



TRENDS  
FORESTRY

# Community Forestry in Central Africa: Still a Fragile Sustainable Forest Management Model

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With proven benefits in terms of conservation, development and the mitigation of climate change, the link between community forestry and international commitments on climate and the fight against deforestation is attracting growing support from NGOs and international organisations. While the global area of forest managed by indigenous peoples and local communities has increased over the past two decades, the record of community forestry in Central Africa remains mixed. The reasons behind it: significant legal constraints, land grabbing and revenue capture by certain elites, but also unequal political support, all of which are undermining this sustainable management model.



DATA OVERVIEW

## Community forestry, still a marginal model in an Africa plagued by deforestation

With a net loss of forest area of 3.94 Mha/year between 2010-2020, deforestation in Africa now exceeds that in South America (2.60 Mha/year).<sup>1</sup> Central Africa, in particular, is home to the Congo Basin forest, the second largest rainforest in the world after the Amazon, a huge carbon sink with an annual absorption potential of 1.5 billion tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e.<sup>2</sup> However, a large part of this forest is in the grip of deforestation,<sup>3</sup> bringing in its wake the release of the carbon stored into the atmosphere: in Gabon, logging and deforestation was still responsible for the release of more of 25 MtCO<sub>2</sub>e in 2017.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) accounted for the largest share of deforestation, with a loss of forest cover estimated at over 490,000 hectares, adding up to a loss of 5.3 million hectares of forest since 2002. In total, the primary forest of the Congo Basin lost 600,000 ha in 2020, 9% more than in 2019 (**fig. 1**).<sup>5</sup> After 2016, 2020 has proved to be the second worst year for the region since 2002.

The imperatives of development and economic diversification identified by the riparian states of the Congo Basin,<sup>a</sup> such as investments in infrastructure, large-scale agriculture and industrial logging, are threatening these forest areas.<sup>6</sup> The

forestry sector represents the largest land-use in Central Africa with approximately 600,000 km<sup>2</sup> of forests under concession, i.e., approximately 15% of the total land area under concession (**fig. 2**). The LULUCF sector accounts for a significant share of the GDP in most of the Congo Basin countries (between 2 and 5% in Cameroon, the Central African Republic and the Republic of Congo).<sup>7</sup> About 100 million people inhabit the Central African region, over 60% of whom live in rural areas in or around the forests on which their livelihoods heavily depend.<sup>8</sup>

However, only a minor part of the total area of national forests is managed by local communities: in Gabon,<sup>9</sup> Cameroon<sup>10</sup> and the DRC,<sup>11</sup> active community forests account for only 236,000 ha of tree cover, i.e., about 1% of the countries' forested areas.

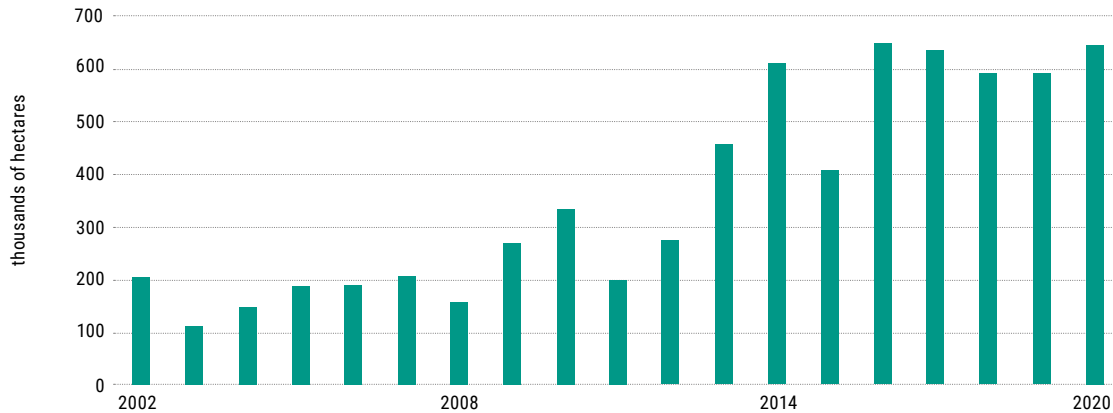
Yet, research<sup>12</sup> tends to demonstrate that community-based forest management can help combat deforestation and illegal logging,<sup>13</sup> while generating substantial socio-economic benefits through a more equitable sharing of income from logging.<sup>14</sup> It is now recognised that local communities and indigenous peoples (LCIP) have carried out sustainable management of forest resources for centuries through various forms of community management.<sup>15</sup> In Brazil, the deforestation of indigenous community forests would have been 22 times greater if these communities had not been legally recognised. In the Yucatan in Mexico, the results are even more striking: the rate of deforestation within community forests was 350 times lower than in other areas.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in Mexico, a highly decentralised country, 80% of forest areas are under community management.<sup>17</sup> In the Asia-Pacific region, 15 million

