

Protected and used sustainably, tropical forests are key to our sustainable future

Sheam Satkuru, Executive Director, International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO)

Forests, and especially tropical forests, sit in the eye of a global storm. Market forces, poverty and climate change are among many factors driving their continuing loss and degradation worldwide. Yet the need to conserve their vast stores of carbon, biodiversity and the socio-economic benefits that forests provide has never been more pressing.

Finding ways to safeguard and restore forest ecosystems so they can withstand these pressures and continue delivering their many benefits will be vital to realizing the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development and its related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), from ending poverty and hunger to strengthening livelihoods and protecting the health of both people and nature.

Forests cover nearly one-third of the Earth's land surface and are among the most productive land-based ecosystems. Some 1.6 billion people depend on forests for their livelihoods or essentials like food, fuel and shelter. Some 70 per cent of people enduring extreme poverty live in the tropics. When managed sustainably, forests conserve soil and water, filter the air we breathe, prevent land degradation and desertification, and reduce the risk of floods, landslides, droughts and other disasters.

Some 45 per cent of global forests are found in the tropics, extending over more than 1.8 billion ha in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The harvesting and trade of wood and other products from tropical forests supply local and global markets while supporting economies and communities in many developing countries. Furthermore, the sustainable management



Image: Sarawak Forest Department

High school students learn about forest values during a field trip to the Lanjak Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary in Sarawak, Malaysia



Image: ENEF, Mhaimayo

Forest education curricula must be kept up to date to meet the demands of this fast-evolving sector

of forests is of critical importance for SDG 15 (Life on land): “Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.”

ITTO and the SDGs

Ensuring the sustainable use of tropical forests is a core mandate of the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), which is aligned with the recognition enshrined in the 2030 Agenda that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies to build economic growth, address social needs, tackle climate change and ensure environmental sustainability.

As the only intergovernmental organization focused exclusively on the sustainable management of tropical forests and the sustainable and legal trade of tropical timber and timber products, ITTO is perfectly placed to assist countries in their efforts towards the SDGs, especially SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (Climate action) and SDG 15.

Following its establishment in 1983, ITTO pioneered the concept of sustainable forest management (SFM). Over the years it has funded more than 1,200 projects and activities to promote SFM through improved policies and on-the-ground practices and by building capacity in tropical countries; work that has contributed significantly to the achievement of many of the 17 SDGs as outlined here.

Forest landscape restoration

A key approach to reviving tropical forests and the land from which they have been largely cleared is forest landscape restoration (FLR). FLR often involves creating a mosaic of productive, resilient and biodiversity-rich land uses, for instance by promoting sustainable forestry and agroforestry as well as conservation and ecotourism.

ITTO considers FLR as an important element in efforts to help economies recover from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Interest in FLR has grown enormously in recent years, and there are an estimated 900 million ha of degraded forest lands in the tropics, meaning that the potential gains are vast.

In 2020, ITTO, in cooperation with several partners, published guidelines for restoring degraded tropical forest landscapes¹ as a tool to help stakeholders — from policy-makers to foresters and farmers — in restoring degraded landscapes, thereby providing vital goods and ecosystem services and creating sustainable rural livelihoods and employment. Training on the application of the guidelines has commenced and is an ongoing exercise.

In addition, ITTO and the International Union of Forest Research Organizations (IUFRO) released a free series of learning modules to increase understanding and raise awareness of FLR among the next generation of professionals and policy- and decision-makers. Released as a contribution to the 2021–2030 UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration, the

modules can be used by high schools and universities across the tropics and elsewhere to boost curricula in science, social science, agriculture, climate change, environmental studies, forestry, geography, and planning and development studies.

At field level, numerous ITTO projects are making tangible contributions to the restoration of tropical forest landscapes. For example, an ITTO project has restored a variety of forest landscapes in Guatemala, part of the Central American Dry Corridor and one of the most vulnerable countries in the world to climate change. Providing training to and working closely with communities, the project has restored four different forest ecosystems: cloud forests, dry forests, pine-oak forests and mangrove forests. In Togo, two ITTO projects have supported women's groups carrying out FLR in the West African country's poorest prefectures, Blitta and Lacs. The initiative has involved 100 women, who produced nearly 48,000 seedlings of forest tree species and used them to transform 20 ha of degraded land into tree plantations and agroforests. The agroforests are generating significant income, and their output will help meet local demand for fuelwood and timber while enriching the livelihoods of local communities by empowering the women involved and granting them financial independence in line with ITTO guidelines on gender equality and women's empowerment.²

ITTO's work on FLR contributes to SDGs 4, 5, 11, 12, 13, 15 and 17.

Integrated fire management

Climate change is fanning the threat from wildfires in ecosystems including tropical forests. ITTO has responded with projects designed to reduce the risk of fire in forest landscapes, protecting communities and businesses that depend on forests along with valuable stocks of timber, biodiversity and carbon.

In Indonesia, where uncontrolled and unmanaged burning causes catastrophic fires, an ITTO project has engaged with local communities and built the capacity of fire brigades in the provinces of South Sumatera, Central Kalimantan and South Kalimantan. Communities have been instructed in how to prepare land without burning, while fire brigades were trained in fire management and provided with gear and equipment. The project has also helped with the development of a monitoring and reporting system for fire prevention. ITTO has carried out a similar project in five departments in Peru, where an increased awareness among local communities of the risks posed by forest fires can accelerate the implementation of national and regional forest fire action plans.

