

# A Legal Appraisal of the Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Forest Conservation Within the CEMAC Region

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## Abstract

This article examines the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in forest conservation within the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) region, comprising Cameroon, Congo, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, and the Central African Republic. The research employs a doctrinal legal research methodology combined with qualitative case study analysis. Primary legal instruments examined include Cameroon's Law No. 2024/008 of July 24, 2024 on the forestry and wildlife regime, the Republic of Congo's Law No. 33-2020 of July 8, 2020 on the forestry code, and regional CEMAC decisions, particularly Decision No. 06/24-UEAC-225-CM-41 of February 23, 2024 on the progressive prohibition of tropical timber exports in log form. Secondary sources include NGO reports, academic literature, policy documents, and institutional materials from organisations such as the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), the Network of Protected Areas of Central Africa (RAPAC), the Environment and Rural Development Foundation (ERuDeF), and the Network of Indigenous and Local Populations for the Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa (REPALEAC). The study finds that NGOs in the CEMAC region perform multifaceted roles encompassing advocacy and policy influence, protected area management, community engagement and capacity building, research and monitoring, and litigation and enforcement. However, these organizations face significant challenges including limited financial resources, constrained legal mandates, operational insecurity, insufficient coordination with state institutions, and restrictive regulatory environments. The research further reveals that recent legal developments—particularly the adoption of Cameroon's new forestry law after sixteen years of legislative revision and the CEMAC Council of Ministers' decision to progressively ban log exports by 2028—have created both opportunities and challenges for NGO engagement in forest governance. The article recommends enhanced legal recognition of NGO roles in forest governance frameworks, establishment of sustainable funding mechanisms including the operationalisation of the proposed CEMAC solidarity fund for climate change, strengthened coordination mechanisms between NGOs and state institutions, capacity building for local and indigenous NGOs, improved access to environmental information and justice, and the inclusion of civil society in the implementation of regional forest policy decisions.

**Keywords:** non-governmental organizations, forest conservation, CEMAC, Central Africa, forest law, environmental governance, sustainable forest management, log export ban, community forestry

## 1. Introduction

Forests constitute one of the most critical ecosystems for global environmental stability, biodiversity conservation, and climate change mitigation. The Congo Basin, of which the CEMAC region forms a substantial part, contains the world's second-largest tropical rainforest, spanning approximately 200 million hectares and storing an estimated 30 billion tonnes of carbon.<sup>1</sup> This vast forest estate provides essential ecosystem services,

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<sup>1</sup> Congo Basin Forest Partnership. (2023). The Forests of the Congo Basin: State of the Forest 2022, p. 15.

supports the livelihoods of over 60 million people, and harbours exceptional biodiversity, including endangered species such as forest elephants, gorillas, and chimpanzees. The Central African forest ecosystems are home to exceptional biodiversity, offering vast potential for the socio-economic development of the region. As a representative from REPALEAC stated, “The forests of Central Africa are not just natural resources; they are the lifeblood of our communities, sustaining our way of life and our cultural heritage.”<sup>1</sup>

Globally, the recognition of forests as vital carbon sinks and biodiversity repositories has intensified since the adoption of the Paris Agreement in 2015 and the subsequent development of REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) frameworks.<sup>2</sup> International instruments such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have progressively emphasized the importance of participatory governance and the inclusion of non-state actors in forest management.<sup>3</sup> This global trend towards multi-stakeholder governance has created space for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to assume increasingly significant roles in forest conservation. The Congo Basin’s forests have been positioned to play a leading role in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, though implementation details remain to be fully developed.<sup>4</sup>

At the regional level, the CEMAC region faces acute forest governance challenges. These include illegal logging, weak enforcement of forestry regulations, land-use conflicts between conservation and development objectives, limited local processing capacity, and the marginalisation of indigenous and local communities in forest management decisions.<sup>5</sup> The region’s forests continue to experience significant deforestation and degradation, driven by agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, and unsustainable timber extraction. These challenges are compounded by climate change impacts, which threaten forest resilience and the livelihoods of forest-dependent communities. The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) has conducted a forest campaign in Central Africa for over a decade, highlighting that the export of logs is “very critical” and has benefitted forest offenders to the detriment of ecosystems, communities, and national economies.<sup>6</sup> According to EIA’s investigations carried out in Congo Basin countries for over a decade, the export of logs against national laws is arguably the largest forest crime, both in volume and revenues, in the region.<sup>7</sup>

Within this complex governance landscape, NGOs have emerged as influential actors in forest conservation. Since the 1990s, international and national NGOs have established a significant presence across the CEMAC region, engaging in activities ranging from policy advocacy and legal reform to community-based conservation and protected area management.<sup>8</sup> The evolution of forest governance frameworks—particularly the recent adoption of revised forestry legislation in several CEMAC member states—has both reflected and been influenced by NGO advocacy efforts. This article examines the multifaceted role of NGOs in forest conservation within the CEMAC region. It analyses the legal and institutional framework governing forest management, appraises the specific contributions of NGOs, identifies the challenges they face, and proposes recommendations for enhancing their effectiveness in forest governance.

