Forest IP addresses seven fundamental barriers to achieving environmental benefits in the Congo Basin:

- Inadequate policies with weak cross-sector collaboration;
- Insufficient ecosystem protection with protected areas below recommended levels and many underfunded “paper parks”;
- Ineffective governance characterized by overlapping mandates and poor community engagement;
- Technological limitations including restricted access to conservation technologies and poor infrastructure;
- Market failure that undervalues standing forests;
- Insufficient capacity among local stakeholders who lack control over land-use decisions; and
- Financial barriers including limited conservation funding and minimal private sector engagement.



Tackling these challenges through four transformation levers

The Congo Forest IP uses four strategic levers to create systemic change and achieve the desired transformation in the Congo Basin. These interconnected approaches work together to address key barriers while leveraging existing opportunities for conservation and sustainable development.



Governance and Policies: Improving inter-sectoral coordination and policy coherence for primary forest conservation



Multi-stakeholder Dialogues: Building constructive dialogue by strengthening pertinent multi-sectoral platforms at local, national, and regional levels



Innovation and Learning: Advancing protected area management, community-based forest restoration, innovative financing models, and new coalitions for change



Financial Leverage: Mobilizing domestic and international resources to channel long-term funding for conservation, restoration, and forest-friendly endeavors



Tackling these challenges through five key focus areas



01 Strengthening Congo Basin forest governance: Strengthen governance through supporting an enabling policy and regulatory framework at national and regional levels for Congo Basin forest conservation to protect biodiversity, enhance carbon sequestration capacity, and ensure ecosystem resilience;



02 Sustainable forest management: Reducing deforestation and forest degradation while restoring ecosystem services by scaling up conservation and forest carbon initiatives through integrated landscape management;



03 Community livelihoods: Empower indigenous peoples, women and local communities in the Congo Basin through green enterprises that enhance livelihoods for forest-dependent populations while fostering sustainable private sector partnerships;



04 Innovative financing mechanisms: Mobilization and effective channelling of finance, piloting novel approaches such as natural capital accounting to strengthen biodiversity conservation in the Congo Basin landscape;



05 Regional Cooperation through knowledge exchange: Facilitate national and regional inter-institutional coordination of efforts to preserve forest resources, protect biodiversity and improve forest and water management through knowledge building, technology exchange and resource mobilization.

Where we are working

The project focuses on critical areas including:

- Atlantic Coastal Forest Ecosystems (Equatorial Guinea and Sao Tome and Principe)
- Oubangui transboundary landscape (DRC and CAR)
- Mayombe landscape (Gabon, Republic of Congo, DRC, and Angola)
- Support for other priority landscapes including TRIDOM and Tri-national de la Sangha (TNS)



How we measure success

The success of the Congo Basin Forest IP will be measured through tangible improvements in both environmental conservation and community well-being. By focusing on these interconnected outcomes, the programme aims to create lasting, sustainable change that balances ecological protection with human development needs. These measures of success include:

- Policies and regulatory frameworks that enhance conservation, forest carbon sequestration and effective forest governance in critical landscapes
- Strategic actions implemented for reducing deforestation / forest degradation and restoring ecosystem services scaled up in multiple landscapes across participating countries
- Sustainable forest-related value chains promoted by empowering local communities, forest dependent people, and partnering with the private sector
- Resources mobilized to sustain conservation efforts in the Congo Basin and invested, including through partnerships with the private sector
- Improved national and regional inter-agency coordination on efforts to maintain forest resources, protect biodiversity, enhance forest and water management, and restore forest ecosystems through enhanced knowledge, technology exchange and financing

Our Partners

The Congo Basin Forest IP recognizes that conservation at this scale requires collaboration across sectors, borders, and stakeholder groups. Strategic partnerships multiply the programme's impact by leveraging complementary expertise, resources, and networks while ensuring local ownership and regional alignment.

The Programme involved GEF Implementing Agencies and is backed by national governments and major regional partners including, among many others:

- Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC)
- Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)
- Congo Basin Forest Partnership (CBFP)
- Zoological Society of London
- International conservation and development organizations

Our national partners under GEF 7	Our national partners under GEF 8
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regional coordination project: UNEP• Cameroon national project: WWF-US• Central African Republic national project: World Bank• Democratic Republic of Congo national project: UNEP• Equatorial Guinea national project: IUCN• Gabon national project: UNDP• Republic of Congo national project: UNEP	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Regional coordination project: UNEP• Cameroon national project: UNEP• Central African Republic national project: UNEP• Democratic Republic of Congo national project: IUCN and IFAD• Equatorial Guinea national project: UNEP• Sao Tomè and Principe national project: IUCN• Angola national project: Conservation International

About the Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative

The Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative is working with governments and partners to preserve the Congo Basin rainforest and peatlands through transformational landscape approaches created together with local communities, forest-dependent people, and the private sector, ensuring meaningful benefits for all involved.

The UNEP-led multi-partner and multi-country Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative includes the GEF-funded Congo Forest Integrated Programme and the IKI-Funded Congo Basin Peatlands Project.

The GEF-funded Congo Forest Integrated Programme, being delivered under the UNEP-led multi-country and multi-partner Congo Basin Landscapes Initiative, comprises two flagship initiatives, including the GEF-7 Congo Basin Impact Programme (2021-2026), and the GEF-8 Congo Critical Forest Biome Integrated Programme (2025-2032).

The main aim of these two GEF-funded programmes is to catalyse transformational change in the conservation and sustainable management of critical forests in transboundary and national landscapes of the Congo Basin.

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