

## Forest Crime and Sustainable Forest Management

### Assessing the Gaps in Forest Crime in the AFoCO Region

#### BACKGROUND

Forest crime can be broadly defined as the “illegal exploitation of wild fauna and flora.” According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), forest crime refers to a range of processes of “taking, trading — i.e., supplying, selling or trafficking — importing, exporting, processing, possessing, obtaining and consumption of wild flora, including timber and other forest products, in contravention of national or international law.”

Illegal logging and related trades are not only major forest crimes but also directly contribute to deforestation, climate change, and species extinction, while having long-term negative impacts on the livelihoods of forest-dependent people. According to FAO’s State of the World’s Forest 2020 report and research findings, overexploitation of natural resources has significant effects on the environment, economy, and human health and is a cause of climate change.<sup>1</sup>

Due to higher market demand and increased profitability of timber and its byproducts, crimes in forests across the world are emerging as a serious threat. Many countries in Asia have lost significant areas of their rich forests to illegal logging activities over the last few decades. In June 2014, at the first United Nations Environment Assembly, all 193 member countries expressed their political will to curb the destruction of natural resources and heritages. This can also be linked to global society’s will for fair trade.<sup>2</sup>

Intrinsically, combating forest crime is vital to halting deforestation and forest degradation. It also relates to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular, SDG 14 (Conserve and Sustainably Use the Oceans, Seas and Marine Resources for Sustainable Development) and SDG 15 (Protect, Restore and Promote Sustainable Use of Terrestrial Ecosystems, Sustainably

<sup>1</sup> Blaser, Jürgen, Zabel von Felten, and Astrid Mirjam (2016). Forest Crime in the Tropics In: Tropical forestry handbook (pp. 3525-3558). Berlin: Springer

<sup>2</sup> Macqueen, D. and Mayers, J. (2020). Unseen Foresters: An assessment of approaches for wider recognition and spread of sustainable forest management by local communities. World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF). [https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our\\_focus/forests\\_practice/](https://wwf.panda.org/discover/our_focus/forests_practice/)

#### Key Messages

1. Funding support should prioritize the use of technology and the improvement of the knowledge of forest-related law enforcement activities.
2. Strong political support and good governance are essential in combating forest crime.
3. Institutional arrangements, coordination and collaboration must be strengthened to reverse the trends of forest crime.

Manage Forests, Combat Desertification, and Halt and Reverse Land Degradation and Halt Biodiversity Loss).

To provide a broader understanding of the impacts of forest crime and efforts to maintain the world’s forests, the AFoCO Regional Education and Training Center organized the capacity building workshop on “Forest Crime and Sustainable Forest Management” from May 16 to 20, 2022. Drawing on the discussions shared among participants of the workshop, this policy brief presents recommendations on how to deal with forest crimes.



Use of drones to monitor forest activities ©AFoCO

## POLICY HIGHLIGHTS

There are three key messages from an analysis of the current core problem of “increasing trends of illegal logging and wildlife trade” in the AFoCO Region (Figure 1).

### 1. Funding support should prioritize the use of technology and improving knowledge of forest-related law enforcement activities.