## 2. Conceptual Overview

Non-governmental organisations are broadly defined as legally constituted, non-profit, voluntary organisations that operate independently of government control.<sup>9</sup> In the context of forest conservation, NGOs encompass a diverse range of entities, including international conservation organisations (e.g., World Wildlife Fund, Conservation International), regional networks (e.g., Network of Protected Areas of Central Africa – RAPAC), national conservation foundations (e.g., Environment and Rural Development Foundation – ERuDeF), and

<sup>1</sup> REPALEAC. (2024). Network of Indigenous and Local Populations for the Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa. Mission Statement.

<sup>2</sup> Paris Agreement, 2015, UN Doc. FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev.1, art. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992, 1760 UNTS 79, art. 6; United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 1992, 1771 UNTS 107, art. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, H.C.P. (2019). *The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in Forest Governance in Central Africa*. PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, p. 45.

<sup>5</sup> Environmental Investigation Agency. (2020). *Tainted Timber, Tarnished Temples*, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Environmental Investigation Agency. (2026). *Cameroon Advances CEMAC Log Export Ban: An Important Step To Combat Forest Crime*. Press Release.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Brown, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> The World Bank. (1990). Operational Directive on NGOs and the Bank, para. 2.

community-based organisations.<sup>1</sup> RAPAC, for instance, is an implementing and advocacy NGO that focuses on the preservation of natural resources and biodiversity in protected areas across nine Central African member countries: Gabon, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, São Tomé and Príncipe, Rwanda, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic.<sup>2</sup>

Forest conservation refers to the protection, preservation, management, and restoration of forest ecosystems.<sup>3</sup> It encompasses biodiversity conservation, sustainable forest management, climate change mitigation, and the protection of forest-dependent communities' rights and livelihoods. In the CEMAC context, forest conservation is pursued through multiple mechanisms, including protected area designation, sustainable logging concessions, community forestry, and payment for ecosystem services schemes.<sup>4</sup> The Network of Protected Areas of Central Africa (RAPAC) aims to improve the state and management of protected areas, as well as promote knowledge of the value of such areas among the general populace, gathering biodiversity and socioeconomic data in the protected areas to inform these efforts.<sup>5</sup>

The role of NGOs in environmental governance has evolved significantly over the past three decades. Initially focused on awareness-raising and advocacy, NGOs have increasingly assumed operational roles in conservation, including protected area co-management, community engagement, scientific research, and monitoring of forest law compliance.<sup>6</sup> This evolution reflects broader trends in environmental governance towards multi-stakeholder participation, decentralisation, and the recognition of non-state actors as legitimate governance partners. In the CEMAC region, the growth of NGO activity has been closely linked to the international discourse on sustainable development and the increasing availability of international conservation funding.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Legal and Institutional Framework

#### 3.1 International Legal Framework

The international legal framework for forest conservation provides the normative foundation for national and regional forest governance in the CEMAC region. The Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, 1992) requires parties to develop national biodiversity strategies and action plans, establish protected area systems, and promote sustainable use of biological resources.<sup>8</sup> The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, 1992) and the Paris Agreement (2015) establish frameworks for climate change mitigation, including REDD+ mechanisms that provide incentives for forest conservation.<sup>9</sup> The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES, 1973) regulates international trade in endangered species, including many forest-dependent species found in the CEMAC region.<sup>10</sup> These instruments create obligations for states that NGOs often monitor and use as benchmarks for advocacy.

#### 3.2 Regional Legal Framework: CEMAC Instruments

The CEMAC has developed a growing body of forest-related instruments through the Economic Union of Central Africa (UEAC). The most significant recent development is Decision No. 06/24-UEAC-225-CM-41 of the Council of Ministers of the UEAC, adopted on February 23, 2024, in Bangui, Central African Republic, to progressively ban the export of tropical timber in log form.<sup>11</sup> Under this decision, from January 1, 2025, CEMAC member states and the Democratic Republic of Congo must take measures for progressive prohibition, with a full and absolute ban taking effect from January 1, 2028.<sup>12</sup> After that date, only timber products that have undergone secondary processing in the country of origin may be exported. However, log exports remain permitted between CEMAC countries and with the DRC to encourage industrial exchanges and cross-border

<sup>1</sup> RAPAC. (2024). Organisation Profile.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Convention on Biological Diversity, op. cit., art. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Cameroon, Law No. 2024/008 of July 24, 2024 on the Forestry and Wildlife Regime, arts. 33-49.

<sup>5</sup> RAPAC, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, op. cit., p. 102.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>8</sup> Convention on Biological Diversity, op. cit., art. 6.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, op. cit., art. 4; Paris Agreement, op. cit., art. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, 1973, 993 UNTS 243, art. 2.

