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“Reconcile land system changes
with planetary health”

Winners, losers, and the implications of inequality in biodiversity conservation policies: Insights from European development aid to Central Africa

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Abstract

International aid for biodiversity conservation is expected to provide alternative livelihoods for forest-dependent communities to offset restrictions on forest use. This aligns with the contemporary conservation discourse that promotes pro-poor, human rights-based, and sustainability principles. We used the Central Africa Forest Ecosystem Program (ECOFAC), the longest-running EU-funded initiative with nearly 200 million euros invested for about 30 years, as a case study to analyse how international aid, has attempted to achieve fair and sustainable conservation practices. Through a longitudinal study of the design of ECOFAC, we assessed its implementation arrangements, budget distribution, prioritised technical solutions, and target actors to identify to whom it has benefited the most (winners) and for whom it has not been beneficial or even harmful (losers). Our findings show that the EU biodiversity conservation programme has prioritised the reinforcement of state administrations to strengthen their coercive power in protected areas. A co-dependency has developed between transnational actors, preferred by the EU as implementing partners, and state conservation actors. This relationship has become a barrier to meaningful reform within ECOFAC despite decades of policy learning. The pro-poor discourse and human rights concerns of the EU aid have not been reflected in the types of activities funded nor in the level of investments aimed at incentivizing forest-dependent communities to support conservation restrictions. EU policymakers need to pay more attention to how their interventions in biodiversity conservation policies create or reinforce power asymmetries and inequality, especially in Central Africa.