

Forests, Rights of tenure, and Rural Livelihoods:



Addressing barriers for
aligning conservation
with inclusive forest
governance in Uganda



POLICY BRIEF



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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Uganda's forests sit at the intersection of environmental sustainability, rural livelihoods, and social inclusion. They underpin the livelihoods of millions of rural households through energy provision, income diversification, ecosystem services, and climate resilience, while simultaneously serving as critical national assets for biodiversity conservation and climate mitigation. However, this dual role has become increasingly strained by deforestation, tenure insecurity, weak local governance, and exclusionary conservation practices which have deepened tensions between forest protection objectives and the survival strategies of forest-adjacent communities. These dynamics pose material risks to the achievement of Uganda's climate commitments, and social stability in rural areas.

This policy brief examines the contribution of forests to livelihood and how forest governance, rights of tenure arrangements, and livelihood dependencies interact to shape conservation and development outcomes in Uganda. The brief draws on insights from an X-Space Policy Dialogue convened by the Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment (ACODE) in December 2025. The information from the dialogue is further complemented by empirical evidence from continuous engagement with Uganda's forest sector stakeholders, and the available published literature on the governance of Uganda's Forest sector.

The purpose of this policy brief is to inform policymakers, government decision-makers, development partners, and practitioners on pathways to align forest conservation with inclusive rural development. It argues that securing rights of tenure, strengthening inclusive forest governance and integrating livelihoods into conservation models are not ancillary concerns but central to achieving durable environmental outcomes. By reframing forests as shared development assets rather than contested spaces, Uganda can advance inclusive growth, climate resilience, poverty reduction, and social cohesion.

2.0 BACKGROUND

Globally, the phenomenon of community and individual livelihood security in the face of natural environmental conservation revenue and benefits is attracting international and local debates. The future of conservation in Africa depends on our ability to ensure that protected area resources provide economic benefits not a burden to those who live side by side with them. The main focus of the ongoing debate revolves around whether conservation policy interventions address people's livelihoods (Craig, 2002). The contestation between local communities and conservationists is often premised on the inadequacy of benefits from PAs in terms of addressing their livelihood needs, yet such communities bear conservation costs (Stringer and Paavola, 2013). This situation is common in sub-Saharan Africa, where areas of high conservation value are under threat due to the increasing populations whose livelihoods depend on the natural resource base (Kabiri, 2010). When local communities do not see the direct benefits of conservation, they tend to downplay its importance. When this happens, government conservation efforts are in vain. That is why in some developed countries, the strictly protectionist approach has given way to a radical change in policy that encompasses the role of local communities in conservation (Noe, 2013). In addition, the fundamental basis of PAs has been questioned, and the adoption of Community Based

Conservation (CBC), has arisen from a greater understanding of linkages between PAs and rural development (Balint and Mashinya, 2008).

In Uganda, Forests form part of the Protected Area network and are key conservation areas. Forests anchor Uganda's rural economy, where 72% of the population depends on agriculture and natural resources (MoPED 2024). Rural households derive essential support from forests for income diversification, subsistence, energy (83% wood fuel), and resilience against shocks like droughts (FAO, 2022). Conservation efforts, including national targets and NDCs, restrict access to forest reserves, creating trade-offs that deepen poverty in adjacent communities. This tension is embedded in Uganda's development path under Vision 2040, which emphasises green growth amid 3.3% population growth and land pressures. Decentralisation devolves responsibilities to districts, although the central oversight and coordination role is played by Forest Sector Department under the Ministry of Water and Environment

