

TMG Global Soil Week 2021

Benin Pilot Study - Info Brief

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September 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank Charles Tamou, Harry Stopes, Kai Siong Chong, Anna Kramer and Frederike Klümper for their valuable contributions to this report.

PUBLISHED BY:

TMG Research gGmbH, Berlin.

TOWARDS AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR GREEN RECOVERY

Sustainable land use has a key role to play in solving many of the most pressing socio-ecological challenges of our time. As the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) states, 'healthy and productive land can play an unparalleled role as an engine of economic growth and a source of livelihood for billions worldwide, including the most vulnerable populations. Achieving land degradation neutrality can become an accelerator of achieving SDGs across the board' (UNCCD, 2021).

While the importance of land can hardly be overestimated, today already 33% of the Earth's soils are degraded and over 90% could become degraded by 2050 (FAO and ITPS, 2015; IPBES, 2018). In this context the achievement of the SDGs will require reaching Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN), a state whereby the amount and quality of land resources, necessary to support ecosystem functions and services and enhance food security, remains stable or increases.

In many countries suffering from high degradation levels, such as in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, sustainable land use will become widespread only by the efforts of smallholder

farmers. Their importance in this respect parallels their pivotal roles in achieving global food security and providing rural employment, which are widely recognised (IFAD, 2011). However, smallholder farmers' efforts in these directions are hampered by the fact they often lack secure access to land and other natural resources and are excluded from the processes through which land is managed and land rights asserted. As a direct consequence, many smallholder farmers find their ability to invest in sustainable land use is severely curtailed.

For smallholder farmers to become the drivers of the transformation of land management, as well as for them to be the beneficiaries of its sustainable use, it is therefore essential to support the establishment of responsible land governance structures. This means also guaranteeing tenure security for smallholder farmers and other marginalised natural resource users. It is against this background, that the UNCCD's land tenure decision 26/ COP.14 explicitly recognises the relevance of legitimate tenure rights, according to the Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure of Soil, Land, Fisheries and Forests (VGGT) for the implementation of Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN) measures.

THE GLOBAL SOIL WEEK: A PLATFORM FOR JOINT ACTION AND POLICY ON SUSTAINABLE SOIL MANAGEMENT AND RESPONSIBLE LAND GOVERNANCE

The Global Soil Week (GSW) is organised by TMG Research in close partnership with the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ). It is a unique international platform bringing together a diverse range of actors to develop new policies, and strengthen existing actions, on sustainable soil management and responsible land governance. The GSW's transdisciplinary format allows sustainable soil management and responsible land governance to be addressed with an integrated approach that acknowledges their closely related character and thereby contributes to innovative solutions.

Since its launch in 2012, the GSW has systematically built a large volume of knowledge and experience from both its practical and theoretical work, while its focus and design have continuously evolved in response to ongoing policy debates and land management programming. In this context the approaching 10th anniversary of the VGGT in 2022 represents a reminder of the importance of implementing LDN measures through responsible land governance approaches, prioritising tenure security for smallholder farmers and other marginalised natural resource users. TMG's commitment to this approach provides the thematic focus of Global Soil Week 2021 "Creating an enabling environment for green recovery".

GSW 2021: LINKING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE WITH INTERNATIONAL POLICY MAKING ARENAS

The GSW 2021 aims to contribute to the creation of an enabling environment in which the rights of vulnerable communities will be protected in LDN initiatives. The GSW's approach combines the pro-active generation of local knowledge and experience-based action research through participatory mapping, with the platform's longstanding expertise in feeding local lessons back to international policy making arenas in the field of sustainable development.

The first component, action research, aims to empower civil society organisations to monitor the effects of LDN measures on the tenure rights of affected land users. The participatory use of a customised digital mapping tool empowers marginalised land users, especially women, to monitor potential or existing conflicts between forest restoration goals and their tenure rights to forest resources. The participatory tenure mapping approach is applied in two case study regions in Kenya and Benin.

