

# Issue brief

## Chinese demand for timber and wildlife in West Africa

### Responding to the environmental and social impacts

Ebagnerin Jérôme Tondoh, Roland Balgah, Caroline Costello, Moses Fayiah, Jean-Luc Kouassi, and Christine A. I. Nougbodé Ouinsavi\*

#### Bottom lines up front

- China's demand for timber and illegal wildlife products contributes significantly to deforestation and biodiversity loss in West Africa.
- Despite existing legal and voluntary frameworks, many West African countries struggle with enforcement due to weak institutional capacity, underfunded regulatory agencies, corruption, limited monitoring, and political interference.
- This brief offers recommendations to strengthen enforcement and promote accountability to address the environmental and social impacts of Chinese demand for timber and wildlife in the region.

#### Executive summary

West Africa's forests are vital for climate regulation, biodiversity conservation, poverty alleviation, and economic growth. They store carbon, protect watersheds, and sustain millions of rural livelihoods. However, accelerating deforestation, habitat loss, illegal wildlife trade, and unsustainable resource extraction—often linked to Chinese actors—threaten these critical functions. Chinese timber companies, agribusinesses, infrastructure developers, and wildlife traders have increasingly contributed to forest degradation across the region. Illegal logging—particularly of rosewood and other valuable timber in Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Sierra Leone, and Liberia—has fueled widespread forest loss, including in protected areas. Driven almost

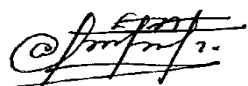
entirely by Chinese demand, rosewood is now the world's most trafficked illegal wildlife product in terms of both value and volume, surpassing ivory and rhinoceros horn combined. Though Chinese investments in the region's timber industry have brought some economic benefits, the environmental costs far outweigh the local gains. Large-scale land acquisitions and infrastructure projects frequently lead to forest conversion, erode community land rights, and put endangered species at risk of extinction. This policy brief examines the environmental and social impacts of Chinese exploitation of forests and wildlife in West Africa and offers recommendations to strengthen enforcement, promote accountability, and engage Beijing to address these challenges.

\* after the first author, others listed alphabetically.

### Editors' introduction

In May 2025, the China Global South Initiative (CGSi), a collaboration between the Keough School of Global Affairs and the Atlantic Council Global China Hub, convened a group of twenty-two African environmental experts at the Peduase Valley Resort in Ghana for a three-day workshop on China's environmental impact in West Africa. This policy workshop, hosted with the support of the Ford Foundation, included representatives from eleven West African countries—Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo—and South Africa. Amid three days of comradery and collaboration, these experts worked together to draft policy memorandums on China's environmental impact across the region. In the months following the workshop, we worked closely with the authors to curate three briefs—on mining and resource extraction, timber and wildlife, and fisheries and water resources—that identify the challenges and offer actionable policy solutions. We would like to recognize the excellent work of the co-authors who contributed their time and expertise to creating these briefs. In particular we would like to thank the group leaders Abosede Omowumi Babatunde, Ebagnerin Jérôme Tondoh, and Ebimboere Seiyafa and Awa Niang Fall, respectively, for their diligent work.

First and foremost, we would like to thank Caroline Costello, assistant director of the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub, for her essential contributions to the workshop in Ghana and this collection of issue briefs. Her tireless efforts were truly essential to the success of the project. Ashley Bennett, events strategy program director of the University of Notre Dame's Keough School of Global Affairs, provided critical logistical support across a dozen countries. Alexandra Towns at the Keough School and Cate Hansberry, Beverly Larson, and Jeff Fleischer at the Atlantic Council provided expert editorial support. Guidance from Notre Dame's Pamoja Africa Initiative helped us identify contributors, and the Kellogg Institute helped support their participation. We would also like to thank the excellent staff of the Peduase Valley Resort for their hospitality during the May 2025 workshop. Last, but not least, we would like to thank our partner, the Ford Foundation, whose support made the workshop and these policy briefs possible. Ford is not responsible for the content of these policy briefs.