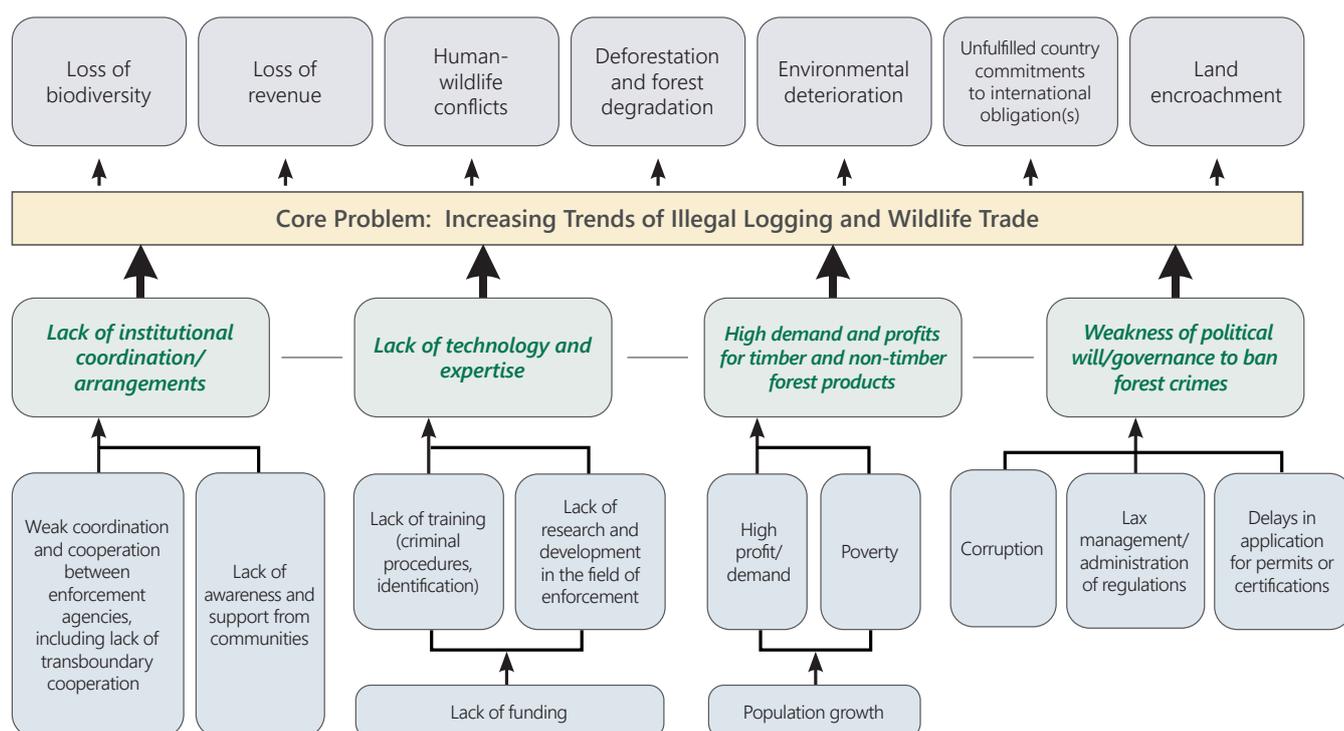
Technology was one of the dominant elements discussed throughout the workshop. Many participants shared the view that technology can serve as a force multiplier for enforcement activities and a suitable remedy to limitations in manpower, the main issue reducing enforcement effectiveness in many countries. After assessing the data collection protocol of each country, participants observed that advanced technologies have been applied in some countries, especially relating to the collection, analysis, and sharing of data regarding forest crime. Yet technology limitations were identified as a main or underlying cause of issues with respect to enforcement and forest crime.

Unstable investment is the main factor that limits a country's ability to leverage technology and expertise. With limited resources, governments find it difficult to allocate national budgets to deal with crime issues, which are mostly dependent on external funding support such as grants for the forestry sector. There is limited funding available for integrating technology into forest-related enforcement activities, such as the application of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) technologies and

computer-based monitoring tools and systems. While funds can be raised through overseas development aid projects, the sustainability of the project becomes an issue after the project period ends.

Furthermore, during the workshop, majority of the participants highlighted “lack of manpower (skilled rangers)” as one of the key challenges of combating crimes in forests (Table 1). Capacity building needs to prioritize forensic facilities, the use and customization of enforcement-related tools and technologies (e.g., Self Monitoring, Analysis and Reporting Technology (SMART)), judiciary and prosecution procedures, data management/digitalization, storage and enforcement-related information collected from the field, networking with cross-sectoral and regional stakeholders, and effective stakeholder engagement, both at the national and regional levels. Since methods and targeted forestry commodities for trade keep evolving, it is essential to devise relevant techniques or methods to keep up with these changes — this can be achieved through proper investment in research and development (R&D). Governments should also improve expertise in forest-related enforcement activities. This will help ensure that forests are properly and sustainably managed and protected for future generations.

