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From research to reform

Assessment of CIFOR-ICRAF's role in shaping Ethiopia's forestry sector

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Key messages

- The Center for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry (CIFOR-ICRAF)'s integrated, multidimensional engagement in education, policy, institutional reform and financing, along with a permanent office in Addis Ababa since 2005, has built the necessary trust, legitimacy and momentum for long-term sectoral transformation.
- Early investment in action research training and MSc-level curricula at Wondo Genet College of Forestry and Natural Resources, bolstered by the Dry Forests of Africa I and II projects (2006–2012) and the collaboration between CIFOR-ICRAF and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in implementing the Sida-funded Development-Oriented Action Research Project, created a cadre of Ethiopian researchers who drove evidence-based forestry reform from within.
- Discreet, informal and relationship-focused collaboration, rather than public advocacy, enabled CIFOR-ICRAF to sustain its support through multiple institutional restructurings and political transitions.
- CIFOR-ICRAF's targeted policy briefs and comparative analyses, including its dry forest focused projects work, directly informed the adoption of: a national definition of forests in 2016 by Ethiopia that included dry forests; the 2018 Forest Proclamation; the 2022 Ethiopian Forestry Development Regulation; and the 2024 Forest Regulation, which enshrined participatory forest management and community carbon rights.
- Co-drafting mandates for the Ethiopian Forestry Development and establishing the Forestry Knowledge Management Center at Wondo Genet College of Forestry and Natural Resources have embedded evidence use into sectoral institutions and prevented policy backsliding.
- The co-designed Green Legacy and Landscape Restoration Special Fund channels 0.5–1% of federal government revenue from domestic sources into restoration, ensuring that legal and institutional gains translate into millions of hectares of on-the-ground impact.
- Without CIFOR-ICRAF's sustained engagement, the policy and institutional outcomes observed today would likely have taken longer to materialize or emerged in less inclusive and evidence-informed forms. CIFOR-ICRAF's role complemented and amplified national efforts, supporting government actors and institutions to translate research into reforms, build consensus and unlock financing.
- However, CIFOR-ICRAF's impact remains vulnerable to institutional instability, shifting political priorities and limited in-country staffing – highlighting the need for deeper institutional anchoring, stronger local partnerships, and expanded technical presence to ensure continuity and sustained influence.

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Importance of forests in Ethiopia

Ethiopia's forests and tree-based systems are central to the country's economy, environment and livelihoods. Covering approximately 26.75 million hectares (ha), or 23.6% of its land area (EFD 2024), Ethiopian forests provide critical ecosystem services, contribute to the national gross domestic product (GDP), and underpin the food security and resilience of rural communities.

Agriculture remains the backbone of Ethiopia's economy, although its share of GDP declined from 54% in 2000 to 32% in 2023; and accounted for 62.8% of employment for its rapidly growing population in 2022 while this was 90.2% in 1990 (ADB 2024). Yet forests themselves account for about 13% of GDP (UNEP 2016), with forest incomes representing up to 21% of annual household income in forest-adjacent communities (Teshome et al. 2015). Wood and non-wood products, fuelwood, timber, fruits, gums and resins are indispensable for both domestic energy needs and emerging export markets. Beyond direct economic value, forests regulate water cycles, stabilize soils, harbour biodiversity (including coffee and many other endemic plant and animal species) and sequester carbon (MEFCC 2018a), helping Ethiopia meet its Nationally Determined Contribution targets under the Paris Agreement.

Despite this importance, historical trends of deforestation – with losses of up to 92,000 ha annually between 2008 and 2013² – and forest degradation have undermined ecosystem health and rural livelihoods. Pressure to expand agriculture, fuelwood harvesting and unsustainable land-use practices have left over 11 million ha of land in need of urgent tree-based landscape restoration (MEFCC 2018b), and this is being compounded by encroaching desertification. Climate variability, marked by recurrent droughts and unpredictable rainfall, exacerbates these challenges, threatening food security, water availability and rural incomes.

