

How to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals?

Focus on forests



What are the SDGs and how do they relate to forests?

In September 2015, world governments adopted an Agenda for Sustainable Development with 17 universal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be achieved by 2030. The aims are noble and daunting – end all forms of poverty, fight inequality, address climate change, and ensure that no one is left behind. EU First Vice-President Timmermans told the European Parliament that “Europe has a duty – to itself, and to the international community – to lead in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.”¹

The importance of forests in meeting these goals cannot be underestimated. It is not enough to see forests as an ‘environment-only’ issue – protecting forests and the communities that defend them is just as much about poverty eradication, food security, climate change, social justice and sustainable consumption and production patterns. Any EU response to the SDGs must therefore include the protection of forests and the recognition and promotion of the rights of those who live in them.

A large, stylized yellow sun is positioned behind the word 'Focus'. To the right of the sun, two yellow birds are depicted in flight, one above the other. The word 'Focus' is written in a large, white, sans-serif font, and the word 'on forests' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font below it. The entire graphic is set against a light yellow background.

Focus on forests

¹ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/2014-2019/timmermans/announcements/remarks-first-vice-president-timmermans-european-parliament-plenary-debate-10-may-2016-follow-and_en

SDG 1 End poverty, in all its forms, everywhere

1.6 billion people depend on forests for their livelihoods,² but weak governance, corruption, and a failure to recognise community land rights mean many millions cannot access the income owed to them through forest activity. When enabled to manage their forest resources, communities get increased benefits and forests are likely to remain standing.³



The EU needs to ensure its new Consensus on Development, which sets out a plan for external development action, recognises the central role of governance reform in achieving development goals, and builds on the successes achieved by the ground-breaking Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan (see Fern's film [Stories from the ground](#)).

SDG 2 End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

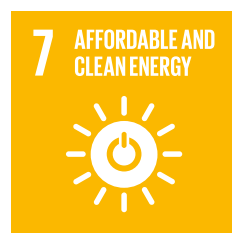
Many of the people that forests support are from financially poor rural communities. When their land rights are secure, and they have access to markets, these communities are best able to provide for themselves. If their land is taken over by large scale concessions however they rarely see financial benefits and their food security is undermined.



The EU needs to increase community control over forest lands through aid and trade policies. That means ensuring European companies and investors follow the UN Voluntary Guidelines on the Responsible Governance of Tenure (VGGT) and that EU aid strengthens local peoples' tenure rights and improves land governance. Such actions will increase the ability of millions of the world's poorest people to sustainably support themselves.

SDG 7 Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Bioenergy currently makes up around 65 per cent of EU renewable energy consumption and EU policies encourage this to grow further. The result is unsustainable pressure on forest and land within and outside the EU, but limited or no emission reductions



(see Fern's reports [A dangerous delusion](#) and [Burning trees is no solution to climate change](#)).

The EU needs to fundamentally change its bioenergy policy to reverse perverse incentives to burn agricultural crops and forests. EU climate and energy policies should focus on reducing energy demand and on increasing truly renewable energy such as solar, wind, tides and small scale water power. A sustainability policy for bioenergy should limit overall use of bioenergy to sustainable levels, ban the use of 'high-risk' sources and include measures to promote resource efficiency (see NGO paper [A new EU Sustainable Bioenergy Policy](#)).

SDG 12 Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Production of commodities such as palm oil, beef and leather, soy, cocoa and timber are the fastest growing threat to forests and the people who depend on them. In 2012 the EU imported EUR 6 billion of soy, beef, leather and palm oil which were grown or reared on land illegally cleared of forests.⁴ Such consumption is increasing demand for agricultural land outside the EU. Fern is calling on the EU to agree an EU Action Plan to halt deforestation and forest degradation and protect rights.



The EU needs to adopt measures that strip deforestation out of its supply chains as forest protection measures will not work unless supply chains are deforestation and conflict free. An Action Plan to protect forests and respect rights would be a start. Such an Action Plan should reduce consumption; ensure that what we consume is legally and sustainably produced and does not lead to deforestation; and strengthen community land rights and food sovereignty through aid and trade policies (see Fern's report [Protecting Forests, Respecting Rights](#)).

SDG 13 Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Levels of greenhouse gases are so high that we already need to be looking at how to remove them as well as getting close to zero emissions.⁵ The best and safest way to extract carbon dioxide from the atmosphere is to restore existing forests. The most consistent way to ensure rich and biodiverse forests is to respect and protect the land rights of the communities that live there. Done poorly however, such attempted reductions would threaten food security, community land rights and forests,



2 <http://www.fao.org/forestry/livelihoods/en/>
3 <http://www.wri.org/securingrights>

4 <http://www.fern.org/stolengoods>
5 www.fern.org/goingnegative

while simultaneously scuppering goals to combat climate change (see Fern report [Going Negative](#)).

The EU needs to change and implement its land use, land use change and forestry (LULUCF) policy in such a way that it protects and restores forests to maximise their carbon-carrying capacity, while making sure this is not used as an excuse to continue burning fossil fuels. EU policies should not support large scale biomass burning as this increases emissions and indirect land use change, and displaces existing uses of timber.

SDG 15 Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

As the only SDG with a specific focus on forests, SDG 15 sets a target to promote sustainable forest management, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation by 2020. The protection and sustainable use of forest resources requires good governance at local, regional and national level.



The Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) which are negotiated and signed as part of the FLEGT Action have proven to be remarkably effective in improving forest governance in a number of countries (see Fern report [Do FLEGT VPAs improve governance?](#)).

The EU needs to maintain its commitment to FLEGT VPAs and transfer lessons about how to ensure participatory decision-making to other EU processes and commodities.

SDG 16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

Peaceful and inclusive societies are built on a foundation of sound governance – where resources are managed equitably for the benefit of all, rule of law prevails, and the legitimacy of those laws is broadly accepted. This understanding is reflected by SDG 16, which focuses on transparency, participation, accountability, government coordination and enhanced capacity. The mismanagement of forests and forest land can fuel conflict. Governed well, forest lands can be harnessed to enhance peace and equity.



The EU needs to integrate the five pillars of good governance (transparency, participation, accountability, coordina-

tion and capacity) in its external action, recognising the decade of learning on these topics encapsulated by the FLEGT VPA process.

Recommended Fern reports

On governance and forests (SDGs 1, 2, 15, 16)

- [Do FLEGT VPAs improve governance?](#)
- [Improving forest governance: A comparison of FLEGT VPAs and their impact](#)
- [Catching it all: Making EU illegal logging policies work better for people and forests](#)

On energy policies and forests (SDG 7, 15)

- [Burning trees for energy is no solution to climate change](#)
- [A dangerous delusion: Debunking the myths around sustainable forests and the EU's bioenergy policy](#)

On climate change and forests (SDG 13)

- [Going Negative – How carbon sinks could cost the Earth](#)
- [Report of a seminar on 'Negative emissions'](#)

On supply chains and forests (SDG 12, SDG 15)

- [Stolen Goods: The EU's complicity in illegal tropical deforestation](#)
- [Protecting Forests, Respecting Rights: Options for EU action on deforestation and forest degradation](#)
- [Less and better: Making EU consumption policies work for people and forests](#)



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