

## Congo Basin Countries Could Double Their Cultivated Area While Limiting pressure on Forests

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The Central Africa Forests Commission (COMIFAC) and the World Bank are holding a two-day regional conference in Kinshasa, on May 15-16, 2013, to discuss findings and policy recommendations from a study on Deforestation Trends in the Congo Basin: Reconciling Economic Growth and Forest Protection. The study is the output of a three-year research effort requested by COMIFAC to strengthen understanding of deforestation dynamics and trends in the sub-region across a variety of economic sectors. Deforestation rates in the Congo Basin are still low compared to those observed in other tropical forests (for example the Amazon, forests in Indonesia, or other sub-regions of Africa), but have accelerated in recent years. Annual rates of both degradation and deforestation have almost doubled from 1990-2000 to 2000-2005. Based on the forest transition theory, which correlates a rise in economic growth with higher deforestation rates, the Congo Basin may well be entering a stage of accelerated forest losses. So far, deforestation and forest degradation have been largely associated with the expansion of subsistence activities (agriculture and energy) and concentrated around densely populated areas. But the situation is likely to change. Local and regional development, population increases and global demand for commodities are likely to increase deforestation and forest degradation in the Congo Basin -- but a number of no-regrets policy actions could help countries avoid a steep drop in forest cover and steer growth in a "forest-friendly manner." The study provides an in-depth analysis of the main drivers of deforestation in the Congo Basin by 2030 in key sectors (agriculture, energy, forestry, infrastructure and mining). It proposes a number of "no-regrets actions" that participants will debate with a view to informing policymaking in the region. For example, unlocking the potential of the Congo Basin for agriculture will not necessarily take a toll on forests: the Congo Basin could almost double its cultivated area without converting any forested areas. Policy makers should seek to primarily target agricultural activities towards degraded and non-forested land. More broadly, participatory land use planning could help clarify trade-offs among different sectors, encourage the development of growth poles and corridors, and direct destructive activities away from forests of great ecological value. The Congo Basin has a huge growth potential and unique forest wealth. The study sought to sound the alarm and provoke thinking about how to achieve "forest-friendly growth." The right choices must be made today in order to promote the sustainable growth of tomorrow, says Carole Mégevand, a World Bank Forestry Expert, the principal author of the study. "By reconciling the development of their economies and the preservation of their forest capital, these countries could "leapfrog the sharp drop in forest cover that has traditionally accompanied development and make a global contribution to reducing the greenhouse effects associated with deforestation, said Jamal Saghir, the Director of the World Bank Sustainable Development Department for the Africa Region. According to Mr. Raymond Mbitikon, the Executive Secretary of COMIFAC, "We have the tools at our disposal to act in a targeted way and take a stand in favor of sustainable development." The study was coordinated by the World Bank and benefited from financial support from various donors, including the Program on Forests, the Norwegian Trust Fund for Private Sector and Infrastructure, the United Kingdom Government, the Trust Fund for Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development and the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility. The World Bank  
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