**Ellis Adjei Adams, PhD**

Associate Professor of Geography  
and Environmental Policy  
Keough School of Global Affairs  
University of Notre Dame  
Series co-editor



**Joshua Eisenman, PhD**

Professor of Politics  
CGSi Co-Director  
Keough School of Global Affairs  
University of Notre Dame  
Series co-editor

## Background

West Africa contains some of the continent's most intact tropical forests, which support more than nine hundred bird species and nearly four hundred species of terrestrial mammals.<sup>1</sup> The region is recognized as a global biodiversity hotspot and hosts 113 key biodiversity areas across countries such as Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, and Cameroon.<sup>2</sup> However, these ecologically important regions are under increasing threat, with more than 265,000 hectares of forest lost in the past decade.<sup>3</sup>

A significant driver of this forest loss is the growing footprint of Chinese economic activity in the region. China's involvement in timber extraction, agribusiness, infrastructure development, and wildlife trade has been linked to deforestation, biodiversity loss, and the breakdown of essential ecosystem services such as climate regulation, water provision, and carbon storage.<sup>4</sup> The demand for valuable hardwoods, especially rosewood—driven almost entirely by the Chinese market—has led to widespread illegal and unsustainable logging, often in protected areas and forest reserves.<sup>5</sup>

Over the past two decades, Chinese investments in West Africa—estimated at more than \$200 billion as of 2021—have expanded rapidly across various sectors.<sup>6</sup> While these invest-

ments have spurred infrastructure development and trade, they have also caused serious environmental damage. In countries such as Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone, Chinese firms are frequently associated with both legal and illicit timber operations. In addition, Chinese-backed agribusiness ventures, particularly in rubber and palm oil, have led to extensive land acquisitions and deforestation, undermining traditional land tenure systems and disrupting local livelihoods.<sup>7</sup>

Chinese infrastructure and mining projects have opened previously undisturbed forest and conservation areas, fragmented habitats and weakened the ecological integrity of critical landscapes. These developments often erode community-based forest management practices and contribute to the marginalization of local populations.<sup>8</sup>

Despite existing legal and voluntary frameworks—including forest codes, environmental impact assessment laws, and international commitments such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+, developed by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) and the African Forest Landscape Restoration Initiative—many West African countries struggle with enforcement due to weak institutional capacity, underfunded regulatory agencies, corruption, limited monitoring, and political interference.<sup>9</sup> In many

1. Olivia Crowe, et al., "A Global Assessment of Forest Integrity within Key Biodiversity Areas," *Biological Conservation* 286 (2023), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0006320723003944>.
2. Norman Myers, et al., "Biodiversity Hotspots for Conservation Priorities," *Nature* 403 (2000), <https://www.nature.com/articles/35002501>; "Key Biodiversity Areas: Standards and Guidelines for Identifying KBAs," KBA Partnership, last visited September 9, 2025, <https://www.keybiodiversityareas.org/about-kbas>.
3. Brittany T. Trew, "Predicting Near-future Deforestation in West African Key Biodiversity Areas to Inform Conservation Urgency," *bioRxiv*, October 8 2024, <https://www.biorxiv.org/content/10.1101/2024.10.07.616969v1>.
4. James Mayers, Samuel Assembe-Mvondo, and Hang Zhou, "Enterprise in the Undergrowth: Exploring the Ways Chinese Companies Operate in the Dja Forest in Cameroon," *African Study Monographs* 43 (2023), 84–101, [https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/asm/43/0/43\\_43.84/\\_article](https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/asm/43/0/43_43.84/_article); Anthony Baidoo, Philippe Méral, and Symphorien Ongolo, "Chinese-driven Ghana Rosewood Trade: Actors and Access Dynamics," *Geoforum* 146 (2023), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016718523001975?via%3DiHub>; Feyi Ogunade, "Flora / Illegal Logging Cuts Deep into The Gambia's Ecology and Economy," *Enact Observer*, Institute for Security Studies, November 29, 2024, <https://enactafrica.org/enact-observer/illegal-logging-cuts-deep-into-the-gambia-s-ecology-and-economy>; "James Mayers, 'China-Africa Forest Governance Project,'" International Institute for Environment and Development, 2018, <https://www.iied.org/china-africa-forest-governance-project>; Julius Chupezi Tieguhong, "Illicit Trading in Africa's Forest Products: Focus on Timber," *African Natural Resources Centre*, 2021, [https://aprm.dedicated.co.za/aprm/galleries/files-elibrary\\_resource/illicit\\_timber\\_trade\\_report-1.pdf](https://aprm.dedicated.co.za/aprm/galleries/files-elibrary_resource/illicit_timber_trade_report-1.pdf).
5. "The Rosewood Racket: China's Billion Dollar Illegal Timber Trade and the Devastation of Nigeria's Forests," *Environmental Investigation Agency*, 2017, <https://rosewoodracket.eia-global.org>.
6. Solomon Obi, "China's Impact on Reshaping African's Infrastructure," *African Leadership*, August 4, 2025, <https://www.africanleadershipmagazine.co.uk/chinas-impact-on-reshaping-africas-infrastructure/>.
7. Ilaria Dibattista, et al., "Socio-environmental Impact of Mining Activities in Guinea: The Case of Bauxite Extraction in the Region of Boké," *Journal of Cleaner Production* 387 (2023), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0959652622052945?via%3DiHub>.
8. Sheridan Prasso, "China's Quest for Iron," *Bloomberg*, June 23, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2022-china-africa-iron-mining-simandou-mountains>.
9. Caroline Jephumba Kibii, "Significance of REDD+ in Africa: Challenges and Probable Solutions," *European Union*, 2022, <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/96b3cb11-139a-11ed-8fa0-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>.

