Making knowledge work for people and forests

Tropenbos International
Network Strategy
2023-2027
By 2030, we will double our impact. We want to improve the governance and management of at least 20 million hectares of tropical forested landscapes. This will benefit the livelihoods of at least five million people, while also contributing to global climate and biodiversity objectives.
WHY WE EXIST

For thriving and climate-resilient landscapes

Tropical forests are vital for life on earth. Yet they are under enormous pressure. Unsustainable land-use practices are rapidly transforming landscapes, leaving them devoid of forests and trees. This has lasting effects on biodiversity, the climate, and the more than 1 billion people who rely on forests for their livelihoods. Tropenbos International aims to reverse this trend. We envision a future with thriving and climate-resilient landscapes across the dry and humid tropics. In those landscapes, land is used sustainably, and local communities exercise their rights and participate equitably in decision-making concerning the future of the places they inhabit.
OUR PURPOSE

Making knowledge work for people and forests

All too often, decisions that affect forested landscapes are made without involving the people who live there, and with limited knowledge of the long-term consequences for people, biodiversity and the climate. This is a great risk. We therefore combine diverse knowledge systems to develop and apply locally owned, evidence-based solutions for thriving and climate-resilient landscapes. We seek to establish more inclusive and equitable governance and management of forests and trees in three impact areas: participatory forest and landscape restoration; community forest management and conservation; and diversified production systems. Across these impact areas, we pay particular attention to gender equality and youth engagement, financial capacities and linkages, and locally responsive policies. These themes support progress in each impact area.

Community forest management and conservation – inclusive and equitable governance of community managed forests, to ensure that communities benefit.

Participatory forest and landscape restoration – bottom-up restoration initiatives in degraded landscapes, based on improved livelihoods and economic opportunities for smallholders.

Diversified production systems – the use of agroforestry and incentives for the sustainable production of commodities and forest products, to prevent deforestation and support food security and livelihoods.
WHO WE ARE

A global network of local organizations

Over the last 30 years, we have evolved into a global network of partners across the dry and humid tropics, with a secretariat in the Netherlands. Each partner is deeply embedded in one or more landscapes, with a long history of working with stakeholders to develop locally owned solutions to landscape-specific challenges. Moreover, each partner has well-established relationships with local and national governments, which allow them to use this landscape experience to inform regulations and policies. As a network, we learn from each other. Together — and in partnership with other organizations and networks — we contribute to better international policies and practices that affect landscapes.

WHERE WE WORK

In frontier landscapes around the world

We work in forested and woodland areas in Latin America (Bolivia, Colombia and Suriname), Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Ghana and Uganda) and Southeast Asia (Indonesia, the Philippines and Viet Nam). We focus on landscapes at the frontier between forests and agriculture. It is in these frontier landscapes where the local and global challenges of poverty, climate change and biodiversity loss converge, and where solutions need to be found.
WHAT WE DO

Six steps to lasting change

The landscape approach is our starting point. We facilitate evidence-based dialogue, collaborative learning and collective action among landscape stakeholders. From there, we inform and influence policies and practices at a range of levels. We work closely with communities, civil society organizations, researchers, businesses, and governments, in order to:

**Understand:** We gather and analyze evidence about landscape challenges and their solutions, by combining local and scientific knowledge.

**Show what works:** We co-create, test and demonstrate locally owned solutions, such as equitable governance arrangements, and innovative business models and financial mechanisms.

**Enable stakeholders:** We strengthen local stakeholders’ capacity for sustainable practices, equitable governance, and better landscape management.

**Connect:** We connect stakeholders within and beyond landscapes, to facilitate dialogue, learning, collaboration and collective action.

**Influence:** We influence governments and companies to adopt policies and practices that support thriving and climate-resilient landscapes.

**Leverage:** We form partnerships with other organizations that complement our capacities, and help us scale up solutions for thriving and climate-resilient landscapes.
Since the 1990s, Bolivia’s Indigenous people have had formal rights to large parts of the country’s forests. The 1996 Forestry Law allowed for commercial logging of timber from these forests. In response, Indigenous communities started to strengthen their technical capacities for timber harvesting and forest management planning. However, the 1996 law allowed only the use of large-scale industrial technologies for logging, processing and transportation. This greatly limited Indigenous people’s opportunities to engage in commercial forest management.

The Instituto Boliviano de Investigación Forestal (IBIF), TBI’s partner in Bolivia, evaluated traditional forms of community forest management, coupled with affordable and easy-to-use technologies. Based on this work, they lobbied the Ministry of the Environment and Water for modifications to the Forestry Law. This campaign resulted in a new decree that allows the use of low-cost technologies, such as chainsaws with portable attachments, within forest management areas. This reduced local communities’ dependence on commercial timber companies and increased their ability to earn income locally, while reducing negative environmental impacts.

