



Strengthening Collaborative Forest Management

for Livelihoods Improvement in West Nile and Karamoja Regions in Uganda



POLICY BRIEFING PAPER

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P. O. Box 29836, Kampala

Email: library@acode-u.org / acode@acode-u.org

Website: <https://www.acode-u.org>

Citation

Jonas Mbabazi Musinga and Paul Twebaze. (2026). *Strengthening Collaborative Forest Management for Livelihoods Improvement in West Nile and Karamoja Regions in Uganda*, Kampala: ACODE Policy Briefing Paper Series, No. 75.

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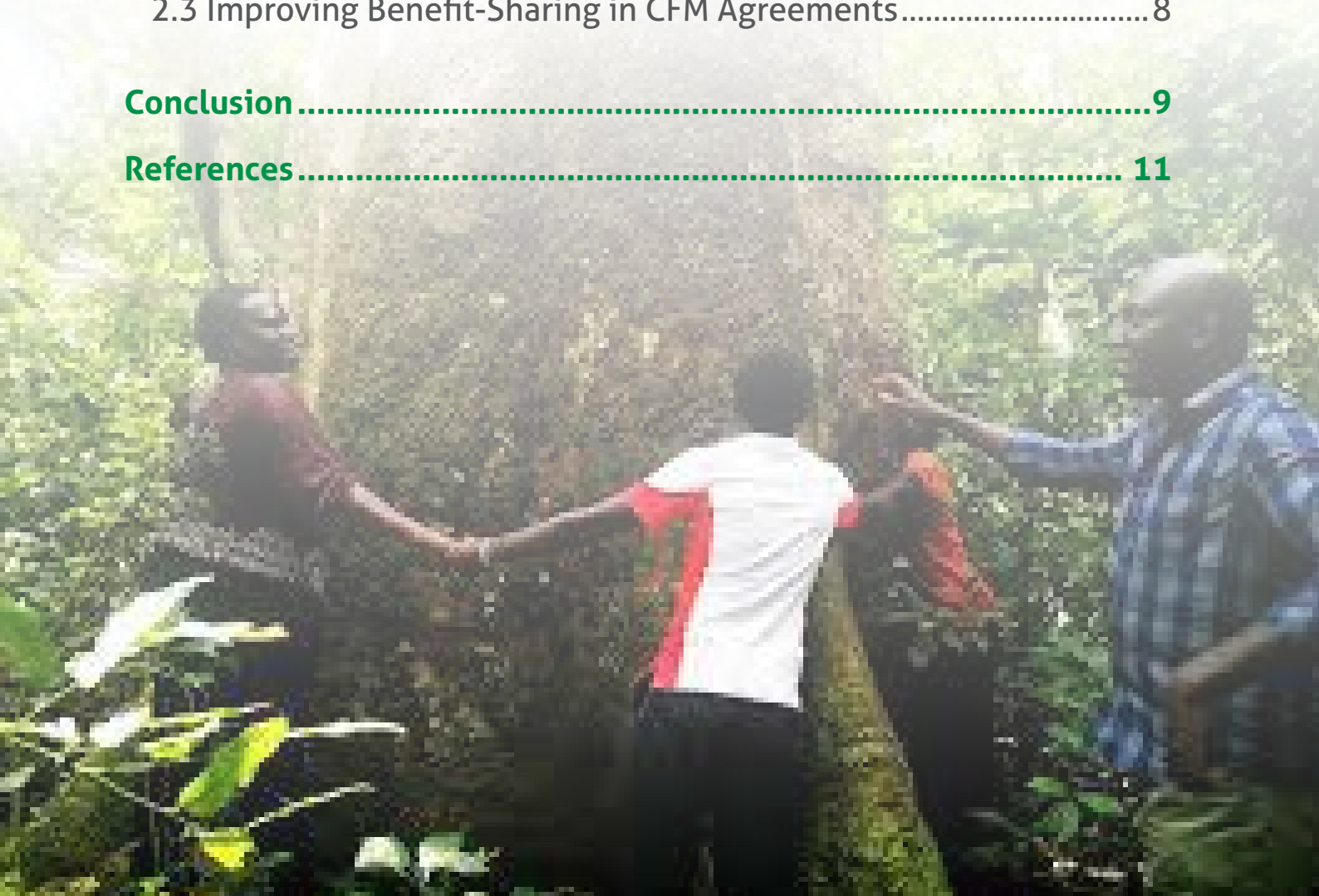
This publication has been financed by the development partners: Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, and Ireland. Responsibility for the content lies entirely with the creator. The Development Partners do not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.

