



AFRICAN FORESTRY AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION

TWENTY-THIRD SESSION

The role of forests and wildlife in building resilience and recovery from crises and threats

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Forestry and wildlife in COVID-19 recovery programmes in Africa¹

I. Background:

1. As the world enters the third year of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the catastrophic effects of the crisis on people's lives and livelihoods and on global efforts to realize the Sustainable Development Goals are now beyond dispute. The pandemic has adversely affected the establishment of sustainable forest management (SFM), including forest governance and forest financing availability, and the livelihoods of forest-dependent people, causing potential setbacks in efforts to implement the United Nations Strategic Plan for Forests 2030 and to achieve the Global Forest Goals. Further, it will adversely impact wildlife conservation particularly in Africa.

2. COVID-19 has been a stark reminder that the protection, conservation and restoration of nature, in particular forests, is essential to preventing future infectious and zoonotic diseases. Forests and wildlife have the potential to offset many of the social, economic and environmental impacts of the pandemic and other global challenges. It is therefore critical to strengthen SFM and actions to halt illegal and unsustainable forest and wildlife practices in post-pandemic recovery strategies. The interlinked and mutually reinforcing threats of climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, forest fires, desertification, land degradation, pollution and other disasters continue to threaten people's lives and the ecological integrity of the planet. Forest and wildlife based actions, grounded in SFM, have a crucial role to play in addressing those threats.

3. The pandemic revealed systemic weaknesses of global social, economic, development and environmental policies and institutions. Depending on their level of development, the availability of

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resources and location, the forest and wildlife sector in different countries and regions, and forests, were impacted to different extents by the pandemic.

4. The major initial socioeconomic and environmental challenges related to forests, the forest and wildlife sectors arose from the health crisis posed by the pandemic and the crisis management measures adopted by countries to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. The heterogenous impact of the COVID-19 pandemic had significant implications for crisis management and policy responses, and governments at all levels operated with great uncertainty trying to balance the economic and social pressures they faced. Restrictive measures designed to slow the spread of the virus caused an initial shock to socioeconomic systems, resulting in a temporary gap in production, trade supply chains and slower activity in Africa and other parts of the world.

5. The Red List Index shows continuing deterioration in terms of species extinction risk around the world, based on repeated assessments of the extinction risk of all amphibians, birds, mammals, corals and cycads, representing about 25,000 species in total. The index went from 0.80 in 2000 to 0.72 in 2022. The prevalence and rate of extinction risk are particularly severe in Central and Southern Asia, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia and small island developing States. COVID-19 pandemic impacts on species extinction risk are likely negative mainly because of reduced conservation capacity and resources, along with increased threats.

6. At the end of 2021, 68 countries had at least one legislative, administrative or policy measure in place to ensure the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the use of genetic resources and associated traditional knowledge in accordance with the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from Their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity. Furthermore, 79 countries reported measures in place to implement the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture.

II. Impact of pandemic on forests, the forest sectors in the African region:

7. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to create uncertainties on the economic recovery in the Africa region. Measures put in place by countries, regional organizations and multilateral bodies as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19 present both challenges and opportunities for the forests sector. The following sections of this paper draw upon key findings from a 2022 study that was conducted on the impact of COVID-19 on forests and the forest sector in Africa.²

8. Governments with the support of the private sector and civil society organizations collaborated in their effort to mitigate challenges of the pandemic and the resulting economic and social crises. Government responses were mainly travel restrictions and stimulus packages to mitigate the social cost of the lock downs/restrictions. Governments also took advantage of various stimulus packages offered by development partners and multilateral agencies. Private sector technology and social media companies introduced various products to support the public sector interventions, including in forestry.

9. Technology was leveraged to provide platforms for continuous cooperation, education, training, and communication. There were reports of wood-based companies shifted from their usual products into producing medical equipment, respirators and face masks for health care workers and sale to the public. Civil society organizations were initially adversely affected by the restrictions on movements; however, some civil society organizations such as SODEIT Global Support Centre united 800 professionals and UN online volunteers from across the world to safeguard vulnerable communities in Cameroon during the COVID-19 pandemic.

² Second Assessment of the Impact of COVID-19 on Forests and Forest Sector in the African Region (2022) <https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/2nd-assessment-Covid19-Africa-final.pdf>

III. Challenges faced by the forest and wildlife sector in Africa in addressing the impacts of COVID-19

10. In 2020 there were some common challenges faced by the forest and wildlife sector including travel restrictions, job losses, business closures, working from home and lower cash inflows. West Africa experienced shipping and logistics difficulties while weak forest governance and low market demand were common to East Africa and Southern Africa.

