Harmonized Standards and Accountability: Key Outcomes of the Forests and Climate Roadmap

I. Overview

The creation of a Forests and Climate Roadmap offers a means of identifying and sequencing the necessary global conditions for halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation by 2030. Since the first Global Stocktake in 2023, which set a goal of halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation by 2030, many countries have taken positive steps toward this target. However, progress globally has been uneven and, overall, far behind the necessary pace and scale.

In charting a pathway toward the 2030 target, a Forests and Climate Roadmap needs to confront the global barriers and inefficiencies stalling progress and identify steps to create the enabling policies and market conditions supportive of effective global action.

Among the most foundational of these steps is facilitating global cooperation through harmonization of standards, best practices, and accountability.

National capacity building cannot stand alone; it requires a coherent international policy framework with clear and harmonized standards for transparency and accountability. Piecemeal financial mechanisms and marketplace standards will not ensure delivery of the 2030 targets. Harmonized accountability is essential to driving cohesion, ensuring alignment with the best available science, mitigating uncertainty and risk, and ensuring equitable efforts for forest protection across both Global South and Global North countries.

Charting a pathway toward the 2030 goals requires, as a priority action, a process to establish the harmonization of standards and accountability between Parties.

II. Background

Forest policy is highly fragmented, both across institutions (FAO, UNEP, UNFF) and agreements (CBD, UNFCCC, SDGs), as well as between countries. This fragmentation hinders synergistic international governance and leads to inconsistency in definitions, monitoring standards, and reporting practices between countries.

In the absence of sufficient international guidance, countries have pursued divergent approaches to defining and reporting on their progress toward halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation. This divergence has led to inefficiencies, marketplace uncertainty, inequitable burden-sharing, and inhibited global progress tracking.[1]

The FAO's 2025 Forest Resources Assessment (FRA) process requested that countries indicate whether they monitor forest degradation and, if so, to provide their working definition of degradation and their monitoring processes and results. Only 59 countries, representing 37% of the global forest area, reported that they have a definition of forest degradation. Seventeen other countries reported that they have adopted definitions from other sources or have criteria for monitoring degradation. Oceania, Asia, and South America all had more than 65% of their forests covered by a national definition, while in Africa 37% was covered. North and Central America had 10% of forests covered by a degradation definition, and Europe just 1%.[2]

The substance of what countries are tracking and reporting also varies significantly, with few countries including key criteria such as loss of biodiversity, loss of forest services, and forest disturbances. Fewer than half used remote sensing as part of their monitoring systems.

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1   Forest Declaration Assessment 2025, https://forestdeclaration.org/resources/forest-declaration-assessment-2025/.

2   FAO, Global Forest Resources Assessment (2025), https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/2dee6e93-1988-4659-aa89-30dd20b43b15/content/cd6709en.html.

While forest degradation includes the loss of primary forests from industrial disturbance (as forests that have been industrially disturbed, even if not deforested, are no longer classed as primary), globally, only about half of the world's primary forests are accounted for in monitoring, meaning this widespread form of degradation is not tracked. There is no comprehensive, accurate and standardized spatial data on primary forests for any forest biome (boreal, temperate, and moist and dry tropical forests),[3] making it difficult to track the extent of deforestation and degradation, including the loss of primary forests, in those regions. Protecting the world's remaining primary forests, across all forest biomes, is an urgent priority in tackling the climate and biodiversity crises.

Countries' Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) also reflect this absence of harmonized standards and accountability. Of the 64 new NDCs from Parties between January 1, 2024, and September 1, 2025, only 27% of countries described measures for reducing deforestation, and 22% for reducing forest degradation.[4]

Meanwhile, 56% of countries reported "sustainable forest management" (SFM) as part of their forest-related climate action. SFM remains poorly defined and inconsistently applied. It is not aligned with halting deforestation and forest degradation, due to its greater emphasis in practice on economic, not ecological, sustainability. Particularly in the absence of agreed definitions and standards, the use of terms like SFM, which continues to appear in UNFCCC dialogues and decisions,[5] hinders transparency and adherence to the 2030 forest targets.

These inconsistencies, terminological vagueness, and muddled target-setting make it difficult to compare progress or incentivize better practices across global supply chains. Effective monitoring, reporting, and verification systems require comparability and interoperability to drive coherent global analyses.

In 2023, the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment issued a declaration calling for the development of an "accountability framework as a means of driving global progress and promoting greater equity between forest protection standards." More than 130 civil society organizations from around the world have subsequently reinforced this call.

At its 2025 World Conservation Congress the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) adopted a resolution, *Harmonising Accountability and Means of Implementation for International Forest Protection Goals*,[6] which mobilizes IUCN and State Members on addressing the alignment of forest

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accountability standards between countries. This includes a Director General-led analysis on inconsistencies in monitoring and reporting and action from State Members to advance "consistent forest measurement, monitoring and reporting."