Policy Brief Highlights

- » **Strengthening Collaborative Forest Management for Livelihoods and Climate Resilience in Uganda.**
- » **Uganda's forests are under severe pressure.** The country loses about 122,000 hectares of forest annually, driven by deforestation, illegal logging, agricultural expansion, and weak forest governance systems.
- » **Collaborative Forest Management offers a practical governance solution.** CFM strengthens partnerships between communities, local governments, and the National Forestry Authority, linking forest conservation with local livelihood benefits.
- » **West Nile and Karamoja face the most acute forest pressures.** Refugee settlements, climate variability, poverty, and pastoral conflicts are increasing the demand for forest resources and accelerating forest degradation.
- » **Evidence shows that CFM can improve forest regeneration and reduce illegal activities.** Where implemented effectively, joint patrols, participatory mapping, and community engagement have significantly reduced forest disturbances and improved forest recovery.
- » **Weak benefit-sharing arrangements undermine community incentives.** Communities often receive limited or delayed economic returns, discouraging participation in forest protection and encouraging unsustainable exploitation.
- » **Policy reforms are needed to strengthen decentralised forest governance.** Uganda should improve benefit-sharing mechanisms, empower district governments, expand alternative livelihoods, and integrate CFM into national climate and development frameworks.

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Forests are essential components of Uganda's development and a lifeline for its people. If managed sustainably, forests can provide unmatched environmental, social, and economic benefits. These benefits range from providing habitats for native flora and fauna, producing wood and non-wood products, generating opportunities for employment and income creation, and acting as carbon sinks, which contributes to healthy environments and climate change mitigation. In Uganda, forests supply 88 percent of the country's total energy needs, provide 61 percent of the tourism income and provides jobs for about 1 million people.¹ Between 2016 and 2019, the forestry sub-sector contributed 3.5 percent² to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In spite of the undisputed value of forests, Uganda's forests are increasingly at risk from encroachment, widespread deforestation, illegal timber logging and forest degradation, resulting from the conversion of forestland into other roles. The estimated loss of forest cover is estimated to be at 122,000 ha annually.³ According to the 10-year plan of action for the restoration of the environment and natural resources of the GoU, Uganda's forest cover decreased from 24 percent in 1990 to 12.4 percent in 2017. Poor governance has been cited as one of the reasons for loss of Uganda's Forest Cover, justifying the need for adoption of sustainable forest governance models. This policy brief presents a case for strengthening CFM as a sustainable forest governance model. It analyses current challenges in the forest sector, presents the current challenges in implementing CFM, and highlights recommendations to strengthen CFM implementation, drawing on a wide range of success stories.

1.1 Collaborative Forest Management in Uganda

Collaborative Forest Management is a common form of Collaborative Resource Management Model. In Uganda, CFM emerged as a policy response in the early 2000's. It was first piloted in 1998. In 2001, it was enshrined in the Uganda Forestry Policy (2001), paving the way for its provision in the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (NFTPA) in 2003. The aim of the CFM model was, and still is, to foster partnerships among NFA, local governments, and communities in the management of both central and community Forest Reserves (NFA, 2024a). This management model decentralises responsibilities for forest governance and increases participation and benefits for community members. The model aligns well with Uganda's 1995 Constitution, which mandates resource protection for citizens. The model is also in line with Uganda's decentralisation policy and the Local Governments Act (NFA, 2024b). By integrating communities, CFM reduces deforestation rates, while supporting livelihoods in forest-dependent areas like West Nile and Karamoja (Makir, 2022).

Therefore, CFM rests on legal foundations including the NFTPA 2003 (Section 15), which allows NFA to partner with communities in the management of Central Forest Reserves (CFRs), and the NFTPA Regulations 2016, which detail the nature of agreements (NFA, 2024c).

1 Obua, J., et al. (2019). A review of collaborative forest management in Uganda. https://www.nfa.go.ug/images/A_REVIEW_OF_COLLABORATIVE_FOREST_MANAGEMENT_IN_UGANDA.pdf

2 UBOS. Uganda Wood Asset and Forest Resource Accounts. Uganda Natural Capital Accounting Program. GoU, UBOS, WAVES, World Bank. Kampala. 2020.