<sup>a</sup> The Congo Basin includes Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea and Gabon. It covers almost 70% of Africa's forest land. Of the 530 million hectares in the Congo Basin, 300 million are forested: 99% of them are primary or naturally regenerated forests, as opposed to plantations (Megevand et al.).

**FIGURE 1**

**TREE LOSS COVER IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE CONGO BASIN, 2002-2020**

Source: [Global Forest Watch, 2021](#)



hectares (Mha) are managed on a community basis, an area equivalent to the size of Cambodia.<sup>18</sup>

LCIP are particularly dependent on forest resources: custodians of 80% of the world's biodiversity, they manage around 24% of the total carbon stored on the surface in the tropical forests of the world<sup>19</sup> and around 28% of the world's land surface, including the most ecologically preserved forest areas.<sup>20</sup> In 2015, indigenous peoples, peoples of African descent and local communities legally owned 10% of the land in the world, a paltry share if we consider that these peoples, as natives, hold and use more than half of the land in the world.<sup>19</sup>

Thus, community-based forest management<sup>b</sup> is recognised as a response strategy to international climate issues and to the needs of populations living in and around forests.<sup>21</sup> It aims to ensure that rural populations, caught between a forest sector long monopolised by private companies and the extension of protected areas within the framework of environmental and nature conservation policies, can strengthen their land rights and their access to forest resources.<sup>22</sup>

As COP26 (November 2021) was approaching, the interest in nature-based solutions (NBS) was growing. The UK Presidency of COP26, in this regard, has identified the protection of communities and natural habitats through the "protection and restoration of ecosystems" among the conference's main objectives.<sup>23</sup> Article 5 of the Paris agreement stresses the Parties' duty to sustainably manage forests and fight against deforestation in order to "conserve and, where appropriate,

expand greenhouse gas sinks". Community forestry has gradually emerged as a model of sustainable and inclusive development, but its implementation is being hampered by issues that are rife in the region.



THE OBSERVATORY'S LENS

**Community forestry in Central Africa:**

The advent of community forestry in the 1990s was part of the decentralisation dynamic, triggered by the democratisation processes encouraged by financial backers (including the World Bank and the IMF). The latter stressed the need for decentralised management of the resources of Sub-Saharan African countries in order to promote rapid social and economic development.<sup>24</sup> This decentralisation was extended to environmental policies by including the LCIP: with regard to forests, the concept of local communities thus became integral to forest management (**see Keys to Understanding**).<sup>25</sup>

Community forestry was first introduced in Cameroon in 1997: village associations were able to legalise the exploitation, processing and trade of forest resources in areas of up to 5,000 hectares.<sup>26</sup> Community forestry was then taken up in Gabon in 2013,<sup>c</sup> in the CAR in 2015,<sup>d</sup> and in the DRC<sup>e</sup> in 2016.<sup>27</sup> At the regional level, in 2010 the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) adopted the "Sub-regional guidelines on the participation of local and indigenous populations and NGOs in the sustainable management of Central African fo-

b This is a term popularised by the FAO and the World Bank.

c With the adoption in 2013 of a decree adding to the existing legal and regulatory framework.