2.1 Contribution of Forests to Rural Livelihoods

Rural households in Uganda depend on forests as a cornerstone of diversified livelihood strategies. On-farm activities such as crop cultivation remain the primary income source, accounting for over 45% of total household income in community forestry areas, yet Forest Environmental Income (FEI)—derived from fuelwood, non-timber forest products (NTFPs) like fruits, medicines, and construction materials, and occasional timber—contributes substantially, representing 25-27% of total income for both Communal Land Association (CLA) members and non-members (Bluwstein et al., 2022). Subsistence uses are equally critical: forests provide wild foods that enhance nutritional security during lean seasons, medicinal plants that reduce healthcare expenditures, and wood fuel meeting 83-92% of household energy needs, especially in rural areas lacking alternatives (UBOS, 2020; MWE, 2018). These contributions extend beyond direct income to include resilience functions that buffer households against climate variability, crop failures, and economic shocks. In refugee-hosting districts, forest resources mitigate vulnerabilities exacerbated by population influxes (Bluwstein et al., 2022). For example, the Uganda Wood and Forest Resources Accounts highlight forests' macroeconomic value, estimating annual household cash contributions at 11-27% alongside ecosystem services worth UGX 222 billion (USD 110 million) for soil, water, carbon, and biodiversity (UBOS, 2020; Kazungu et al., 2016).

2.2 Forest Tenure, Rights, and Governance Framework

The rights to tenure in forests define who can use, manage, control, and transfer forest land and resources. These rights range from ownership and leasing to community-based management and customary access. Securing these rights is essential for sustainable management, preventing land-use conflicts, and supporting local livelihoods.

The Constitution of Uganda (1995) and the Uganda Land Act (Cap. 227), introduced significant land reforms by giving legal recognition to customary land ownership and use. The Uganda National Forestry Policy (2001) aims to achieve sustainable management of forest resources, alleviate poverty, and conserve biodiversity through a participatory, multi-stakeholder approach. The Uganda Wildlife Act (Cap 135), further recognized historic rights of local communities in wildlife conservation areas. The National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (Cap 160) provides a legal framework in Uganda for the conservation, sustainable

management, and development of forests, as well as the promotion of tree planting. These frameworks provide for significant public engagement in forest management. In particular, the National Forest Policy of 2001 called for promoting innovative approaches to community participation in forest management on government and private forest lands.

This was aimed at reversing protectionism in forest management as well as the destructive practices associated with open access forests. The National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (Cap 160) and the Uganda Wildlife Act (Cap 135) lay out specific approaches for promoting community participation.

Guided by this legal framework, forests in Uganda now include: i) public or government forests, specifically the central forest reserves, local government forest reserves and wildlife conservation areas; and ii) private forests, in particular community forests and other forests owned by individuals, companies, organisations, or public institutions. Much of the forestry sector is overseen by the MWE, with the FSSD serving as the Ministry's technical arm, responsible for formulating forestry policies and providing technical support to the sector. Meanwhile the Uganda Wildlife Authority, overseen by the Wildlife Conservation Department of the Ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities is responsible for the management of wildlife conservation areas including national parks, wildlife reserves and wildlife sanctuaries.

2.3 Forms of inclusive forest governance approaches

(a) Collaborative Forest Management (CFM)

Collaborative Forest Management (CFM) is a formal, legal arrangement between the National Forestry Authority (NFA) or local governments and forest-adjacent communities to co-manage forest resources. It aims to reduce forest loss and enhance livelihoods by allowing community groups to engage in sustainable activities. As provided for under the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (Cap 160) CFM creates an opportunity for local communities to support forest management in central and local forest reserves through mutually beneficial arrangements.

Under Act, the National Forest Authority may establish CFMs in central forest reserves, while the Ministry of Local Government may establish them in local forest reserves through District Forest Services. CFM guidelines specify its objectives as the rehabilitation of degraded forests, the maintenance of boundaries, the regulation of access to forest products, and law enforcement through public participation. The guidelines outline the process for establishing CFMs, emphasizing the need to conform to pre-established management plans. The CFM guidelines provide mechanisms for settlement of disputes over rights contained in the agreements or memoranda of understanding with communities.