3 UBOS. Uganda Land Physical Asset Accounts 2019. World Bank-WAVES Uganda Natural Capital Program, UBOS. Kampala. 2019.

The Uganda Forestry Policy 2001 emphasises equitable partnerships between government and private forests, with agreements that define the "4Rs": rights, roles, responsibilities, and returns (Obua et al., 2019).

The roles of different actors under the CFM approach are clearly delineated. NFA leads planning, vetting, and monitoring; DLGs handle livelihoods, bylaws, and communities via registered CBOs, patrols, and plans, while CSOs facilitate neutrally (NFA, 2024b; NFA, 2024c). In practice, CFM unfolds in stages. These are: initiation (expressions of interest); participatory situation analysis (PSA) assessing socio-economic and resource conditions; negotiation of 10-year renewable agreements (2-year probation); and implementation with monitoring (NFA, 2024b). Benefits include access to fuelwood, beekeeping, and NTFP, but must align with Forest Management Plans (FMPs) to avoid ownership transfer—NFA retains title (NFA, 2024a).

1.2 Rationale for strengthening CFM in West Nile and Karamoja

West Nile and Karamoja represent contrasting yet complementary fronts in Uganda's forest governance challenges, where Collaborative Forest Management (CFM) grapples with unique ecological, socio-economic, and conflict dynamics. West Nile, bordering the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and South Sudan, was hosting over 1.5 million refugees as of 2025, exerting immense pressure on forests for fuelwood, construction, and NTFPs amid cross-border trade and climate variability marked by floods and erratic dry spells (Relief Web, 2023; ACODE, 2025). Karamoja's arid, drylands, conversely, contend with pastoralist conflicts, prolonged droughts, and a 74% multidimensional poverty rate, where forests serve as dry-season fodder, medicines, and conflict buffers for post-disarmament (Climate-Diplomacy, 2014; Observer, 2025). Both sub-regions exhibit high forest-dependency with over 60% of households relying on forest reserves, yet CFM implementation reveals divergent outcomes shaped by tenure insecurity, institutional flux, and livelihood trade-offs (Nabanoga et al., 2022; Zake & Mawa, 2016).

West Nile, bordering DRC and South Sudan, hosts refugees who ordinarily strain resources amid cross-border trade (ReliefWeb, 2023; ACODE, 2025). In both regions, Forests support livelihoods via timber, poles, and NTFPs, but face encroachment and poaching. In Karamoja's dry lands, people grapple with pastoral conflicts, droughts, and 74% poverty, even when forests provide fodder and medicines amid disarmament challenges (Climate-Diplomacy, 2014; Observer, 2025).

There is an increase in forest degradation in both sub regions. In West Nile for example, Central Forest Reserves (CFRs) like Zoka and Agoro-Agu face acute degradation. Zoka forest lost 40% of its cover (2001-2015) to refugee camps (e.g., Bidibidi, housing 270,000), charcoal syndicates, and tobacco curing, with annual deforestation at 3.2% compared with the national average of 2.1% (Zake & Mawa, 2016; Jickling, 2018). Cross-border smuggling exacerbates illegal logging, while floods erode boundaries, displacing communities into forests.

In Karamoja, the CFRs, such as Timu and Murungore, suffer from overgrazing, wildfires, cultivation, and the felling of trees for charcoal. In these areas, forest cover declined by 25% (2010-2020) due to the conversion of forested areas to agriculture (Observer, 2025). Both regions are characterised by elite-driven extraction of forest resources and

weak enforcement, especially by the District Local Governments. The available literature underscores causal links, where refugee hosting correlates with two-times deforestation in West Nile (Jickling, 2018), while Karamoja's poverty-forest nexus drives 70% illegal activities (Geocarto International, 2026). Without alternatives, communities perceive forests as open-access, perpetuating a degradation trap.