The second component, linking local knowledge with international policy making, is a direct

contribution to the UNCCD 26/COP.14 decision on land tenure. The GSW pilot studies accordingly provide the basis for an empirically sound reporting on land governance and tenure rights at the upcoming UNCCD COP 15. Beyond the reporting at the UNCCD COP, the approach described here can also serve to point out the cross-cutting relevance of land governance and tenure rights in the context of the other two Rio Conventions, i.e. the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

TMG Research follows the concept of a counter current principle, reasoning that international reporting processes require well-founded contextual information generated from experience and local knowledge. At the same time, local knowledge and experience, for example generated through participatory tenure mapping, can better inform and shape policies at national and international level thereby increasing accountability at various levels.



*Land use in northern Benin is under scrutiny in the context of LDN initiatives.
Credit: Charles Tamou, TMG Research.*

“The annual cost of land degradation in Benin is estimated at US\$490 million.”



Severe soil erosion in Tchaourou municipality, Benin.
Credit: Charles Tamou, TMG Research.

BENIN'S COMMITMENT TO LAND DEGRADATION NEUTRALITY

In Benin, 1.8 million people were living on degrading agricultural land in 2010 - an increase of 37% in a decade, bringing the share of rural residents who inhabit degraded agricultural land up to 32% of the total rural population (Global Mechanism of the UNCCD, 2018). During the same time period (2000-2010), the amount of people residing in remote degrading agricultural areas with limited market access increased by 37%, reaching 243,000 people (ibid.). The annual cost of land degradation in Benin is estimated at US\$490 million. This is equal to 8% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (ibid.).

Benin's forests are at the centre of the country's political commitments to international environmental agreements. The emphasis on protecting or restoring gazetted forests in Benin's ambitious LDN target-setting document highlights the country's dependency on forests. In view of achieving Land Degradation Neutrality by 2030, Benin's ambitions translate into the following targets: restoring at least 50% (1.25 million ha) of land degraded throughout the 2000- 2010 reference period, limiting the loss of non-degraded land to 5% (398,200 ha) (forests and savannas) and reaching a 12% (1,364,604 ha) net improvement of vegetation cover (Global Mechanism of the UNCCD, 2018).

More specifically, Benin commits to reinforcing ongoing measures and efforts to:

a) Lower, from 21% (1,484,900 ha) to 5% (353,547 ha) the conversion of forests and natural

savannas into other types of land cover, namely into agricultural and urban lands.

b) Increase by 5% (154,895 ha) the percentage of forest cover.

c) Cut down by half (350,000 ha) forest areas showing a decrease of net productivity.

d) Increase overall land productivity on agricultural lands showing a declining productivity (631,400 ha) and those relatively stable (1.8 million ha) throughout the 2000-2010 reference period.

e) End conversion of wetlands into other types of land cover.

Source: Global Mechanism of the UNCCD (2018)

Benin's political goals in the field of forest protection are at odds with the current deforestation trends. Despite the existence of comprehensive forest management plans, about 1.5 million hectares of forest and savanna were converted into agricultural lands between 2000 and 2010. This represents around 35% of the total area occupied by forests and savannas, and 19% of Benin's national territory (MCVDD, 2017). Land degradation affects over 2.2 million hectares of land (MVCDD, 2017); as a result, land primary productivity has also decreased, exacerbating the risks of conflicts and encroachment on forest lands, as well as threatening food security and the integrity of forest ecosystems.

THE THREE-RIVERS GAZETTED FOREST PILOT STUDY

There are 46 gazetted forests in Benin, covering a total of almost 1.4 million hectares (DGEFC, 2016). The Three-Rivers gazetted forest is the largest of its kind in the country (259,300 hectares) and is located in a region identified as an intervention hotspot in the Benin LDN target-setting document (MCVDD, 2017). The forest contributes directly to the livelihoods of over 50,000 residents of 48 villages and hamlets (Orou N'gobi, 2019; RGPH, 2013). It is also of great ecological importance. The western part of the forest is home to countless animal species, including hippopotamus, harnessed guib, common duiker, hartebeest, buffalo, warthog and cercopithecus. An assessment of fish species diversity in the forest's water bodies reveals over twenty fish families and about forty species.