As with CRMs, CFMs are secured through 10-year agreements between communities and the government. Use rights are spelled out in the agreements, which in turn are informed by the Forest Management Plans of the reserves. In general, the regime allows communities to harvest Non-wood Forest Products and fuelwood from forest reserves, primarily for subsistence purposes accessed through permits. Members may sell excess produce, especially from trees they planted. Harvesting levels and collection days are typically detailed in the agreements.

Communities may generate income through beekeeping, enrichment planting as well as by establishing and managing tree plantations. Timber harvesting and mining are permitted if a license is obtained and the fees are paid.

CFM communities may receive financial and technical support from the National Forest Authority, including provision of seeds and seedlings. CFM guidelines provide mechanisms for settling disputes over rights under the agreements. The agreements are usually reviewed after five years and may be modified or cancelled in case of serious breach of agreements. Additionally, individuals, including smallholders, may establish private plantation forests within forest reserves under tree-growing leases and licenses, with technical and financial support from the government and donors. As of 2025, Collaborative Forest Management (CFM) in Uganda encompasses approximately 103,839 hectares across various Central Forest Reserves (CFRs), representing a significant increase from the historical figure of 75,397 hectares. This expansion is part of the National Forestry Authority's (NFA) strategy to enhance community participation and secure forest tenure (NFA, 2025).

Issue

While CFM provides for rights of communities in access and use of forest products, the communities do not have a right to compensation in case of withdrawal of the said. With the exception of areas where communities have been allowed to plant trees, communities have very limited management rights with little influence in decision-making, planning and regulating use. The emphasis of CFM majorly on rehabilitation and maintenance of forests rather than on supporting local livelihoods.

(b) Private community forests

Community forests in Uganda are legally recognised, community-managed, or communal land-based forests aimed at sustainable management and improved local livelihoods under the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (Cap 160). They offer an alternative to centralized management by allowing communities to secure land titles. As per the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (Cap 160), community forests provide community members the right to subsistence use of forest products free of charge. Community forests are intended to improve the livelihoods of forest-dependent rural communities, ensure community participation in the management of forests, promote equitable sharing of costs and benefits, and support conservation and sustainable forest management. Meanwhile, the Land Act (Section 23) confers ownership rights to communities to such communal lands. The Community Forestry Guidelines (MWE, 2015a) further note that the certificate of ownership may be used as collateral by joint owners seeking bank or microfinance loans for collective benefit. Once registered, communities can claim all land, resource, and carbon rights with no requirement for additional approvals.

But communities are required to pay taxes on income derived from forest products. Communities have the right to exclude non-members. Community forests may be drawn from former public land held by the District Land Board, National Environment Management Authority (NEMA) designated fragile ecosystems, or areas planted as community plantations, and woodland/pastoral areas communally used by a community.

The National Forestry and Tree Planting Act allows the local governments to make by-laws for these forests. It also allows the MWE to transfer management of the community forests to the local government if this is deemed necessary to ensure proper management. Community forests may be established and registered by a community or group of communities adjacent to a forest, a forest user group, a community land association, a cooperative society, farmers' group or a non-governmental organization that draws its membership from the local community. Registration also allows communities access to a range of government benefits. The district land boards within the local governments are responsible for registration of these forests.

There is no comprehensive data on private community forests. However, as of 2015, private community and household forests constituted 697 986 hectares (or 38 percent) of the country's total forest area (MWE, 2016). In 2016, government registered community forests covering 664 hectares in the districts of Masindi and Lamwo in Western and Northern Uganda respectively. The registration process was initiated in 2003 and was supported by the FAO/FSSD/ DFID forest tenure project.

Issue

The registration process as outlined in the Community Forest Guidelines (MWE, 2015a) can be time-consuming, requiring preparation of forest management plans and a series of approvals including final declaration as community forests by the MWE. It should be noted that the registration of community forests is not mandatory, although its encouraged by government to prevent open access. This coupled with the hectic process demotivates registration of these forests, and without registration, their management becomes complicated leading to their degradation.

