CLEVER

CREATING LEVERAGE TO ENHANCE BIODIVERSITY OUTCOMES OF GLOBAL BIOMASS TRADE

A catalogue of narratives co-designed with media representatives

Deliverable 8.7

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About CLEVER

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Executive Summary

Researchers can experience frustration when their research fails to attract media or public attention. Even when journalists do cover their work, they may present the findings in ways that don't fully reflect what the researchers intend to convey. This disconnect is partly due to unclear messaging and limited communication from researchers themselves. Many assume or expect the public to have a certain level of knowledge about their research topics and often use technical language that leaves most people behind.

To support transformative change in society, we need more researchers committed to communicating their work effectively. They play a key role in sharing evidence-based insights about how human activities affect nature and biodiversity and what actions humans can take to reduce those impacts. As part of capacity building, the CLEVER project implemented an **experiment to bring researchers and journalists closer to each other and help researchers improve their communication about their research**. Insights from this process have been distilled into a practical tipsheet designed to support researchers across the Transformative Change cluster and beyond to craft public-friendly, digestible narratives around their research activities.

Introduction

As a final communication and dissemination output, the CLEVER project undertook a co-design process to develop a catalogue of four public-friendly, research-based narratives. This initiative involved 23 experts, including not only scientists and researchers but also editors and journalists from the media, contributing to the process as authors, contributers or reviewers.

The objectives of this effort were fourfold:

- To provide CLEVER partners with accessible, public-friendly policy messages
- To offer policymakers at various levels clear insights from research
- To support media professionals with policy-relevant messages from CLEVER
- To share co-designed communication best practices with other partners in the Transformative Change Cluster

Our co-design process started off with CLEVER researchers to distill key insights from existing research as well as published or forthcoming studies that were considered both policy-relevant and societally significant. They were then reviewed by researchers alongside communication specialists within the consortium. This was followed by a robust feedback process involving four media professionals, including investigative journalists following the link between global trade and deforestation, as well as a science editor reporting about climate change issues. These journalists shared their comments, and in many parts, suggested revisions to improve researchers' narratives which then have been then been incorporated into the final narratives you will read in this document.

Special attention was paid to ensure diversity in terms of both geographical background and areas of expertise among all contributors. This involved not just researchers based in both Europe and exporting regions, but also journalists from Manaus in the Brazilian Amazon to Doula in Cameroon.

The outcome of this process was enlightening. Researchers gained valuable insight from journalists on crafting engaging and accesible research-based narratives, while the journalists deepened their understanding of the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR), including its potential and challenges. This was a **mutually enriching capacity-building process that helped bridge the gap between science and media**, fostering greater mutual understanding of each other's perspectives and communication styles.

To further facilitate knowledge transfer, the catalogue concludes with a **tipsheet on how to write an effective, public-friendly research narrative**. The CLEVER consortium hopes this resource will also benefit other partners in the Transformative Change Cluster, as well as scientists and researchers seeking to enhance the communication of their research and Horizon project outcomes.

A Catalogue of Narratives

Narrative 1:

More science-informed policy-making is needed to reduce the environmental impacts of agricultural and forest products

Thanks to international trade, people and businesses in Europe have access to a wide range of agricultural and forestry products sourced from every corner of the globe. However, many of these products are not intended for direct human consumption. Instead, they serve as biofuels for vehicles, food for animals, or natural materials for everyday items like furniture and textiles. Two-thirds of the land used to produce these non-food products lies outside EU borders. Their production is often tied to the destruction of rainforests and other critical ecosystems in Southeast Asia, South America, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Forest loss causes not only the emissions of gases that contribute to climate change and global warming. The affected regions also lose biodiversity, such as valuable plant and animal species, due to habitat changes and pollution, resulting from the excessive and harmful use of agrochemicals. Research has shown that these environmental impacts have economic and social consequences for people in the affected regions and beyond. In short, deforestation can not just increase the likelihood of extreme weather events. The changing landscape can also worsen the living conditions of vulnerable communities and local agricultural productivity in the most affected areas of the world.

