

The political economy of forest policy in Nigeria: changing trends

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Key findings:

- Environmental concerns in Nigeria have previously typically been portrayed in the country's policy circles as being an externally driven agenda pushed by donors and developed world publics, and as remote from the more urgent economic and social development concerns that national stakeholders prioritise; this is only slowly beginning to change.
- However, Nigeria now has a new domestically driven pro-conservation movement, including internationally recognised Nigerian conservation scientists, an urban middle-class that values nature as a leisure resource, faith groups which have a values-led approach to environmental issues, and traditional communities taking a pro-poor approach to resource custodianship, as well as rural publics who are beginning to experience the realities of environmental degradation and climate change.
- The issues affecting the environment and forestry sector differ from those in other productive and social sectors in Nigeria, which have well-funded programmes but have been undermined by rent-seeking and patronage politics. Environmental issues suffer from an overall lack of resources but benefit from the presence of professionals with a real commitment to conservation.
- While there are embedded incentive problems affecting the environment and forestry sector, the greatest challenges relate to more direct issues of attention and capacity. These problems are in theory easier to resolve compared with the complex problems which would be involved in confronting vested interests opposed to reform.
- As a political economy issue, forests, and the risks and gains associated with the environmental services they provide, are distributed across various levels of actors, from the global to the local community. As such, potential solutions need to work across each of these scales.
- Within Nigeria, forestry policy is managed by layered and overlapping actors at a national level but is also decentralised to states and thus subject to considerable variation between localities. Some states pursue conservation-oriented policies; at the opposite end of the scale, others actively promote forest destruction. Many are somewhere in between, paying inconsistent attention to the policy area or pursuing multiple contradictory policies.

Recommendations:

- Environmental programming conceptualised by international partners is often far too technically complex to work as planned in the local context. Environmental and conservation donors need to learn from the past decade's innovations in governance and development, especially around ideas of adaptive programming and 'good enough' governance, which works with the grain of the local context.
- Projects focusing on specific forests have localised impact. They may help innovate and change the sector but can at worst represent ineffective tokenism. Site-based projects should be used as a proof of concept but need to also be linked to wider reform initiatives at the sectoral level.
- Environmental economic valuation of national forests and the ecosystem services they provide may help change policy-makers' perceptions of forest resources as a one-off revenue stream, aiding them instead to see them as longer-term resources meriting reinvestment and environmental custodianship.
- Although 'communities' have become doctrinally central to forest management, actual modes of project execution create what we term a 'top-down-bottom-up' philosophy, whereby the engagement of communities is on terms entirely predetermined by the government or donor actors. New projects or policies should involve communities much earlier to inform more appropriate conceptualisation and effective implementation.
- Nigeria's National Climate Change Council, formed in 2022 and involving all relevant ministries and government bodies, provides a great opportunity to generate the policy coordination that has proved challenging in the past. The critical question in such coordinating initiatives is whether the vision that emerges is 'horizontal' in harnessing stakeholder energies or 'vertical' in attempting to impose central direction, which other autonomous agencies are likely to resist and which may divert energies at the local level. For optimal success and impact, Federal-level institutions should work more in the 'horizontal' mode, to facilitate and amplify collectively-formed vision.

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Acronyms

CDM	Clean Development Mechanism
COP	Conference of the Parties
LEAF	Lowering Emissions by Accelerating Forest Finance
MDA	Ministry, Department and Agency
NCCC	National Council on Climate Change
REDD+	Reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries
TWP	Thinking and Working Politically
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations

1. Climate change and the state of Nigeria's forest

The global climate is heating rapidly, with huge implications for societal wellbeing, livelihoods and economic outcomes. Tropical forests have historically offered a crucial service to humanity and the planet as a nature-based solution, by pulling carbon dioxide out of the atmosphere. However, their role as carbon sinks is increasingly under pressure, both from deforestation and because the effects of climate change are leading to faster rates of tree death in rainforests, according to recent evidence published in *Nature* (Hubau et al., 2020). Along with global drivers of tree mortality, local pressures on forest resources have left tropical forests critically imperilled.

