

## Moroccan Forest Ecosystems: Risks, Challenges and Opportunities



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The Economic, Social and Environmental Council has brought to light forest ecosystems' substantial potential while highlighting their vulnerability to daily strains and diverse environmental and climatic risks. In a bid to strike a balance between the sustainability and resilience of these ecosystems and the socio-economic development of the territories and populations they serve, the Council has put forth a range of alternative measures. This Opinion was unanimously adopted by the CESE General Assembly during its 141<sup>st</sup> Ordinary session on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022.

The forested lands in Morocco, primarily located in mountainous areas, span across 13% of the country's total territory. These ecosystems significantly impact the population in this area, totaling 7 million and making up 50% of the rural population. Beyond their abundant biodiversity, these ecosystems play a critical role in regulating the water cycle, mitigating the impacts of climate change, and contributing to energy and food security.

From an economic perspective, the forest sector emerges as a substantial contributor to the country's GDP, constituting a noteworthy 1.5%. Furthermore, it serves as a vibrant source of employment, generating nearly 10 million workdays, which is equivalent to 50,000 permanent jobs. Notably, the forestry industry satisfies a significant share, approximately 30%, of the demand for timber, which finds its application in construction and manufacturing sectors, provides 17% of the livestock's food requirements, and makes up 4% of the world's cork supply.

Nevertheless, the potential of these ecosystems is undermined by the persistent degradation, estimated at a staggering 17,000 hectares per year. This alarming trend primarily stems from the deleterious effects of climate change and the mounting pressures imposed by human activities.

Furthermore, the lack of genuine ecotourism prospects, coupled with the over-harvesting of firewood (3 million tons per year) and the overgrazing, exceeding two to three times the environmental carrying capacity, impede the sustainable use of the forested lands.

Mindful of the challenges at hand, the competent authorities introduced the «Morocco Forests 2020-2030» strategy in 2020, which builds upon prior initiatives spanning three decades. Driven by a steadfast commitment to sustainability, this strategic framework aims to breathe new life into forest ecosystems through rehabilitation, restoration, and value enhancement. However, while an interim assessment of the strategy may appear promising, a comprehensive and impartial assessment of its impact on the forest sector remains premature at this stage.

In view of this situation, the CESE highlights the imperative of fostering a shared and cohesive vision among all relevant stakeholders, with a particular emphasis on engaging the local community. The primary objective is to achieve a comprehensive transformation of forested lands into a resilient and dynamic environment that attracts sustainable investments, fosters the growth of thriving industries, and offers economically viable alternatives to enhance the well-being of the local population.

To this end, the Council recommends implementing a set of measures, prioritizing the following:

- Develop a forestry code that compiles, consolidates, and updates the relevant legal provisions. This code will comprehensively elucidate the rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders, employing advanced methodologies to steadfastly safeguard biodiversity, enhance the resilience of ecosystems, proactively prevent and mitigate forest fires, and fortify the unwavering integrity of forested landscapes.
- Rehabilitate Forest ecosystems through a planned transition that involves a gradual transfer of usage privileges from local populations to the State within protected areas. To ensure the successful implementation of this process, it is crucial to provide practical alternatives that effectively support the well-being and livelihoods of the local population.
- Undertake a gradual expansion of the protected areas to transition from the current coverage of 3.76% to a targeted extent of 30% by the year 2050.
- Promote reforestation and natural regeneration initiatives through a range of measures, including but not limited to identifying the afforestation potential of specific areas, conducting countrywide planting campaigns, fostering sustainable investments, providing fiscal incentives to involved enterprises, and reassessing species selection for reforestation and regeneration purposes.
- Harness the potential of artificial intelligence for plantation monitoring, forest fire surveillance, and combatting forest fires, leveraging the established expertise fostered by the private sector.
- Optimize the value of forest resources through the establishment of environmentally responsible and transparent forest concessions to the advantage of local communities and businesses through the following actions:
  - Implement forest certification within the forestry sector to ensure sustainable practices and responsible management.

- Review the classification of economically and commercially valuable forest trees, recognizing them as fruit trees. (The Argan tree in private domains as an example).

- Promote ecotourism in protected areas, with due regard for their cultural, territorial, and ecological specificities.
- Foster the growth of the social and solidarity economy through dedicated support to local communities and livestock breeders. This undertaking involves mobilizing grants from the National Forest Fund to facilitate initiatives centered on planting fruit trees and cultivating aromatic and medicinal plants on privately owned or communally managed lands.

This Opinion was developed through an inclusive and collaborative process, with productive debates among all stakeholders, including the Council constituent categories. Valuable insights were also gathered through hearings with key actors and feedback from citizens via the Council's digital platform «Ouchariko.ma». The number of interactions amounted to 96,625 including 388 respondents to the consultation launched on the digital platform «Ouchariko» and 534 comments posted on the CESE's pages across various social networks. The key findings of the consultation unveil that:

- Based on the survey findings, a significant 84% of respondents express concern about the degraded state of forested lands, while a mere 10% perceive the forest ecosystems as well-preserved and valued.
- The majority of the respondents (61%) attribute the deterioration of forested lands to over-exploitation of resources, followed closely by climate change (53%) and uncontrolled urbanization (48%).
- A substantial majority of respondents, exceeding 50%, assert that pivotal actions should encompass the sustainable utilization of forest resources (64%) and the active engagement of local populations in the management of forest ecosystems (58%).