Many of these environmental and related socio-economic impacts could be reduced if the existing agricultural land in these regions were used more sustainably. To make this happen, we must overcome three obstacles.

First, gaps in our knowledge about biodiversity and the multiple causes that lead to its loss often prevent governments from developing and implementing effective policies that promote sustainable land use.

Second, many countries lack the infrastructure and financial means to maintain functioning authorities that effectively implement and enforce environmental regulations.

And third, some of these countries must address widespread poverty and food insecurity, including in rural areas. These issues often rank higher than environmental concerns on national policy agendas compared to many EU countries.

To overcome these obstacles, we need the support of science and research to inform policy-making at different levels in the EU and beyond. Research on biodiversity in combination with insights from economics is particularly important. Recent advances in biodiversity research have improved our understanding of where and why trade threatens biodiversity. This enables decision-makers to design policies that achieve

higher conservation impacts at lower costs. Evidence from economics shows that both exporting and importing countries benefit from trade in agricultural and forest commodities. Just because the environmental damage linked to trade occurs mostly in exporting countries, we cannot expect these countries to address them alone. Instead, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 16 - Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions and Goal 17 - Partnerships for the Goals, imply principles of equitable and non-discriminatory benefit and burden sharing. This calls for societies and policymakers in industrialized economies to become more aware of their shared responsibility in making international trade beneficial for both people and the environment. Policymakers in importing regions, like the EU, can apply a range of measures to do so. One solution is international cooperation through knowledge and technology transfer, supporting environmental monitoring and effective law enforcement. Economic research also increasingly supports incentive-based mechanisms. This includes, for example, international payments for ecosystem services and related finance mechanisms, such as import taxes that vary depending on how the goods are produced, whether they are made in ways that protect forests, avoid harmful chemicals, or reduce the destruction of rich biodiversity in tropical forests.

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Narrative 2:

The EUDR may have little impact on reducing deforestation

What's on your plate and in your house might be quietly clearing forests in the Amazon and the Congo Basin. The production of internationally traded agricultural and forest commodities is responsible for more than half of the global loss of forests and natural vegetation every year. To help reduce deforestation associated with the import of these products into the EU, the European Parliament passed the EU Deforestation Regulation on deforestation-free products (EUDR) in 2022. Set to take full effect by the end of 2025, the EUDR obliges all importers of soy, palm oil, coffee, cocoa, beef, forest products, and rubber - known as forest risk commodities - to provide proof that the production was legal according to national legislation in the producer country and not associated with any deforestation. However, new research based on expert assessments has raised doubts about whether the EUDR can effectively reduce or even slow down global forest loss:

First, in many producer countries, such as Brazil and Cameroon, the EU holds a relatively small market share of forest risk commodities. This means the vast areas heavily impacted by commodity production may not be addressed by the EUDR at all. At the same time, importers will then often be able to meet EU demand by buying from producers who do not engage in deforestation or from regions with a low deforestation risk, either within the same country or in other producer countries. Unless other major importing regions, such as China and the US, adopt similar policies, the EUDR alone would be likely to have little to no impact on reducing forest loss.

Second, the EUDR could weaken political support for existing domestic policies in producer countries that have effectively reduced deforestation caused by forest-risk commodity production. This has been observed, for example, in the case of Brazil's Amazon Soy Moratorium, which has lost crucial political backing from certain national agro-industry and state-level administrations. Inconsistencies between specific rules of the EUDR and the Moratorium provided opponents with new arguments to renegotiate the existing set of rules.

Third, the EUDR imposes additional reporting obligations on many actors along forest risk commodity value chains, including those with limited resources like small landowners. The associated costs could disproportionately hurt small producers, processing companies, and logistics providers.

EU lawmakers must closely monitor whether the EUDR will make any tangible contribution to reducing the loss of tropical forests. Otherwise, companies can hide the deforestation footprint by simply rerouting imports through another country or region before they reach the EU. At the same time, researchers and policymakers must find more affordable and viable ways to reduce the negative environmental impacts of trade

in agricultural and forest commodities, without harming vulnerable businesses in the producing countries. This could, for example, involve taxes on deforestation-linked commodities. The funds raised through the tax in the EU could be reinvested in producer countries to help protect and restore natural ecosystems and biodiversity.

