

Understanding and overcoming policy (in)coherence to control deforestation in Colombia

A must to achieve the 2030 Agenda and climate goals

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Key messages

- Deforestation in Colombia has been a significant concern for several decades, with the Colombian Amazon being hit the hardest. In 2023, Colombia had lower rates of primary forest loss, but tropical rates have remained steady over the last few years.
 - Colombia has a robust policy framework addressing the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate change-related goals and land use change, which are intrinsically related to deforestation. However, implementation suffers because of a lack of harmony among these policies. Competing priorities, implementation obstacles and conflicting objectives within the policy landscape perpetuate this incoherence.
 - Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach that integrates environmental concerns into various sectors, fosters coordination among government bodies, improves law enforcement, strengthens land rights, and provides viable economic alternatives that avoid unsustainable deforestation and land use and align with conservation efforts.
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1. Introduction

Since 2020, the authors have analysed deforestation and related policies in Colombia as part of ongoing research in several countries to determine whether these policies work together to combat deforestation, and if not, to identify the underlying obstacles. The brief's results are described in more detail in the full case study report and several related scientific articles (Cárdenas-Vélez & Lobos-Alva, Unpublished manuscript; Shawoo et al., 2022) and book chapters (Cárdenas-Vélez & Lobos-Alva, 2023). More information on this research can be found on the [program website](#).



Deforestation is a lens through which policy coherence and social challenges can be analysed, as it hinders sustainable development, fuels social conflict and exacerbates inequality. Colombia struggles to balance trade-offs between economic, social and environmental goals. This conflict contributes to inconsistencies in policy formulation and implementation, which can hinder progress toward achieving deforestation reduction goals.

The country's diverse ecosystems, including the Amazon rainforest and the Andean cloud forests, have been under threat due to agricultural expansion, illegal logging, mining and infrastructure development. From 2002 to 2023 Colombia lost 1.99 million hectares of primary forest, and 5.3 million hectares of total forest cover (GFW, 2024).

The 2030 Agenda considers deforestation as one of the crucial issues we need to manage to achieve sustainable development, under Goal 15: "protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss". Failure to address deforestation jeopardizes the achievement of the SDGs and climate-related goals. Between 2013 and 2020, increases in deforestation in Colombia accounted for 1.24 gigatons of CO₂. The need to steeply reduce these emissions lies at the heart of the country's nationally determined contribution under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. In terms of the SDGs, the current national development plan has two fundamental environmental goals: contain deforestation and restore 750 000 ha of lost ecosystems by 2030. To support these goals, the government has continued ongoing efforts to address deforestation, including implementing policies and initiatives to protect forests, promote sustainable land use practices, and involve local communities in conservation efforts. These efforts have yielded mixed results.

This brief aims to highlight the how actors can collaborate to implement successful strategies to combat deforestation, promote sustainable land use and foster economic development. It also identifies roadblocks preventing partnerships, knowledge-sharing and concerted efforts to tackle this complex issue.

2. Issue and methodology

To understand deforestation in Colombia, it is necessary to untangle a complicated history of conflict and power. We must also investigate its multiple drivers, including the policy landscape, institutional arrangements, social and economic inequalities, and the influence of powerful economic interests.

To analyse this phenomenon, we apply a framework that considers the broader political context to explore how policy issues rely on ideas, institutions and interests (often referred to as the 'three Is') (Shawoo et al., 2022). This framework illuminates the factors that help explain the level of policy coherence in any given policy field. Ideas refer to how policy problems, solutions, and coherence are defined and interpreted, as well as how goals are prioritized. Institutions refer to government capacities, governance structures, laws, policies and responsibilities. Interests cover the preferences and agendas actors hold, power dynamics, and resource allocation.

A combination of ideology, vested interests and institutional rigidity shape policy processes and outcomes horizontally (between ministries and departments) and

vertically (between national, regional and municipal governance levels), as well as between policy objectives and their implementation.

In this brief, we look at land use and deforestation from a policy and institutional perspective to assess how land use policies integrate climate and sustainable development, how these are implemented, and who the main actors are. Finally, we recommend how to improve the coherence of policies and strategies.