<sup>11</sup> CEMAC, Decision No. 06/24-UEAC-225-CM-41 of the Council of Ministers of the Economic Union of Central Africa, February 23, 2024.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 1.

value chains.<sup>1</sup> This decision represents a long-standing advocacy priority for environmental NGOs in the region, including the EIA, which has been campaigning for stronger controls on log exports.<sup>2</sup>

The decision followed several postponements from an initial January 2022 date to January 2023, and then to the current 2028 deadline.<sup>3</sup> The postponements have been attributed to pressure from forestry industry lobbies and concerns over fiscal revenue losses.<sup>4</sup> As a source within the CEMAC Commission noted, “This is not the first time there has been such a postponement,” with the earlier implementation attempts having been “defeated by the victory of the large forestry operator lobbies” who pressure governments to continue log exports.<sup>5</sup> Officially, the hesitation of four CEMAC countries—Cameroon, Chad, the Central African Republic, and Equatorial Guinea—to implement the ban stems from the significant fiscal revenue losses that the decision would entail.<sup>6</sup>

In 2025, the CEMAC Council of Ministers adopted a new directive establishing a harmonised framework for incentive forestry taxation related to the export of processed wood products, aiming to encourage local processing and create a level playing field for timber industries.<sup>7</sup> The CEMAC budget for 2025, adopted at the 42nd ordinary session of the UEAC Council of Ministers, amounts to 82,981,074,871 CFA francs, representing a slight decrease from the previous fiscal year.<sup>8</sup> The budget provides for the creation of a solidarity fund to respond to climate change challenges in the CEMAC zone, reflecting the region’s growing recognition of the links between forest conservation and climate resilience.<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3 National Legal Frameworks

At the national level, recent legislative reforms are particularly noteworthy. Cameroon adopted Law No. 2024/008 of July 24, 2024 on the forestry and wildlife regime after sixteen years of legislative revision, comprising 191 articles grouped into seven chapters, which repeals and replaces the previous Law No. 94/01 of January 20, 1994.<sup>10</sup> The law covers all rules that govern the conservation, protection, exploitation, restoration of forest landscapes and degraded lands, and the development and renewal of forest and wildlife resources in forest areas.<sup>11</sup> It incorporates customary rights, the usage rights of riparian communities, and a forest control system based on the national strategy for forest and wildlife controls.<sup>12</sup>

The new law introduces participatory and inclusive mechanisms, including community protected areas (classified spaces within the State’s private domain granted to communities for their cultural and socio-economic needs),<sup>13</sup> community forests (portions of national forest on which the State grants usage rights to village communities, managed with technical assistance from the forestry administration),<sup>14</sup> community hunting territories,<sup>15</sup> and community-managed hunting interest zones.<sup>16</sup> Community forests are allocated for use by the State to a riparian community that expresses an interest in it, initially through a provisional agreement for a maximum period of two years, followed by a simple management plan for a period of five years, then a definitive agreement for a period of twenty-five years renewable.<sup>17</sup> The riparian community itself decides on the activities it will carry out in the community forest, which may include agriculture, hunting, gathering, collection

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Environmental Investigation Agency, ‘Cameroon Advances Cemar Log Export Ban’, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Bodjongo, M.J.M. and Mbobda, J.K.F. (2023). Economic and Environmental Effects of the Ban on Log Exports in the CEMAC Zone. *International Journal of Agricultural Resources, Governance and Ecology*, 19(4), p. 285.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

<sup>5</sup> CEMAC: *Le report de l’interdiction d’exportation de grumes suscite des interrogations*. (2023, January 15). Agence Ecofin.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> CEMAC. (2025). 42nd Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers of the Economic Union of Central Africa, Final Communiqué.

<sup>8</sup> CEMAC: *Le budget 2025 arrêté à 82,9 milliards FCFA*. (2024, October 23). Agence Gabonaise de Presse.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Cameroon, Law No. 2024/008 of July 24, 2024 on the Forestry and Wildlife Regime.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 33.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 37.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 45.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 49.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 38.

of dead wood, felling of trees for construction, logging, and religious activities.<sup>1</sup>

However, civil society organisations have criticised the law for lacking clarity on the legal framework for community protected areas and for not including concrete financing mechanisms or technical assistance for communities.<sup>2</sup> A consortium of civil society organizations from the forests, environment and human rights sector (APED, CeDLA, CERAD, ECODEV, FLAG, GDA, SAILD) closely monitored the legislative process and conducted a critical reading of the bill, highlighting its innovations and weaknesses, but their recommendations were not taken into account.<sup>3</sup> The law is described as a mixture of “glimmers of hope in view of the salutary developments it enshrines, and lures in view of the pitfalls identified.”<sup>4</sup> It is particularly concerning that a circular setting increased restrictive conditions for national and international civil society organisations working on forest and wildlife issues was published soon after the adoption of the new forest law.<sup>5</sup>

The Republic of Congo adopted a new forestry code through Law No. 33-2020 of July 8, 2020, comprising 260 articles divided into 13 titles.<sup>6</sup> The law aims to establish the fundamental principles of organisation and management of the national forest domain, as well as the rules for exploitation and marketing applicable to forest products.<sup>7</sup> Article 97(1) of this law provides the legal basis for the prohibition of log exports, which was implemented from January 1, 2023 through a directive from the Director-General of the Autonomous Port of Pointe-Noire.<sup>8</sup> The law also introduced the principle of Free, Prior and Informed Consent (CLIP) in Article 5.<sup>9</sup> Other CEMAC member states—Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, and the Central African Republic—maintain their respective national forestry laws, though these are increasingly harmonised through CEMAC regional instruments.