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Narrative 3:

Deforestation, forest degradation, and the EU's response

Ever wondered what goes into making your favorite chocolate bar, shampoo, pet food, bedroom closet or toilet paper? You might be surprised to discover they could hide some secret ingredients: a pinch of deforestation and a dash of forest degradation. Many everyday products are made using imported commodities like cocoa, palm oil, soy, or wood, which cause deforestation and forest degradation in the tropics and subtropics. Overall, one-quarter of tropical forest loss is linked to expanding agriculture for export, and losing a forest means losing the beneficial ecosystem services it provides, such as carbon sequestration, wood production, or water purification.

Consumption of everyday products in Europe can drive significant conversion of natural ecosystems in countries like Brazil, Indonesia, and Côte d'Ivoire. But along with European consumers, many other stakeholders globally affect forest destruction and conservation, like other consumer markets, companies along globalized supply chains, policymakers, public agencies enforcing laws, local populations with different rights and access to land use, and civil society aiming to safeguard the environment. This means that forests face multiple interests and pressures, challenging their governance.

The international community has not agreed on globally valid laws on forests and land use, although many public policies and private regulations from national to international levels try to tackle these urgent issues. In Europe, policymakers seek to reduce the EU's role in commodity-driven deforestation with the new EU Regulation on Deforestation-free Products (EUDR), which obliges companies in the EU to ensure that their sourcing of seven key agricultural and forest commodities does not directly cause deforestation and forest degradation. However, rather than becoming a global game changer for forests, this could merely result in "cleaning up" of supply chains for the EU market, according to new research by CLEVER, a research project funded by the EU. This means that in a globalized world, even if the EUDR was to be implemented strictly according to the rules, so that all EU supply chains became perfectly deforestation- and land degradation-free, different spillover effects in these markets would still limit what global reductions in deforestation and forest degradation this move could achieve. For instance, commodity markets could be segregated, so that the 'deforestation-free' (and more expensive) products go to the EU, while less sustainable (and cheaper) ones go to other markets with no or fewer environmental safeguards. The EUDR could also weaken or delegitimize some well-functioning forest conservation policy mixes among Europe's major trading partners, such as the Amazon Soy Moratorium in Brazil. Furthermore, the EUDR poses governance challenges due to the way it was developed without seeking agreement of stakeholders outside the EU and sometimes misalignment with national policies in producing countries. This suggests that to tackle deforestation and forest degradation effectively, policy makers must carefully customize actions by taking into account existing policies.

Still, from a positive perspective, the EUDR sets an example that could influence other global consumer countries of agricultural and forest commodities to do the same:

strictly regulating the import of products causing forest loss. This development could materialize through international cooperation and policy diffusion across companies and governments alike. Multilateral partnerships and societal pressure, such as trend setting by the civil society, can all support more forest-friendly supply chains.

The EUDR, while well-aligned with broader sustainability goals, introduces both regulatory opportunities and challenges for producer and consumer countries. To avoid unintended consequences, such as conflicting standards, better policy coordination is required. Although the EUDR closes a significant regulatory gap in requesting legal and deforestation- and land degradation-free agricultural and forest commodities, countries also need to come together to find workable solutions - such as supporting the lack of enforcement of existing domestic environmental regulations on the ground. Finally, the EUDR and private sector policies should not divert attention from traditional conservation measures, such as protected areas or payments for environmental services, as they remain key to combating deforestation at its source.

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Narrative 4:

Navigating the EUDR: timber trade in the Congo Basin

As the timber sector in the Congo Basin prepares for the European Union Regulation on Deforestation-free Products (EUDR), affected stakeholders have voiced their opinions about the opportunities, challenges, and needs the regulation creates. The EUDR will come into effect at the end of 2025, from which point businesses wishing to place products containing a relevant commodity[35], such as timber, onto the EU market will need to demonstrate that the commodity is legally sourced and not linked to destruction of forests at any point in the supply chain. With this requirement, the EUDR aims to ensure that EU sales of products containing timber do not lead to forest destruction in countries like Cameroon and Gabon, where timber is grown. Demonstrating that timber meets this requirement will require significant effort that will impact stakeholders throughout timber supply chains.

