

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Ending Deforestation: Shared Data and Accountability

April 2023

Forest Data Partnership



On 18 April 2023, roughly 60 participants from civil society gathered for an online forum to discuss the topic: **Ending Deforestation: Shared Data and Accountability**.

Data, information and technology are critical to protect forests, advance restoration and strengthen the rights of forest-dependent communities. But how can we create a consistent geospatial data ecosystem that generates greater transparency and accountability towards deforestation-free supply chains?

As civil society plays a crucial role in preserving the world's forests, the Forest Data Partnership convened key organizations and actors in this space to discuss how we can collaboratively improve land use data, particularly when it comes to restoration and forest risk commodities such as palm oil, cocoa, soy and cattle.

The objective of the Forum was to create a space for an open exchange of views on the challenges and priorities when it comes to data used for the monitoring and evaluation of policy and corporate action on deforestation and restoration. Participants contributed to a rich and productive dialogue about how we can build a shared data ecosystem that can help accelerate progress toward sustainable supply chains.

Key Takeaways

1. **Data accuracy, availability and accessibility are major challenges — regardless of the country/commodity context.**

Data pain points are largely similar across regions and commodities.

Accurate monitoring of crops like cocoa is tricky as it is grown both under tree shade and in the open, so better land-use maps are needed to understand where cocoa farms end and forests start. Similarly for palm oil, there are challenges in distinguishing forest reserves from plantations and determining boundaries. Even when this data is available online, access may be severely limited. In addition, granularity of data is often insufficient.

Soy and cattle breakout participants underscored the importance of baseline data sets like native, primary and secondary forests. They noted that while there is reasonably comprehensive data available within Brazil, there is a dearth of recent data for other countries in the Latin American region.

Cost was often cited as another barrier to data acquisition, especially for high-resolution data that could better inform risk assessments and improve sourcing. In the case of cocoa, farm-level data is not accessible for privacy/security reasons, which requires additional investment in field investigation to validate areas.

Monitoring the outcomes of restoration projects is also tricky; for example, it is difficult to distinguish between tree cover gain from replanting and from agroforestry. One participant pointed out the elusiveness of data on what species have been planted in these projects.

Participants also raised concerns about timeliness of updates since frequent updates for palm oil concessions and reserves are necessary to accurately track the footprint of palm oil.

2. Comparing apples to oranges: Standardization and interoperability are key to making better use of the data that currently sits in local, national and institutional silos.

For civil society actors focused on cocoa and palm oil, a major challenge in effectively analyzing and comparing forest loss data is the variation in definitions of “forest” and “high risk” depending on the country, monitoring entity and time period.

Participants also cited disparate protocols and methodologies as posing formidable barriers to sharing, integrating and working with the wealth of data that is available today. This misalignment can lead to confusion around how data is applied for specific purposes.

While more global products are becoming available and more country-level work is being done, these data sets are not always consistent or complementary. This can result in silos as well as duplication of resources. For instance, restoration actors spoke about inconsistent reporting on tree planting across countries.

The lack of synergy makes it hard for actors to integrate data from multiple sources. Deploying data interoperability solutions can lead to increases in accuracy and decreases in uncertainty. This would help us to unlock the full potential of existing data to truly realize sustainable supply chains.

3. Governments are top priority stakeholders, along with Indigenous groups and smallholder farmers, but communicating why alignment on data matters is critical to overcoming any resistance to engagement.

Participants agreed unanimously that engagement with governments is critical to improving the data landscape. Most national governments have their own deforestation monitoring system so it is important to engage countries at the federal level.

While there is a tendency for civil society organizations to be perceived as wielding data as a “policing” tool to hold states and other actors accountable, we must acknowledge that governments have a positive role to play in delivering services around forest resources and fulfilling their commitments to society. Thus, it is essential to find ways to engage governments proactively and productively in the data discussion.

The disinclination of some governments to make data public poses challenges. In some places, this lack of transparency has led to lower levels of trust in the reliability and accuracy of the data. However, participants noted opportunities for leveraging inter-governmental processes and platforms to encourage greater disclosure, collaboration and access to data.

Leveraging the right channels can also facilitate engagement with fragmented and hard-to-reach stakeholders like smallholder farmers. For example, the Cocoa & Forests Initiative (CFI) is engaging with smallholders via cooperatives to ensure that information trickles down to them effectively. Support and capacity-building need to be provided to these cooperatives to ensure they have the right tools to access and verify data. Participants also brought up gender and social inclusion as key considerations for equitable and representative stakeholder engagement.

Local actors, including civil society, play a significant role since they can monitor what is happening on the ground and report on data accuracy. However, some participants pointed out that while local communities are having a lot of dialogue about data, they may not fully appreciate technical aspects like interoperability and standardization. This could impact discovery (and use) of the data, and as a result, compel stakeholders in the broader ecosystem to default to easily available global data.

Participants also cited engaging with Indigenous groups as a high priority. Assumptions that data is not one of their primary concerns were challenged since Indigenous groups will feel the impact of important decisions about land use the most. Thus, data should be presented as a powerful tool to influence decisions and harness resources for communities.

The conclusion was that unless we all share the same data, it will be challenging to make informed decisions. Participants see the value of an aligned data ecosystem in building trust and accountability, enabling everyone to reach the same understanding of what is happening on the ground.