1.3 CFM implementation: Lessons from past experience

(a) Learning from the challenges, constraints and risks

The Government of Uganda, through NFA, has previously promoted and implemented the CFM model in communities living adjacent to Central Forest Reserves in Uganda. There are, therefore, quite a number of lessons to learn from, comprising both failure and success stories. Available literature and evidence from stakeholder engagements by ACODE reveal that most failures in CFM stem from benefit-sharing shortfalls. The shortfalls stem from delays in promised income, as interventions such as bee-keeping usually yield less than prior illegal harvests. In some cases, the uncompensated patrols affect the forest protection efforts. CFM institutions are also affected by increased demand for forest resources. There is also evidence that the increase of refugees in Forested Areas increases encroachment and frustrates CFM effort (Nabanoga et al., 2022, Makir, 2025). Refugees in Uganda's West Nile sub-region pose profound challenges to forest management, exacerbating degradation in an already vulnerable landscape hosting over 1.5 million displaced persons from South Sudan and the DRC as of 2025. The influx of refugees overwhelms the capacity of CFM institutions to protect the forest. For example, deforestation rates in key Central Forest Reserves (CFRs) such as Zoka, Agoro-Agu, and areas around Bidibidi and Palorinya refugee settlements increased by 2-3 times the national average. The causal pathways link rapid influxes to resource overuse, tenure conflicts, and institutional overload, undermining Collaborative Forest Management (CFM) while heightening risks to climate resilience, livelihoods, and peace.

The core challenge stems from the surging demand for wood-fuel and construction materials. Over 93% of refugees and host households rely on firewood/charcoal for cooking. Settlements like Bidi-bidi (270,000 residents) consume an estimated 1,000 tons daily; which is equivalent to clear-felling of 500ha annually. This has led to a 40% tree cover loss in Zoka CFR (2001-2015) and doubled woodland degradation around settlements post-2016 South Sudan influx, shifting bushland to bare soil and farmlands. Refugees clear forests for plots (0.05ha/household) for tobacco curing, and brick-making. This overwhelms regeneration. Forest supply assessments flag Pagirinya, Nyumanzi, and Imvepi as "high-pressure" zones where fuelwood scarcity has reached to levels of limiting cooking.

Other studies have linked failure of CFM to Institutional weaknesses and enforcement gaps, which lead to unclear boundaries and enable illegal logging (Makir, 2025). Experience from field engagements with CFM institutions in Timu, Kabong district in Karamoja, highlighted the fact that Institutional weaknesses such like staff transfers, disrupt continuity and affect CFM performance (Envalert, 2021, NFA, 2024b, Nabanoga et al., 2022). Governance constraints include NFA dominance, limited power-sharing, and vague sanctions regulations, fostering elite capture (Makir, 2022; Makir, 2025). DLG capacity is low, with fragmented coordination in Karamoja (Observer, 2025).

Experience from ACODEs work has also revealed that CFM work can be challenged by limited financial resources arising from lack of dedicated budgets, to finance the implementation of the Management plans. Other challenges include climate stress which amplifies risks of droughts (Climate-Diplomacy, 2014; ACODE, 2025).

(b) Learning from previous gains

While there may be some challenges, the Implementation of CFM has demonstrated successfulness, with a number of positive lessons to learn from. In Budongo Central Forest Reserve, the implementation of CFM tripartite agreements since 2010 have boosted stem densities by 28% and merchantable volume by 15% (2015-2022). Creating joint patrols reduced forest disturbances by 40% (Obua et al., 2019; Nabanoga et al., 2022). In 2016, the implementation of CFM activities in Zoka and integrated refugee zoning, via UNHCR-NFA collaborations reduced encroachment by a half encroachment (Zake & Mawa, 2016). Karamoja's Napak CFM (piloted 2018) linked to water committees, restored 200ha via agroforestry, cutting conflicts 30% by zoning grazing (USAID, 2017).

Evidence from reviews from CFM sites show 20-35% regeneration where monitored, with trust-building via production sharing agreements (PSAs) fostering compliance (Envalert, 2021; Makir, 2025). Political economy wins include DLG revenue from eco-tourism (e.g., Kidepo), aligning incentives.

Key lessons from Zoka and Agoro-Agu Central Forest Reserves (CFRs) in Uganda's West Nile sub-region offer critical, evidence-based insights for refining Collaborative Forest Management (CFM), highlighting both enabling conditions and persistent pitfalls in refugee-impacted, high-pressure landscapes (Zake & Mawa, 2016; Environmental Alert, 2017). These reserves, adjacent to Bidibidi and Palorinya settlements, have lost 30-40% tree cover since 2001 due to refugee fuelwood demand and encroachment, yet targeted CFM pilots demonstrate pathways to partial recovery when institutional and incentive barriers are addressed (Envalert, 2017). Lessons learnt emphasize adaptive, multi-stakeholder designs over rigid templates, informing scalable reforms amid decentralization and climate pressures.