The Three-Rivers is one of several gazetted forests in Benin governed through a participatory forest management plan, developed jointly by local communities, local and municipal authorities, civil society organisations, and the forest department. The plan for the Three-Rivers Forest was developed within the frame of the country-wide Forest and Adjacent Land Management project, financed by the World Bank from 2013 – 2018. During the first phase of the project, it relied on civil society organisations to facilitate processes for community participation and engagement. During the subsequent implementation phases, the forest administration took over the role of civil society, establishing a new management body of forest officers referred to as the Technical Forestry Management Unit (Cellule Technique d'Aménagement Forestier).

The participatory forest management plan of the Three-Rivers gazetted forest presents a multitiered arrangement through co-management structures involving participatory approaches between the public sector and the local population. The management plan envisages collaboration between the



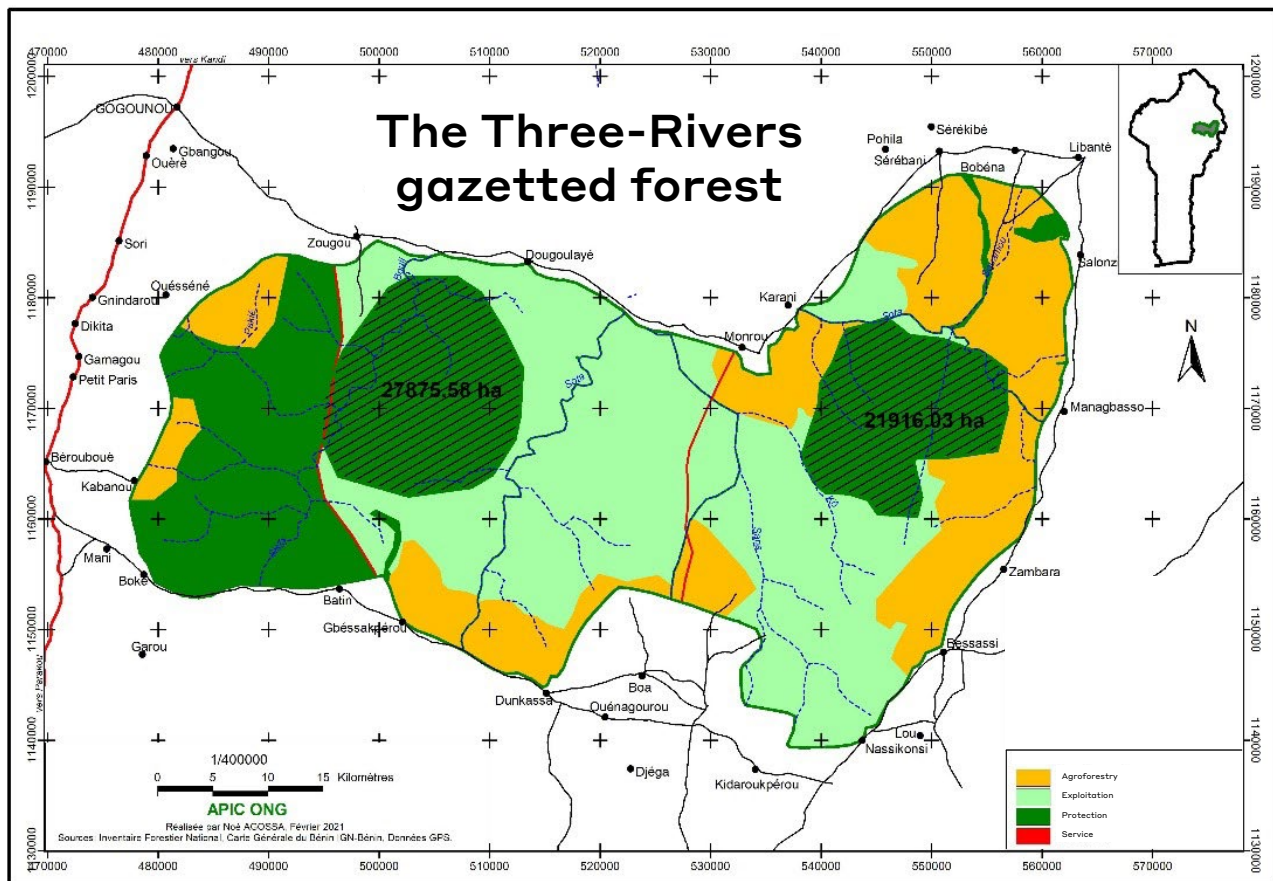
Local users are envisioned to actively participate in the management of the forest.
Credit: Charles Tamou, TMG Research.