Nigeria has one of the world's fastest rates of deforestation, having lost over 90% of its forest resources since 1900, according to 2010 data from the Federal Ministry of Environment. Recent estimates by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation indicate a rate of forest loss exceeding 400,000 ha every year since 2000. Since the Paris Global Climate Agreement in 2015, Nigeria has signed ambitious Nationally Determined Contribution commitments to reduce its national greenhouse/carbon emissions by 20% unconditionally, and by up to 45% depending on support from developed countries by 2030 (i.e. conditional reductions). However, widespread governmental and societal recognition of the importance of Nigeria's forest resources to global efforts to fight climate change remains lacking. Conservation and biodiversity are equally marginal, although growing, topics of public interest. Public awareness of climate change is gaining ground, especially in areas hit by flooding in recent years. However, while forests remain important to those who subsist in and from them, in policy terms they are equally undervalued for their other attributes, including local ecosystem services, livelihoods, biodiversity and landscape management.

The study that has informed this working paper was commissioned as part of the UK government's support to Nigeria through the climate and natural resource focus of its strategic approach to Africa.¹ Taking forestry and biodiversity conservation as entry points, the study (based on fieldwork in 2020) sought to understand better the socioeconomic actors, institutional factors and drivers shaping climate and environmental governance in Nigeria, especially as regards forests. Our final output- a political economy analysis of the forestry sector - was the product of field interviews and site visits in seven states across the South-West, North-Central and South-South (Niger Delta) regions of Nigeria (see Figure 1). These regions cover a wide span of Nigeria's considerable ecological diversity, especially rainforest, mangrove and savannah forest mosaic habitats. Logistical and time constraints meant the research team were not able to cover the northernmost drylands.

¹The opinions contained here are the authors' own and do not reflect any official position of the UK government or its agencies.

Figure 1: Map of Nigeria



As well as making frequent rhetorical pledges regarding conservation and afforestation at the highest levels of leadership, Nigeria boasts a panoply of national and state government institutions ostensibly charged with sustainably managing forest resources. Potential drivers of conservation and reforestation include emerging local constituencies for biodiversity conservation, as well as relatively dedicated forestry professionals in the public sector. However, forestry exploitation in Nigeria remains largely unplanned, destructive and unsustainable, while the afforestation policy has been politically marginal and economically undervalued. Donor approaches to biological conservation and afforestation policy in Nigeria have likewise been projectised, under-resourced, overly technocratic and lacking in wider coherence. Meanwhile, forest resources remain key to many communities' economic and social health and wellbeing in Nigeria, as the source of many food, economic and herbal products, as well as ecological services.

This working paper summarises our key findings by briefly explaining the constituencies, drivers and barriers involved in forestry conservation; the role of state institutions and donor agencies in forest management; and implications for policy aimed at enabling more sustainable forest resource management in Nigeria.

2. Constituencies, drivers and barriers in forestry conservation

Deforestation and forest conservation in Nigeria are propelled by a host of communal, local and global actors and imperatives. Agendas that have emerged at the global level are reflected in the local institutional and discursive landscape, including questions related to conservation, climate change and stemming the illegal timber trade. The shifting agendas and changing funding patterns of bilateral donors and multilateral institutions have left a trail of projects that still shape how community, private and state actors view and engage with forestry conservation in Nigeria.

2.1 National level issues

The Nigerian state has also pioneered forestry conservation agendas of its own, including the Department of Forestry's new **National Forest Trust Fund initiative**, the recent successful offering of two rounds of Green Bonds and Nigeria's initial regional leadership in the pan-African **Great Green Wall initiative**. Such initiatives have nonetheless tended to emerge from national-level deliberations rather than from local beneficiaries at the community level.

Nigeria's role in global timber supply has also been in the spotlight, both as a transit country for illegal timber sourced in neighbouring states and as a source country for rare and valuable timber such as rosewood (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*), much of which has been trafficked across regional borders. This trade first involved Nigerian wood being exported illegally through Cameroon; the transnational flow reversed as regulatory and enforcement conditions in the two countries fluctuated. Cameroonian wood is now smuggled into Nigeria through areas like Mubi in Adamawa for onward export, according to the Pulitzer Center's Rainforest⁴ Investigations Network. This rosewood trade alone was estimated by the UN Office for Drugs and Crime as comprising 35% of all illegal wildlife trafficking by seizures in 2020.