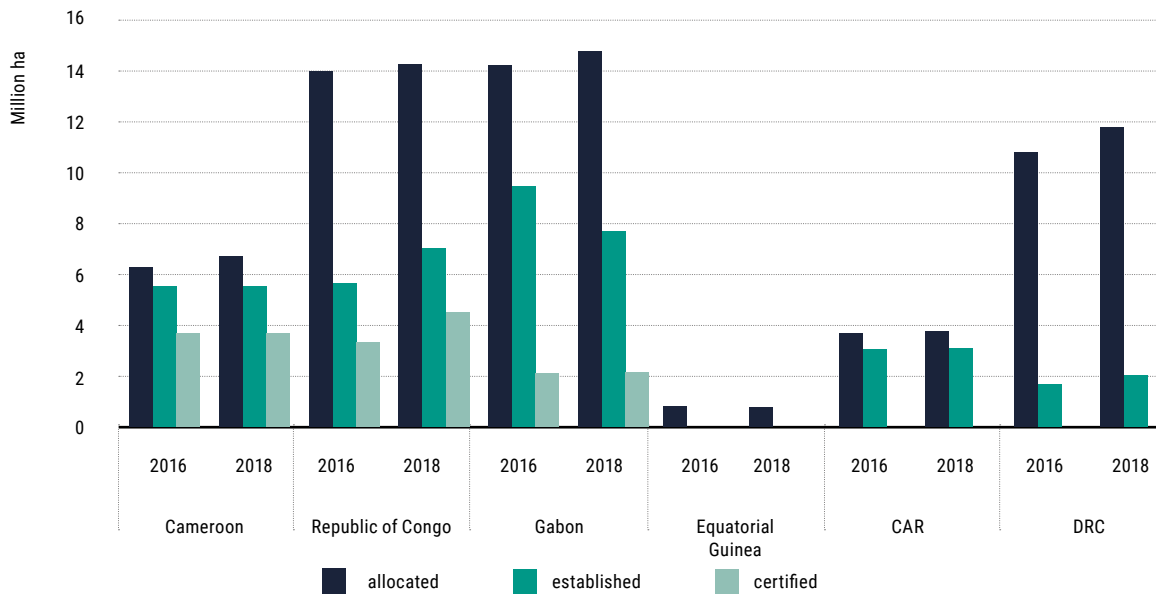
d In the CAR, the concept of community forestry was made into a law in 2008, and translated into the regulatory framework in 2015. It was created at the end of a special consultation process between the administration, the private sector, civil society and LCIP.

e In the DRC, community forestry was only made into a law in 2014, then translated into the regulatory framework in 2016. Local community forest concessions (LCFC) permanently confer land ownership on local communities by virtue of custom 18 and allow multiple uses to be made of the forest as a space within which to develop a range of socio-economic and ecological activities.

**FIGURE 2**

**TOTAL SURFACE AREA OF FOREST CONCESSIONS IN SELECTED COUNTRIES, 2016-2018**

Source: [COMIFAC, 2018](#)



rests.” The text points to the need to involve LCIP “in the forest management decision-making process”.<sup>28</sup>

The first forest laws governing community forestry were criticised by NGOs for their restrictive nature. The NGOs argued that these laws would not allow any real inclusive management and would limit the rights of beneficiaries, the spaces to be assigned and the support, mainly due to a lack of institutional capacities and appropriate structures.<sup>29</sup> The legislation puts significant restrictions on logging operations (inventory and development plans), which have led to difficulties in bringing the technical and financial capabilities of local communities up to the mark. These shortcomings can lead LCIP to get into debt by contracting third-party forest operators for logging and NGOs for technical support, thereby generating a strong dependence on third-party actors.<sup>30</sup> Beyond the relative profitability of the economic operations, the corruption and embezzlement observed in the management of community forests has held back the initial efforts made.