(c) Private household forests.

These include private smallholder natural and planted forests. Guidelines exist for private natural forests (MWE, 2015b), laying out objectives in terms of boosting productivity, increasing farm incomes, alleviating pressures on natural forests and improving food security. These guidelines are intended to optimize the flow of economic, social and environmental benefits from forests and trees to local communities, supply various commercial tree products and enhance environmental services. The precise extent of private household forests is unknown; however, several natural forests are owned and managed by private sector associations or individuals in the districts of Kisoro and Masindi in Western Uganda, and the district of Kalangala in Central Uganda with support from NGOs.

Additionally, traditional institutions are managing cultural forests in the districts of Bugisu, Busoga and Tororo in Eastern Uganda, Buganda subnational kingdom and Bunyoro in Western Uganda. This regime entitles individuals, corporate bodies and organizations to access, use, manage, sell, lease or mortgage their forests. Provided for by the Uganda Land Act (Cap. 227), and the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (Cap 160) these rights are perpetual, with no set duration. Timber, other wood and non-wood forest products may be harvested for subsistence or commercial purposes, with no limits on quantities harvested.

The government, through the District Forest Service, provides some technical services to support the regime, including purchase of improved seeds and other forestry inputs, advocacy for securing tenure, improving the investment climate, and financial support for the provision of commercial timber plantations.

Issue

Whereas the National Forestry and Tree Planting Act (Cap 160) provides for government authority over forest management, including harvesting and marketing of forest products in practice this authority is not exercised except in the collection of value-added tax and stamp fees on products sold in markets. It is extremely difficult for government to regulate forests on private land. While the Act provides for registration of Private household forests in accordance with the provisions of the Land Act (Cap 227), and Private (Natural) Forest Guidelines (MWE, 2015b), there is no mechanism and incentives for private forest owners to undergo a hectic process of registering their forests. As a result, these forests can be degraded any time at will, including change of land use.

(d) Community Resource Management (CRM)

While CRM in wildlife conservation areas are governed under the Uganda Wildlife Act (Cap 315), it is also highly relevant to forestry conservation because most Wildlife Areas in Uganda are also Forests. The framework allows the Uganda Wildlife Authority to enter into agreements with communities and others for the management of Wildlife areas. CRM is intended to reduce pressure on Wild Life protected areas by promoting tree-growing for local use of firewood and timber, add value to resources, promote alternative livelihoods outside of protected areas, regulate community access to resources, promote benefit-sharing, and strengthen community participation in managing these areas. CRM is secured through 10-year agreement between communities and the Uganda Wildlife Authority. Rights of communities are limited to subsistence use of selected non-wood forest products (NWFPs) and firewood accessed through a permit system granted to the registered community resource user groups. Harvesting of timber and any other high-value resource by the community is prohibited. In terms of income, communities may benefit from beekeeping in buffer zones, and park revenues (20 percent of park entry fees) where tourism is developed, along with limited extraction of craft materials and bamboo. The CRM agreements specify rights, quantities and collection times that are confined to multiple use zones or collaborative management areas. The agreements are renewable and are reviewed periodically.

Issue

While the Uganda Wildlife Act, Cap 315 recognises historic rights of local communities, it does not provide for formal recognition of these rights. Communities are expected to support the authorities with fire control, patrolling boundaries and reporting rule violations. All decision-making remains in the hands of the Wildlife Authority. Communities have no rights to compensation in case of withdrawal of rights. Nor are there any easily accessible dispute-resolution mechanisms for communities to seek

redress if they feel their rights are not being upheld. Overall, CRM regimes provide very limited use rights while saddling communities with responsibilities for conservation and protection. In addition, the process of formalizing CRMs tends to be lengthy and very bureaucratic.