After some lag, this wild timber exploitation boom is beginning to have material consequences on human welfare, especially in hilly areas prone to rainfall erosion.² Nigeria has a wide-ranging and thorough set of policies in place to combat illegal logging, but implementation capacity is very limited and in many places illegal logging continues unchallenged. Illegal loggers work in remote areas, and are also on occasion linked to organised crime, armed militancy or political interests. This means controls at points of transport and export represent the best opportunities for effective enforcement. For such controls to be possible, key enforcement agencies such as the Customs Service need to be better linked to forestry authorities for training, support and co-enforcement purposes. Meanwhile, as regards legal trade, while Nigeria has developed a timber export standard, there is as yet no well-established global industry tie-in pathway for sustainable and high-value timber and charcoal exports, such as an established national standard for Forest Stewardship Council certification.

² For instance, Ekiti state authorities investigating rainfall runoff damage that affected 105 houses in the town of Oke-Ako, Ikole, in early 2023.

2.2 Local politics of forests, communities and land:

While broad forest policies are defined at a national level, the management of forest reserves (other than national parks) is legally the role of the 36 state governments. Therefore, local political agendas tend to determine how forest resources are managed. Most modern environmental initiatives centre on the idea of community involvement - but 'community' does not necessarily mean unified perspectives. There are areas of intra-community tension, particularly between generations. In some locations we studied, elders who controlled land wanted to retain trees while youths were attracted to the quick capital gains of logging; in others, the split was the other way around. There is also a narrative in both national and local public discourse about 'modernisation', which associates forests and uncultivated land with backwardness and lack of development. In addition, though, there is a great deal of local recognition of the value of species that have a livelihood or cultural significance, including non-timber forest products.

Land use change is also evident throughout Nigeria. In some cases, this has resulted from the privatisation of previously communal land, or from consolidation of ownership in the hands of elites. Urbanisation is also a major driver of land use change. Changes in cropping patterns also play a part, for instance through the replacement of shade-tolerant (and thus forest-compatible) crops, such as cocoa, with open land-loving crops, such as maize and tomato, in the South-West. The limited productivity gains in agriculture also propel extensification of cultivated lands as the main means of expanding production.

Policy origination:

One major weakness of environmental and conservation policy in Nigeria is that, except for on some high-visibility local issues, such as Niger Delta oil pollution or desertification/erosion, environmental and conservation issues have traditionally been given lower priority compared with basic social and economic development concerns. This has meant that, historically, policies have not been locally driven and have been pushed by external actors. The outcome of this has been a combination of conformity with the rhetoric of the international community and isomorphic mimicry³ to capture the benefits, such as the establishment of counterpart institutions to receive UN funding. It is only now that mainstream policy actors in Nigeria are beginning to see the environment and development agendas as intrinsically linked, with wider public awareness of these interconnections.

New actors, new incentives:

A major finding of this study is that, although global policy drivers remain important, it is increasingly the case that the key constituency promoting conservation is within Nigeria. There are three aspects to this. First, a tradition of localised, culturally embedded ways of valuing trees as productive and environmental services and assets, especially used by the poor, remains widespread despite commercial pressures for rapid logging. Second, there is a new and growing constituency of younger-generation Nigerian conservation scientists and practitioners, who are working in innovative ways with communities and in some cases

³ Literally 'copying the shape' - that is, here, the creation of agencies, institutions and policies to mirror international processes rather than as driven by domestic imperatives.

engaging with the corporate private sector.⁴ Third, and most crucially for the long term, Nigeria's precarious but growing urban middle-class is increasingly recognising the value of the country's natural environment. This move has been led by students, day trippers, and hiking and backpacker groups, who are starting to appreciate forests for their leisure and patrimony value. This is a change from even 10 years ago, when forests were rarely visited for leisure activities, and is redolent of the ways that new urban publics became significant conservation drivers in the industrial and post-industrial era in the global north.⁵

⁴ See, for example, innovators such as Africa Nature Investors (<http://www.africanatureinvestors.org>).

⁵ For example, the US's Audubon Society, established in 1905 to raise awareness of bird conservation among urban publics, now has over 500 separate registered affiliated chapters and runs a nationwide network of reserves.

3. State institutions and forest management

Governmental institutions remain the largest funders and coordinators of conservation and reforestation activity in Nigeria through their roles of regulating forest exploitation for commercial purposes, managing national and subnational forest reserves and national parks, implementing forestry research and funding tree planting programmes.