11. In 2021, the forest sector faced financial challenges, including budget reductions, fall in revenue, and difficulties mobilising finance. East and West Africa experienced financial challenges in addressing the negative impacts COVID-19. Many countries put in place social protection programmes to address increasing poverty and vulnerability. However, these mostly covered urban populations, and did not always extend to rural and forest dependent populations. Socially, the pandemic disrupted the forest and tree-based livelihood options for forest dependent people. The pandemic posed a major threat to local communities as well as critically and vulnerable indigenous people like the Batwa in Uganda.

12. Forest-based ecotourism was highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in almost all the subregions in Africa, but particularly in East Africa and Southern Africa. The travel restrictions, curfews, and restrictions in gathering, social distancing measures etc. had an effect on visitor numbers to the forest nature-based tourist sites. It caused closure of the ecotourism activities and hence resulting in loss of income jobs in the forest sector. This also impacted on hotels, and other hospitality businesses. The spill-over effect of loss in the local economy was experienced by adjacent communities living closer to the forests with high ecotourism potentials (Shoo et al., 2021).

13. Forestry enterprises, especially in Africa experienced difficulties in several ways. Mobility restrictions, trade barriers, new health and safety measures were some of the challenges faced by forest enterprises. Additionally, changing production and market dynamics, reduced availability of workers, global supply chain disruption and travel bans contributed to a challenging situation. In Africa, a decrease in income was observed in forest-based tourism and recreational industries due to supply chain disruptions and travel restrictions. It was reported that in some areas of Africa, women were disproportionately impacted as they lost their forest income when urban dwellers moved to rural communities and entered the forest sector.

IV. Response measures to the COVID-19 pandemic

14. Governments, with the support of the private sector and civil society organizations collaborated in their effort to mitigate challenges of the pandemic and the resulting economic and social crises. The responses by governments were mainly travel restrictions and stimulus packages to mitigate the social cost of the lock downs/restrictions. Governments also took advantage of various stimulus packages offered by development partners and multilateral agencies. Forests and the forest sector in a few countries in Africa benefited from government stimulus packages that were targeted at the whole economy. Private sector technology and social media companies also introduced various products to support the public sector interventions, including in forestry.

15. Technology was leveraged to provide platforms for continuous cooperation, education, training, and communication. There were reports of wood-based companies shifted from their usual products into producing medical equipment, respirators and face masks for health care workers and sale to the public. Civil society organizations were initially adversely affected by the restrictions on movements; however, some civil society organizations such as SODEIT Global Support Centre united 800 professionals and UN online volunteers from across the world to safeguard vulnerable communities in Cameroon during the COVID-19 pandemic.

V. Recovery measures adopted by countries in combating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on forests and the forest sector

16. Governments adopted different strategies to limit the spread of COVID-19 and measures to promote economic recovery and stability. Many of the measures adopted tended to focus on fiscal policy responses and strategies to address health and economic challenges. Most of the countries in Africa adopted general strategies and recovery measures that were aimed at reducing the impacts of COVID-19 in general and not specifically directed towards forests and the forest sector, although the forest sector also benefited. In some countries, civil society also played a significant role in addressing pandemic-related challenges in some communities.

17. In Africa, some countries accelerated the use of e-services for licensing and payments in the forest sector. That improved service delivery and reduced unnecessary congestion in public offices. In the forest sector, electronic payments have been introduced for taxation, permit fees, license fees, parking fees and other revenue sources. Digital platforms were also used for online auctions, harvesting licenses and log-tracking systems. Several other online services are in development to respond to the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

18. In southern Africa, one strategy was the establishment of partnerships with bilateral donors to support environmental activities in recovery programmes. For example, a significant amount of resources were mobilized for conservation and ecotourism by the Peace Parks Foundation and the Government of Germany in support of the Kavango-Zambezi Transfrontier Conservation Area in order to mitigate the devastating impacts of COVID-19 in Angola, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

19. In East Africa, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations developed the East Africa Resilience Strategy to respond to the impacts of COVID-19 and other long-term impacts related to food and climate change. The strategy centres on several targets that are related to the forest sector, including the following areas: (a) Climate information and adaptation; (b) The link between resilient food systems and humanitarian food security needs; (c) Curbing the spread of the desert locust and protecting the livelihoods of affected communities; (d) Boosting the resilience of smallholders for COVID-19 recovery.

20. A number of countries adopted or initiated policies addressing nature conservation and the restoration of forest ecosystems and on the conceptualization of resilient forest management systems, which integrate the role of forests into a green economy. Other recovery measures included targeted forestry programmes linked to wider objectives, in particular with regard to climate change, forest fires, pests and disease management, as well as enhanced regional cooperation, especially on fire management.

