INTRODUCTION

The objective of this paper is to (i) briefly outline the global challenges related to crimes in the forest sector, as well as to (ii) provide an overview of the role and response of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

CRIMES IN THE FOREST SECTOR

Covering nearly a third of the planet’s land surface, the world depends on forests for survival. Forests are essential for human life, livelihoods and well-being. They provide habitats for animals, prevent soil erosion, offer watershed protection, act as carbon sinks to mitigate climate change, and millions around the world depend on sustainable and resilient forests for their livelihoods. Yet despite the vital services they provide, forests are under significant threat from intensive agriculture, criminal activities, and exploitation of natural resources including by organized criminal groups.

Global deforestation and forest degradation\(^1\) have been progressing at an alarming rate. Forests have a high capacity for carbon sequestration, which is lost when they are harvested unsustainably, further amplifying climate change and ecosystem degradation, and threatening the critical relationship between forests and water resources. While illegal logging often gets the most attention, other crimes in the forest sector are also often associated with a variety of illegal activities, and protecting and sustainably managing forests is critical to climate mitigation success.

Since 1990, it is estimated that some 420 million hectares of forest have been lost through conversion to other land uses. The issues around forest loss and timber trafficking are complex, often involving multiple actors in multiple countries. Crimes in the forest sector have all the hallmarks of organized and sophisticated crime, sharing many characteristics with other transnational criminal activities, frequently involving fraud, money-laundering and corruption. A unique feature of crimes in the forest sector is that when the forest is harvested and the timber sold, another valuable resource is created - land.

---

The general rule that applies to forest loss worldwide is that the higher the economic benefits of land without trees, compared to the benefits of land with trees, the greater the forest loss. Corruption is a key enabler of forest loss, fuelling crime and undermining efforts to protect, and sustainably manage forest lands. Large economic incentives, remoteness, lack of traceability, demographic pressure, and the lack of available tools, methods, or even standardized definitions to assess forest loss, among others, make forests fertile ground for corruption. Corrupt acts which occur at early stages of the forest management process, for instance at the land-rights allocation or land classification stages, can render future activities resulting in the destruction or degradation of forest appear completely legal.

It is important for countries to broaden their efforts against forest loss beyond a focus on the most well-known types of crime, including illegal logging and timber trafficking, to include all stakeholders involved in the production, administration, trade, financing and consumption of commodities driving forest loss. Understanding the economic interests driving forest loss and which agencies are involved in those activities is central to developing the right measures to address crime and corruption in these areas and to eventually mitigate forest loss and disrupt the organized criminal groups profiting from it.

UNODC PROGRAMMING

UNODC, as the guardian of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC) and the Protocols thereto, as well as the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), supports Member States’ efforts to address crimes that affect the environment including crimes in the forest sector. In 2020, States Parties to the UNTOC adopted resolution 10/6 on preventing and combating crimes that affect the environment. States commitment in addressing such crimes was further reiterated in UN General Assembly resolution 76/185 (2021), which details practical actions for Member States and the international community to prevent and combat crimes that affect the environment, including illicit trafficking in timber and timber products. The resolution requests UNODC to support Member States in this regard, including in relation to corruption and money laundering as well as to amend national legislation related to such crimes. The resolution further requests UNODC to expand coordination as well as cooperation with relevant organizations including the International Consortium on Combating Wildlife Crime (ICCWC). UNODC support to Member States on crimes that affect the environment is led by the Environment Team of UNODC’s Border Management Branch. The Environment Team is responsible for coordinating the expertise of all relevant UNODC sections, both in headquarters and in the field.

Due to the complexity of the forest sector a broad range of interventions are required to address the crimes that impact it. Several UNODC programmes and sections provide technical assistance, which either directly address crimes in the forest sector or are being expanded to ensure that it is included:

- Global Programme on Crimes that Affect the Environment (GPCAE)
- UNODC – INTERPOL Law Enforcement Assistance Programme to Reduce Tropical Deforestation (LEAP)
- UNODC – WCO Container Control Programme (CCP)
- Global Programme against Money Laundering, Proceeds of Crime and Financing of Terrorism (GPML)
- Global Programme on Implementing the Organized Crime Convention: From Theory to Practice
- Corruption and Economic Crime Branch
- Drugs, Laboratory and Scientific Service
- Research and Trends Analysis Branch
Technical Assistance and Capacity Building

In line with its mission to support Member States to confront the threats and challenges posed by crime, drugs, corruption and terrorism, by providing effective and comprehensive assistance that meet their needs, UNODC offers capacity building to Members States to better prevent, detect, investigate, prosecute and adjudicate transnational organized crimes that affect the environment, including crimes in the forest sector. UNODC technical assistance is based on a sound, multi-faceted analysis of the situation on the ground, taking into consideration empirical data and the broader criminal justice system and local political environment, while ensuring full adherence to human rights and gender sensitive responses. More specifically, UNODC technical assistance includes support to authorities to strengthen legislation, develop and implement strategies on crime prevention, mitigate corruption risks, enhance international cooperation, build capacities of legislative drafters, law enforcement, customs and border agencies, prosecutorial offices, the judiciary, and financial intelligence units for increased detection, investigation and prosecution of crimes in the forest sector.