The application of these laws is also hampered by a number of local issues: in the Central African Republic, the demarcation of community forests in the southwest of the country (where most of the tropical forest cover is) remains blocked by the existence of industrial logging concessions and protected areas. In Cameroon, the limited financial impact on rural livelihoods and complex administrative procedures have hampered the expansion of community forests. Logging has met with a number of difficulties and has never been done in full compliance with the law: in 2013, a group of researchers<sup>31</sup> showed that no community forest was fully adhering to the legal framework. The Support Service for Local Initiatives (SAILD)<sup>32</sup> confirmed this diagnosis by drawing up an inventory of logging issues in the following areas: falsification of stock data, unlimited felling of unauthorised species and wood trafficking. The

forestry administration receives new requests for community forests every year, but the consolidation of rights to permanent agreements is making much slower progress (fig. 3).

A diagnostic study published in partnership with Fern<sup>33</sup> reports the failure to revise the “Simple Management Plans” (SMP), which is mandatory every five years for many community forests. Thus, in February 2020, the Cameroonian Minister of Forests and Wildlife declared in a circular sent to his regional delegates that “it is repeatedly emerging that the exploitation of community forests is fuelling the laundering of illegally logged timber” and requires a rapid diagnosis of the situation.<sup>34</sup>

In many ways, the path taken in Gabon, with an emphasis mainly on logging, has met with the same pitfalls as in Cameroon. 51 statutory forests were created between 2013 and 2017; however, faced with the numerous reported cases of illegal operations, in 2017, the Ministry responsible for forests called for the allocations to be temporarily suspended.<sup>35</sup> A recent study set out to demonstrate the lack of compliance with the legislation in force concerning the exploitation of community forests, as well as the extremely limited traceability of the wood from these forests, due to administrative largesse, the failure of the authorities to enforce the laws, ignorance of the laws, and poor control and monitoring of logging activities.<sup>36</sup>

After decades in operation, the results are mixed; participatory forestry does not yet fully play the role it has been vested with, in terms of both preserving forest resources and improving the livelihoods of local populations.<sup>37</sup> As Guillaume Lescuyer, associate researcher at the CIFOR says, “the failure of community forestry in Cameroon is worrying because the model was copied about 15 years ago in all Central African countries, in particular Gabon, the DRC and the Central African Republic”.<sup>38</sup>



## KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING

### COMMUNITY FORESTRY “BY THE PEOPLE AND FOR THE PEOPLE”

Community forestry can be seen as “forestry for the people and by the people,” in the words of Alain Karsenty and his colleagues. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, community forestry is a sub-category of participatory forestry in which communities or groups of people have specific rights over forests, such as the right to establish, implement and enforce rules governing access to and use of these forests. These rights can be formal legal rights, or traditional or customary rights, which can be legally recognised by the state. Thus, from a legal point of view, it is a transfer, by the state authority, of the forest decision-making and management responsibilities to local communities. This broad definition of community forestry reflects the variety of community forest management models that exist in Central Africa: community forests (Cameroon, Gabon, the Central African Republic, the Republic of Congo) and local community forest concessions (DRC). In Nepal, community forests are, from a legal point of view, former state-owned forests that have been assigned to communities to promote conservation. Communities receive use rights for a maximum, renewable period of 10 years. Thus, community forestry can take the form of management of natural forests and woodlands, but also of community or collective wood plantations.

