Land rights protect forests and biodiversity

If local communities in forest areas have rights to their land, this protects their livelihoods, the sustainability of the forests and biodiversity.

Background

More than a third of the Earth's surface is covered by forests. These green ecosystems provide a home for countless animal and plant species – for about 80 per cent of amphibian species, 75 per cent of bird species and 68 per cent of mammal species. Forests are indispensable for a sustainable future: they maintain soil fertility, filter and store water, cool and produce clean air and also act as gigantic carbon sinks. For around 30 per cent of the world's population, forests form the foundation of their existence – they provide income, food, building materials and medicines. In this way, forests make societies more resilient – to crises, hunger and poverty.

However, more and more forests are being cleared to make way for agriculture, infrastructure, settlements and mining. On average, 13 million hectares of forest are cut down worldwide every year. Without forest protection, the goals of the Paris Agreement on climate change cannot be achieved. At the same time, negative impacts of climate change such as droughts, heat, forest fires, storms and pest infestations increase the pressure on forests and jeopardise their role as carbon sinks and habitats.

Local communities and indigenous people manage about half of the world's tropical forests. However, the frequent lack of formal recognition or protection of their land rights is a powerful driver of deforestation and land degradation, preventing sustainable forest management and investment and worsening overexploitation and conflict. Land and land use rights are therefore an important basis for preserving and sustainably managing forests and restoring deforested landscapes.

Decisive action is needed to halt and reverse global forest destruction. Some 140 countries are committed to this as part of the Glasgow Leaders' Declaration on Forests and Land Use. They aim to work together to end forest loss, restore 350 million hectares of forest and make agricultural supply chains deforestation-free by 2030. The Forest & Climate Leaders' Partnership is pursuing similar ambitions.

This commitment is also in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 2 (Zero Hunger), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), SDG 13 (Climate Action) and SDG 15 (Life on Land).

The recognition of
land rights in forest areas
contributes to the preservation of forests and biodiversity and thus creates the basis for
sustainable rural development.





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Solutions from development cooperation

Create legal certainty: The formal recognition and registration of land rights, especially for indigenous and local communities, help to protect forests and biodiversity.

Participation: If the subnational level is involved in decision-making processes on the use of forest areas and these processes are transparent and participatory, then indigenous and local communities are less marginalised.

Strengthen control and legal systems: In order to enforce and control rights to forest areas, but also to achieve a fair balance of interests with regard to the use of forest landscapes, effective mechanisms such as the involvement of local communities are needed. In this way, conflicts of use can be avoided, and biodiversity can be protected.

Raising awareness and promoting transparency: Extensive awareness-raising campaigns and training measures are needed to protect and restore forest areas and associated land rights.



Land rights for forest conservation and climate protection

More secure land ownership and use rights support more sustainable land use and boost investment in forest protection while reducing deforestation. Integrated land use planning and economic incentives for investment in the restoration of forests and landscapes also benefit forest conservation and climate protection.

This helps to restore forests and ecosystems, thus preserving biodiversity and mitigating climate change. For rural communities, this offers socio-economic opportunities.



Laos: Legal certainty as a successful model for sustainable forest conservation

In Laos, more than 3,000 rural communities are located in state-designated forest areas. Some communities have lived there for generations, but without formal land rights. Because their land could be expropriated at any time, local people rarely invest in sustainable forest management and often overexploit it, with a negative impact on the protection of forests and biodiversity.

The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH supported the Government of Laos in its efforts to secure land rights in forest areas. GIZ's Global Programme Responsible Land Policy piloted and reformed the country's Forest Code and the Lao PDR Forestry Law. In all, 3,676 land parcels were recorded and registered in a digital cadastre, thus documenting the land rights of almost 2,000 households. The findings were incorporated into policy recommendations for the legal recognition and formalisation of land rights in state-owned forest areas.

In May 2024, the Lao National Assembly passed a resolution (NA Res. 57), which for the first time allows the issuance of land titles and land use certificates to households in forested areas. This created the legal basis to secure land rights for an estimated 227,000 households and up to 740,000 land parcels, even if the land remains classified as a state forest. This protects communities from displacement and enables long-term investment in sustainable management, such as soil-conserving cultivation methods and reforestation.

The new legal situation also created clear responsibilities for the use and protection of forest areas and thus established the basis for forest protection measures together with local communities. It helps to preserve habitats for people, animals and plants and to reduce the overexploitation of forest resources. Women and poorer households benefit particularly from the recognition of their previously informal rights of use and now have more livelihood security.