cases, Chinese firms bribe local officials to push forward opaque timber and land deals.<sup>10</sup> The co-optation of local elites further shields environmental offenders from accountability.<sup>11</sup>

There is an urgent need for coordinated national and regional responses to address these challenges. Key policy priorities should include strengthening environmental governance, enhancing transparency in investment and land deals, securing community land rights, and holding Chinese firms accountable for environmental damage. Without these measures, the region's forests—and the critical ecological and social benefits they provide—will remain at risk from unchecked Chinese firms exploitation.<sup>12</sup>

### Evidence

The evidence of China's role in accelerating deforestation and biodiversity loss in West Africa is substantial and alarming. Driven by surging demand for valuable timber and wildlife products Chinese firms have emerged as the dominant foreign actors in the trade. Even when there are existing protections for threatened tree species (e.g., the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), these logging activities, which are often conducted illegally or through weak regulatory channels, have far-reaching consequences for ecosystems and rural livelihoods.<sup>13</sup>

At the heart of the crisis lies demand for rosewood, a valuable tropical hardwood used in traditional Chinese furniture. According to the Environmental Investigation Agency, rosewood is now the most trafficked illegal wildlife product globally—by both value and volume—surpassing ivory, rhinoceros horn, and big cats combined.<sup>14</sup> The value of rosewood exports from West Africa to China was estimated to have surpassed \$2 billion between 2017 and 2022, with logs fetching on average more than \$20,000 per metric ton in 2021.<sup>15</sup> China's domestic market demand drives rampant logging in West Africa, with an estimated 70 percent of logging in Ghana, 65 percent in Cameroon, and 56 percent in Nigeria classified as illegal.<sup>16</sup> Despite an export ban, Ghana sent 540,000 metric tons of rosewood to China between 2012 and 2019—equal to six million trees or about 2,000 acres of forest loss.<sup>17</sup>

The financial losses attributed to illegal timber harvesting are staggering. The World Bank estimates that illegal logging deprives source governments worldwide of between \$7 billion and \$12 billion annually.<sup>18</sup> In 2018, illegal deforestation cost countries approximately \$4,000 per hectare in lost tax revenue, ecosystem degradation, and social conflict.<sup>19</sup> Each year Nigeria loses \$191 million to \$383 million in tax revenues; Cameroon loses \$51 million to \$103 million; Côte d'Ivoire loses \$38 million to \$76 million; and The Gambia loses \$4 million to \$9 million.<sup>20</sup> The illegal rosewood trade—driven by corruption, the misuse