1.4 Summary of lessons

Essential Preconditions for CFM Viability

- a) **Boundary Demarcation and Participatory Mapping Are Non-Negotiable.** Unclear boundaries—exacerbated by floods eroding pillars in Zoka have enabled 60% of encroachments, as communities and refugees exploit ambiguities for farming and charcoal. Agoro-Agu's 2016 PSA (Participatory Situation Analysis) with Environmental Alert mapped zones using GPS, reducing disputes by 35% and enabling joint patrols. Without this, NFA enforcement fails due to staffing ratios of 1: 50,000 ha (Zake & Mawa, 2016; Environmental Alert, 2017). Therefore, it is critical to mandate digital demarcation in all tripartite agreements, integrating UNHCR data for refugee buffers to pre-empt conflicts.
- b) **Alternative Livelihoods Must Precede or Accompany Benefit Promises.** Communities reject CFM when NTFP yields (e.g., beekeeping) become less than previous benefits

such as charcoal trade. Agoro-Agu succeeded by linking to Operation Wealth Creation (inputs) and beehives, restoring 150ha while sustaining participation (Envalert, 2017). The line ministry ought to consider Frontloading agroforestry/tree nurseries (e.g., 50ha pilots) with market linkages, subsidized via PDM, to offset opportunity costs—proven to boost compliance 40% in analogous sites (Obua et al., 2019).

Governance and Institutional Imperatives

- a) Hybrid Stakeholder Engagement Builds Legitimacy in Contested Spaces.** NFA dominance alienates hosts/refugees. For instance, the failure of CFM in Zoka’s stemmed from top-down plans that ignored customary rights, sparking vigilante clashes. Agoro-Agu’s model—NFA-DLG-CBO-UNHCR coupled with CSO facilitation—fostered trust, halving illegal felling via refugee quotas in patrols (20% membership). This is call for embedding conflict-sensitive clauses (e.g., host-refugee ratios) and CSO mediation in regulations, aligning with post-conflict dynamics.
- b) Capacity Gaps Demand Targeted, Phased Support.** Under-resourced DLGs (funding <5% needs) and NFA staff turnover disrupted Zoka continuity. Agoro-Agu thrived via advocacy for updated FMPs (2018) and training (300 leaders), cutting disturbances by 30% (Environmental Alert, 2017). Allocate 10% forest revenues to DLG CFM desks; phase from 6-month trainings to performance grants, as World Bank pilots recommend.

Risks and Adaptive Strategies

- a) Refugee Pressures Require Zoned, Inclusive CFM—Not Exclusion.** Settlements overwhelm reserves (1,000t wood/day in Bidibidi), but blanket bans fuel smuggling. For instance, Zoka zoning (20% buffer for fuelwood) reduced poaching 25%, while Agoro-Agu’s pro-poor REDD+ integrated vulnerable groups, enhancing equity (Envalert, 2017). The MoWE should consider Piloting “refugee-integrated CFM” with usufruct zones, monitored via apps—cutting GBV risks from distant collection.
- b) Monitoring Must Be Real-Time and Community-Led to Counter Elite Capture.** Vague audits enabled elites to skim benefits in Zoka; Agoro-Agu’s community scorecards exposed leakages, sustaining buy-in (Zake & Mawa, 2016). The lesson here is that Digital dashboards (NFA-UNHCR) with annual verifications prevent corruption, scaling successes.