Subnational institutions are especially relevant because the colonial-era Forest Reserves (created as timber extraction areas, as against National Parks under Federal control) were under the Regions and were then inherited by Nigeria's 36 States. Nigeria's states spent most of the 20th century over-exploiting natural forest timber. Not enough replacement stock was planted, and where it was, it was mainly monocrop plantations of imported South-East Asian species (especially teak and gmelina) These species have dominated industrial forestry in Nigeria since the late colonial period, and, while they have a place in creating fast-growing feedstock for local timber demand, they have much less commercial and biodiversity value than do key indigenous tree species (see von Hellerman, 2013).

During our research, stakeholders within and outside state institutions expressed largely critical views on the performance of the key government agencies mandated to manage forestry resources in Nigeria. Both federal and state institutions are beset by critical limitations that are either inherent to Nigeria's wider political economy or specific to the internal dynamics of the sector. In particular, state governments, which have the most power over lands, agriculture and forests, are unfortunately the most uneven and often represent the weakest link, sometimes even promoting illegality and forest destruction.

Forest depletion is driven by the widespread view among political actors at the state and local government levels – and among unemployed youth in forest zone communities – that forests are a natural source of self-replenishing revenue that do not merit a budget for reinvestment. Economic valuation of the nation's forests and the environmental services they provide may help change policy-makers perceptions.

Incentives or capacity?

Economic management in Nigeria is often undermined by the politics of patronage and by elite capture of rents and resources. While such incentive problems are also present in the forestry sector, there are also limitations related to capacity and financing, which undermine the ability to conserve forests even where most actors agree on the benefits of this. While some states (e.g. Ekiti) take an active interest in forest management and others (e.g. Cross River under the immediate past administration) have been sometimes unwilling to challenge interests behind illegal logging, the most common issue is benign neglect. A combination of lack of interest and underfunding means that resources are concentrated on more obviously salient policy areas while the forestry sector gets by on shoestring funding and the professional goodwill of a few local officials.

Several factors explain this widespread neglect, including a laissez-faire mindset that forest

resources can be relied on to reproduce themselves and that policy can concentrate on revenue without commensurate investment, as well as pressures to spend resources in other more pressing or visible areas. Substantial variations between states can be explained by differences in political will and interest at the top, or by path dependency, with some states having built up a store of expertise and experience – and, with this, a critical mass of interested and more empowered stakeholders. Sometimes, the two imperatives of sustainable management and immediate revenue are at odds – as has been seen in Cross River, where former Governor Ben Ayade's intensive exploitation stance was at odds with the many community and non-governmental organisations in the sector. Further, in some states, forestry departments or commissions are housed in Ministries of Environment; in others, they come under Ministries of Agriculture. This connotes two very different approaches to the issues, one of custodianship and the other of resource-cropping.

At the national governmental level, the relative lack of emphasis on environmental issues is evident in the resources allocated. The Federal Ministry of Environment (FmoE) is under-resourced in comparison with its needs, as are its constituent parastatals; it does not appear in the top 12 ministries by either capital or recurrent expenditure. However, there is an upside to this: some of the better-funded Federal government ministries, departments and agencies (MDAs) have become a locus for deeply embedded rent-seeking that is extremely hard to uproot, and these practices – although present to some degree – are less established in forestry MDAs, which have only small budgets. The problems of the latter are more straightforward and relate mainly to maintaining reasonable focus, competence and dedication in the face of extremely constrained resources.

There is also a 'vocational' effect. Since specialisation in environmental issues has not been seen as a high-profile or lucrative career path, it has tended to attract and retain personnel with some genuine professional interest and commitment. At a political level, leadership is given either to those with a relevant professional background or to newer politicians who need what is seen as a minor or 'soft policy area to learn in. At a national level, at the time of our initial research in 2020, FMOE was fortunate to have ministers in charge (including Minister Muhammad Mahmood Abubakar, who has a background in water resources, and Minister of State Sharon Ikeazor, a well-regarded lawyer with a track record in institutional reform) who were seen as competent, focused and established within the ruling All Progressives Congress party, and able to speak up for their mandates and the MDAs they supervised. Subsequently, focus and drive diminished a little, with the departure of Abubakar and then Ikeazor in reshuffles in 2021 and November 2022, respectively. More recently, the Tinubu administration has also appointed some well-qualified technical appointees to bolster leadership in the sector, based within the Presidency.