III. Roadmap Components

The Forests and Climate Roadmap should include the goal of harmonization of standards and accountability in pursuit of the 2030 goal of halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation and contain concrete, high-priority actions towards achieving this goal. These actions should include measures both within and beyond the UNFCCC, charting more holistic strategies that leverage change across the Rio conventions and other agreements and processes.

Ultimately, this harmonization process should result in:

- **Clear Responsibilities:** In line with the principles of the UNFCCC and Paris Agreement, Parties should coordinate with relevant international bodies to define objectives and expectations that support greater alignment and comparability. All countries should be enabled to ensure that domestic forest policies and actions are clearly reflected in their NDCs and other relevant reporting, including under the Enhanced Transparency Framework.

- **Common Monitoring:** To address disparities in how metrics - such as primary forest loss - are tracked, Parties should have comparable monitoring criteria and definitions. Targeted capacity-building should be provided to developing countries to enable access to technology, training, and institutional resources.

- **Standardized Reporting:** Were countries to report on forest sector progress using standardized templates and indicators, it would enable cross-national comparability and

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3   WRI, "Primary Forest Loss Indicator." Global Forest Review (2025), https://gfr.wri.org/forest-extent-indicators/primary-forest-loss.

4   UNFCCC, Nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement. Synthesis report by the Secretariat. October 2025, https://unfccc.int/documents/650664.

5   See, e.g., United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Forum on Forests Secretariat. 2021, The Global Forest Goals Report 2021, https://www.un.org/esa/forests/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Global-Forest-Goals-Report-2021.pdf.

6   WCC-2025-011, Delivering harmonised accountability and means of implementation for international forest protection goals, https://portals.iucn.org/library/sites/library/files/resrecfiles/WCC_2025_RES_011_EN.pdf.

evaluation. These templates should be developed in collaboration across Rio Conventions to streamline reporting and maximize synergies between Convention objectives.

To achieve these outcomes, the roadmap's accountability pillar should include the following steps:

1. A review of existing UNFCCC processes and commitments on forests, and the adoption of recommendations for aligning them with the global, equitable achievement of the 2030 forest targets across all forest biomes.

2. The development and adoption of guidance on the integration of deforestation and forest degradation in biennial transparency reports (BTRs) and other reporting processes.

3. In coordination with other relevant bodies, such as the FAO and the CBD, the development and adoption by the UNFCCC of clear definitions and indicators for deforestation and forest degradation, guidelines for their inclusion in NDCs and other target-setting, and guidance on best practices for forest monitoring, including the loss of primary forests and other forms of forest degradation, across all forest biomes.

4. In collaboration with the Forest Declaration Assessment, an independent annual analysis of countries' progress and transparency practices.

These measures should include clear, urgent timelines that enable timely delivery of the 2030 forest targets.

IV. Benefits of Harmonization

Harmonization is critical to ensuring comprehensive ambition that is equitable between countries, fostering marketplace certainty, and facilitating efficient cooperation.

While progress and accountability must be considered in light of national circumstances, shared guidance on best practices will provide countries with a clearer set of objectives and considerations for their policy choices. Accompanied by the necessary financial support, this will ease, rather than increase, burdens for many Parties, helping to guide their implementation of the 2030 forest targets and standardize their engagement with international and multinational processes.

Harmonization will also create a more equitable playing field, mitigating disproportionate burdens for those countries—particularly in the Global South—who have historically borne outsized scrutiny relative to countries in the Global North. It will ensure that all countries, regardless of geographic location or forest type, will recognize a common set of standards, to then be adapted for application domestically.

The absence of harmonized standards and accountability has been one of the most significant, yet under-recognized, barriers to halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation.

Alignment of standards and transparency is also critical to the marketplace. Stable and effective markets depend on certainty, comparability, and transparent risk. Vague, inconsistent standards, inaccurate risk assessment, and lack of data on ecological conditions will hinder the development of sustainable and resilient markets, as well as investment in forest protection. Harmonization will improve the functioning of economic flows, create higher-integrity supply chain transparency mechanisms, and, overall, enrich forest-dependent economies.

Creating global governance around harmonized standards and accountability will also allow all countries to take ownership of their own risk assessment under new laws such as the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) and ensure they will not be disproportionately burdened by compliance.

V. Conclusion

The absence of harmonized standards and accountability has been one of the most significant, yet under-recognized, barriers to halting and reversing deforestation and forest degradation. Alongside increased finance for developing countries recognition of collective tenure rights, and measures to align financial flows with sustainable outcomes, harmonization is a precondition to reaching the 2030 goal and fostering a healthy, resilient global economy. A roadmap to durable, effective outcomes on forests and climate must chart steps toward comprehensively recognizing this longstanding weakness in global cooperation and, from those findings, develops tangible solutions that elevate progress everywhere.