Table 1: Risks and Adaptive Strategies related to CFM

Lesson	Zoka Evidence (Failure-Leaning)	Agoro-Agu Evidence (Success-Leaning)	CFM Implication
Boundaries	60% encroachments from floods	GPS mapping cut disputes 35%	Mandatory in PSAs (Environmental Alert, 2017)
Livelihoods	25% dropouts from low yields	Beehives, OWC restored 150ha	Frontload alternatives (Envalert, 2017)
Stakeholders	Top-down sparked clashes	Quartets halved felling	Include refugees/CSOs (Opio et al., 2023)
Capacity	Turnover disrupted plans	Training yielded 30% gains	Revenue-funded desks (Zake & Mawa, 2016)

These lessons affirm CFM's potential to reverse West Nile degradation (15-20% less loss vs controls) but demand customisation. Rigid national templates fail amid refugee/cross-border fluxes, while adaptive hybrids deliver ecological (regeneration), social (equity), and carbon co-benefits (Nabanoga et al., 2022). For Karamoja analogues, it is important to translate to national pastoral zoning, embedded in NFTP amendments for resilience.

1.5 Lessons for Decentralised Forest Governance

Decentralised forest governance succeeds when it empowers local actors with real decision-making authority while maintaining national oversight. Best practices from Sub-Saharan Africa emphasise clear roles, incentives, and monitoring to balance ecological health, livelihoods, and equity (Larson & Petkova, 2013; World Bank, 2020).

Strong legal frameworks devolve meaningful powers to elected local bodies, such as district governments or community forest associations (CFAs), rather than just consultative roles. In Kenya's Participatory Forest Management (PFM), the 2005 Forests Act grants CFAs rights to co-manage gazetted forests, including NTFP harvesting and patrols, thereby reducing encroachment when paired with tenure security (Kariuki & Birgegard, 2013). Uganda's CFM under NFTP similarly assigns tripartite agreements, but success hinges on DLGs enforcing bylaws—failures occur when DLGs lack discretion over revenues (Nabanoga et al., 2022). It is always good to separate revenue collection from management to curb elite capture, as World Bank diagnostics recommend (World Bank, 2018).

Effective decentralisation requires democratic representation. Local authorities must be accountable via elections, with powers over planning, enforcement, and benefits. Tanzania's policies devolve to village councils, boosting compliance, as communities control 40-50% of revenues, unlike narrow-discretion models that mimic central control (Mustalahti et al., 2020). Political economy analysis upfront identifies elites, ensuring inclusion clauses for women and youth (Larson & Petkova, 2013).

Communities thrive with aligned incentives. Benefit-sharing of 30-50% of revenue funds patrols and alternatives such as beekeeping, similar to Ethiopia's reforms, where livelihoods improved without degradation (Tesfaye et al., 2021). Building social capital through participatory mapping and PSAs to foster ownership. Kenya's Kakamega PFM saw regeneration post-agreement (Kariuki & Birgegard, 2013). Capacity building is key to training CBOs in monitoring and linking to markets for sustainable NTFP (FAO, 2015).

Robust M&E is necessary to track outcomes. It is important to conduct local audits that feed into national dashboards, showing density of gains where such M&E frameworks are enforced (Tesfaye et al., 2021).

Also, the use of performance-based grants to reward compliance and scale successes would incentivise decentralised forest management arrangements.

This adaptive management is required to address trade-offs—e.g., livelihood gains may initially lag ecological gains, requiring phased scaling (Larson & Petkova, 2013).

Table 2: Best Practices for Decentralised Forest Governance

Country/Region	Key Practice	Outcomes	Challenges Addressed
Kenya (PFM)	CFA agreements with revenue shares (Kariuki & Birgegard, 2013)	Reduced encroachment, livelihood gains	Elite capture via elections
Tanzania	Village council devolution (Mustalahti et al., 2020)	Compliance in 40% revenue models	Narrow discretion
Uganda (CFM)	Tripartite DLG-NFA-CBO (Nabanoga et al., 2022)	Density improvements where enforced	Enforcement gaps
Ethiopia	NTFP incentives (Tesfaye et al., 2021)	Sustainable management	Livelihood trade-offs

2.0 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Uganda’s CFM framework requires an evidence-based reform agenda to translate analysis into tangible outcomes, addressing immediate implementation barriers while building toward structural change. Prioritised actions range from short-term “quick wins” focused on procedural fixes and capacity gaps to medium-term legislative and institutional shifts. These would ensure alignment with decentralisation principles under the Local Governments Act, Cap 138, climate commitments in the Paris Agreement National Determined Contributions (NDCs) and livelihood goals in the NDP IV. Feasibility hinges on political will. The implementation of all the recommendations requires regular Monitoring and Evaluation to track trade-offs, such as fiscal sustainability and inclusion.