10. Oluwale Ojewale, "Nigeria and Cameroon Must Confront Timber Trafficking Together," Institute for Security Studies, July 15, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/nigeria-and-cameroon-must-confront-timber-trafficking-together>
11. Oluwale Ojewale, "Nigeria and Cameroon Must Confront Timber Trafficking Together," Institute for Security Studies, July 15, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/nigeria-and-cameroon-must-confront-timber-trafficking-together>; "Case Study: Enabling Private Sector Investment for Forest Landscape Restoration through Multi-Partner Platforms in Africa: The Case of AFR100," Partnerships for Forests, October 2022, [https://partnershipsforforests.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/AFR100\\_Case\\_study\\_EXT.pdf](https://partnershipsforforests.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/AFR100_Case_study_EXT.pdf).
12. Ojewale, "Nigeria and Cameroon Must Confront Timber Trafficking Together"; Labode Popoola, "Cross-border Trade in Forest Products and Services and Trade Impacts in West Africa," African Forest Forum, 2014, 56, <https://afforum.org/publications/cross-border-trade-forest-products-and-services-and-trade-impacts-west-africa>.
13. "The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES)" US Congress, August 27, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL32751>.
14. "The Rosewood Racket."
15. Annika Hammerschlag, "Gambia Bans Exports of Endangered Rosewood; Enforcement Woes Remain," VOA News, July 7, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/gambia-bans-exports-of-endangered-rosewood-enforcement-woes-remain/6649532.html>. Nijman, Vincent & Siriwat, Penthai & Shepherd, Chris. (2021). Inaccuracies in the reporting of volume and monetary value of large-scale rosewood seizures. *Forest Policy and Economics*. 134. 102626. 10.1016/j.forpol.2021.102626.
16. "Illegal Logging in SSA by FCN," Financial Crime News, 2020, <https://thefinancialcrimenews.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Illegal-Logging-SSA-by-FCN-2020.pdf>; Miranda Montero, et al., "Illegal Logging, Fishing, and Wildlife Trade: The Costs and How to Combat It," World Bank Group, October 1, 2019, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/422101574414576772>.
17. Eric M. Kioko, "Forest Crime in Africa: Actors, Markets and Complexities" in *African Futures*, 2022, 125–140, <https://brill.com/display/book/9789004471641/BP000021.xml>.
18. Montero, et al., "Illegal Logging, Fishing, and Wildlife Trade."
19. "The Economic Impacts of Illegal Agro-Conversion on Tropical Forest Countries: A New Framework Supports National and Global Cost Estimates," *Forest Trends Information Brief*, June 2018, [https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Info-Brief-Costs-of-Illegal-Agro-Conversion\\_Final.pdf](https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Info-Brief-Costs-of-Illegal-Agro-Conversion_Final.pdf).
20. Montero, et al., "Illegal Logging, Fishing, and Wildlife Trade."

of licenses to recover trees downed by storms or construction, and weak oversight – has been particularly profitable.

Criminal and extremist networks use profits from this illicit trade to fund their operations. As of 2020, more than 1 million trees were illegally harvested and sent to China from Senegal's Casamance region, helping to fund separatist groups such as the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance.<sup>21</sup> In Mozambique, the rosewood trade fuels al-Shabab militants linked to the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).<sup>22</sup> Chinese smugglers source rosewood from Nigerian regions controlled by Boko Haram, allowing the group to profit.<sup>23</sup> In Mali, despite a 2020 national export ban, nearly 150,000 tons of rosewood—equivalent to 220,000 trees—were exported to China.<sup>24</sup> In Mali, al-Qaeda-linked Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin militants profit by controlling access to rosewood forests.<sup>25</sup>

Corruption plays a central role in sustaining the illegal timber trade. Chinese companies often operate through shell firms or local agents to obscure accountability.<sup>26</sup> Regulatory enforcement remains underfunded and inconsistent, while laws requiring environmental impact assessments for logging are frequently bypassed or ignored. Forestry agencies and customs offices are often compromised by corruption.<sup>27</sup> One of the most egregious cases happened in Nigeria in 2017, when Chinese customs authorities intercepted 1.4 million illegal

rosewood logs valued at \$300 million, facilitated by nearly \$1 million in bribes to Nigerian officials.<sup>28</sup>

Chinese-funded infrastructure also contributes to deforestation. Chinese-financed roads, ports, and dams often cut through protected areas, offering loggers access to previously unreachable forests. Operating through local intermediaries, Chinese timber companies extract high-value hardwoods such as rosewood, teak, and ebony either illegally or through legal loopholes. Based on geospatial analysis, approximately 10 percent of Ghana's critical forest reserves and 11 percent of Côte d'Ivoire's overlap with Chinese-sponsored infrastructure.<sup>29</sup> One of the most contested cases is Ghana's Atewa Forest Reserve, a biodiversity hot spot threatened by Chinese bauxite mining.<sup>30</sup> Despite strong civil-society opposition, the government proceeded with road construction in anticipation of mining operations, causing significant environmental degradation including forest fragmentation, incursions into conservation zones, and habitat destruction. Deforestation disrupts rainfall patterns, accelerates erosion, and increases the frequency of droughts and floods, undermining agricultural productivity in a region where 70–80 percent of rural livelihoods depend on farming.