VI. Strategies and recovery measures for addressing challenges of COVID-19 impacts

21. Multilateral institutions put in place stimulus packages that can be accessed by all African countries and cover loans, emergency response and debt relief.

22. Governments in the region responded with different strategies to limit the spread of COVID-19 and implement measures to promote economic stability. Some countries, such as Morocco have put in place longer term response strategies for recovery.

23. In Southern Africa, the main strategy employed in most countries in the sub-region to address economic impact of COVID-19 was by accessing funding grants from bilateral donors. This was more visible in Zambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe. Most of the funding was mainly for conservation and ecotourism related activities. Other countries, for example South Africa, instituted paid leave.

24. With most of the government offices working at a reduced human capacity, the EAC countries accelerated the use of e-services in licensing and payment of dues including in the forest sector. The forest agency in Tanzania for example, launched digital platforms (i.e., e-payments) that provided all services, such as online auction, harvesting licenses, including log tracking systems. There are several online models that are under development that resulted from the course of Covid 19 disruptions.

VII. Conclusion

25. As countries continue to emerge from the most acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, policy makers and citizens need tools to monitor efforts to revive economic activity, fulfil the shared commitment to build back better. Even more critical is the need to seize the opportunities presented by COVID-19 to drive development along a green pathway including:

- Promoting and encouraging strategies that boost legal and sustainable products and nature-based solutions to counter any short and longer-term shocks to livelihoods, particularly for more vulnerable people in rural societies who depend on income from land use
- Forest and wildlife dependent communities should be supported through social protection, livelihood options as well as capital investments such as seeds and income generating activities.
- The most vulnerable and marginalized groups such as forest communities and indigenous people have specific challenges and needs, and these must be addressed in recovery plans and policies.
- There is a need to build capacity to migrate to the digital age in monitoring and evaluation of forest resources and promoting investments in this area.
- Strategies that promote nature-based solutions to address short- and long-term shocks to livelihoods should be implemented, and policies to conserve, restore and sustainably manage and use forests and wildlife should be promoted as a means of creating resilient and sustainable recovery plans.
- Innovative forest and wildlife management practices and forest landscape restoration should be promoted to increase the economic performance of forests.
- Greater investments in new business opportunities, in particular in enhancing the skills of youth, women and micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises, should be promoted. The capacity of civil society groups and their engagement in the implementation of recovery strategies should be strengthened.
- Public and private investments are needed to enhance forest resiliency and the capacity to adapt to climate change and can help forests to cope with the negative impacts of climate change, protect people against current diseases and reduce future pandemics.
- Enhancing international cooperation in the areas of capacity-building, including in forest and wildlife education, forest monitoring and financial and policy measures. Technological cooperation should be a main component of all strategies and measures to minimize the impacts of COVID-19 on forests and the forest sector. It is important to leverage support from the private sector and the international development community for a post-COVID-19 recovery and to identify additional funding alternatives to support sustainable forest and wildlife management and the production of sustainable timber and non-timber products.
- Collaboration on forest and wildlife related policies, education and scientific research should be strengthened with other relevant sectors and stakeholders, including, in particular, with the health sector, in line with the One Health framework. Interdisciplinary research and synergies between foresters, environmentalists and experts in human and wildlife infectious diseases should also be enhanced to prevent future zoonotic diseases.

VIII. Points for consideration

26. The Commission may wish to invite members to :
- Implement strategies that boost legal and sustainable products and nature-based solutions to counter any short and longer-term shocks to livelihoods,
 - Support the most vulnerable and marginalized groups such as forest communities and indigenous people through social protection, as well as capital investments
 - Promote policies to conserve, restore and sustainably manage and use forests and wildlife as a means of creating resilient and sustainable recovery plans.
 - Promote Innovative forest and wildlife management practices and forest landscape restoration to increase the economic performance of forests.
 - Promote investments in new business opportunities in particular in enhancing the skills of youth and women.
 - Strengthen Public and private investments to enhance forest resiliency and the capacity to adapt to climate change.
27. The Commission may wish to request FAO to :
- Enhance international cooperation in the areas of capacity-building, including in forestry and wildlife education, forest monitoring and financial and policy measures.
 - Strengthen collaboration on forest and wildlife related policies, education and scientific research with other relevant sectors and stakeholders, in particular, with the health sector, in line with the One Health framework.
 - Build capacity to migrate to the digital age in monitoring and evaluation of forest and wildlife resources and promoting investments in this area.