2.1 Short-Term Reforms

These actions target low-hanging fruit to build momentum, enhance compliance, and generate early demonstration effects in high-pressure sub-regions like West Nile and Karamoja.

- a) **Enhance Existing CFM through Capacity Building.** The Ministry of Water and Environment (MoWE) should Scale-up training for NFA, DLGs, and CBOs, linking to climate finance like REDD+ and other local financing options.
- b) **Legislate Benefit-Sharing Reforms.** The MoWE should amend the NFTP to require mandatory shares (e.g., a percentage NTFP revenues to CBOs) and tenure-like use rights. Medium-term, moderate fiscal (monitoring), boosts incentives but risks elite capture if enforcement lags.
- c) **Decentralise to DLGs with Blended Finance.** There is need to empower DLGs for LFRs/CFRs, to blend national/climate funds for enterprises. This aligns well with the decentralisation framework with potential high impact in different sub-regions.
- d) **Pilot Climate-Resilient CFM Hubs.** The MoWE should pilot CFM Hubs including region-specific models such as refugee-integrated CFMs in West Nile, and pastoral community enclaves (in Karamoja) with performance-based grants.

- e) **Gazette Revised CFM Guidelines.** The MoWE should formally publish the pending 2017 CFM Guidelines (updated 2024) as statutory instruments under NFTP Section 15, mandating standardised templates for tripartite agreements with minimum benefit entitlements (e.g., 20% interim NTFP shares). This clarifies ambiguities that currently allow NFA discretion to short-change communities, as seen in Echuya and Mabira cases.
- f) **Capacity Building for DLG/CBO Leaders.** The MoWE/NFA should deliver targeted training on Participatory Situation Analysis (PSA), negotiation skills, and benefit valuation prioritising District and Sub-County Local Governments staff and CBO representatives from West Nile and Karamojong. The Curriculum should emphasise gender-sensitive facilitation to counter patriarchal exclusion.

2.2 Medium-Term

The following proposed reforms embed CFM in the national architecture, require parliamentary buy-in to yield scalable impacts

- a) **Legislate Mandatory 30-50% Benefit Shares:** The MoWE/NFA should amend NFTP 2003 (Section 15) to enforce graduated shares—30% baseline for NTFPs, scaling to 50% for high-performers—directly banked to CBO accounts. Also, amending the NFTP Regulations to eliminate vagueness in negotiations is necessary. It is vital to include non-monetary benefits like priority access to deadwood, land for agroforestry, and/or training, as in successful Budongo pilots where beekeeping supplemented incomes.
- b) **Integrate CFM into NDP IV and NDC via REDD+ (2027):** The MoFPED, through a Cabinet memo, should operationalise CFM as an NDC pillar, channelling REDD+ carbon payments (e.g., from FCPF) to performance-verified sites. It would help to link to Parish Development Model (PDM) for enterprise kits (beekeeping, bamboo) under Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), targeting women/youth beneficiaries (NFA, 2024a).
- c) **Decentralise FMP Approvals with Tenure Pilots (2028):** The MoWE should shift Forest Management Plans (FMP) co-approval to DLGs for Local Forest Reserves (LFRs), piloting 25-year renewable licenses in 20 CFRs. Conflict provisions for Karamoja (pastoral zoning) and West Nile (refugee buffers) ensure sensitivity.
- d) **The MoWE and DLGs should enforce 50% women/youth quotas in CBOs via eligibility criteria:** conduct annual conflict mapping in Karamoja (e.g., via APMIS data) and refugee zoning in West Nile (UNHCR coordination).

2.3 Improving Benefit-Sharing in CFM Agreements

Improving benefit-sharing in Uganda's CFM agreements requires mandating equitable mechanisms, transparent negotiation, and livelihood-linked alternatives to address current shortfalls where communities perceive low returns despite conservation efforts (New Vision, 2017). Reforms build trust, reduce encroachment, and sustain partnerships by ensuring that the benefits of patrols and monitoring outweigh their cost.