Large-scale agricultural ventures compound these impacts. In Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Cameroon, Chinese

21. "Illegal Logging in SSA by FCN."

22. Ogunade, "Flora / Illegal Logging Cuts Deep into The Gambia's Ecology and Economy"; "Shipping the Forest," Environmental Investigation Agency, May 14, 2024, [https://eia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/EIA\\_US\\_Mozambique\\_Timber\\_Report\\_0424\\_FINAL\\_SINGLES-5-13.pdf](https://eia.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/EIA_US_Mozambique_Timber_Report_0424_FINAL_SINGLES-5-13.pdf).

23. "The Rosewood Racket."

24. "Poached Timber: Forest Crimes, Corruption, and Ivory Trafficking in the Malian Rosewood Trade with China, May 18, 2022, [https://eia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/EIA\\_US\\_Mali\\_Timber\\_report\\_0422\\_FINAL.pdf](https://eia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/EIA_US_Mali_Timber_report_0422_FINAL.pdf).

25. Iván Navarro Milián, et al., "Alert 2022! Report on Conflicts, Human Rights, and Peacebuilding," United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict, February 2022, <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/report/alert-2022-report-on-conflicts-human-rights-and-peacebuilding/Alert-2022-Report-on-conflict-human-rights-and-peacebuilding.pdf>; Christian Ani, "Timber Logging Drives JNIM's Expansion in Mali," Institute for Security Studies, June 19, 2024, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/timber-logging-drives-jnim-s-expansion-in-mali>.

26. "The Rosewood Racket."

27. Ibid.

28. "Historic Endangered Timber Smuggling Case Revealed Between Nigeria and China," Environmental Investigation Agency, November 9, 2017, <https://eia.org/press-releases/historic-endangered-timber-smuggling-case-revealed-between-nigeria-and-china/#:~:text=WASHINGTON%2C%20DC%20%E2%80%93%20One%20of%20the,million%2C%20were%20laundered%20into%20China>.

29. Suyash Padhye, Jenan Almullaali, and Makarand Hastak, "Geospatial Analysis of China's Overseas Development Finance (CODF) Projects with Protected Areas in Africa," Proceedings of the 23rd CIB World Building Congress, Purdue University, May 2025, <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/cib-conferences/vol1/iss1/36/>.

30. Terrence Neal, "The Environmental Implications of China-Africa Resource-Financed Infrastructure Agreements: Lessons Learned from Ghana's Sinohydro Agreement," Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions, March 2021, <https://nicholasinstitute.duke.edu/sites/default/files/publications/The-Environmental-Implications-of-China-Africa-Resource-Financed-Infrastructure-Agreements-Lessons-Learned-from-Ghana%E2%80%99s-Sinohydro-Agreement.pdf>; Sebastian Purwins, "Bauxite Mining at Atewa Forest Reserve, Ghana: A Political Ecology of a Conservation-exploitation Conflict," *GeoJournal* 87 (2022), 1085–1097, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10708-020-10303-3>.

agribusinesses have cleared vast tracts of forest for rubber, palm oil, and rice cultivation. Free, prior, and informed consent policies are on the books in all of these nations, requiring consultations with indigenous peoples and local communities.<sup>31</sup> But agribusinesses routinely ignore such requirements. In Cameroon, Sudcam (a subsidiary of China Hainan Rubber Group) cleared more than 10,000 hectares between 2011 and 2018 and contributed to 45,000 hectares of deforestation.<sup>32</sup> These enterprises displace communities without proper compensation.