Within FMOE, the morale and professionalism of civil servants appear to be relatively good. Policy initiatives have been evolving from a centralised top-down approach to a more decentralised and demand-driven one. FMOE also benefited from a widespread makeover by former Minister Amina Mohammed (in office 2015-2016), now [Deputy-Secretary General](#) at the UN, who compensated for the low resourcing of the ministry by convening an informal cross-governmental group of ministers sharing environment-relevant portfolios, with rotating leadership. This was important in breaking down perceptions of competition between

ministries, counteracting latent 'silo' ways of working and giving environmental issues an enhanced coordinating platform beyond the limited scope achievable by FMoE alone.

However, important sources of funds, such as Nigeria's Ecological Fund (established in 1981), have long been removed from the ministry's oversight, and have been widely misused, most notoriously in a massive corruption scam by Plateau State Governor Joshua Dariye in 2004. This legacy of better organisational functioning, a sense of purpose and a greater ability to influence wider government policy creatively still stands, and has been extended, for instance through an annual summit event intended to highlight keynote issues and focus energy on common agendas. However, there are still sources of structural dysfunction.

Competing for the light:

Rather than working in close alignment, key agencies and initiatives under FMoE follow a 'rainforest' ethos - of multiplying institutional life forms working in overlapping ecological niches whilst struggling to reach the light and overshadow their competitors.

Within FMoE are various agencies clustered around the delivery or regulation of forestry goals. These tend to embed the dominant thinking of the era in which they were designed, so for example the colonially created Forestry Department with its technical resource management philosophy, followed by the top-down statist planning vision of the National Agency for the Great Green Wall. More recently they have been joined by 'buy-in'-led programmes, such as the Forestry Trust Fund (designed as a stakeholder-overseen federal-state partnership), which offers the potential for transparency and performance accountability.

Other key organisations include the Forestry Research Institute of Nigeria, with an expanding role in expertise and implementation; the National Parks Service, with the biggest role of all agencies as a custodian of actual forest resources; the Department of Climate Change, which has led on Green Bonds and on UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP) participation; and the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD+) Secretariat. The overall effect over successive generations is what has been termed 'sedimentation'- the gradual creation of a complex layered set of organisations, which overlie each other and are never holistically reformed or fully aligned with each other (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2014).

Policy-makers have grappled with re-establishing rationales and modes so that these bodies can work together. However, the political economy of competition for governmental resource flows encourages each body to foster its own programmes, partnerships and sources of funding separate from each other and from the ministry's core processes.

There has only really been one good example of different departments and agencies coming together to work on a common policy area: the Green Bonds,⁶ first issued by Nigeria's Debt Management Office in 2017, with significant uptake by investors and which at the time of research were entering their third round. FMoE received Green Bond funds to work on

⁶ <https://www.dmo.gov.ng/fgn-bonds/green-bond>

afforestation. However, the significant mandate overlaps between departments and agencies led to extensive discussion. It is significant that the aims of each MDA had become so indistinguishable that the only solution found to be acceptable by all was a basic geographical carve-up: the various MDAs concerned with forestry were each given responsibility for a particular part of the country. The result is a confusion of functional and geographical responsibilities. Some MDAs with particularly influential or well-networked leadership have gone outside the agreed framework to seek political backing for a more prominent role.

This process showcases the ways in which the resource flows associated with policy implementation drive a competitive mentality that inhibits effective coordination. The overheads associated with central coordination also incentivise MDAs to seek autonomous external relationships so they can maximise resources. This may increase the availability of funding but further inhibits coordination in the sector. And yet coordination does not always equate to efficiency - the key is whether the coordinating agency or person has a 'horizontal' vision of harnessing stakeholder energies or a 'vertical' vision of dictating direction and pace, which is likely to be resisted by others.

