

World Bank Approves \$394.8 Million Programme to Transform Congo Basin Forest Economies

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The World Bank Group has approved a major new programme aimed at reshaping forest economies across Central Africa, combining sustainable land management with job creation at scale.

The Sustainable Congo Basin Forest Economies Program (SCBFEP), funded through the International Development Association (IDA), will deploy \$394.83 million in its first phase to improve forest management, strengthen value chains, and generate an estimated 220,000 jobs across Cameroon, the Central African Republic, and the Republic of Congo.

The initiative forms part of a wider \$1.02 billion multi-phase programme designed to unlock the economic and environmental potential of the Congo Basin, the world's second-largest tropical forest.

From conservation to economic delivery

The programme marks a shift in approach, moving beyond conservation-led models towards building viable forest economies that support long-term livelihoods.

During Phase 1, nearly 8 million hectares of forest will be placed under sustainable management. The programme also aims to reduce annual greenhouse gas emissions by 17.6 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent and increase the share of legally processed wood by 15 percent.

Alongside environmental outcomes, the focus is firmly on economic inclusion. More than 500 small and medium-sized enterprises will receive support, while 20,000 people—40 percent of them women—will gain access to training, finance, and infrastructure. A further 7,000 young people will be supported into entrepreneurship.

These measures are designed to unlock opportunities for the 60 million people living in and around the Congo Basin, many of whom have historically seen limited benefit from economic growth.

Chakib Jenane, World Bank Regional Director for Planet, said:

“This new program marks a milestone for the Congo Basin, where sustainable forest economies create jobs, raise incomes, and strengthen resilience for millions of people. By scaling legal wood production, improving governance, and investing in skills and enterprise growth, countries can unlock inclusive and sustainable prosperity.”

A coordinated regional programme

A defining feature of the SCBFEP is its regional structure, bringing together three countries under a coordinated investment framework.

The programme will work closely with regional institutions including the Central African Economic and Monetary Community (CEMAC) and the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) to harmonise policies, improve governance, and strengthen cross-border collaboration.

Marina Wes, Acting World Bank Director for Regional Programs, said:

“The Congo Basin is a shared resource, and its sustainability depends on coordinated policies and close regional cooperation. By strengthening regional institutions, the program improves wood trade standards and create a powerful platform for learning and collaboration across the Basin.”

This regional alignment is expected to address long-standing challenges around fragmented regulation and inconsistent enforcement, which have historically limited both environmental outcomes and market development.

Strengthening value chains and investment readiness

Beyond forest management, the programme places significant emphasis on developing value chains and improving market access.

Investments will support agroforestry systems, community forest enterprises, and SME processing zones, helping to increase value addition within the region rather than relying on raw material exports.

The initiative also aims to create the conditions for long-term private sector investment, including opportunities linked to carbon markets and sustainable forestry.

By aligning policy reform, institutional strengthening, and enterprise development, the programme is designed to move forest economies from subsistence and informality towards structured, investable

sectors.

A delivery model for complex, multi-country programmes

From a project delivery perspective, the SCBFEP reflects the increasing scale and complexity of development programmes that operate across borders, sectors, and stakeholder groups.

The multi-phase structure allows for staged implementation, learning, and adjustment over time, while the regional governance model supports coordination across national systems.

The programme aligns with the World Bank's Global Challenge Program on Forests for Development, Climate, and Biodiversity, as well as national development strategies and climate commitments across participating countries.

In doing so, it positions the Congo Basin not only as a critical environmental asset, but as a platform for inclusive economic growth—demonstrating that sustainability and development are not competing priorities, but interdependent outcomes.