In addition to timber, China's demand for exotic wildlife has turned West Africa into a hub for global wildlife trafficking. Since 2015, Nigeria has been China's primary source for ivory and pangolin scales. Between 2018 and 2023, seizures in Nigeria included more than 30 metric tons of ivory and 167 metric tons of pangolin scales, equivalent to at least 4,400 elephants and hundreds of thousands of pangolins, respectively.<sup>33</sup> While West African countries are signatories to relevant international frameworks like CITES, which monitors the trade in endangered wild animals and plants, in many West African countries sales continue due to weak enforcement, corruption, poor monitoring, and lack of effective local regulatory mechanisms.<sup>34</sup>

China has responded to criticism of its global development and infrastructure initiatives by releasing voluntary environmental

sustainability guidelines, including the 2017 *Guidance on Promoting a Green Belt and Road* and the 2021 *Green Development Guidelines for Overseas Investment*.<sup>35</sup> These guidelines encourage Chinese firms to abide by host country laws, but they lack enforcement mechanisms. Similarly, China's 2019 Forest Law discourages illegal timber imports but lacks provisions for supply chain oversight. Firms can evade prosecution by claiming ignorance of illegality.<sup>36</sup> A 2022 draft regulation aims to apply aspects of China's domestic Forest Law to its international practices, but it lacks the enforcement mechanisms necessary to make the international supply chain traceable.<sup>37</sup>

In short, China's timber harvesting, infrastructure construction, agriculture investments, and wildlife trade have contributed significantly to deforestation and biodiversity loss in West Africa. The convergence of high domestic Chinese market demand, weak governance across West Africa, lapse enforcement within China, and corruption has created a perfect storm of environmental degradation. Addressing this behavior requires a strong political commitment to combat criminal activity and shift the incentives that drive the market for illegally traded wildlife products. To address the problem, African countries must coordinate policy responses across the local, regional, and international levels. For its part, China should adopt and strictly enforce mechanisms that ensure responsible practices toward West African forests and wildlife.

31. "Chinese Group Invests in Sierra Leone Rubber," Tyrepress, January 24, 2012, <https://www.tyrepress.com/2012/01/chinese-group-invests-in-sierra-leone-rubber/>; Samuel Assembe-Mvondo, et al., "What Happens When Corporate Ownership Shifts to China? A Case Study on Rubber Production in Cameroon," *European Journal of Development Research* 28 (2015), 465–478, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/ejdr.2015.13>; Xavier Aurégan, "Les Investissements Publics Chinois Dans Les Filières Agricoles Ivoiriennes," *Cahiers Agricultures* 26, 1 (2017), <https://www.cahiersagricultures.fr/fr/articles/cagri/abs/2017/01/cagri160051/cagri160051.html>; "ADF-16 Report 2023: The African Development Fund Evaluates the Transformative Effect of Its Interventions in Africa," African Development Fund, December 2, 2024, <https://adf.afdb.org/adf-16-report-2023-the-african-development-fund-evaluates-the-transformative-effect-of-its-interventions-in-africa/>.
32. "Chinese Rubber Plantations in Cameroon Destroy the Lives and Livelihoods of the Baka," African Defense Forum, August 22, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/08/chinese-rubber-plantations-in-cameroon-destroy-the-lives-and-livelihoods-of-the-baka/>; "Guidelines on Free, Prior and Informed Consent," UN-REDD Programme, July 30, 2018, <https://www.un-redd.org/document-library/guidelines-free-prior-and-informed-consent>.
33. "Out of Africa: How West and Central Africa Have Become the Epicentre of Ivory and Pangolin Scale Trafficking to Asia," Environmental Investigation Agency, December 2020, <https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/2020-Out-of-Africa-SPREADS.pdf>; Zwannda Nethavhani, Catherine Maria Dzerefos, and Raymond Jansen, "Scaly Trade: Analyses of the Media Reports of Pangolin (Pholidota) Scale Interceptions Within and Out of Africa," *Global Ecology and Conservation* 61 (2025), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2351989425002707?via%3DIhub>; Alisa Davies, et al., "Live Wild Bird Exports from West Africa: Insights into Recent Trade from Monitoring Social Media," *Bird Conservation International* 32, 4 (2022), 559–572, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/bird-conservation-international/article/abs/live-wild-bird-exports-from-west-africa-insights-into-recent-trade-from-monitoring-social-media/4A01FE8DBD90A1095F3557F55219994C>.
34. Dumenu, "Assessing the Impact of Felling/Export Ban and CITES Designation on Exploitation of African Rosewood (*Pterocarpus Erinaceus*)."
35. Kelly Sims Gallagher and Qi Qi, "Chinese Overseas Investment Policy: Implications for Climate Change," *Global Policy* 12 (2021), 260–272, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.12952>.
36. Hiromitsu Samejima, "Summary for Business Entities: Revised Forest Law and Status of Timber Legality Verification by Business Entities in China," Institute for Global Environmental Strategies, 2023, [https://www.iges.or.jp/system/files/publication\\_documents/pub/commissioned/12847/Summary\\_China%20technical%20report%20in%20EN\\_final.pdf](https://www.iges.or.jp/system/files/publication_documents/pub/commissioned/12847/Summary_China%20technical%20report%20in%20EN_final.pdf).
37. "Timber Legality Risk Dashboard: China," Forest Trends, October 2021, <https://www.forest-trends.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/China-Timber-Legality-Risk-Dashboard-IDAT-Risk.pdf>.