Madagascar: Secure land rights strengthen forest protection and livelihoods

Only about 20 per cent of Madagascar's land area is forested. Due to structural deficits, forests are poorly managed. Smallholder farmers use around 70 per cent of these forest areas extensively for self-sufficiency, but with low yields and often on the basis of land rights that are not clearly regulated. To counteract deforestation and contribute to the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative's (AFR100) goal of restoring four million hectares of forest landscape in Madagascar by 2030, GIZ's Global Programme Responsible Land Policy in the DIANA region is focusing on safeguarding individual and community land rights and reforestation.

With its support together with that of the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Natural Resources (PAGE) programme, local community members are able to acquire land and receive official ownership documents. Secure land rights allow them to invest in sustainable land use practices, such as tree planting and low-emission production techniques. A land title also facilitates access to loans, which in turn supports income generation, education for children, and further investment in equipment or infrastructure to improve livelihoods.



In total, GIZ supported the DIANA region in securing the rights for 3,000 reforested plots on 4,320 hectares of land. More than 3,000 people benefit from this, 33 per cent of whom are women. A further 8,000 plots on 7,800 hectares are currently in the process of being secured. Up to 36,000 tonnes of coal can be produced annually on the areas that have already been secured – this corresponds to around 36 per cent of the needs of the region's urban households. In addition, 4,800 hectares of forests will be preserved, which contributes to climate protection and biodiversity.

Results of GIZ's Global Programme
Responsible Land Policy (GPRLP) (2016–2026)

827,434 hectares of forest area
were secured in the partner countries.

In the DIANA region of Madagascar,
more than 3,000 people,
33 per cent of whom **are women**,
benefit from securing reforested plots on
4,320 hectares of land.

Key messages

1 Clearly defined land and use rights are a basic prerequisite for sustainable forest and biodiversity conservation.

2 Land rights must be recognised and secured for the benefit of local communities, particularly indigenous people. This is the only way to protect local livelihoods and preserve forests and biodiversity.

3 Participatory and inclusive land management strengthens social cohesion, prevents conflicts and ensures equitable use of resources.

4 Nature-based solutions and sustainable management of forests protect the climate and biodiversity.

Securing land rights and
using natural resources more sustainably
promotes **local development**
and supports the achievement of
global environmental goals.







Recommendations for development cooperation

1. Integration of land rights into policy dialogue: Land rights should be systematically integrated into development cooperation, particularly into policy dialogue, with a focus on forest and biodiversity protection.

2. Raising awareness of the impacts of unclear land rights: All stakeholder groups should be sensitised to the fact that unclear land and use rights contribute significantly to land degradation and deforestation.

3. Scaling of lessons learned and successful models: Lessons learned and successful models, such as those in Laos, should be scaled up and adapted to local conditions.

4. Promotion of appropriate solutions for vulnerable groups: Solutions to secure land rights that meet the specific needs of vulnerable and marginalised groups should be promoted.

5. Strengthening international initiatives and partnerships: International initiatives and partnerships, such as the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative (AFR100), the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) mechanism and the Forest & Climate Leaders' Partnership, should be strengthened to advance the security of land rights, forest conservation and biodiversity conservation globally.

6. Linking land rights with sustainable management: Actions that aim to safeguard land rights should give due consideration to environmental constraints and the integration of sustainable management models.

7. Strengthening civil society and local institutions: Civil society and local institutions should be strengthened so that they are able to actively shape and control land and resource use.

The needs of
vulnerable and **marginalised groups**
must always be taken into account
when securing land rights.





Learn more

BMZ: Forests and Biodiversity

FAO (2024): The State of the World's Forests 2024

Glasgow Leaders Declaration on Forests and Land Use (2021)

The Global Forest Finance Pledge (2023): 2022 Progress Report

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity/ UNEP (2011): Convention on Biological Diversity

UN (2017): United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests 2030

UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2021): The Global Forest Goals Report 2021

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Registered offices
Bonn and Eschborn

Global Programme Responsible Land Policy
landmanagement@giz.de

Friedrich Ebert Allee 32 + 36
53113 Bonn, Germany
T +49 228 44 60-0
F +49 228 44 60-17 66

E info@giz.de
I www.giz.de

Authors:
Oliver Puginier, Sofia Schirocky, Alexander Strunck, Alina Stamm

On behalf of

Federal Ministry
for Economic Cooperation
and Development

Responsible:
Maraile Görgen, maraile.goergen@giz.de

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