In October 2024, some of the business, policy, academic and NGO stakeholders from the timber sector in Cameroon and Gabon came together to describe the impact the EUDR is already starting to have, and the risks and opportunities they expect the regulation to create. Cameroon and Gabon lie in the Congo Basin, which is an important case study for the EUDR. The basin's forests are critical for climate regulation, and the world's second largest rainforest is an important hotspot for biodiversity. Like most rainforests, the Congo Basin faces increasing pressure from timber extraction and commodity production and trade, which are vital sectors supporting economic development. The following four key themes emerged from the stakeholder discussions.

Uneven business readiness for the EUDR

There is a clear divide in timber supply chains between large (often European-owned) companies with established certification systems and smaller, locally owned businesses with limited resources and capacity. Many larger companies view the EUDR as a manageable opportunity because they already have systems in place that will help them comply. By contrast, many smaller operators expect the extra administrative work to be a significant challenge. Some are considering shifting their exports to less regulated markets, while others are exploring partnerships with bigger companies to help them navigate the new requirements.

The EUDR is already reshaping timber supply chains

The EU remains the most profitable market for timber exporters in the Congo Basin, but it presents heightened barriers to entry. Asian markets are easier to access but offer lower

[35] The EUDR applies to cattle, coffee, cocoa, palm oil, rubber, soy, and timber, and any products containing any of these commodities.

prices. Meanwhile, a growing inter-African timber market is opening up new trade opportunities that could help retain economic value within the region. Since exporters have access to non-EU markets, some stakeholders were concerned that a "two-tier" system could develop that would undermine the forest-protecting aim of the EUDR. In one tier, timber that is demonstrably not linked to forest destruction would be exported to the EU, while in the other tier, timber that is linked to forest destruction would be exported elsewhere. In this scenario, known as market segregation, the EUDR may not significantly reduce forest destruction but could mainly influence where timber is sold.

Barriers to compliance and enforcement

Stakeholders in Cameroon and Gabon identified multiple barriers to complying with and enforcing the EUDR. One challenge for compliance is that every timber product placed on the EU market must be fully traceable – from the exact harvesting plot, through any processing, to the final product – to prove it is not linked to forest destruction. Another challenge can be bureaucratic delays in obtaining the harvest and trade permits, which are needed to prove the timber was legally harvested in the country of origin.
Enforcement of the EUDR could be limited by the capacities of governments and institutions in producer countries like Cameroon and Gabon. Another significant risk stakeholders identified was "commodity laundering", whereby illegal timber could be processed in a third country before being placed on the EU market as a final product, thereby evading the EUDR restrictions. This is because, while raw materials are easier to trace and label, there is often minimum information on them embedded on the final products that utilize them—the example of imported wooden furniture from East Asia was used, where the country of manufacture is known, but the origin of the timber in it is not. This opens a window for non-compliant timber to be diverted into other markets, and ultimately enter the European market as a finalised product.

Building capacity for the EUDR can deliver benefits for all parties

The timber supply chain stakeholders in Cameroon and Gabon feel burdened by the administrative requirements of the EUDR, which is being implemented with limited consultation to date, and will face challenges if they want to comply. However, actors across the board believe that with appropriate resources and the right incentives and support mechanisms in place, both the public and private sector stakeholders could overcome these challenges.

The EUDR provides an opportunity to enable sustainable forest governance that can support economic development in the Congo Basin. However, realizing this potential will require the EU and EU-based companies to provide resources and assistance to producer countries to facilitate implementation. EU actors with leverage and resources must proactively provide incentives and support mechanisms. There is a particular need for targeted technical and financial support for small and medium enterprises to build capacity in sustainable forest management. The promise of higher EU market prices provides an incentive, but without special attention, smaller enterprises may become

marginalized and be unable to comply with the requirements of the EUDR. For government regulators and monitoring agencies in producer countries, increased resources and capacity to oversee forest management would enable environmental and economic benefits to be realized through better protection and management of natural resources while also making it easier for actors across the supply chain to meet their legal obligations. Additionally, EU policymakers will need to address concerns about weak enforcement capacity and potential commodity laundering through third countries to prevent undermining the EUDR's effectiveness and further disadvantaging compliant operators.