## Policy recommendations

### Improve oversight and compliance

- **Disclose environmental and social impact assessments.** To enhance transparency and facilitate oversight, West African governments should require all foreign investments in logging, agribusiness, and infrastructure to conduct and publicly disclose their environmental impact assessments. These results must be made available to relevant local authorities prior to project approval.
- **Improve legal transparency.** Publish a national land and concession registry that includes all foreign allocations and permits. Ensure contracts are clearly defined, legally binding, and aligned with national conservation laws. Update land tenure legislation to protect customary rights and require public registration of all foreign land concessions. Strengthen customs enforcement in African countries, shared border points, and Chinese ports to prevent the export and import of unverified timber and endangered species.
- **Establish escrow accounts to ensure reforestation.** Require licensed logging and agribusiness firms to deposit funds into escrow accounts dedicated to ecological restoration. Funds should only be released upon verification of reforestation or land rehabilitation by either a certified private institution or the relevant state agency, depending on relevant laws and regulations. If companies fail to restore the land, the funds should be redirected to local communities for remediation and compensation.
- **Create national whistleblower systems.** Develop national level secure, multilingual tools—such as short message service (SMS) platforms, mobile apps, and anonymous hotlines—for communities, nongovernmental organizations, and forestry workers to report illegal logging, land grabs, and wildlife crimes. Rather than rely entirely on global reporting platforms that may be inaccessible, national and local level platforms would enable faster and real time detection of illegal logging for prompt action by relevant subnational institutions. Enforce strong legal protections for whistleblowers and environmental defenders. Partner with international bodies such as Interpol, TRAFFIC (a network of two hun-

dred experts on the trade of wild species), and CITES to verify and investigate reported violations.

### Raise public awareness

- **Support regional civil-society coalitions.** Fund and strengthen regional and national coalitions of civil-society organizations that monitor Chinese forestry investments and expose violations of national laws and regulations. Recognize land governed and managed according to traditional community-based systems and build local capacity to negotiate fairer contracts. Equip community actors with tools including drones, Global Positioning System (GPS) devices, and mobile reporting apps to document and report illegal activities in real time.
- **Train and protect environmental journalists.** Work closely with local and transnational civil society organizations to provide training for local journalists to investigate the illegal timber trade, land seizures, and biodiversity threats linked to foreign investments. Training should focus on developing investigative methods, digital security, environmental law, and data-gathering. National and regional safety support programs should be made available to journalists, including emergency legal support, and encrypted communication platforms for those facing threats or harassment.

### Regional cooperation

- **Adopt a regional forestry code of conduct.** The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) should establish a binding regional code of conduct that sets minimum environmental and social standards for all foreign investments in terms of forests and biodiversity. This framework could be modeled on the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade (FLEGT) policies of the European Union or United Kingdom, and include voluntary partnership agreements.<sup>38</sup> Collective regional action can encourage individual reform-minded leaders to act as a counterweight against corrupt local officials.
- **Create a regional public forestry investment database.** Establish and maintain an online database that tracks foreign licenses, timber exports, and environmental violations. Under ECOWAS auspices, this platform should become a regional information hub that documents licensing status, compliance records, and audit outcomes. The intention is to enable public over-

38. “Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade—the European Union Approach,” European Forest Institute, 2008, <https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/8287d950-35a6-4aaa-9d66-c32295b06134/content>; “The Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Regulations 2012,” UK Statutory Instruments, 2012, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/2012/178/contents>; Matilda Miljand, et al., “Voluntary Agreements to Protect Private Forests—A Realist Review,” Forest Policy and Economics 128 (2021), <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1389934121000630?via%3Dihub>.

sight of Chinese and other foreign firms operating in forest and critical biodiversity areas.

