

Backgrounder

Forests

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China-Africa collaboration to improve forest governance

Increasing understanding, dialogue and joint actions around Chinese engagement in Africa's forests

China's engagement in natural resources extraction in Africa has received much attention from policymakers, practitioners and the press in recent years. The impacts of these investments and trade on Africa's forests are immense: many investments are in forested or woodland areas, some are directly in forest management and logging enterprises, and many others use timber and other forest products.

In the forestry sector, China has become a major export destination for timber-rich African countries from both the Congo Basin in Central Africa and the Miombo woodlands in Southern and Eastern Africa. It has been estimated that some three quarters of African annual timber exports have been destined for China in recent

years, making timber the third largest commodity exported from Africa to China after oil and mineral ores.

A shortage of information

Despite the growth and the significance of Chinese forest-related engagement in Africa, however, many Africans feel they lack information about Chinese investments in their countries. In a survey carried out by African partners working with IIED, a majority of African forest sector researchers and opinion formers said that they were much less well informed about Chinese forest-linked investments than about those of other countries.

In addition to the lack of knowledge sharing, international media coverage of Chinese

KEY TERMS

Forest governance: A system of rules and institutions that determine societies' decisions and actions regarding forest resources. Specifically, it is about who makes decisions about forest resources, how the decisions are made and carried out, and who is accountable.

VITAL STATISTICS

- China has become Africa's biggest trading partner — over the past decade African trade with China has risen from US\$11 billion to \$166 billion.
- China is currently the largest importer of tropical wood in the world.
- In 2009, 78% of Africa's timber exports were bound for the Chinese market, having risen from 35% in 2000.¹
- By 2010, more than 80% of Mozambican timber exports were destined for China,² and 25% of timber concessions in Gabon were owned by Chinese companies.³

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

China imports increasing amounts of timber from African countries in Central Africa, Southern and Eastern Africa. The statistics show the significance of the engagement and there is no doubt that the impact of Chinese investment is huge. Yet very few African forestry specialists feel they have a complete picture of what is happening and media coverage tells a story of negative effects on the environment and communities. This leads to policymaking based on limited real evidence and to minimal accountability. We urgently need an improved understanding about Chinese engagement in Africa's

investment and trade in Africa's forests has largely assumed negative environmental and social outcomes, including deforestation, damage to local livelihoods, corruption and illegal logging. While the large volume of Chinese business interests in Africa's forests may imply significant environmental and social impacts, there is generally only weak evidence to guide effective policymaking among African, Chinese and international policymakers. Therefore, we urgently need an improved understanding about Chinese engagement in Africa's forests and more dialogue and joint actions between China and Africa.

IIED's work so far

In March 2013, IIED launched the China-Africa Forest Governance Learning Platform. The platform aims to build greater understanding among forest governance researchers and opinion leaders on both sides of the Africa-China relationship. Some 15 African forest governance experts — from Cameroon, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Republic of Congo, Tanzania, Mozambique and South Africa — travelled to Beijing to join representatives from the Chinese Academy of Forestry, the Global Environmental Institute, IIED and other international organisations.

At the conference, Chinese colleagues were keen to explore how progress made in Chinese forestry in areas such as tenure reform for household and community-managed forestry, and industrial forestry and timber processing methods, might be replicated in Africa. Chinese forest officials, researchers and civil society were also eager to test out ways to improve the environmental and social responsibility of Chinese companies. The platform event concluded that there is huge potential — through research, dialogue and joint action — to contribute to improving forest governance in China and Africa.

IIED is well suited to continue this work through our strong partnerships with African and Chinese institutions. Since 2003, our African partners in the Forest Governance Learning Group have worked to promote approaches to forest governance that encourage sustainable forestry and benefit local communities. They have a decade of experience, in a diverse array of African countries, in doing research, working with marginalised communities, connecting diverse groups of influential opinion formers and decision makers and influencing policy. This expertise is of deep relevance to our

Chinese partners at the State Administration of Forestry, the Chinese Academy of Forestry and the Global Environmental Institute who want better information from the field in Africa and better understanding of the views of African stakeholders.

Looking ahead

In the next few years, we will continue to pursue research, dialogue and joint action to influence policy and practice through the China-Africa Forest Governance Learning Platform. We hope this platform will strengthen the much-needed knowledge exchange and direct communications between African and Chinese policymakers, researchers and NGO practitioners. Drawing on the rich experiences of IIED's African partners and our partnership with Chinese institutions (both governmental and civil society), the aim is to promote environmentally friendly and socially responsible forest-related investments in Chinese and African policymaking.

Next steps include co-hosting an expert consultation event in Shanghai in March 2014 with the Chinese Academy of Forestry, Global Environmental Institute, World Wide Fund for Nature, European Forest Institute, and Forest Trends, where African forest experts will provide feedback on the Chinese Guidelines on Overseas Forest Products Trade and Investment and engage in discussions with the Chinese authors of the guidelines. We are also developing plans to conduct in-depth research to generate stronger evidence on Chinese participation in Africa's informal logging and mining sectors through research collaboration with highly capable local partners. By delving deep into these issues in the forests of the Congo Basin and the Miombo Woodlands, we hope to develop an accurate picture of Chinese engagement on the ground and provide critical information for policymakers in Africa, China and Europe.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges. We support some of the world's most vulnerable people to strengthen their voice in decision making.

forests and more dialogue and joint action between China and Africa.

KEY SPACES

- **Chinese forest policymaking.** Chinese government's policies regarding its forestry trade and investment overseas have significant impacts on Africa's forests and forest-dependent communities.
- **African governments' forest policies.** African governments' policies to regulate the forestry trade and investment have significant impacts on their forests, people and economy.
- **EU policymaking.** Legality verification policies pursued through the FLEGT-VPA process have significant impacts on tropical timber trade around the world, especially for African producer countries and China as a processing hub.

SOUTHERN VOICES

At the China-Africa Platform event I realised how we can work together to get a better grip of the forest sector. When I came back to Mozambique I started to work with some NGOs to organise a meeting of all the Chinese companies to go through laws and guidelines.

Renato Timana, National Directorate of Land and Forest, Mozambique

¹ Huang, W. et al. 2012. Who Is Importing Forest Products From Africa to China? An Analysis of Implications for Initiatives to Enhance Legality and Sustainability. *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 15 (2) 339–354. ² German, L. and Wertz-Kanounnikoff, S. 2012. Sino-Mozambican relations and their implications for forests. CIFOR. ³ Putzel, L. et al. 2011. Chinese trade and investment and the forests of the Congo Basin. CIFOR.

FIND OUT MORE

Our work on China-Africa forest governance is run by IIED's natural resources group and partners. This group drives our efforts to build partnerships, capacity and wise decision making for fair and sustainable use of natural resources. Find out more about our work on China-Africa forest governance at www.iied.org/natural-resources-group