**Figure 1. Analysis of gaps in reducing forest crime in AFoCO Member Countries**



Source: Country reports from participants of the AFoCO Capacity Building Workshop on Forest Crime and Sustainable Forest Management, 16-20 May 2022

## **2. Strong political support and good governance are essential in combating forest crime.**

Political support is a critical element to tackling increasing rates of forest crime. Participants highlighted increases in “unsound management and administrative regulations,” “corruption,” and “delayed processes of permitting or certification applications” as factors that slowly erode the political will and weaken governance associated with the banning of forest crimes in the AFoCO region.

These trends reflect the ongoing demand for illegal market products from the world’s forests, which inevitably tempts timber and non-timber producers. Profitability and demand are closely linked. High demand can result in high forest product profits. As a result, the illegal trade of forest products is driven by high profit margins and, in many cases, the high prices paid for rare and threatened species. In general, the demand and price of wildlife and forest products rises with their rarity, which follows a function of as a function of their morphology and life history, origin, conservation status, and trade regulations. There is also demand for species that are endemic in the region and/or extinct in other regions. Some consumers may prefer rare species and pay disproportionately high prices for them, which may lead to increased hunting efforts. As an endangered species becomes more valuable, the price and the incentives for trafficking rise.

Governments should partner with civil society and the private sector to strengthen law enforcement agencies’ abilities to implement effective enforcement strategies against forest crimes. This will disrupt the supply chain of illegal products and support efforts by industry and civil society organizations to build greater awareness and understanding among the public about forest crime. Improved public awareness can support the enhanced governance needed to expedite the process of acquiring legal permits or certifications to effectively ban forest crimes. This can effectively prohibit forest crimes and support legalization systems that are instrumental in curbing the illegal trade of wildlife and forest products.

## **3. Institutional arrangements, coordination, and collaboration must be strengthened to reverse forest crime trends.**

Coordination and collaboration between and among various relevant stakeholders (i.e., government agencies, the private sector, academia, law enforcement agencies, and international organizations) are essential to in the management of forest crimes by forestry ministries and departments. Forest crimes, including illegal logging and wildlife trade, involve not only those who cut trees and traffick wildlife or their parts illegally, but also traders, wood processing plant or market owners, officials who process permits for wildlife gatherers, and law enforcement officers who accept bribes. This calls for joint efforts in managing forest crimes. There is no single institution capable of eradicating these crimes; thus strategic approaches should be implemented simultaneously.

Such coordination and collaboration between various stakeholders must be strengthened to reverse the trend of illegal logging and wildlife trade. Although it may not be easy to establish a platform addressing all concerns, an organization and forum that could handle this would be a good initiative to begin with.

Local communities may identify illegal harvesting and wildlife trade as the most profitable way to earn a living. Although extracting natural resources without proper documentation is illegal, local communities are not always aware of the policies, laws, and regulations they are violating. It is therefore necessary to develop various Information, Education, and Communication (IEC) activities to disseminate relevant knowledge and explain policies and laws in layman's terms to improve understanding among local communities.

### **BOX 1. Workshop Summary**

The capacity building workshop on ‘Forest Crime and Sustainable Forest Management’ was virtually organized from May 16 to 20, 2022. The workshop welcomed 26 participants from 10 Member Countries (Bhutan, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Viet Nam) and experts from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), Center for International Forestry Research-World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF), ASEAN Center for Biodiversity (ACB), and World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Greater Mekong.

The workshop aimed to:

- improve understanding of major drivers of forest crime and its socio-environmental impacts, and
- share knowledge and experiences in combating forest crime in AFoCO Member Countries.