Concrete examples of UNODC’s support to prevent and combat crimes in the forest sector include, but are not limited to:

**Data Collection, Research and Analysis:** identification and mapping of illegal logging activities using remote sensing, geospatial analysis and geographic system (GIS) technologies combined with Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning algorithms. UNODC provides analyses on illegal timber trade using UNODC’s World WISE database of wildlife seizures as well as conducting field interviews to understand how the trafficking occurs and what actors are involved. UNODC also conducts field-based assessments on forest-related crime in the context of illicit drug cultivation, wildlife crime and alternative development interventions on forest protection; this research feeds into the *World Wildlife Crime Report*, *the Global Analysis on Crimes that Affect the Environment* and *the World Drug Report*. National analyses of crimes in the forest sector are also conducted through the *Wildlife and Forest Crime Analytic Toolkit* and *Indicator Framework of the ICCWC*. More targeted analyses are also conducted on crimes in the forest sector to identify needs of law enforcement, prosecutors and the judiciary and inform programmatic interventions.

**Legislative assistance and strategic support:** development of legislative guides, including model legislative provisions and on implementing the UNTOC to prevent and combat crimes that affect the environment, supporting States in adopting strategies against organized crime; assistance in conducting legislative assessments and supporting Member States to review, draft and amend legislation related to crimes in the forest sector; collecting and uploading relevant legislation and case law on UNODC knowledge management portal (Sharing Electronic Resources and Laws on Crime - SHERLOC).
Regional and International Cooperation: creation of opportunities for networking and sharing of best practices through various fora, including the Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice; supporting the establishment of national Forest Crime Platforms that bring together inter-agency teams of technical experts and decision-makers from national justice and forest authorities whose range of functions are directly related to the regulation, prevention, and enforcement efforts to combat crime in the forest sector; facilitating enhanced cooperation amongst law enforcement authorities, including matters involving illicit supply chains as well as coordination and follow-up to law enforcement and customs operations to combat crimes that affect the environment; strengthening cooperation and information/intelligence including with the private sector, civil society and other relevant agencies through the establishment of task forces and mobile teams; supporting regional and inter-regional cooperation to identify and address problems relating prosecutions; and facilitating and strengthening capacity on international cooperation in criminal matters so that prosecutors can obtain evidence from source, transit or destination countries and seek the proceeds of these crimes, including by supporting judicial cooperation network and networks of environmental crime prosecutors.

Criminal Justice Responses: Identification of vulnerabilities in the timber supply chain prone to crime and corruption; promotion of capacity building to increase prevention and interdiction of timber trafficking including in the maritime and containerized trade supply chain through establishment of and training for Port Control Units; supporting maritime law enforcement including through mentorships and training in Visit, Board, Search and Seizure (VBSS), and riverine patrol as well as strengthening the Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capability of both technological and human capacity to detect vessel movement in high-risk inland waterways, estuaries, adjacent islands and coastal regions; improving investigations, enhancing application of forensic techniques, and strengthening prosecution including through the development of tools such as mobile applications for timber identification, Rapid Reference Guides for Investigators and Prosecutors of Forest Crime, and mock trial exercises; specialized training and long-term mentorships including through the use of new technologies provided to criminal justice actors to combat crimes in the forest sector more effectively.

Financial Sector Responses: inclusion of crimes in the forest sector in national and sectoral Anti-Money Laundering and Countering the Financing of Terrorism Risk Assessments and introduction of financial investigations; training and mentorship of relevant authorities to identify and investigate financial crimes related to crimes in the forest sector; supporting member states to prevent money laundering, conduct parallel financial investigations, trace, seize and confiscate proceeds of crimes in the forest sector.

Crime Prevention and Sustainable Livelihoods: provision of alternative, sustainable livelihoods, including through sustainable natural resource management and commercialization to prevent involvement of organized criminal groups as well as work with communities, including youth, at risk of involvement in crimes in the forest sector through sustainable livelihoods development and social entrepreneurship.

Addressing Interlinkages with Other Criminal Activities: addressing enabling, accompanying or consequential crimes associated with crimes in the forest sector, such as corruption and other economic crimes; developing knowledge products to help policy makers identify specific points in their legal and regulatory frameworks that are vulnerable to corruption risks, and to act to address those weaknesses, for example, Rooting Out Corruption: An introduction to addressing corruption driving forest loss aims to assist governments and other stakeholders in their goal of reversing forest loss by suggesting measures that can be used to mitigate the corruption that can lead to forest loss; supporting the assessment of corruption risks and the development and implementation of corruption mitigation measures in public institutions entrusted with the management and conservation of forests and other agencies relevant to the prevention of forest loss; strengthening beneficial ownership transparency and take action against professional enablers of corruption; enhancing capacity to investigate and prosecute corruption and other economic crimes to help target more senior members of criminal groups and the actual beneficiaries of crimes in the forestry sector, and to disrupt organized criminal groups.

Raising Awareness and Sharing Knowledge: convening awareness-raising events with the aim of increasing understanding on the importance of preventing and addressing crimes in the forest sector; developing educational and resource materials on crimes in the forest sector; developing social media campaigns and other awareness-raising campaigns and events, including the Wildlife Wednesday series for Permanent Missions; building public-private partnerships to leverage expertise and raise awareness amongst key stakeholders.