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Tipsheet for writing a public-friendly research narrative

"I can't see the connection between these narratives and my reality or the reality that I need to talk about. I want to see more solid examples, not generalized ideas and conclusion."
Vinicius Sassine, Amazon Correspondent, Folha de São Paulo

"Stepping outside yourself and kind of remembering what it's like not to know things is very, very important when writing for general audiences."
Alok Jha, Science & Technology Editor, The Economist

"A lot of NGOs, especially in the environmental field, they have become very good at doing investigations themselves. And they also became better storytellers. When they publish their reports, they provide a lot of details that journalists can pick up on easily as a start."
Scilla Alecci, Investigative Reporter, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists

"*Sometimes journalists send a long list of questions to researchers and they say "everything is in my research paper". But what journalists want is some quotes from the researcher to better explain in simple words the technical things in their paper."*
Madeleine Ngeunga, Africa Editor, Pulitzer Center

What should scientists and researchers keep in mind before crafting a narrative to communicate their work to the broader public and the media?

Here are some key tips we've gathered through our direct engagement with journalists and our review process.

- Start by writing **your main point in one sentence**.
- Ask yourself: **What does my narrative add to the ongoing debate?**
- **Your opening sentence** should be a page-turner to capture reader's attention.
- Make your unique perspective **obvious from the start**.
- If your research offers a new perspective, **make that your headline**.
- Hook your reader. Give a **reason why they should care**.
- To engage readers, share **human stories**.
- Or simply mention something relatable, **something they encounter daily**.
- **Build your argument step by step**, just as you would tell a story to a teenager.

- Keep a **logical, easy-to-follow structure**. Give context before shifting topics.
- Use **active voice** instead of passive.
- **Avoid generalisations**. Support big claims with **examples.**
- Use relevant **data** and **research results** to support your argument.
- A **list** can greatly help your readers follow your narrative
- **Bypass vague references** like “it is believed”, “some argue”, “many countries”
- Instead, **be specific**. Name the actors and explain their relevance.
- Stick to **one idea per sentence** to avoid confusing your readers.
- **Refrain from long sentences** that crowd too much information.
- **Don’t assume everyone knows** and spell out abbreviations (e.g., SDGs, SMEs).
- **Avoid technical terms** unless essential. If used, explain them in plain language.
- **Be specific and explanatory** instead of using academic or technical words like:
    - *forest risk commodities*
    - *deforestation-free trade*
    - *non-food biomass*
    - *policy mixes*
    - *stakeholders*
    - *consumption dynamics*
    - *non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading*
    - *value chain intermediaries*
    - *unilateralism*
    - *Brussels effects*
    - *normative pressure*
- **Don’t name-drop projects** (e.g. Horizon project)
- Instead, **briefly explain what the project is and its relevance to your point**.

Conclusion

This capacity-building experiment resulted not only in concrete narratives ready to be shared with a broader public beyond the usual academic circles but also in a valuable learning process for all involved. It gave researchers deeper insight into how journalists perceive the world—what they look for in narratives from researchers and what they define as strong storytelling.

Although initially conceived as a capacity-building excercise for researchers, the process also proved highly valuable for journalists to explore the ongoing policy debates. The mutual benefits that both science and media derived from this collaboration offer important takeaways for research communities involved in Horizon Europe projects and beyond.

At its heart, this collaboration proved that when science and media come together, inspiration and learning were mutual. The CLEVER Consortium hopes that these co-designed narratives will serve as best-practice examples for future narrative development. At the same time, the accompanying tipsheet will be widely used to support the writing process and enable more effective stakeholder engagement by researchers.