### 3.4 Institutional Framework

The institutional landscape includes CEMAC bodies such as the Council of Ministers of the UEAC (which adopts regional decisions), the CEMAC Commission (which implements them and coordinates member state actions), and the Community Court of Justice (which adjudicates disputes).<sup>10</sup> The Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), though not a CEMAC institution per se, works closely with CEMAC on forest policy coordination.<sup>11</sup> The Network of Protected Areas of Central Africa (RAPAC), as an implementing and advocacy NGO, works to support conservation in and around the protected areas of Central Africa by building an efficient and supportive network of actors driven by the promotion of professional governance and harmonization of management policies and instruments.<sup>12</sup> National forestry administrations in each member state are responsible for implementing forestry laws, issuing permits, monitoring operations, and enforcing regulations. NGOs interact with all these institutions, often acting as watchdogs, technical partners, and advocates.

## 4. Appraisal of the Role of NGOs in Forest Conservation

### 4.1 Advocacy and Policy Influence

NGOs have been instrumental in shaping forest policy at both national and regional levels. The Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) has conducted a forest campaign in Central Africa for over a decade, highlighting the critical nature of log exports and advocating for stronger controls.<sup>13</sup> According to Luke Allen, Senior Campaigner at EIA, the export of logs is “very critical.”<sup>14</sup> Following the February 2024 CEMAC decision, EIA welcomed the Government of Cameroon’s decision to expand the list of timber species prohibited to be exported

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 39.

<sup>2</sup> *Bois de la CEMAC: Nouvelle loi forestière camerounaise: des insuffisances inquiétantes.* (2024). Civil Society Analysis.

<sup>3</sup> PFBC-CBFP. (2024). Cameroon’s New Forest and Wildlife Regime: An Analysis by GDA and its Partners, p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> GDA Cameroon. (2025). Rights of Local and Indigenous Communities under Cameroon’s New Forestry Law. *Analysis Note*, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Congo, Law No. 33-2020 of July 8, 2020 on the Forestry Code.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 1.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 97(1).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, art. 5.

<sup>10</sup> Treaty Establishing the Central African Economic and Monetary Community, 1994, art. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Central African Forests Commission, Strategic Plan 2020-2025.

<sup>12</sup> RAPAC, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Environmental Investigation Agency, ‘Cameroon Advances Cemar Log Export Ban’, *op. cit.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

as raw logs, adding 15 species to the list covered under the national log export ban.<sup>1</sup> Fabrice Lamfu, the Africa Program Manager at EIA US, stated, “The log export ban will not solve all forest crimes overnight, but it raises the cost of illegality and ultimately serves as a deterrent against criminal actors.”<sup>2</sup>

Civil society organisations actively participated in the legislative process leading to Cameroon’s Law No. 2024/008, presenting proposals to improve forest management and ensure that the rights of local communities and indigenous peoples are properly considered.<sup>3</sup> A consortium of civil society organisations conducted a critical reading of the bill and submitted recommendations to parliamentarians.<sup>4</sup> However, their recommendations were not taken into account.<sup>5</sup>

Following the CEMAC log-export ban decision, civil society organisations in the Central African Republic have worked to disseminate and promote compliance with the prohibition on exporting logs outside the CEMAC and DRC.<sup>6</sup> In the Democratic Republic of Congo, the NGO “Le Réseau national des observateurs indépendants des ressources naturelles en RDC” (Renoi) has exhorted the government and its partners to strengthen legislation, eliminate degradation factors, and take immediate measures to mitigate factors harmful to the preservation of Congolese forests.<sup>7</sup> Renoi has also insisted on the securing of forest titles, the cleaning and updating of the forest titles database to eliminate those obtained illegally, the clarification of the carbon market and its regulation in the DRC, while guaranteeing equitable benefit-sharing with local communities and indigenous peoples.<sup>8</sup>

In September 2025, a high-level webinar was co-organised by the Pan-African Network for the Conservation of Natural Resources in Africa (PANCANR) and the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) on the prohibition of log exports in Africa, focusing on the Central African region.<sup>9</sup> The webinar aimed to share experiences and lessons learned from countries implementing this policy, raise awareness among African countries and forest sector stakeholders on the importance of the log export ban, and encourage compliance from the private sector, promote strengthened regional cooperation between states, NGOs, institutions and companies for 100% implementation of the prohibition.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.2 Protected Area Management and Conservation