Nigeria's potential with regard to prioritising and coordinating policy on environment-related issues took a step forward in September 2022 with the inception of the legislation-backed National Council on Climate Change (NCCC)⁷, an inter-ministerial coordination body that is domiciled in the Presidency, in order to give it more convening power, and which is now Nigeria's Designated National Authority for projects under the UN Clean Development Mechanism (CDM). However, the efficacy of this will also depend on whether it evolves a way of working that complements or competes with established ministries. Straight away, inherent tensions became apparent; it is significant to note that, at the event for the inception of the council, President Buhari ordered an immediate amendment to its founding legislation, which he himself had signed in November 2021, to eliminate elements of power concentration and bureaucratisation that had crept in. Specifically, the approach had already been identified as sidelining state environment commissioners; disregarding provisional arrangements identified by a transitional Inter-Ministerial Committee and as incorporating blueprints for what would have been an unacceptably costly vast structure of state and zonal offices across the nation (Mojeed, 2023). Relatedly, at COP27 in Egypt, the presentation by the NCCC was focused mainly on clarifying its mandate in relation to all other related bodies.⁸

In reality, states often find that federal efforts, even those designed to help them, are implemented through accustomed centralised bureaucratic patterns, and thus in a manner that limits their flexibility to engage new partners. Thus even the new Lowering Emissions by Accelerating Forest Finance (LEAF) coalition programme, specifically designed to help subnational jurisdictions engage with the otherwise compliance-heavy and complex world of REDD+, was introduced to potential participant states with a circular memorandum from the federal ministry, requesting information on suitable sites but lacking clear detail on the ultimate purposes. This led to some interested jurisdictions missing out on the opportunity.

⁷ <https://natccc.gov>

⁸ The first significant matter in which this mandate is likely to be deployed is working with the Federal Inland Revenue Service, Nigeria's national tax body, to study the possibility of carbon taxes in Nigeria, another progressive idea in principle that will in practice need to be implemented carefully to avoid misaligned incentives.

4. Donor-funded approaches - and their limitations

West Africa has not been a major focus for donors working on environmental issues in Africa. Donors have tended to focus either on East and Southern African countries, where postcolonial conservation is tied to wildlife with global visibility and a high profile in public policy, while driving important national tourist industries; or on the large rainforests of Central Africa, which have global prominence in climate change discussions. Nigeria's geographical separation from these areas of focus, its complex policy environment, multiple human factors and the federal system have placed the country at the margins of traditional conservation funding.

Rather than focusing on environmental issues, donors supporting Nigeria have tended to work on public sector reform, governance, peace and security. Against these areas, the few existing examples of donor-funded environment and conservation projects appear old-fashioned and are dominated by technical approaches that are not well rooted in an understanding of the local political economy context. Viewed from a governance perspective, many of the programmes appear to be dominated by the thinking of 15-20 years ago, before concepts such as applied political economy analysis, thinking and working politically, and problem-driven iterative adaptation came to prominence in donor thinking.

Major international programmes create their own incentive problems. UN-driven initiatives, including the Global Environment Facility and the Green Climate Fund, translated through mechanisms such as REDD+, are heavily compliance-driven, highly demanding of expensive expertise, overwhelming of ordinary bureaucratic capacity and tied to very slow processes, which prevent them being useful to political actors in Nigeria, who need to work within four-year electoral cycles. Equally, project guidance from multilaterals such as the World Bank is detailed and technically near-perfect but designed in a way that seems to hugely overestimate the capacity of those who are receiving the funds to implement it as designed.

This reality gap further incentivises 'paper compliance' in reporting project progress but without pervasive commitment to the actual goals, which remain beyond reach. There is a need to learn from governance programming, centring on concepts such as working 'with the grain' of local realities (Levy, 2014), implementing 'good enough' rather than technically perfect solutions (Grindle, 2011) and thinking and working politically (Laws and Marquette 2018) about the nature of forests as policy objects and how people behave with regard to them. Centrally, this also means being flexible and adaptive in methods of working constructively, rather than trying to import models often designed amid the very different challenges of South American or Southeast Asian tropical forest management.⁹

In addition, the approaches of most major donors are heavily 'projectised', geared towards the delivery of discrete projects that attempt to achieve limited and site-specific goals but largely

⁹ One example of this is the emphasis on indigenous peoples in UN and other processes. While this focus is laudable, the concepts and language in which it is couched draw heavily on assumptions about minority forest-dwelling communities embedded in mixed wider societies in the Americas, and translate poorly to a Nigerian context, where most people in the majority population consider themselves 'indigenous', and where it is instead migrant minorities labelled as 'non-indigenes' who suffer the most marginalisation.

ignore the wider policy and sectoral issues. Encountering this repeatedly prompted the authors to ask, why not work on the governance of the sector first? Here, major donors have both resources and the status for suasion and influence. There are many issues in conservation and forestry - how to include the private sector, for example - by means of which limited but intelligently directed donor funding could make a huge difference to the alignment of incentives around the sector as a whole. This would be instead of trying to implement projects directly, with their top-down conception, limited duration and apparently limited success rate.