2.3 Emerging issues for youth, Women and indigenous people

(a) Limited participation in inclusive forest governance approaches and inequalities in access to benefits

While the inclusive forest governance approaches aim at increasing forest access for communities, the design of these models favors men to the disadvantage of women and youth. There are differentiated access opportunities based on gender, age, and social inequities. For example, women and youth are often excluded from high-value chains due to poverty, physical risks, mobility constraints and patrilineal tenure norms, yet derive critical subsistence benefits that support household food security (FAO, 2022). The youth are often challenged by the scarcity of forest opportunities and have limited legal avenues for value addition, while Indigenous groups like the Batwa bear legacies of eviction from reserves such as Mgahinga and Bwindi, resulting in near-total loss of traditional forest-based livelihoods and persistent marginalisation (Bluwstein et al., 2022). The youth and women and indigenous people lack skills for value-added enterprises often proposed under Forestry management.

In central forest reserves like Budongo, legal access via permits or Collaborative Resource Management (CRM) agreements restricts harvest volumes to unsustainable NTFP quotas, forcing reliance on risky “illegal” extraction amid fines and patrols by the National Forestry Authority (NFA) or Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) (Miller et al., 2024). In most CFM institutions the women, youth and indigenous people are usually excluded from the key governance positions (Miller et al., 2024). Experience has also shown that, membership to these CFM and CRM groups requires payment of certain fees, which have in most cases turned out to be expensive for women and youth thus excluding them from membership.

(b) Undermining the Role of Women, Youth and indigenous people in Ugandan Forest

Tenure Security

Women and youth play pivotal yet underleveraged roles in securing forest tenure in Uganda, where customary patrilineal norms, statutory gaps, and male-dominated sectors constrain their participation despite progressive policies like the 2001 Forest Policy and 2003 National Forestry Act, which mandate gender equity in Communal Land Associations (CLAs) and Collaborative Resource Management (CRM) (CIFOR-ICRAF, 2025a). Their involvement enhances tenure security by fostering community buy-in, reducing elite capture, and promoting sustainable practices, but systemic barriers limit representation to 20-30% in leadership roles, perpetuating insecurity across 60% of contested forest estates (Bluwstein et al., 2022).

The vulnerable and marginalised groups face amplified constraints and barriers to Community Land Association (CLA) membership, with tenure reforms facing veto players in customary hierarchies while gender safeguards encounter cultural resistance. For example, women's CLA representation has been stagnant at 20-30% (NFA, 2023). The reforms under the 2003 National Forestry Act lag due to bureaucratic hurdles, funding shortfalls, and socio-cultural barriers, with Community Forest (CF) registration stalling in districts like Kakumiro and Masindi (Resilient Landscapes Africa, 2024). Women and youth encounter patrilineal documentation biases, securing joint titles in only 15% of cases, while the Batwa and Ik communities historically evicted from reserves such as Mgahinga and Kidepo lack evidentiary recognition of customary claims, thereby amplifying displacement risks (CIFOR-ICRAF, 2025a). The Youth face age-discriminatory permit exclusions, limiting CLA leadership to 20-30% (UBOS, 2023). This protectionist bias erodes NFA's 2025-2030 restoration goals, tied to broader decentralisation failures.

Women, bearing 70% of non-timber forest product (NTFP) collection burdens (fuelwood (83% household energy), wild foods, and medicinal) serve as de facto stewards whose practical knowledge underpins CLA viability, yet face evidentiary hurdles (e.g., lack of spousal consent documentation) and cultural biases excluding them from titles or high-value permits (CIFOR-ICRAF, 2025a). Participatory Prospective Analysis (PPA) in Masindi district revealed that women prioritise land access for forestry as a core driver of tenure security, forecasting empowerment scenarios in which they claim 60% leadership in local groups, supported by cultural institutions and equitable benefit-sharing (CIFOR-ICRAF, 2025b).

3.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are derived from Space discussions, participant suggestions, and aligned Ugandan policy directions (e.g., from government statements). Emphasis is placed on policy-oriented actions to strengthen Inclusive forestry governance approaches and foster long-term sustainability, with a focus on integration across sectors.