- a) Prioritise vulnerable groups—women, youth—via quotas, preventing elite capture seen in Mabira forest, where corruption eroded gains. Without floors, power asymmetries exclude marginalised groups;
- b) MoWE/NFA should approve the draft Benefit Sharing Guidelines promptly, gazetting them for enforceability. Undefined shares lead to distrust and non-compliance; fixed floors align incentives, mirroring Tanzania’s PFM, where 40% shares boosted cohesion and reduced leakage.
- c) Mandate independent facilitation by CSOs during tripartite agreements, using standardised PSAs to value benefits upfront and track via annual audits.
- d) Publish agreements online and hold community validations, ensuring DLGs to verify inclusivity—this would be key in post-conflict West Nile, where refugee pressures demand fairness.
- e) Diversify benefits beyond patrols: integrate enterprise development like honey processing or bamboo, subsidised via climate finance (REDD+), to offset foregone charcoal income. Provide market linkages and microfinance. Performance-based payments—e.g., grants for verified density gains—motivate.
- f) Introduce “usufruct rights” granting CFM groups renewable 25-year licenses for specified zones, conditional on FMP compliance. Harmonise with the Land Act, Cap 236.
- g) Mandate public disclosure of agreements and annual audits through a MoWE/NFA portal, with penalties under the new NFTP Section 15A.
- h) Empower DLGs to co-approve FMPs and retain 20% shares for capacity building. Dedicate 5-10% of revenues to the CFM Equity fund.

CONCLUSION

Uganda’s forests remain central to national development, environmental sustainability, and rural livelihoods. However, rapid forest loss, institutional weaknesses, and increasing socio-economic pressures continue to undermine the long-term sustainability of forest resources. Evidence presented in this policy brief demonstrates that Collaborative Forest Management (CFM) offers a viable governance framework to address these challenges by aligning conservation objectives with community livelihood interests.

The analysis shows that CFM has delivered measurable ecological and social benefits where institutional arrangements, incentives, and community participation are effectively structured. Experiences from sites such as Budongo, Zoka, and Agoro-Agu illustrate that joint patrols, participatory mapping, and livelihood diversification can significantly reduce forest disturbances and improve forest regeneration. In some areas, joint management arrangements have reduced illegal forest activities by up to 40 percent while strengthening trust between forest authorities and local communities.

Despite these gains, the effectiveness of CFM in Uganda remains constrained by several structural and operational challenges. Weak benefit-sharing arrangements, limited financial resources, institutional fragmentation, and unclear enforcement mechanisms continue to undermine community incentives to participate in forest protection. Furthermore, pressures from refugee settlements, climate variability, and widespread poverty in sub-regions such as West Nile and Karamoja intensify the demand for forest resources, thereby complicating conservation efforts.

Addressing these challenges requires a deliberate reform agenda that strengthens the institutional, legal, and economic foundations of collaborative forest governance. First, equitable and transparent benefit-sharing arrangements must be formalised to ensure that communities derive tangible and timely returns from conservation efforts. Second, district local governments should be empowered with greater authority, resources, and technical capacity to support CFM implementation within the broader decentralisation framework. Third, alternative livelihood opportunities such as agroforestry, beekeeping, and sustainable non-timber forest product enterprises should be expanded to reduce dependence on destructive forest exploitation.

Equally important is the need to adopt adaptive and context-specific approaches to forest governance. In refugee-hosting areas of West Nile, inclusive CFM arrangements that integrate both host communities and displaced populations are essential for reducing resource conflicts and promoting shared stewardship of forest resources. In Karamoja's pastoral landscape, forest management strategies must recognise the interaction between grazing systems, drought resilience, and communal land governance. Tailoring CFM models to these distinct ecological and socio-economic contexts will improve their effectiveness and sustainability.

Strengthening monitoring and accountability mechanisms is also critical. Community-led monitoring systems, transparent disclosure of CFM agreements, and performance-based incentives can help prevent elite capture while enhancing local ownership of forest governance processes. At the national level, integrating CFM into broader development frameworks such as the National Development Plan IV, climate commitments under the Paris Agreement, and decentralised governance reforms will ensure policy coherence and long-term institutional support.

Ultimately, strengthening Collaborative Forest Management represents not only a strategy for protecting Uganda's forests but also a pathway for advancing inclusive rural development, climate resilience, and democratic resource governance. When properly implemented, CFM can transform forest-dependent communities from passive beneficiaries into active custodians of natural resources. With sustained political commitment, adequate financing, and stronger institutional coordination, Uganda has the opportunity to position itself as a regional leader in participatory forest governance and sustainable landscape management.

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