Several NGOs are directly involved in the management and conservation of protected areas across the CEMAC region. The Network of Protected Areas of Central Africa (RAPAC) is an implementing and advocacy NGO that focuses on the preservation of natural resources and biodiversity in protected areas across nine Central African member countries.<sup>11</sup> The network aims to improve the state and management of protected areas, as well as promote knowledge of the value of such areas among the general populace.<sup>12</sup> Its work comprises the creation of pilot demonstration sites, biodiversity reserves, climate change laboratories, and spatial planning tools for protected areas in its member countries.<sup>13</sup> To date, it oversees 82 protected areas, including 6 biosphere reserves recognized by the MAB Program, and 8 that are UNESCO World Heritage Sites.<sup>14</sup>

RAPAC’s core mission is to support conservation in and around the protected areas of Central Africa by building an efficient and supportive network of actors driven by the promotion of professional governance and

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> SAILD. (2024, June 28). *Forestry and wildlife bill: Civil society presents its contributions to parliamentarians* [Press release].

<sup>4</sup> PFBC-CBFP, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> *Centrafrique: Le CIEDD veut vulgariser la décision interdisant l’exportation de grumes hors de la CEMAC et de la RDC.* (2025, October 24). Oubangui Médias.

<sup>7</sup> *RDC: Le gouvernement exhorté à renforcer la législation pour préserver les forêts.* (2024, November 13). Agence Congolaise de Presse.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Pan-African Network for the Conservation of Natural Resources in Africa. (2025, September). *Webinar on the prohibition of log exports in Africa* [Webinar].

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> RAPAC, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

harmonization of management policies and instruments.<sup>1</sup> The network has undergone reforms that have repositioned it as the institution regionally legitimate and credible to support Central Africa's protected areas, making it the sole "regional leader" meant to legitimately support protected areas of Central Africa.<sup>2</sup>

The Environment and Rural Development Foundation (ERuDeF) is an award-winning non-profit Cameroonian conservation organization established in 1999.<sup>3</sup> ERuDeF has been working across Cameroon and has significantly contributed towards restoring fragile ecosystems, regeneration of forest through plantation and agroforestry, conservation of biodiversity through wildlife habitat protection and protected area management.<sup>4</sup> ERuDeF is also promoting environmental education, as well as empowering rural communities through innovative economic and livelihood development programmes.<sup>5</sup>

ERuDeF's activities include research and bio-monitoring, collecting data of flora and fauna species and anthropogenic factors for effective management and policy implementation; protected area and corridor management, including the creation of Protected Areas and development as well as implementation of Management Plans for the conservation of threatened species such as critically endangered cross river gorillas, endangered Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee, drills, goliath frog, pangolin, wild cats, elephants and a host of endangered birds and reptiles; community forestry to link protected areas within the landscape as well as the genetic corridors; restoration of degraded ecosystems through planting of agroforestry and other economic trees; food security and economic resilience programmes promoting agrobiodiversity, agroecology, agroforestry, organic farming and forest gardening for rural small scale farmers; and economic development programmes supporting local livelihood development with alternative income generating options such as bee keeping, cassava processing, animal husbandry, and processing of Non-timber forest products.<sup>6</sup>

ERuDeF has also been active in great ape conservation, significantly advancing its efforts in the Tofala Hills Wildlife Sanctuary (THWS) through collaborative management approaches.<sup>7</sup> With fewer than 300 individuals surviving in scattered forest fragments along the Cameroon-Nigeria border, the Cross River Gorilla holds the distinction of being the most endangered gorilla subspecies on Earth, and ERuDeF has played an active role in initiatives to protect this species and its forest habitats.

#### 4.3 Community Engagement and Capacity Building

NGOs have been particularly active in engaging local and indigenous communities in forest conservation. The Network of Indigenous and Local Populations for the Sustainable Management of Forest Ecosystems in Central Africa (REPALEAC) was established in 2003.<sup>8</sup> REPALEAC represents more than 120 Indigenous groups across eight Central African countries.<sup>9</sup> The network works to advance Indigenous land and resource rights, promote sustainable forest management, and support community-led sustainable development across the Congo Basin region.<sup>10</sup> REPALEAC serves as a key partner under the FSC Indigenous Foundation's Indigenous Peoples Alliance for Rights and Development (IPARD) Program, working to advance the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) across Central Africa.<sup>11</sup>

REPALEAC's advocacy focuses on the participation and consideration of the rights and interests of Indigenous and Local Communities in negotiation spheres related to their issues and the implementation of sustainable management of lands, forests, and natural resources at local, national and international levels.<sup>12</sup> In August 2024, REPALEAC, in collaboration with the FSC Indigenous Foundation, hosted an intensive training workshop in Douala, Cameroon, with 50 representatives from its member organisations to strengthen the organisational and

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Environment and Rural Development Foundation. (2024). *Mission and activities*.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Environment and Rural Development Foundation. (2024). *Cross River gorilla conservation progress report*.

<sup>8</sup> REPALEAC. (2024). *Network profile*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> FSC Indigenous Foundation. (2024). *Indigenous Peoples Alliance for Rights and Development program*.