- a) **Pilot Livelihood-Integrated Conservation Zones:** In 10 high-dependency districts (e.g., Masindi, Kakumiro, Budongo-adjacent), there is a need to delineate multi-use zones through district-NFA mapping, allowing sustainable NTFP quotas (20% reserve harvest) alongside carbon protection. This should integrate women-led NTFP hubs and youth patrols. These interventions will balance zoning options with economic pressures/conflicts (FAO, 2022).
- b) **Fast-Track CLA Titling and Benefit-Sharing Protocols:** Gazette 100,000 ha of Community Land Associations (CLAs) under the 2003 Forestry Act, mandating 30% revenue ring-fencing for livelihoods (NTFPs, ecotourism) via transparent ledgers audited quarterly by the Auditor General. Prioritise women/youth/Indigenous quotas (40% leadership) to counter patrilineal biases (15% joint titles currently). This will tackle stalled reforms and exclusion, and about 12.5% FEI uplift (Bluwstein et al., 2022).
- c) **Enforce Gender/Youth/Indigenous Quotas and social Safeguards:** In partnership with CSOs and development partners, the MoWE should revise regulations and

mandate at least 40% representation in CLA/CRM leadership in revised regulation regulations, with ESF-disaggregated monitoring for all programs. In addition, the MoWE should launch women/youth skills funds for NTFP value addition, targeting 40% participation by women and youth and a 25% increase in women's income. This intervention will counter disproportionate burdens (70% of labour by women; youth migration) and rights violations (CIFOR-ICRAF, 2025a).

- d) Establish Multi-Stakeholder Tenure Dispute Platforms:** The MoWE should create district forums (NFA, districts, UFWG, customary leaders) for mediating 40% reserve conflicts, integrating Batwa/Ik customary claims with digital registries. This would mitigate political interference, coordination deficits, and overlapping rights (Walker, 2023).
- e) Legislate Smallholder NTFP Quotas and Anti-Syndicate Measures:** The MoWE should review guidelines and provide quotas for legal smallholder access (50% high-value NTFPs) and ban politically linked charcoal networks via NFA-led taskforces to reduce syndicates and enhance FEI equity gain. This targets illegal trade and pro-rich biases (Miller et al., 2024).
- f) Institutionalise National Forest Coordination Forums:** Operationalise the quarterly platforms (NFA, CSOs, donors) with 40% vulnerable seats for joint planning, ESF audits, and scaling UFWG mediation. This will fix fragmented ties, episodic training (NFA, 2025).
- g) Launch Annual Forest-Livelihood Baseline Surveys:** There is a need for regular Forest-Livelihood Surveys. The MoWE should collaborate with UBOS to collect this data annually. The data should be gender/age/Indigenous-disaggregated to track FEI, coverage and conflicts. This will build evidence on emerging issues such as climate impacts (UBOS, 2020).
- h) Enhance Education and Community Empowerment Programs:** Launch targeted awareness campaigns on climate adaptation, stewardship, and sustainable practices in rural areas. Policy direction: Integrate environmental education into national curricula and community development plans under the Ministry of Education and Sports. Fund NGO-led literacy initiatives with incentives such as subsidies for eco-friendly farming tools. Long-term: Aim for 100% coverage in climate literacy by 2030, aligning with Uganda's Vision 2040.
- i) Promote Alternative Livelihoods and Economic Diversification:** Develop eco-friendly activities, such as agroforestry, ecotourism, poultry, piggery, and horticulture, to reduce reliance on forests. Expand the four-acre model promoted by the government, providing tractors, seeds, and training for commercial agriculture. Introduce 49-year leases for forest settlers, conditional on reforestation and responsible animal rearing, as outlined in recent presidential directives. Support artisan groups with grants and infrastructure (e.g., markets, roads) to create non-forest-based jobs, integrating with Parish Development Model (PDM) funds.

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