This research is based on the review of literature and policies from the last decade, a stakeholder mapping exercise, interviews with key actors held in February and March 2023, and a focused group discussion workshop held in Bogotá 29 May 2023. We also use SDG Synergies, a tool for understanding how policy areas and targets interact, using systems thinking. This analysis allowed us to assess how deforestation and land use-related policies interact with the SDGs and climate-related goals to determine opportunities for synergies and identify potential trade-offs. The policies analysed are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Policies analysed in this case study

Name/theme	Description
The National Development Plan 2018–2022, “Pact for Sustainability: Production and Conservation”	The Colombian government has integrated forest protection and sustainable land use strategies into its national development plan. This includes commitments to reduce deforestation rates and increase reforestation efforts (DNP, 2018).
Policy bundle covering related issues	Includes CONPES 3700, which is the institutional strategy for the articulating policies and actions on climate change in Colombia (DNP, 2011), and the National Policy for the Integral Management of Biodiversity and Its Ecosystemic Services. The nationally determined contribution for Colombia (2020) is a more recent commitment addressing climate change. We also examined current Colombian mining laws, as outlined in the “Long-term vision for the mining and energy sector” (MinMinas, 2001).
Payment for environmental services (PES)	Colombia has implemented PES programs that pay landowners and communities to conserve forests and practice sustainable land use (Presidencia de la República, 2018).
Protected areas expansion	Governments have worked to expand protected areas and national parks to conserve critical ecosystems and biodiversity.
Forest governance	The government has strengthened institutions responsible for monitoring and regulating forest activities. This involves increasing law enforcement to combat illegal logging and land clearance (DNP, 2020).
Agricultural and land use planning	Colombia has promoted more sustainable agricultural practices and land use planning to reduce the pressure on forests. This involves supporting agroforestry systems and sustainable land management practices through training, financing and technical support (Minagricultura, 2019).
International agreements	Colombia has engaged in international agreements and collaborations to tackle deforestation. For instance, the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, the Paris Agreement and REDD+ (reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation in developing countries) initiative, aim to provide financial incentives for countries to reduce deforestation and promote forest conservation (DNP, 2011).

3. Findings

Synergies and trade-offs between deforestation and land use-related policies

Figure 1 shows the interactions between 25 policies included in our analysis. When a row or a column has a dark colour or a higher total, it may correspond to a highly influential (row totals) or highly influenced (column totals) policy. For example, Colombia's current mining legislation (policy 20) conflicts with other objectives, preventing their progress, as reflected in row 20, which shows it restricts several other policies. In contrast, the restructuring and development of sustainable agricultural production processes (policy 12) is a highly influenced policy, meaning it is prone to being positively or negatively affected by other policies, which is reflected in a high column total (see Figure 1 for both scores).

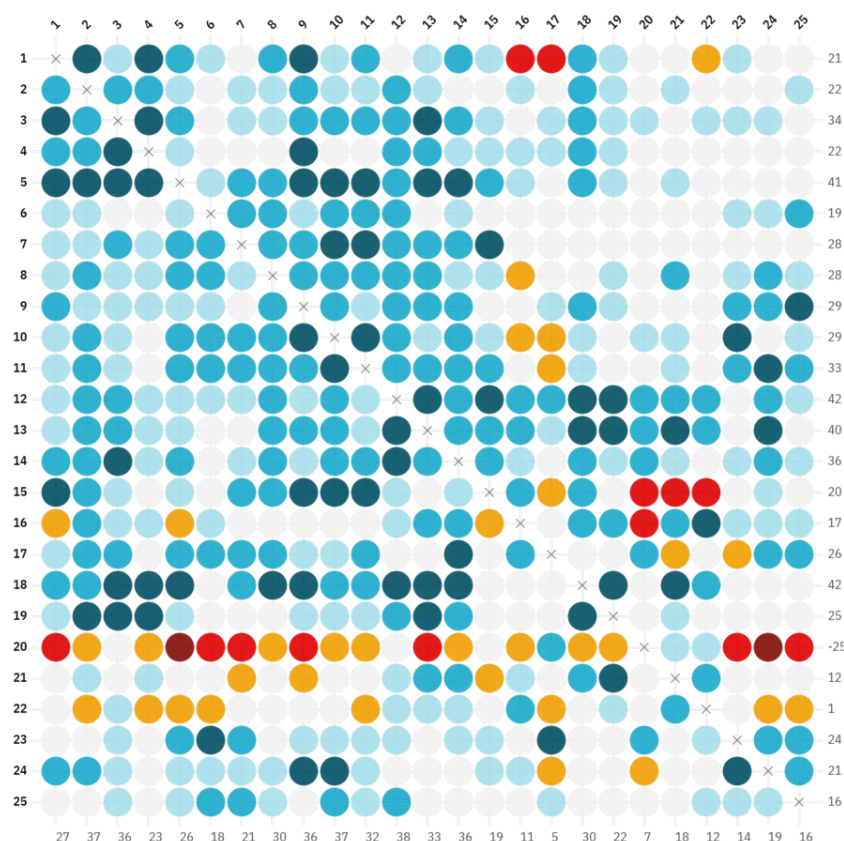


Figure 1. Cross-impact matrix of 25 deforestation targets. The row sum (right) indicates the net influence of the goal on the rest of the group, and the column sum shows how much all other goals in the network influence that goal. Source: Own development using the SDG Synergies Tool.