Sources: [Karsenty, A., et al., 2010](#); [FAO, 2016](#); [Ott Duclaux-Monteil, C., 2016](#)

#### Business partners and civil society are working to strengthen the normative frameworks

Aid to “participatory” local development, applied according to a top-down logic and often perceived by populations as paternalistic, has slowed down the sustained entrenchment of community management. While it should allow choices to be expressed locally on the basis of the expectations of the LCIP and their social and natural capital, the influence of the forest administration, elites, donors, national civil society organisations and international NGOs compromises the LCIP’s appropriation of the management methods, for which they are nevertheless expected to be responsible. The lack of knowledge and understanding of the laws adds to these difficulties. The formal establishment of community forests is therefore dependent on the limited technical, human and financial capacities of the administrative bodies. Competition from non-official logging operations, weak infrastructure, remoteness of markets, high transaction costs and an often-unsuitable tax structure are all factors that reduce the incentives for stakeholders to commit and invest.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, various civil society projects are attempting to strengthen the management capabilities of communities and are pushing to have these laws revised, in particular through the African Network on Community Rights and the CoNGOs consortium.<sup>39</sup> Efforts, whose results are still uncertain, are underway, particularly in the CAR for the establishment of “inclusive” community forests, that is to say located within forest concessions.<sup>40</sup> The DRC is moving towards a similar model,<sup>41</sup> with pilot projects aimed at replicating the Central African experience and taking it further; but to date, no formal implementation has taken place because the implementing decrees for the new forest code have not yet been drawn up. Other civil society actors are committed to supporting approaches based on the development of an economic and business model in order to support communities in “forma-

*lising and professionalising their business activities in the long term and thus improving the livelihoods of small and medium-sized forestry companies”<sup>42</sup> NGOs like ClientEarth,<sup>43</sup> the International Institute for Environment and Development, and Fern have recently affirmed the urgency of a change of approach. These set out to test the existing legal tools by monitoring compliance with the rights of LCIP who hold existing forests and by setting up pilot forests.*

The Brazzaville Roadmap, drawn up by the FAO in 2018 with contributions from NGOs, governments, research institutes and the private sector,<sup>f</sup> is an example of a multi-stakeholder initiative to embed a new vision of participatory forestry, and hence of community forestry. This roadmap intends to contribute to the objectives of the Convergence Plan of the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) for the sustainable management of forest ecosystems in Central Africa (2015-2025) including to “promote community and decentralised management of forest resources” and “strengthen the active participation of vulnerable populations in the management of forest resources”. Its objective is to propose “actions to be put in place to unleash the potential of participatory forestry and enable millions of people who depend on the forest for their livelihood to sustainably manage resources while improving their livelihoods – thus contributing to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.”<sup>757</sup>

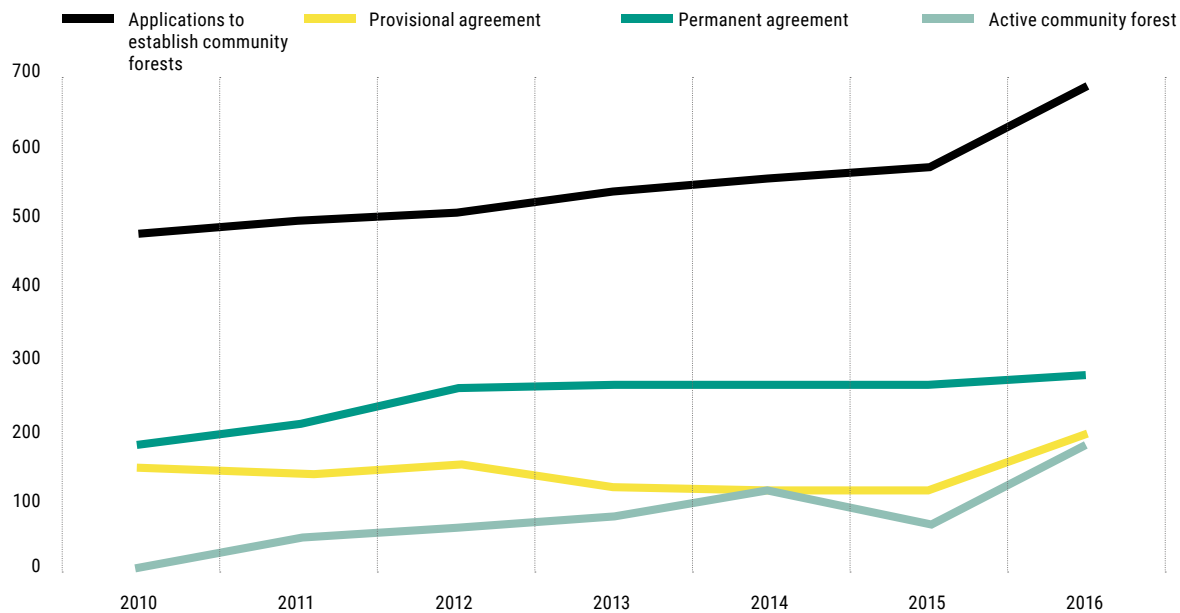
The normative requirement of foreign markets can also help transform the transparency and practices of countries that export logging products. In order to prevent uncontrolled deforestation and the illegal sale of its timber, all the countries of the Congo Basin have signed VPAs (voluntary partnership agreements) with the European Union. These bilateral agreements are provided for in the FLEGT (Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade) action plan, adopted by the EU in the form of a regulation in 2005, in order to strengthen the