<sup>12</sup> REPALEAC, op. cit.

operational capacities of the network.<sup>1</sup>

REPALEAC has expanded its partnership with the Rights and Resources Initiative and its rightsholder-led funding mechanism, the Community Land Rights and Conservation Finance Initiative (CLARIFI) across the Congo Basin.<sup>2</sup> Their efforts have led to measurable impacts in the region since 2022, helping to secure communities' rights to about 2.1 million hectares and strengthening their governance, conservation practices, and livelihoods across 17.8 million hectares in Gabon, the DRC, and the Republic of the Congo.<sup>3</sup> In March 2026, REPALEAC, RRI, and CLARIFI convened local partners, Indigenous leaders, donors, and global allies in Kinshasa for a high-level event, "One Basin, One Vision: The Congo Basin's Path to Rights, Livelihoods, and Impact Towards 2030."<sup>4</sup>

The Centre pour l'Environnement et le Développement (CED) is a Cameroonian NGO engaged in environmental advocacy, contributing to protecting the rights, needs, and culture of local and indigenous communities in Central African forests, promoting sustainable natural resource management based on environmental justice.<sup>5</sup>

NGOs have also supported the establishment and management of community forests under national legal frameworks. Cameroun Ecologie (Cam-Eco) is a non-profit national NGO established in September 2000 that is active in sustainable natural resource management, including community forestry support, mangrove ecosystem sustainable management, forest governance, and community land and forest tenure.<sup>6</sup> Under Cameroon's new law, community forests are managed by riparian communities with technical assistance from the forestry administration, and NGOs often provide that assistance and capacity building.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.4 Research, Monitoring, and Data Collection

NGOs contribute significantly to forest research and monitoring in the CEMAC region. ERuDeF conducts research and bio-monitoring, collecting data of flora and fauna species and anthropogenic factors for effective management and policy implementation.<sup>8</sup> Sekakoh, a Cameroonian NGO dedicated to safeguarding the nation's biodiversity, conducts field research tracking primates, large mammals, reptiles, amphibians, plants, and tree phenology to understand species ecology and inform restoration plans.<sup>9</sup> The organisation focuses on protecting endangered species such as the Nigeria-Cameroon chimpanzee and Kordofan giraffe, with work built upon four core pillars: Research & Monitoring, Protection & Patrol, Community Engagement & Education, and Collaboration & Capacity Building.<sup>10</sup>

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has intended to set up a forest integrity monitoring system within riparian communities, conducting baseline studies on forest integrity using the Forest Integrity Assessment (FIA) tool.<sup>11</sup> NGOs have trained government eco-guards and community members to identify potential deforestation sites via satellite data, contributing to early warning systems for forest loss.<sup>12</sup>

RAPAC gathers biodiversity and socioeconomic data in protected areas to inform conservation efforts.<sup>13</sup> The network's work includes the creation of climate change laboratories and spatial planning tools for protected areas.<sup>14</sup> The Action for the Conservation of Biodiversity (ACB-ONG) provides services in protected area management, sustainable forest management, and support to biodiversity conservation, sustainable management of natural resources, and the fight against climate change.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup> REPALEAC, & FSC Indigenous Foundation. (2024, August). *Training workshop report*.

<sup>2</sup> Rights and Resources Initiative. (2026). *Indigenous and local communities' rights coalitions drive bold 2030 vision for the Congo Basin*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> CED. (2024). *Mission statement*.

<sup>6</sup> Cameroun Ecologie. (2024). *Activities overview*.

<sup>7</sup> Cameroon, Law No. 2024/008, op. cit., art. 37.

<sup>8</sup> ERuDeF, op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Sekakoh. (2024). *Collaboration towards a wilder Cameroon*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> World Wide Fund for Nature. (2024). *Forest integrity monitoring initiative*.

<sup>12</sup> *Monitoring group cracks down on deforestation in Cameroon gorilla sanctuary*. (2024, November 28). Mongabay.

<sup>13</sup> RAPAC, op. cit.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Action for the Conservation of Biodiversity. (2024). *Services overview*.

#### 4.5 Litigation and Enforcement

NGOs have increasingly engaged in litigation and enforcement actions to protect forests in the CEMAC region. The Environmental Investigation Agency has been particularly active in documenting and exposing illegal logging operations.<sup>1</sup> According to EIA's investigations, the export of logs against national laws is arguably the largest forest crime, both in volume and revenues, in the region, hurting fragile forest ecosystems, livelihoods, and national coffers.<sup>2</sup>

Civil society organisations have also used legal mechanisms to hold logging companies accountable for environmental damage. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, Renoi has called for the securing of forest titles and the cleaning and updating of the database of forest titles to eliminate those obtained illegally, and for this to be done in complete transparency.<sup>3</sup> Renoi has also emphasised the need to ensure the protection of socio-environmental activists, their security, and their voices in favour of more open and transparent governance of natural resources.<sup>4</sup>

EIA has called on government institutions, private sector operators, regional bodies, and international partners to intensify efforts to eliminate log exports and ensure strict compliance with the new classification.<sup>5</sup> The organisation remains committed to supporting this transition across Cameroon and the wider CEMAC region by strengthening transparency, reinforcing independent forest monitoring, and working with partners to ensure accountability in timber flows.<sup>6</sup> EIA has noted that full enforcement of the log export ban by 2028 is not only a policy commitment but also a strategic economic opportunity to drive local value addition, reduce illegal logging, and improve sector governance.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4.6 Challenges Facing NGOs

Despite their significant contributions, NGOs in the CEMAC region face numerous challenges.