A similar critique applies to the involvement of communities in forestry programmes. Although this has become rhetorically central to any forestry project, actual execution, especially when involving governmental agencies, creates a 'top-down bottom-up' philosophy whereby the engagement of communities and the public may be extensive, but still takes place on terms entirely predetermined by government or donor actors and according to their preconceptions of what constitutes success or failure.

5. Policy implications

The ecological, social and political heterogeneity of Nigeria means that one-size-fits-all approaches are bound to fail, whereas flexibility and adaptation to local conditions are essential. Beginning from this starting point, the following basic principles appear to be essential in ensuring that policy interventions deliver positive outcomes:

- The demands and design specifications of technically complex internationally conceptualised initiatives need to be broken down into 'what works' on the ground given the actual constraints of capacity, political will, opportunity and other factors affecting success or failure. This includes continual learning and adaptation through the course of implementation. Box 1 illustrates an 'intelligent design' in response to a local problem in Ekiti state.

Box 1: An example of intelligent design

As deforestation extends areas of savannah into previously forest-dominated areas, fire risks increase. Following a particularly heavy bout of fire damage to reforestation efforts in dry season 2022/23, Ekit State Government determined that a prime cause of fire was the lack of labour supply in (mainly manual) rural agriculture, which was leading farmers to make more use of fire as a tool of land clearance than previously. Enforcement approaches were ineffective because of the difficulty of policing large spaces at night. Therefore, while the Ministry of Environment embarked on a local language radio sensitisation campaign, the State Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security created a programme through which small farmers could obtain subsidised access to hire tractors for land clearance, thus reducing the need to use fire.

- Overall, interventions in the sector need to adopt differentiated approaches adapted both (i) to states where political will currently exists and (ii) to states that are currently destroying valuable assets but where civil society and community actors could act as a source of pressure for change.
- As an overarching principle, policy interventions should encourage the migration of the commercial forestry sector towards high-quality/high-value production rather than low-value/high-volume exploitation that diminishes forest resources. Similarly, incentives need to be shifted towards sustainable investment in Nigeria's indigenous tree species beyond the current concentration solely on commercial exotic species with less monetary and biodiversity value. Demand for indigenous tropical hardwoods is strong, as the continuing illegal trade shows, so efforts need to focus on how to strengthen the response capacity, sustainability and biodiversity value addition of legal trade. Transaction costs for sustainable commercial forest use need to be limited to competitive actors so as to reduce the incentives favouring illegal logging.

- Long-term conservation and short-term livelihood issues need to be combined in policy design. Otherwise, one set of imperatives will continually prevent successful implementation of the other.
- To make real impact in this sector, donors need to support initiatives that target key sectoral issues including political will, public discourse, profitability, livelihoods, incentives and the regulatory environment. This would be instead of limited scope, site-based projects that risk being perceived as tokenism and that are rarely accompanied by strategies for sustainability, replication, spatial extension or use in advocacy and learning.
- Given the nested global-local nature of environmental issues, global actors should seek to link better with localised (national, regional or community) interests who share the same eventual aims to overcome the problems posed by a dispersed terrain of policy-making action. This means not just non-governmental organisations but also new public constituencies as diverse as traditional hunters, or hikers groups based in cities.
- Policy approaches should also encourage public-private initiatives focused on reforestation among organised private sector groups, individual companies, and national business and sustainable finance organisations.
- Environmental economic valuation of national forests and the services they provide may help change policy-makers perceptions of forest resources as a one-off revenue stream, aiding them instead to see them as longer-term resources meriting reinvestment if they are to continue being productive.
- While most land comes under the control of states, which have very differing drivers of forestry policy, federal government institutions directly control numerous landholdings, which could be better managed from an environmental viewpoint. The landholdings of institutions such as the military, the police and the railways offer scope for economies of scale in landscape restoration, within organised structures that already exist and that have clear legal status.

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