f More than a hundred actors contributed to the drafting of the Roadmap.

**FIGURE 3**

**EVOLUTION OF THE NUMBER OF COMMUNITY FORESTS IN CAMEROON**

Source: [SAILD, 2017](#)



traceability in the trade of forest products intended for the European market and prevent any import of illegally felled timber.<sup>44</sup> One of the pillars of the FLEGT is the tightening up of the law, including strict compliance with all regulations and procedures relating to the extraction, processing, exploitation and marketing of products. This innovative legal framework has made it possible for the communities themselves to launch forestry initiatives in Cameroon and Gabon following interventions led by governments or development partners through NGOs.<sup>27</sup>

**Polymorphous international funding that is still insufficient**

International financial investments appear to be a necessity for the development of community forests in Central Africa. 85% of the objectives set by African countries in their NDCs are conditional to the inflow of international financial aid.<sup>45</sup> The commitments made by many African forest countries do not necessarily include forest governance in achieving the climate goals. On the other hand, the cost of establishing a community forest remains a major obstacle: in the DRC, between \$100,000 and \$160,000<sup>38</sup> is needed to create a community forest in accordance with regulations.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the potential of community forestry under the REDD + mechanism (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) has aroused donors' interest. Furthermore, the clarification and securing of land rights are among the key objectives of REDD+ projects, alongside securing livelihoods and generating income and jobs.<sup>46</sup>

However, in the DRC, for example, members of LCIP who have benefited from land in perpetuity under local community forest concessions (LCFC) can decide whether or not to participate in a REDD+ programme and to benefit from the corresponding funds. However, the Congolese government has so far focused on community access to forests, while failing to carry out the underlying work to strengthen their technical capacities to manage these forests.<sup>47</sup> As a result, communities are more readily turning to private companies to harvest their timber and receive direct compensation in return.

At the international level, the Central African Forests Initiative (CAFI), launched by Norway at the United Nations Summit for Sustainable Development in September 2015, intends to help the countries of the Congo Basin to implement reforms and to strengthen investment frameworks to support the sustainable use and conservation of their forest resources, in particular through the implementation of REDD + activities. CAFI aims to achieve a number of goals, such as improving governance, land-use planning and reducing pressure on forests. It is both a multi-donor trust fund that provides direct investment on the ground, and a negotiating platform that aims to promote political dialogue.

Through 30 programmes, the six countries<sup>h</sup> participating in the initiative received \$202 million. In contrast, forest management, governance and monitoring captured only 18% of investments made in 2020 (**fig. 4**). At the same time, CAFI is negotiating and encouraging political commitments, such as the Republic of Congo's ban on agro-industrial activities of

g These costs include the costs of meetings, the training of the coordination committees, studies to create demarcation lines and maps, and other administrative procedures.  
 h Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the DRC, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of Congo.