Alongside its research and lobby activities, IBIF has been giving training courses and workshops in indigenous territories; for example, to increase the capacity of women and youth to develop forest-related business proposals. They have helped transfer traditional forest management knowledge from older to younger generations, and provided leadership courses to young people, empowering them to participate in the governance and sustainable management of indigenous territories.
Large areas of the Solano landscape in the Colombian Amazon are degraded, mainly due to cattle ranching by local peasants. The forests within indigenous territories are relatively well preserved, but peasants often encroach on these areas, leading to conflicts with Indigenous people. We have been bringing together Indigenous people and peasants to find solutions and establish intercultural agreements for managing the territories. These agreements are mostly related to the care of water bodies, the use and conservation of trees, and the restoration of degraded areas.

The restoration initiatives that we support are based on the concept of participatory productive restoration. Rather than conventional, government-led restoration — which uses only a few fast-growing tree species — the participatory approach is led by the local communities themselves, and uses up to 40 species. All species are native to the area, and are identified based on Indigenous people’s intricate understanding of the forest and the needs of the communities. The trees can be used for a wide range of purposes. They decrease people’s vulnerability to the effects of climate change, and contribute to a healthier and more resilient ecosystem.

We have enabled families — from both indigenous and peasant communities — to start restoring degraded lands, while decreasing social tensions along the way. We then used successful examples of this participatory productive restoration to show others that it works. As a result, the approach has been included in the programmes of other civil society organizations working in similar contexts, as well as in the spatial plans of the Solano municipal government. This is providing the leverage needed to achieve impact at larger scales. Participatory productive restoration has started taking root as a locally owned solution for thriving and climate-resilient landscapes.
Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) has the largest forest area in Africa, but deforestation rates have doubled during the last decade. Chiefs and local elites have been finding ways to sell off large tracts of forest to external parties, without consulting the local communities that depend on those forests. Young people have been moving to cities in desperate attempts to make a living.

In response to these challenges, we have been supporting local communities by enabling them to apply for community forest concessions. These concessions give a community the formal right to sustainably exploit forest resources on their own terms. All decisions regarding forest management are made by democratically elected community forest committees, and are in line with a sustainable forest management plan. Community forest concessions have proven to be an effective local solution to prevent deforestation by external actors.

Applying for a concession involves many administrative steps, and we are influencing the provincial government to adopt procedures to accelerate the formalization of community rights. But formalizing rights is only the beginning. Poverty levels remain extremely high, especially among shifting cultivators. To improve local livelihoods, we promote cocoa-based agroforestry. We do this, among others, by connecting shifting cultivators to agroforestry farmers from other areas, so they can exchange knowledge and skills. The combination of secure rights and better income-earning opportunities is providing new hope, and giving young people a reason to stay.
Ghana is one of the world’s main cocoa producing countries. Cocoa is traditionally grown in agroforestry systems, where trees provide shade and protection. In recent decades, however, farmers increasingly switched to growing cocoa in monocultures; this had negative effects on long-term production levels and farmers’ resilience in the face of climate change. We are trying to stop this trend, by supporting local farmers to bring back diversity.

We collect evidence to better understand and communicate the multiple benefits of cocoa agroforestry. Based on this, we enable smallholders — women farmers in particular — to develop their own locally owned solutions that support more resilient livelihoods. This includes providing training, establishing saving groups, and helping farmers to voice their concerns with companies and policy makers. Moreover, we influence the national government to develop policy incentives for sustainable, deforestation-free cocoa agroforestry and to incorporate agroforestry in its climate change plans and ambitions. While doing so, we make sure to document the lessons learned.

Nationally, we have been a stable and trusted partner for NGOs, research organizations and the government for more than 20 years. Internationally, we have been sharing our experiences with other organizations, and were able to directly inform EU legislation on deforestation-free value chains. In these ways, we have championed diversity on cocoa farms, both in Ghana and beyond.
In Indonesia, recurring peatland fires are a major source of greenhouse gas emissions, and have devastating effects on biodiversity, health and the economy. Every year, Ketapang Regency in West Kalimantan is among the worst-hit areas; it has large areas of drained peat, which is highly flammable. Seeing that the fires were becoming increasingly difficult to control, the Ketapang local government asked us to help develop a plan for fire prevention.

The most effective approach to fire prevention is to rewet the drained peatlands. However, this may decrease the productivity of existing agriculture practices, and oil palm companies and farmers were therefore not in favour of this option. To create more momentum for peatland restoration, we connected with the national Peatland and Mangrove Restoration Agency, which then designated the Ketapang peatland as a priority restoration area. We also convened a regency-level fire prevention task force, connecting government agencies, communities, companies and NGOs. Through the task force, we increased stakeholders’ awareness of the benefits of rewetting peatland, and the ways in which agriculture could be adapted to the resulting humid conditions. The idea started gaining traction. Eventually, the various stakeholders embraced a joint vision for the landscape that included peatland restoration.

The joint vision became the basis for a range of activities, many of which are ongoing. We work with communities, companies and financial institutions to support a transition to peat swamp forest protection and to agricultural practices that are adapted to the humid peatland environment. Through multi-stakeholder processes, we influence the regency government’s plans and regulations related to fire prevention, paying particular attention to locally owned solutions. We show that these solutions work, in order to inspire other districts to follow suit.
The expansion of coffee monocultures on the slopes of the Central Highlands of Viet Nam has resulted in severe land degradation. But all is not lost. Planting trees in mixed agroforestry systems can regenerate the soil, restore the water cycle, and provide smallholders with a sustainable income. Women in communities of ethnic minorities can play a leading role in this, as they are traditionally the ones who plant and take care of trees in home gardens.