“The Forest Administration is responsible for involving the population in management decisions and ensuring their active participation in forest management.”

community, the Forest Administration, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and the private sector for the development of forest inventories, studies, and management plans. In these collaborations, village communities are envisaged as key parts of the inventory teams providing indigenous knowledge and insight into socio-cultural norms and idiosyncrasies. Additionally, the Forest Administration is responsible for involving the population in management decisions and ensuring their active participation in forest management.

THE LEGAL FOUNDATIONS OF PARTICIPATORY FOREST MANAGEMENT

The overarching objectives and legal foundations of participatory forest management in Benin are defined by the country's Forest Code. The Forest Code stresses that participatory management should a) strive to meet the current and future socio-economic, cultural and ecological needs of the country; b) be implemented in the interest of and with the assistance of the riparian population; c) ensure the preservation of the environment, and the long-term conservation of biological diversity. In practice, this reconciliation of environmental protection and resource use requires a well-tailored governance system.



Location of the Three-Rivers gazetted forest.
Source: APIC ONG

IMPLEMENTING PARTICIPATORY MANAGEMENT AT THE THREE RIVERS FOREST: A REALITY CHECK

Despite the ambitious participatory management plan of the Three-Rivers gazetted forest, observations of actual management approaches used by the forest department so far point to a challenged governance system. Deforestation and land degradation have been rampant for years and continue almost unchecked today. Locally, the ongoing destruction of the forest poses an acute threat to the livelihoods of the local population. From a national and international perspective, it is a serious setback on the way to achieving the country's LDN goals.

While several reasons could explain the observed degradation trends, the nationwide increase in demand for agricultural land closely associated with the steady expansion of cotton production, as well as the food demands of a growing population, are important factors. As stated above, forest areas in Benin in general are increasingly under pressure. The Three-Rivers gazetted forest is therefore not an isolated case, but rather an expression of a larger, complex problem that must be solved through a systemic approach involving a revision of current institutional and policy settings at the national level.

Degradation can also be connected to the low participation of local communities in the implementation of the participatory management plan itself at the local level, as well as unclear regulations and management rules. As a result, the implementation of the plan is hampered by disagreement and uncertainty around the rights and obligations of the various local actors and groups living around and within the forest.

Due to disagreement and mismanagement, communities' rights to land and forest resources are repeatedly transgressed, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately. Similarly, obligations around forest conservation are not met or only inadequately fulfilled.

The consequence is not only inadequate forest management. Conflicts over resources involving various group of stakeholders have also increased in recent years. As a case in point, severe conflicts occur between the local forest administration and the various

resource users, particularly local farmers, and pastoralists. The forest administration complains about the resource users supposed rampant disregard for rules and obligations in the field of environmental protection and forest management. The local farmers and pastoralists, on the other hand, claim that they are repeatedly deprived of their rights to use resources and that they are affected by arbitrariness, corruption, and other forms of abuse on the part of the authorities. In addition, severe and sometimes violent conflicts among competing resource users are reported.

The conflict lines and challenges described here are characterised by a pronounced power imbalance and significant socio-economic inequality between the stakeholders involved. A few actors, including the local forest administration and a few influential and often well-off farmers, have far better opportunities to represent or assert their interests against other conflict parties. The vast majority of the heavily impoverished local population, on the other hand, is repeatedly affected by the marginalisation of their interests.



Village meeting in Karakou-Daassi, a hamlet of Kabanou village.

Credit: Check Abdel Kader Baba, TMG Research.