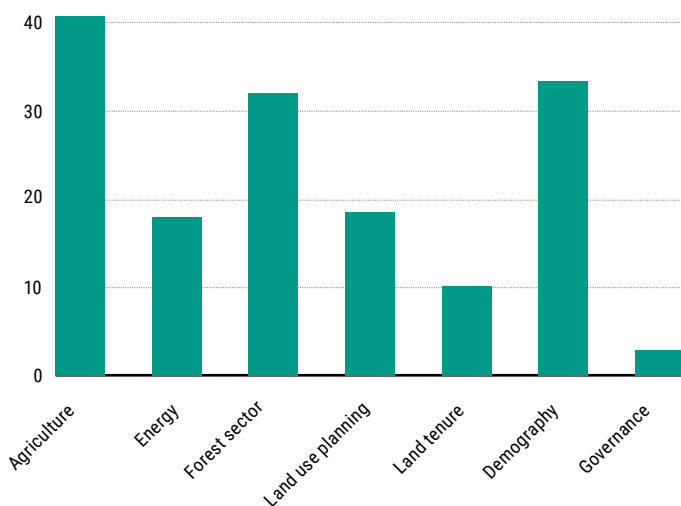
over 5 ha in forests, Gabon’s commitment to avoid or limit the conversion of forests with a high carbon stock and with high conservation value, and the DRC’s commitment to integrate the forestry and land-use sector in its nationally determined contribution.

In its 2016-2020 forestry action plan, the World Bank renewed its commitment to clarifying forest land rights: securing the rights of LCIP is highlighted as an important criterion for the approval of the Bank’s interventions.<sup>48</sup> The Bank embraces three of the top five multilateral recipients of European aid (EU and Member States) in the forestry sector worldwide, behind the United Nations REDD Program (UN-REDD) and the Global Environment Facility (GEF, which the Bank administers): the Forest Investment Program (FIP), the Forest Carbon Partnership Fund (FCPF).

**FIGURE 4**

DISTRIBUTION OF CAFI INVESTMENTS PER SECTOR, IN MILLIONS OF DOLLARS, AS OF 31 DECEMBER 2020

Source: [CAFI, 2021](#)



However, these commitments in principle are not leading to the prioritisation of support for forest communities and their forest management practices. In addition, the financing of land rights and forest management in tropical countries as a whole remains low. Between 2011 and 2020, an average of \$270 million was allocated each year for this purpose. This figure is equivalent to less than 5% of total official development assistance (ODA) for general environmental protection and less than 1% of ODA for climate change mitigation and adaptation over the same period. In comparison, since 2008, more than \$5 billion has been pledged to multilateral climate funds under REDD+ programmes.<sup>49</sup> Most funds earmarked for community land tenure and forest management go through intermediaries rather than the communities themselves – consequently, the latter are still not considered key players in the fight against climate change and the loss of biodiversity, which they have nevertheless preserved for generations.<sup>50</sup>



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

**Over the past twenty or so years, the community forestry model developed in the Congo Basin has had rather incongruous results, and has not fully played the role it was initially assigned. We can therefore see a different concept taking shape, with the need to secure the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples. Although international aid and European agreements have enabled significant progress to be made, the political will and internal cohesion to make community forestry a model for sustainable and inclusive development is still lacking. Significant challenges remain, which several organisations such as CIFOR, Fern and the Rainforest Foundation have attempted to address by making recommendations, such as the need to strengthen independent monitoring of forests by civil society, and the consequent need to improve forest management, access to digital technologies, the fight against corruption, and the improvement of the existing legal framework to promote the creation and use of community forests that are adapted to the needs and capacities of the communities (and which remain non-discriminatory to towards women).**

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