The interactions between the selected public policies for deforestation and land use, the SDGs, and climate goals in Colombia are mostly positive (Figure 1), meaning they

mutually boost each other. Figure 1 also shows that of the 600 interactions evaluated, only 48 (8%) resulted in trade-offs, impeding the success of other policies. On the other hand, 378 (63%) interactions were rated as promoters, and 174 (29%) interactions were neutral (categorized as “no influence”).

There are also several relevant synergies between current climate change policies and the policies for managing biodiversity and ecosystem services in Colombia. Our findings suggest that while Colombia has not yet fully developed its institutional capacity for climate change mitigation and adaptation, there is significant potential for improvement. By maximizing the synergies between the SDGs and broader climate targets, Colombia can not only promote sustainable forest management but also strengthen its institutions to more effectively address climate challenges. This alignment would enhance the country’s ability to implement policies, coordinate across sectors, and achieve long-term sustainability and resilience. Interviewed experts also highlighted potential connections and mutual benefits that exist between the Aichi Biodiversity Targets (CBD & UNEP, 2010), the SDGs, and the Paris Agreement.

However, current Colombian mining laws (policy 20) (MinMinas, 2001) conflict with two of the studied policies in particular:

- Avoid deforestation of natural forest and promoting economic development of communities and ethnic groups (policy 5) (Minambiente, 2012).
- Impacts of mining on the ecosystems of the Colombian territory (policy 24), which states that territorial-municipal entities can regulate the use of their land and guarantee environmental protection, even prohibiting mining activity (Minambiente, 2016).

For more than a decade, communities have sought a public policy that harmonizes the conservation of national parks with the rights of peasants to exploit natural resources within these areas. Progress has been made through agreements like the Agreement for Prosperity 079 of 2022, which assigns the state responsibility for preventing and controlling environmental degradation while requiring administrative authorities to coordinate these efforts (Minambiente, 2022a). However, the inclusion of Article Seven in the current National Development Plan, which allowed for agreements with the peasant population in protected areas, has not been effectively implemented (DNP, 2018). As a result, many local communities feel sidelined in conservation efforts, increasing tensions between the state and peasant populations. Moreover, the enforcement actions under Operation Artemisa (Box 1), aimed at halting deforestation, have violated these agreements, generating territorial conflicts that banish people from their homes and undermine community trust in the state. These challenges highlight the urgent need for policies that genuinely incorporate local voices and reconcile environmental goals with the rights of marginalized communities.

Box 1. Operation Artemisa and how efforts to stop deforestation fuel inequality

Created in 2019 as the primary national military strategy to stop deforestation (Alfonso, 2022; Minambiente, 2022b), this strategy included coordinated military operations between armed forces and different government entities to control deforestation and environmental crimes, such as the execution, promotion, and financing of deforestation.

Operation Artemisa (2019–2021) criminalized peasant farmers as drivers of deforestation, who, in many cases, are victims of deforestation (Bautista, 2022). Military operations in the region persecuted peasants, including people who have inhabited these areas for decades. This military treatment, reminiscent of the violence against peasants in the context of the counter-insurgency war, which started in the '60s, and the ongoing war on drugs, has harmed human rights and rural development.

Drivers of incoherence

Our research, including literature review, expert interviews and a multi-stakeholder forum, found that political agendas, institutional weaknesses and vested interests contribute equally to policy incoherence in Colombia. The influence of powerful interests within the agricultural and mining sectors is pervasive, as well as the counterproductive actions to combat deforestation, which hinders progress and prioritizes economic benefits over environmental protection.

In terms of social inequality, the current policy framework for deforestation lacks community involvement in decision-making processes. Local communities are mostly at the receiving end of policy impacts, as in the example of Operation Artemisa. Similar examples can be found in the implementation of mining laws.

A key obstacle to fighting deforestation is the low coordination and collaboration between government agencies and stakeholders. Unequal distribution of financial resources among ministries, with the fewest resources given to the environment and scientific research sectors, highlight the government's low prioritization of these issues, compared to other sectors.

Finally, existing policies do not support enhanced coordination. Policies such as CONPES 4021 and Decree 1257 of 2017 that created the Intersectoral Commission for the Control of Deforestation and the Integral Management for the Protection of Natural Forests do not effectively harmonize the different sectors and agendas involved in deforestation reduction, resulting in conflicting actions and limited progress (DNP, 2020). For instance, the deforestation caused by mining, combined with the strong mining restrictions intended to promote conservation, biodiversity, climate and sustainable development, underscore such conflict, making it a key sector to tackle to achieve policy coherence.