First, financial constraints are acute. Local non-profit organisations face significant challenges when seeking to access ecosystem restoration funding.<sup>8</sup> The CEMAC budget for 2025, while providing for the creation of a solidarity fund for climate change, does not allocate dedicated resources for NGO engagement in forest conservation.<sup>9</sup> The budget represents a decrease of 8.9% compared to that of 2024, a reduction of 7.6 billion CFA francs.<sup>10</sup>

Second, legal mandates are often constrained. Cameroon's new law, while participative and inclusive, lacks clarity on the legal framework for community protected areas and does not include concrete financing mechanisms or technical assistance for communities.<sup>11</sup> The recommendations made by the consortium of civil society organisations during the legislative process were not taken into account.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, a circular setting increased restrictive conditions for national and international civil society organisations working on forest and wildlife issues was published soon after the adoption of the new forest law, raising concerns about the operating environment for NGOs.<sup>13</sup>

Third, operational insecurity is a persistent issue. In August 2025, Louis Nkembi, founder of conservation NGO ERuDeF, was abducted.<sup>14</sup> In April 2017, ERuDeF, like most other conservation NGOs in the region, had to halt operations due to the risk of death and abduction.<sup>15</sup> This security situation severely constrains the ability of

<sup>1</sup> Environmental Investigation Agency, 'Cameroon Advances Cemar Log Export Ban', op. cit.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> 'RDC: le gouvernement exhorté à renforcer la législation pour préserver les forêts', op. cit.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Environmental Investigation Agency, op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Funding options for ecosystem restoration in Central America and Africa*. (2024). UNCCD Library.

<sup>9</sup> CEMAC, 42nd Ordinary Session Final Communiqué, op. cit.

<sup>10</sup> 'CEMAC: le budget 2025 arrêté à 82,9 milliards FCFA', op. cit.

<sup>11</sup> 'Bois de la CEMAC: Nouvelle loi forestière camerounaise: des insuffisances inquiétantes', op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> PFBC-CBFP, op. cit., p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> GDA Cameroon, op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> Louis Nkembi, founder of conservation NGO ERuDeF, abducted. (2025, August). Mongabay.

<sup>15</sup> Environment and Rural Development Foundation. (2017, April). *Security situation report*.

NGOs to operate effectively in forest areas.

Fourth, coordination with state institutions is often insufficient. The CEMAC regional framework does not establish formal structures for NGO participation in forest governance.<sup>1</sup> While the CEMAC and RDC leadership on the log export ban has been encouraged, the role of civil society organisations in its implementation remains to be fully defined.<sup>2</sup> The Pan-African Network for the Conservation of Natural Resources in Africa has emphasised the need for strengthened regional cooperation between states, NGOs, institutions and companies for 100% implementation of the prohibition.<sup>3</sup>

Fifth, capacity constraints—particularly among local and community-based NGOs—limit their technical and institutional effectiveness in complex governance issues. REPALEAC's training workshop in August 2024 aimed to strengthen the organisational and operational capacities of its member organisations, indicating the ongoing need for capacity building.<sup>4</sup>

Sixth, the implementation of the CEMAC log export ban remains uncertain. Within the CEMAC Commission, many officials remain skeptical about the effective implementation of the decision at the new dates.<sup>5</sup> The postponements have been attributed to pressure from forestry industry lobbies and concerns over fiscal revenue losses.<sup>6</sup> The effective implementation of the ban will also be crucial to comply with the new European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), which is slated to come into effect in December 2026, and the EU should actively support the new measures.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

This article has examined the role of non-governmental organisations in forest conservation within the CEMAC region. The research demonstrates that NGOs perform multifaceted and increasingly significant roles in forest governance, encompassing advocacy and policy influence, protected area management, community engagement and capacity building, research and monitoring, and litigation and enforcement.

The recent legal developments—particularly Cameroon's Law No. 2024/008 on the forestry and wildlife regime, adopted after sixteen years of legislative revision, and the CEMAC Council of Ministers' Decision No. 06/24-UEAC-225-CM-41 to progressively ban log exports by 2028—have created both opportunities and challenges for NGO engagement. While these instruments reflect progressive policy directions and provide new spaces for community participation through mechanisms such as community forests, community protected areas, and community hunting territories, they also present implementation challenges that NGOs are well-positioned to address.

