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POLICY BRIEF

Saving forests to build back sustainably

KEY FINDINGS

- Forests alone cover 39% of Ghana's total land area with the forestry sub-sector considered to be one of the largest contributors of foreign exchange earnings and critical to the country's economy.

- Forests have been explored for their timber and wood products for local and foreign use, and non-timber forest products such as food and medicinal herbs .

- Agricultural expansion, illegal logging, wildfires, urbanization, minerals exploitation, institutional and policy failures are major drivers of deforestation in Ghana.

INTRODUCTION

Forests form an integral part of the world, constituting 4.06 billion hectares of land worldwide and representing about 30.8% of the global land area as of 2020 (FAO and UNEP, 2020). This important resource is critical to the existence, balance, and continuity of the natural ecosystem. Besides serving as a habitat and preserving the diverse fauna and flora of the ecosystem, it is important for the survival of mankind, through the provision of environmental cushioning, social and economic benefits (Derks, Giessen, & Winkel, 2020; Kajtoch, Wilk, Bobrek, & Matysek, 2016; Ferenti, Marcov, 2013).

Despite its importance, the health of forests has been declining rapidly through anthropogenic activities and natural disturbances.

In Ghana, factors including the clearing of thousands of hectares of forest for agricultural activities especially the cultivation of cocoa for exports, the increasing demand for fuel wood and charcoal by households for their cooking and heating needs, and the activities of illegal chainsaw operators have all led to the degradation of Ghana's forest resources. Other factors are increasing population growth coupled with high rate of rural-urban migration (leading to expansion of urban areas and the creation of new settlements), clearing of forests through the increased activities of illegal small-scale miners, and ineffective and ill-resourced institutions responsible for forestry services. (Acheampong, Macgregor, Sloan, & Sayer, 2019; Yoda, 2019; Boadi, Nsor, Antobre, & Acquah, 2016).

This policy brief, culled from the Environment chapter of ISSER's Ghana Social Development Outlook 2020, highlights the drivers, extent, and impact of Ghana's depleted forest resources since the beginning of the 20th century and the extent to which green economy approaches support the reversal of deforestation in Ghana.

Forest resources

The forest resources of Ghana cover 39% of the total land area of the country, that is, the three (3) main ecological zones: High Forest Zone (HFZ), Transitional Zone (TZ) and Savannah Zone (SZ). The HFZ is found in the southern part of Ghana and covers about a third (8.2 million hectares) of the land area. It experiences the highest precipitation rate and is mainly vegetated with rain and deciduous forests. The Savannah Zone (SZ) mainly exists in the northern part of Ghana but stretches southward towards the east coast, covering 15.2 million hectares of forest. The SZ exists in three (3) different forms; Coastal, Guinea and Sudan Savannah. The Transitional Zone (TZ), which is mostly semi-deciduous forests covers 1.1 million hectares in the mid-part of Ghana and has characteristics of both the HFZ and SZ (MLNR, 2016; FC, 2016a). Ghana has 266 forest reserves and 216 off-forest reserves (UNEP, 2015). Thirty (30) forest reserves have been classified as Globally Significant Biodiversity Areas (GSBA).

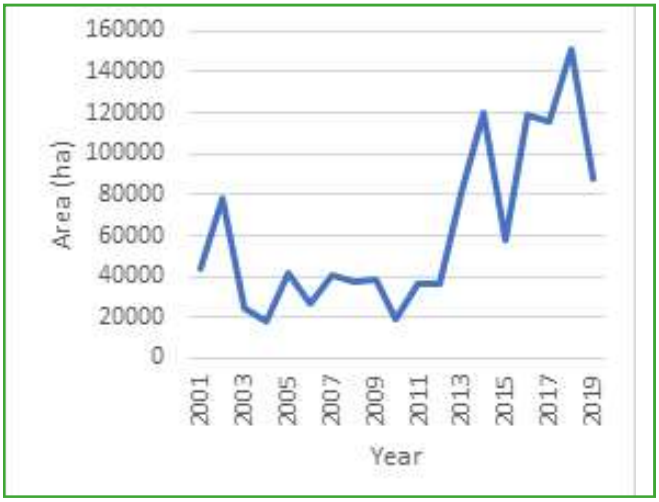
The forestry sub-sector is critical to the economy of the country through the provision of many ecosystem services and functions. The supply of timber and wood products for local and foreign use, non-timber forest products such as food and medicinal plants, provision of jobs to millions of Ghanaians, and the protection of biodiversity, watershed, and climate change mitigation are some of the important benefits derived from forests. The livelihoods of about 67% of an estimated 11 million people living in forest areas are directly dependent on forest resources. The forestry sub-sector is considered as one of the largest contributors of foreign exchange earnings to the country (UNEP, 2012).

Deforestation trend in Ghana since 2000

Ghana is counted among the countries in the world with the fastest rates of deforestation. At the turn of the 20th century, the country had approximately 8.2 million hectares of closed forest zone, having lost approximately 2.7 million hectares (60%) from 1950 to 2000 (FC, 2016b). Since 2000, nearly 135,000 hectares of forest has been lost annually, translating into a deforestation rate of 2% per year (FC, 2016b). Figure 1 presents the total amount of tree cover loss per year from 2001 to 2019.

The year 2018 saw the highest loss of about 151,444 ha of tree cover and the lowest year was 2004. The World Forest Institute (WFI) confirmed this alarming loss in tree cover of Ghana in 2018 to have been the highest in the world.

Figure 1: Tree cover loss per year from 2001 to 2019



Source: Global Forest Watch, 2020

The key drivers of deforestation in Ghana include agricultural expansion, illegal logging, wildfires and biomass burning, urbanization and mineral exploitation, and institutional and policy failures.

Green economy measures such as the implementation of several afforestation programmes from the year 2000 under the national forest plantation programmes, promotion of clean cooking fuels, the joining of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programmes, commissioning of different anti-galamsey task forces such as Operation Vanguard and "Galamstop" have contributed to slowing down the rate of deforestation, but not without challenges.

There has been a gradual increase in forest cover since 2015, increasing by approximately 105,000 between 201 and 2020. This is evidence that with the right measures, the country can salvage and regain the lost forest cover.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Ghana is blessed with rich forest resources and biodiversity. These resources are critical to the economy through the provision of many ecosystem services and functions. Unfortunately, unsustainable exploitation of forest resources has drastically depleted and degraded Ghana's forests over the years. Despite the various measures such as tree planting and task forces to check the depletion of forests, the country has not been able to overcome the menace and Ghana is at risk of losing its forest reserves and species diversity. Necessary measures must be taken to preserve and restore Ghana's forest reserves and prevent further depletion.

The following points are recommended to promote sustainable management of Ghana's forest resources.

- Enforce stricter punishment against illegal miners and galamseyers to serve as a deterrent.
- Engage community members in deforestation fight and address fundamental livelihood issues driving people into illegal activities in forests.
- Enforce already existing laws and bans against illegal lumbering and timber exportation.
- Embark on a well-planned awareness creation and information dissemination campaign on deforestation
- Implement smart remote forest monitoring during times of less mobility.

Forests are vital in providing home and sustenance for humans and animals alike.
Photo: wirestock/freepik.com

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A full version of the content of this policy brief, titled 'Environment,' can be found in the Ghana Social Development Outlook 2020

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