- **Enhance international coordination.** Set up an ECOWAS task force to regularly exchange information on West African forest and wildlife resource exploitation. The task force would facilitate intelligence sharing on illegal timber trade routes and identify specific violations and bad actors. It could facilitate joint investigations into cross-border violations in shared forests such as the Upper Guinea region, which traverses Liberia, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea. The group would publish an annual report for ECOWAS members states and make specific recommendations to member countries. The task force could form a collective negotiation platform in collaboration with national forestry commissions to engage Chinese state-owned enterprises and private investors.
- **Work with China.** Create formal and informal dialogue channels among African environment ministries, ECOWAS, and Chinese embassies and companies to address logging violations and environmental disputes. To enhance contract transparency, the equitable sharing of benefits, and improve oversight, urge Beijing to make its *Green Development Guidelines for Overseas Investment* mandatory. West African governments should push China publicly and privately to implement timber supply chain tracing and to regularly publish customs data on timber imports into China.



---

### About the authors

**Roland Azibo Balgah** is professor of development studies at the University of Bamenda, Cameroon, and visiting professor at Sol Plaatje University, South Africa and University of Cologne, Germany. As a social economist, he researches on the human-nature sustainability nexus, with thrust on hazards, poverty and livelihoods, and sustainable development in Africa.

**Caroline Costello** is an assistant director with the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub. Prior to joining the Atlantic Council, Costello worked on the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program. In previous roles, she has taught English in Xiting, China; interned with the Peace Corps, the Department of State, and Save the Children; and served as the head of Learning Enterprises, an international volunteer program which sends students to teach English in underserved communities abroad.

**Moses Fayiah** is a forestry lecturer at the Department of Forestry and Wood Science, School of Natural Resources Management, Njala Campus, Njala University, Sierra Leone and has over 10 years of professional experience. He is also the executive director of Universal Consulting Services and the Forum for Environment, Biodiversity and Climate Change in Sierra Leone. His research interests include forest regeneration, sustainable forest management, climate change, forest policy and ecosystem restoration and conservation.

**Jean-Luc Kouassi** is an assistant professor of forestry and environmental management at the Felix Houphouët-Boigny National Polytechnic Institute (INP-HB) of Cote d'Ivoire with a decade of experience in cacao agroforestry, fire ecology, and GIS. His research explores the intersection of agriculture and sustainability, focusing on climate change mitigation, community empowerment, and sustainable landscape management.

**Christine Ajokè I. N. Ouinsavi** is a professor at University of Parakou (Benin), where she coordinates doctoral training in natural resources management, chairs the Scientific Committee of Natural Sciences and Agronomy, and leads the Forestry Studies and Research Laboratory. Her research focuses on ecology, agroforestry, climate change, biodiversity conservation, forest management and restoration in tropical regions. As former cabinet minister she led national policies in trade and education, chaired critical commissions, and participated in international negotiations.

**Ebagnerin Jérôme Tondoh** is an Associate Professor in ecology and sustainable management of land at Nangui Abrogoua University, Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. He has an extensive experience in stakeholder engagement, feasibility studies, and strategic planning. He is currently involved in projects for the sustainable management of tree-based cash crops agroforestry and other climate smart cropping practices. He is also in dialogue with various ministries responsible for forest, agriculture, and the environment in Côte d'Ivoire to provide science-based insights into their activities and develop integrated management plans for the sustainable management of agroecological landscapes.

---

### About the Center and the School

The Global China Hub tracks Beijing's actions and their global impacts, leveraging its network of China experts around the world to generate actionable recommendations for policymakers in Washington and beyond. Founded in 2014, the Donald R. Keough School of Global Affairs is a vibrant community committed to serving human dignity through research and scholarship, teaching and learning, and policies and practices designed to advance the development of the whole person and of each person in their specific socio-cultural context.