**Table 1. Assessment of trends and limitations of forest crime in AFoCO Member Countries**

Countries	Most commonly traded items	Institutional limitations in dealing with forest crime
Bhutan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Timber species (red sanders being traded from other countries), other timber species used for construction purposes</li> <li>Wildlife (tiger and other cat species parts, bear bile, bear paws and parts, musk deer pods)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ineffective/outdated legal and policy interventions for funding</li> <li>Lack of awareness</li> <li>Lack of crime prevention, detection and investigation skills</li> <li>Lack of effective bi/multilateral collaboration</li> <li>Lack of manpower (skilled rangers)</li> <li>Lack of technology and equipment</li> <li>Limited knowledge of prosecution</li> </ul>
Brunei Darussalam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Agarwood</li> <li><i>Dipterocarpus</i> species</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of funding</li> <li>Lack of manpower (skilled rangers)</li> </ul>
Kazakhstan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Timber species (birch, pine, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase in penalties</li> <li>Lack of funding for the forest industry</li> <li>Lack of manpower and material base</li> </ul>
Kyrgyzstan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Herbs (licorice root, St. John's wort, oregano, sage, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Increase in penalties</li> <li>Lack of funding for the forest industry</li> <li>Lack of manpower and material base</li> </ul>
Malaysia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Timber species</li> <li>Agarwood</li> <li>Wildlife (elephant ivory, pangolin, tiger, sun bear)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Access to technology</li> <li>Lack of awareness and expertise</li> <li>Lack of funding</li> <li>Lack of manpower (skilled rangers)</li> </ul>
Myanmar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teak, rosewood, <i>Xylia xylocarpa</i>, <i>Pterocarpus</i> spp., <i>Dalbergia</i> spp.</li> <li>Wildlife (elephant, tiger, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Corruption</li> <li>Lack of manpower (skilled rangers)</li> <li>Security of enforcement officers</li> </ul>
Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Logs (narra, lauan, etc.)</li> <li>Endemic wildlife species (pawikan, pangolin, elephant tusks, etc.)</li> <li>Non-timber forest products (agarwood, raw rattan, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of manpower (skilled rangers)</li> <li>Logistical resources (equipment, and funding)</li> <li>Past overdue policies and laws that need to be enhanced and amended, a peace and order situation</li> </ul>
Timor-Leste	<i>No response provided</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lack of manpower and material base</li> </ul>
Viet Nam	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High-value tree species (<i>Dalbergia oliveri</i>, <i>Erythrophleum fordii</i>, etc.),</li> <li>Wild animals (tiger, rhinoceros, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness within communities of the importance of high-value tree species</li> </ul>

Source: Results of group work conducted at the AFoCO Capacity Building Workshop on Forest Crime and Sustainable Forest Management, 16-20 May 2022

## THE WAY FORWARD

The rise of forest-related criminal networks and new methods of carrying out wildlife and forest crimes calls for the use of technology and knowledge to adapt to these changes. Developing a strategic approach with inclusive and cross-sectoral stakeholder engagement is one of the key areas to focus on when combating forest crimes.

### Recommendations to reduce forestry-related crime in the AFoCO region include:

1. Identify specific capacity and technology needs of respective member countries.
2. Form regional expert groups on enforcement to assist countries in the region in developing and strengthening policy guidelines and provide necessary technical support.
3. Develop two-tier initiatives at the national and the regional levels for R&D initiatives targeted at strengthening enforcement and forest protection.
4. Develop schemes at the national level to incentivize front-line staff.
5. Develop comprehensive capacity development programs at the regional level and customize them to tailor to each individual member country's needs.
6. Intensify IEC campaigns to help local communities and the general public better understand forestry laws and policies.



### Asian Forest Cooperation Organization (AFoCO)

AFoCO is a treaty-based intergovernmental organization that is committed to strengthening forest cooperation and taking concrete actions to promote sustainable forest management and address the impacts of climate change.

[www.afocosec.org](http://www.afocosec.org)