ITTO's work on integrated fire management contributes to SDGs 3, 13, 15 and 17.

Mangroves

ITTO's work also encompasses coastal forests. In several tropical countries, ITTO activities have enabled the restoration and sustainable management of mangroves.



Brigade training on fire management in South Sumatera, Indonesia



Image: Aporosa Ramulo Livani, Ministry of Forestry

The Nasilai women's group planted 5,000 mangrove propagules along the foreshores of their village as part of an ITTO project in Fiji

In Fiji, for instance, an ITTO project has supported the efforts of local communities and government in restoring mangroves and wetlands in the Rewa Delta, the country's most important marine ecosystem. The project is a key element of the government's effort to increase tree cover across the Pacific archipelago. The project established sites to demonstrate the rehabilitation and sustainable management of coastal ecosystems; worked with communities and other stakeholders to improve decision-making on mangroves; developed a national guideline on mangrove use and management; and raised awareness of the importance of sustainable mangrove management, including through the production of guidelines and several videos.³

ITTO's work on mangroves contributes to SDGs 1, 5, 13, 14, 15 and 17.

Tropical timber supply chains

As well as field projects that showcase best practices in SFM that can be applied at scale, ITTO supports the strengthening of governance frameworks and policies that foster sustainable forestry and the trade in sustainably and legally harvested tropical timber and other forest products and services. A central pillar of these activities is support for the development of legal and sustainable supply chains, whose establishment can promote the use of tropical timber as an environmentally friendly, sustainable material and help consumers identify green products. This includes support for tracking systems that prove the origin and legality of timber in international trade. Together with improved enforcement against illegal logging and trade, such measures are critical to channeling urgently needed investment into wood industries with

sustainable business models. For example, ITTO is implementing a programme that harnesses the benefits of legal and sustainable supply chains (LSSC) for climate-change mitigation, biodiversity conservation and development.

Under its capacity building component, the ITTO LSSC programme produced a comprehensive training course aimed at managers and technical staff across Africa's Congo Basin to facilitate their understanding and appropriate management of LSSCs for tropical timber products. The course is already being disseminated in five countries. In Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, an ITTO project is supporting the development of domestic markets for sustainably produced wood products to reduce the sector's dependence on exports and of sustainable plantation forestry to meet demand and provide jobs and income in rural communities. This involves working to improve the regulatory framework and building capacity among stakeholders to engage in wood supply chains.

Vietnam is a focus along with other countries in the Greater Mekong Subregion of ITTO activities to enable smallholders to improve their livelihoods while meeting growing demand for sustainable teak. For example, an ITTO project has produced a book presenting best practices for planting, managing, harvesting and processing this valuable tropical hardwood and for demonstrating legality and sustainability along supply chains. Other activities have included training programmes for hundreds of foresters and smallholders and the establishment of tree nurseries in the subregion, which also includes Cambodia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar and Thailand.

ITTO released a free online course⁴ designed to help realize the potential of sustainable timber supply chains derived from



Image: ITTO

Farmers work in their teak nursery in Lampang, Thailand, which is producing higher-quality teak planting stock as part of efforts to expand and improve the area's planted teak resource

sustainably managed forests. The course is aimed at entrepreneurs, forestry professionals, government officials, students and others; it encourages the uptake of SFM by creating a conducive policy environment and builds the capacity of businesses to meet market requirements for sustainability. This course was ITTO's output to a larger project in collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and IUFRO to improve forest education worldwide.

ITTO's work on legal and sustainable timber supply chains contributes to SDGs 4, 8, 9, 12, 15 and 17.

Policy and advocacy

Knowledge-sharing to foster SFM and sustainable development involves, in addition to hands-on training, the formulation of guidance for policymakers as well as cooperation with a wide range of stakeholders. ITTO's policy work has seen it issue several guidelines on, for example, FLR in the tropics, criteria and indicators for the sustainable management of tropical forests, the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in tropical timber production forests, and gender equality and empowerment of women.

Achieving the goals of ITTO as well as the SDGs depends on governments deepening their commitment to Agenda 2030 in general and the sustainable management of tropical forests in particular. To that end, ITTO is tireless in its advocacy for SFM and sustainable trade, whether through its communications, field activities, outreach work, or presence at major international forums.

Speaking at the December 2022 Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, where a new global

framework for the conservation of nature through to 2030 was agreed, ITTO called for more investment in tropical forests and greater recognition of how global challenges are intertwined. Tropical forests are increasingly susceptible and vulnerable to land-use change, deforestation and degradation, all of which are precipitated by worldwide threats affecting food, wood and energy security. Finding integrated and cross-cutting solutions that can address these issues simultaneously is the challenge of our times. Forests will be central to meeting the goal of conserving 30 per cent of lands and water by 2030 under the new framework. Managing tropical forests so that they continue to deliver their many precious benefits must be part of the solution, and ITTO stands ready to assist in devising and implementing the actions needed to secure a sustainable future.



Image: G. Sánchez-Vigil

A rural landscape of forest and agricultural land in Sierra los Tuxtlas, Mexico