

Backgrounder

Governance; Forests

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How good governance protects forests

Preliminary insights from correlating governance indicators with forest loss in African protected areas

'Good governance' is increasingly recognised as a factor contributing to improved protected area (PA) management and conservation outcomes. Yet how exactly governance at different levels supports or hinders successful PA management, and how this should be considered in conservation policy, planning and practice, remains insufficiently understood. This backgrounder considers how the quality of a country's governance in general, and environmental governance in particular, may be a factor in influencing rates of deforestation in PAs in Africa.

Governance and deforestation

Recent studies of the loss of forest habitats within terrestrial PAs show that while PA coverage has now reached 16% of the Earth's land surface, 59% of this area has still experienced significant deforestation. The highest deforestation rates within PA boundaries are in Africa.

The primary direct driver of deforestation globally is agricultural expansion. In Latin America where much research has been done on the role of governance as an indirect driver, studies show that an important factor is the balance between the overall quality of governance at the country-level (notably in its conventional understanding as corruption control, rule of law and accountability) and environmental governance. The worst scenario for forest conservation seems to be relatively good governance in general, which makes the country more attractive for private sector investment in agriculture (and other sectors), and relatively weak environmental governance (as is currently the case in Brazil). Although good quality of governance in general can increase anthropogenic pressures, it is also an important enabling factor for effective conservation management at the site level. Where there is poor overall governance at the country level, corruption

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?

Biodiversity in Africa is decreasing rapidly. Forests are cut down faster in Africa than anywhere else, with an annual rate of net forest loss of 3.9 million ha from 2010–2020. With rapid economic development these trends are expected to magnify. Africa's forests are of global value as vital carbon stocks, but also for national- and local-level ecosystems, economies, livelihoods, wellbeing and biodiversity. Protected areas (PAs) are one instrument to control rapid biodiversity loss. But formal designation is not enough. For PAs to deliver, they need adequate conservation strategies and effective implementation — building on resources, collaborative expertise and careful management of socio-environmental trade-offs. It is crucial to understand the contextual and systematic factors that enable or constrain effective PA management — and one key factor is the role of national-level governance and the quality thereof.

KEY SPACES

- The Ibrahim-Index for African Governance (IIAG) provides annual scores of governance quality for 54 African countries from 2008–2017, ranging from 0–100.
- It defines governance as "the provision of the political, social and economic public goods and services that every citizen has the right to expect from their state, and that a state has the responsibility to deliver to its citizens."
- The IIAG assesses rule of law, transparency and accountability, safety, political participation, human rights and gender, but also indicators for economic opportunity and human development.

disrupts resource channels, a weak rule of law impedes enforcement locally and permits impunity of powerful actors, bureaucratic inefficiencies waste time and money, and political instability coincides with conflict and hampers project continuity.

Importance of site-level governance

A small study by IIED and King's College London explored the relationship between governance and deforestation in PAs in 33 African countries. We used annual governance scores from the Ibrahim-Index for African Governance (IIAG) and annual rates of forest cover change from the Hansen Global Forest Change dataset.

All the countries experienced some forest loss within their PAs between 2008–2017. However, we found no strong correlation between changes in governance quality in general and deforestation rates. In other words, the overall quality of country-level governance is not a strong predictor for forest conservation in African PAs.

Instead, other factors, such as site-level governance and management, are likely to be more important for a PA's success. If so, localised conservation efforts may be effective and worth supporting, even when they are in countries with long histories of political instability, corruption and other governance weaknesses. This would be good news, as addressing governance at a site-level is more feasible than improving governance systems and cultures at scale, and there are tools for assessing and improving quality and equity of site-level governance, including IIED's GAPA and SAGE tools.

Importance of environmental governance

Although there was no strong correlation between a country's general quality of governance and the rate of deforestation within its PAs, we did observe a weak positive correlation: improvements in governance slightly increased deforestation in PAs. This prompted a further analysis to find out whether effective environmental governance can counter this effect. We split the study countries into categories with on average:

1. high overall governance and high environmental policy scores
2. high overall governance but low environmental policy scores, and
3. low overall governance and low environmental policy scores,

and compared the average annual rate of forest loss in PAs from 2008–2017. Indeed, deforestation was highest in the nine countries identified with high overall governance but low environmental policy scores, whilst the three countries with high overall governance and high environmental policy scores experienced the lowest rates of deforestation in their PAs. Notably, when environmental governance scores were low, deforestation was considerably worse in countries with better overall quality of governance.

Despite this study's limitations, we see some evidence that effective environmental policy and regulations are vital for protecting forests and biodiversity in Africa's PAs. This is particularly so in a context of generally strong country-level governance. This would be in line with the more robust analysis conducted in Latin American countries where improvements in the overall country-level governance were shown to increase agricultural expansion into natural forests.

Looking ahead

The relationship between 'good governance' and conservation success is more complex than a simple cause and effect. There is still uncertainty about the many possible and confounding pathways to PA effectiveness: better quality of country-level governance may support effective and equitable management at the site level, but it may also increase anthropogenic pressures. Disentangling these complex indirect relationships is necessary to disrupt negative impacts and support integrated governance frameworks to ensure the effectiveness of PAs and wider conservation policies. Future research needs to incorporate more complex research designs, better data on environmental governance (including secure community land rights) and more accurate ecological indicators for PA effectiveness.



Knowledge Products

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VITAL STATISTICS

- 14.1% of the terrestrial area in Africa has been designated as PAs. This covers over 4.2 million km². Yet biodiversity can only be adequately protected by PAs when they are effectively governed and managed.
- The PAs included in our study on average experienced a total loss of forest cover of 5.28% from 2008–2017, with a lost area of over 20,000 km². Within PA boundaries, forest loss was particularly severe in Benin, Sierra Leone and Malawi (22.9%, 17.94% and 16.72%, respectively) and near to absent in Seychelles, São Tomé Príncipe and Cameroon in the same time period.
- Across Africa, there has been a moderate improvement in the quality of governance as measured by the IIAG. Amongst the countries in our study, Mauritius, Seychelles and South Africa had the highest average governance scores (80.66, 70.48 and 68, respectively, out of 100), and Equatorial Guinea, the Central African Republic and South Sudan the lowest (31.19, 29.5, 23.19, respectively). Côte d'Ivoire experienced the greatest increase (+12.7) and Burundi the greatest decrease (-5.0) from 2008–2017.

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FIND OUT MORE

Our work on governance and protected areas is being undertaken as part of the Conservation, Communities and Equity programme of IIED's Natural Resources Group working in partnership with King's College London. Find out more about this work at www.iied.org/conservation-communities-equity.