BEYOND LDN POLICY ENFORCEMENT: FACILITATING RESPONSIBLE GOVERNANCE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Given the current state of Benin's forests and the increasing demand for land and other natural resources, tighter policy and better enforcement of current conservation measures are required to ensure achievement of the country's LDN targets. Policy reforms, and more effective enforcement of existing policies, are essential given the broader dynamics pressuring the country's land resources described above.

Yet, in a context like that of the Three-Rivers gazetted forest, where local communities are already complaining of the forest department's top-down management approach and different forms of abuse and conflict, there is a concern that new or intensified LDN initiatives will exacerbate the conflicts between the forest department and the riparian communities. The likely consequences would be both a greater threat to the communities' livelihood, and a continued failure to achieve the country's ambitious LDN targets.

Beyond greater emphasis on national LDN policy implementation, there is accordingly also a strong case to be made for direct local engagement towards promoting a genuine reconciliation of resource use and resource

conservation in the context of LDN initiatives. Local engagement involving all stakeholders has the potential to contribute to an immediate improvement of the situation in the Three-Rivers gazetted forest. It would also provide opportunities for lessons to be learned that facilitate national efforts to implement LDN mechanisms in a way that allows local resource users to be both stewards and beneficiaries of LDN measures.

Here is where the GSW's action research approach takes effect, with the objective of enhancing local stakeholder engagement and political accountability at various levels. As part of the ongoing GSW 2021 programme, TMG Research and its local partners have begun implementing a pilot process at Three-Rivers gazetted forest. The GSW's objectives are to

- (1) facilitate stakeholder engagement especially with respect to the genuine inclusion of marginalised communities, and
- (2) enhance accountability with respect to the enforcement of rights and duties on the part of both private and public stakeholders.

Both objectives are based on granting all stakeholders improved access to information, as well as the promotion of transparency and participation in the process of forest management and land governance. The relevant information is obtained, shared, and monitored based on a variety of methods. Of central importance is the participatory tenure mapping approach which systematically draws on the active participation of the local community to help identify and monitor legitimate tenure rights and potential conflicts.



*Reconciling land use and resource conservation is key to the success of LDN initiatives in Benin.
Credit: Check Abdel Kader Baba, TMG Research.*

“GSW's action research approach takes effect, with the objective of enhancing local stakeholder engagement and political accountability at various levels.”

SUMMARY

Smallholder farmers have a key role to play in international aspirations for Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN). Yet, for smallholder farmers to become the drivers and beneficiaries of sustainable land use, it is essential to support the establishment of responsible land governance and tenure security.

The Global Soil Week 2021 focuses on linking LDN approaches with responsible land governance, with a focus on tenure security for smallholder farmers and other marginalised natural resource users. Special emphasis is put on demonstrating the potential of participatory tenure mapping approaches to enhance local stakeholder engagement, as well as political accountability for commitments to responsible land governance in the context of LDN implementation.

At Three-River gazetted forest, Benin, TMG Research and its local partners have begun implementing a pilot process to facilitate stakeholder engagement towards the ends of the genuine inclusion of marginalised communities, and enhanced accountability for the enforcement of rights and duties on the part of both private and public stakeholders. At the heart of this pilot is a participatory tenure mapping approach which systematically draws on the active participation of the local community to help

identify and monitor legitimate tenure rights and potential conflicts.

The Global Soil Week pilot at Three-River gazetted forest provides a unique opportunity to analyse the complex challenges that face the implementation and monitoring of a participatory forest management plan. The results of the pilot, and the experience of the participatory process that accompanied it, represent a valuable contribution in several respects. For the forest dependent communities and other private and public local stakeholders, the pilot offers a new perspective and enhanced access to information that can ultimately facilitate a reconciliation of conservation needs and local tenure security. Beyond the local level, the Three-River pilot is also a direct contribution to the UNCCD 26/COP.14 decision on land tenure. The pilot study accordingly provides the basis for an empirically sound reporting on land governance and tenure rights at the upcoming UNCCD COP 15. Beyond the reporting at the UNCCD COP, the approach described here can also serve to point out the cross-cutting relevance of land governance and tenure rights in the context of the other two Rio Conventions, i.e. the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

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