NGOs have demonstrated their value as partners in forest conservation, bringing technical expertise, community connections, and advocacy capacity that complement state institutions. The work of organisations such as RAPAC in managing protected areas, ERuDeF in community-based conservation and ecosystem restoration, REPALEAC in advancing the rights of Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities, and EIA in advocacy and enforcement has contributed significantly to forest governance in the region.

However, NGO effectiveness is constrained by limited financial resources, constrained legal mandates, operational insecurity, and insufficient coordination with state institutions, capacity limitations, and restrictive regulatory environments. The future of forest conservation in the CEMAC region will depend significantly on the extent to which NGOs can overcome these challenges and strengthen their contributions to sustainable forest governance. This requires not only enhanced NGO capacity but also supportive legal and institutional frameworks that recognise and enable NGO participation.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are proposed.

First, enhanced legal recognition of NGO roles. CEMAC member states should amend their forestry laws to provide clear and explicit recognition of the roles of NGOs in forest governance, including rights to participate in policy development, access to environmental information, and standing to bring enforcement actions. The

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>2</sup> Pan-African Network for the Conservation of Natural Resources in Africa, op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> REPALEAC and FSC Indigenous Foundation, Training Workshop Report, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup> 'CEMAC: le report de l'interdiction d'exportation de grumes suscite des interrogations', op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Bodjongo and Mbobda, op. cit., p. 286.

<sup>7</sup> European Union, Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 on Deforestation-Free Products, art. 35.

implementation of Cameroon's Law No. 2024/008 should be accompanied by regulations that clarify the role of civil society in community forestry and protected area management. The recommendations made by civil society organisations during the legislative process should be taken into account in the development of implementing decrees. The restrictive circular that imposes increased conditions on civil society organisations working on forest and wildlife issues should be reviewed to ensure that it does not unduly constrain legitimate NGO activities.

Second, establishment of sustainable funding mechanisms. CEMAC institutions and member states should establish sustainable funding mechanisms to support NGO engagement in forest conservation. This could include allocating a portion of revenues from forest taxes and fees to NGO conservation programmes, facilitating access to international climate finance (e.g., REDD+ funds, Green Climate Fund) for NGO-led initiatives, and operationalising the proposed CEMAC solidarity fund for climate change to provide dedicated resources for civil society organisations working on forest conservation. The CEMAC budget for 2025, while providing for the creation of a solidarity fund, should ensure that this fund is adequately resourced and accessible to NGOs.

Third, strengthened coordination mechanisms. CEMAC should establish formal mechanisms for NGO participation in regional forest governance processes, including NGO representation in forestry policy development, regular consultations between CEMAC institutions and civil society, and the creation of a CEMAC Civil Society Advisory Group on Forest Governance. The strengthened regional cooperation between states, NGOs, institutions and companies called for in the September 2025 webinar should be actively pursued.

Fourth, capacity building for local and indigenous NGOs. International partners, CEMAC institutions, and national governments should invest in capacity building for local and community-based NGOs, including technical training in forest monitoring, conservation planning, and legal advocacy; institutional strengthening and organisational development support; and mentorship and partnership programmes linking local NGOs with international organisations. The work of REPALEAC in strengthening the capacities of Indigenous and Local Communities should be supported and expanded.

Fifth, improved access to environmental information and justice. CEMAC member states should strengthen legal frameworks for access to environmental information and justice, including implementation of the Aarhus Convention principles (access to information, public participation, and access to justice in environmental matters), establishment of environmental courts or specialised chambers to handle forest-related cases, and legal aid mechanisms to enable communities and NGOs to pursue enforcement actions. The protection of socio-environmental activists called for by Renoï should be ensured by all CEMAC member states.

Sixth, integration of traditional knowledge and community rights. Forest governance frameworks should better integrate traditional knowledge and community rights, building on the provisions of Cameroon's Law No. 2024/008 regarding community forests, community protected areas, community hunting territories, and community-managed hunting interest zones. NGOs should continue to support indigenous and local communities in asserting their rights and participating in forest management decisions. The 2030 Vision for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities in the Congo Basin developed by REPALEAC should be supported by CEMAC institutions and member states.

Seventh, enhanced regional cooperation. CEMAC member states should strengthen regional cooperation on forest conservation, including harmonisation of forestry laws, joint monitoring of transboundary forest resources, coordination of enforcement actions against illegal logging, and collective implementation of the log export ban. The effective implementation of the CEMAC Decision No. 06/24-UEAC-225-CM-41 by 2028 should be ensured through transparent monitoring, independent oversight, and the active participation of civil society.

Eighth, inclusion of civil society in the implementation of the log export ban. The CEMAC Commission and member states should actively involve civil society organisations in the implementation of the log export ban, including in monitoring compliance, raising awareness among stakeholders, and ensuring accountability in timber flows. The EIA's work in strengthening transparency, reinforcing independent forest monitoring, and ensuring accountability in timber flows should be supported and expanded. The webinar series organised by PANCANR and EIA should be continued to share experiences and lessons learned and to encourage compliance from all stakeholders.

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