To understand the possibilities for women-led restoration, we worked with women and a local university to identify agroforestry models that are suitable to local conditions and based on the traditions of women farmers. We were then able to show the benefits of diverse agroforestry, influencing the government’s agricultural department to formally endorse a land-use model that combines coffee with indigenous fruit and timber tree species. This made it possible for us to connect with extension agencies and provide joint training, focusing on female-led households. For the extension officers, this focus on women was new. It opened their eyes. Seeing how the training caught on, they decided to extend the approach to other communities as well.

By actively engaging government agencies, we managed to change their approach to extension services. This was key to leveraging impact. More needs to be done, however. We aim to increase the economic feasibility of agroforestry and integrate locally owned restoration into spatial plans and regulations. To achieve this, we are collaborating closely with universities, farmer organizations and relevant government agencies, making it a joint effort from the start. Experience has shown that this greatly increases the likelihood of success.
Tropical forests in Suriname — The Saamaka Maroons are one of six tribal peoples in Suriname. They are descendants of enslaved people of African descent who freed themselves and established communities deep in the rainforest, where they established their own territory. The national Parliament of Suriname is expected to approve a new law that provides collective land rights to all Indigenous and tribal people, including the Saamaka. This should enable them to benefit more from the sustainable management of their forests, and protect them against appropriation by outsiders.

The new law will come with responsibilities. The Saamaka tribe, which consists of 12 clans spread over 75 villages in two districts, will need to establish a legal entity and develop sustainable forest management plans. We have been supporting the Saamaka with meeting these requirements. As a first step, we facilitated a process of internal deliberations, in order to develop a joint vision for their territory. We also started working with Saamaka youth, increasing their understanding and awareness of traditional decision-making processes, enabling them to get actively involved in the territory’s governance, and developing ideas for sustainable income generation to provide economic opportunities for young people within the territory. Together with the Saamaka, we have been influencing the national government, advocating for a speedy approval of the new law. The objective is that the Saamaka themselves remain in the driver’s seat, with a key role for the younger generations. After all, it is the young people who will shape the future of their territory and its forest resources.
We typically work from the bottom up — starting in focus landscapes. But sometimes there are opportunities to start from the top, working directly with national governments to develop policy frameworks that can leverage support for thriving and climate-resilient landscape solutions.

TBI’s partner in Ethiopia, the Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA), was instrumental in the truly inclusive development of the country’s first national drylands restoration strategy. Initial studies highlighted the potential contribution of dryland restoration to improving local livelihoods and mitigating climate change. Despite the ongoing armed conflict in the Tigray Region, PENHA managed to bring together key stakeholders at national and regional levels to develop a shared vision, and task teams worked tirelessly to finalize the strategy in only 18 months. The Ministry of Agriculture endorsed the strategy in 2022, and praised the TBI programme for its efforts. The strategy aligns the various government levels and sectors, and focuses attention on restoration efforts that benefit local people.

TBI’s partner in Bolivia, the Instituto Boliviano de Investigación Forestal (IBIF), conducted an evaluation of the country’s first Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC), in which the government set out its plans to achieve climate change mitigation and adaptation goals. The evaluation increased the understanding of the ways in which landscape management strategies could be integrated into the NDC. And the work did not go unnoticed. The government recognized IBIF’s expertise, and requested further assistance. IBIF then became actively involved in revising the NDC, by including wildfire prevention as an explicit ambition, among other changes. In this way they were able to directly influence government policy, providing a firm basis for landscape-level initiatives.
A significant portion of global deforestation is the result of the European consumption of commodities produced in the tropics, such as soy, cocoa and palm oil. The EU has therefore been working on developing a regulation to prevent commodities sold in Europe from being produced at the expense of natural forests. This can be achieved by requiring companies to produce a due diligence statement showing that their supply chains are not contributing to the destruction of forests and are produced according to national laws, before they can sell their products on the EU market.

This EU-wide regulation can help to reduce the pressure on natural forests. But it also brings risks. To fulfil their due diligence requirements, companies may put a disproportionate burden on the smallholders that produce agrocommodities, or they may simply push smallholders out of the market. To draw attention to this risk, we connected with five other NGOs in a smallholder coalition. Together we lobbied the EU to consider the regulation’s effects on smallholders, and to provide support measures in producing countries to comply with the regulation’s requirements, in order to ensure a true transition on the ground. Eventually, the European Parliament adopted nearly all the ideas put forward by the coalition.

In December 2022, the European Parliament and Council reached political agreement on a final version of the regulation. Although the regulation does not include explicit requirements to protect smallholders, it does acknowledge the need for partnerships with producing countries to promote sustainable production practices through capacity building and technical assistance, among other initiatives. We continue to work with our partners in the smallholder coalition to ensure that these partnerships support a true transition toward deforestation-free value chains, while contributing to the resilient livelihoods of smallholders.