4. Policy recommendations

Addressing deforestation in Colombia requires a comprehensive and integrated approach that tackles the political, institutional and social drivers of the problem. Policy coherence can be undermined by competing interests and institutions, which can be mitigated if the government makes a concerted commitment to slowing deforestation.

We recommend the following actions:

- **Cooperate with regional allies to achieve concrete deforestation goals.** Brazil and other countries linked to the Amazon biome can help tackle the issue of low political will. Monitoring and policy enforcement will only be possible through a concerted regional effort. The Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization offers a neutral platform to hold these discussions and plan specific joint actions.
- **The SDGs, climate goals and equality-focused objectives must remain high on the policy agenda.** This prioritization needs to be accompanied by adequate resources and national and local budget allocations. For instance, achieving ambitious goals like Colombia's nationally determined contribution (NDC) under the Paris Agreement necessitates adequate technical expertise and comprehensive monitoring programs. Investing in equipment, personnel, and local-level monitoring systems is essential for effective implementation.
- **Engaging communities affected by deforestation** in policymaking processes is critical. By ensuring their voices are heard and their needs considered, Colombia can enhance the local ownership and effectiveness of policy interventions.
- Finally, policymakers, stakeholders, and international partners should **prioritize addressing policy incoherence, strengthening institutional capacities, and aligning policies** with the objectives outlined in Colombia's NDC and the SDGs. This can be achieved, initially, by systematically reviewing interlinkages, synergies and trade-offs using available methodologies and tools focused on systems thinking, such as [SDG Synergies](#).

Policy annex		
No.	Target (short title)	Policy reference
1	Use of policies, actions and measures to address and reduce deforestation	Integrated strategy for deforestation control and forest management (EICDGB)
2	Forest degradation and carbon accounting	Conpes 3700: Institutional Strategy for the Articulation of Climate Change Policies and Actions in Colombia
3	Greenhouse gas (GHG) mitigation through silvopastoral and agroforestry production systems.	Law 1447 of 2018 and National Strategy for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (ENREDD+)
4	Reduced CO2 emissions from prevented deforestation	Decree 1257 of 2017 for the creation of the Intersectoral Commission for the Control of Deforestation
5	Avoid deforestation of natural forest and economic development of communities and ethnic groups	National Policy for Integral Management of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (PNGIBSE)
6	Reducing gender-based economic, social and political inequalities	Conpes 3918: Strategy for the Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Colombia
7	Income generation for ethnic groups through the sustainable use of biodiversity	National Development Plan 2018–2022: Pact for Equity and Opportunities
8	Inter-institutional community deforestation projects	Integrated strategy for deforestation control and forest management (EICDGB)
9	To reduce deforestation of Colombian Amazon	Sentencia STC 4360 de 2018
10	Deforestation planning with local communities	Conpes 3700: Institutional Strategy for the Articulation of Climate Change Policies and Actions in Colombia
11	Community forestry and ecosystem conservation	Conpes 4021: National Policy for the Control of Deforestation and Sustainable Forest Management
12	Restructuring and development of sustainable production processes	National Development Plan 2018–2022: Pact for Sustainability: production and conservation
13	Potential GHG mitigation of productive sectors	Conpes 3700: Institutional Strategy for the Articulation of Climate Change Policies and Actions in Colombia
14	Incorporate climate change adaptation guidelines and actions in environmental and territorial planning instruments.	National Plan for Climate Change Adaptation
15	Regional green business programs and national green market plan	Plan for Biodiversity Action
16	Environmental regulations for non-conventional energy sources	National Development Plan 2018–2022: Pact for sustainable growth and expansion of opportunities
17	Formalization and mining development	National Development Plan 2018–2022: Pact for Mining and Energy Resources
18	Climate change mitigation and adaptation – NDC	NDC Colombia – 2020
19	21% reduction in GHG emissions from the sector by 2030	Conpes 3934: Green Growth Policy
20	Current Colombian mining legislation	Law 685 of 2001 – Colombia's Mining Code (Código Minero)
21	Mining and energy sector's climate change mitigation strategies	Integrated Climate Change Management Plan for the Mining-Energy Sector (PIGCCM-E)
22	Long-term vision for the mining and energy sector	National Energy Plan 2020–2050
23	Prior consultation to Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities	Decreto 1320 de 1998
24	Mining impacts on ecosystems in Colombian territory	Sentencia T445 de 2016
25	Rights of the population where the mining operation takes place	Resolution 40796 of 2018 – Human rights policy of the mining and energy sector

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