Over the past two decades, the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR-ICRAF)³ has emerged as a trusted partner to the Government of Ethiopia in advancing legal and institutional reforms for sustainable forest management and forest landscape restoration. Through collaborative efforts with relevant institutions – notably the Ethiopian Forestry Development (EFD), the Ministry of Agriculture (MoA), the Ministry of Finance (MoF), the Wondo Genet College of Forestry

and Natural Resources of Hawassa University, the (then) Ethiopian Environment and Forestry Research Institute (EEFRI) and the Ethiopian Forestry Association, as well as with development partners and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) actively supporting the forestry sector – CIFOR-ICRAF has informed national efforts that led to the revision of legal and institutional instruments in support of transforming the forestry sector. The main ones are the 2018 Forest Development, Conservation, and Utilization Proclamation No. 1065/2018; the 2024 Forest Development, Protection and Utilization Regulation No. 544/2024; which better articulates community rights on forest carbon; and the 2022 Council of Ministers Regulation No. 505/2022 to Determine the Power, Duties and Organization of the Ethiopian Forestry Development (EFD).

Since 2022, CIFOR-ICRAF has partnered with the MoF and EFD to co-design the Green Legacy and Landscape Restoration Special Fund, a dedicated financing instrument established by Proclamation No. 1361/2024 in December 2024 to support the Green Legacy Initiative – a flagship restoration programme launched in 2019 – and other large-scale restoration initiatives on degraded lands. The Special Fund is intended to mobilize and allocate government resources for restoration, and CIFOR-ICRAF continues to work with EFD in developing bankable proposals to attract additional finance and technical support for the forestry sector.

This analysis sets the stage by demonstrating that, in a country where forests are both a critical natural asset and a foundation for rural livelihoods, strategic research-to-policy partnerships such as CIFOR-ICRAF's can unlock transformational change across legal frameworks, institutional capacities and financing mechanisms.

Purpose and methodology of the policy contribution analysis

Coordinated by CIFOR-ICRAF's Quality for Impact (Q4I) team, this analysis documents how CIFOR-ICRAF's research and engagement have shaped Ethiopia's forestry laws, institutions, education and financing. It aims to: map CIFOR-ICRAF's outputs; assess their uptake and influence on the formulation of the above-mentioned legal instruments, capture stakeholder perceptions; and distil lessons for future engagement. We applied a theory-based contribution analysis in the following six steps, combining document review with 12 key informant interviews:

1. Define questions: Finalized key evaluation questions with the CIFOR-ICRAF Ethiopia country office.
2. Theory of change: Drafted causal pathways linking CIFOR-ICRAF activities to policy and institutional outcomes.

2 The deforestation rate has declined significantly since 2013 (NDC 2021).

3 The Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and World Agroforestry (ICRAF) merged in 2019. Research and engagement in Ethiopia were initiated by CIFOR prior to the merger, but for the sake of consistency the organization's current name (CIFOR-ICRAF) is used throughout.

3. Document review: Compiled and analysed legislation, technical briefs, meeting minutes and project proposals.
4. Initial narrative: Mapped CIFOR-ICRAF's outputs against observed changes in laws, curricula and financing instruments.
5. Interviews: Conducted 12 semi-structured interviews across government (EFD, MoF), academia (Wondo Genet College of Forestry), research (the then-EEFRI), NGOs (Ethiopian Forestry Society, World Resources Institute, and the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union) and donors (Royal Norwegian Embassy).
6. Refinement: Integrated new insights, tested critical assumptions and finalized the contribution story.

CIFOR-ICRAF engagement in Ethiopia: Key stakeholders involved

Over the past 20 years, CIFOR-ICRAF has woven a network of partnerships across Ethiopia's forestry landscape, engaging institutions, communities, donors and civil society actors through tailored, trust-based modalities. This broad engagement was necessary to address the sector's complexity, from legal reform to academic curricula, fiscal innovation and on-the-ground restoration. In January 2005, CIFOR-ICRAF further cemented this presence by opening a permanent Addis Ababa office to backstop local partners.

Government agencies and regulatory bodies

Ethiopian Forestry Development (EFD)

As the lead forestry agency (formerly under MoA, then a separate ministry in 2013, later a commission and currently Ethiopian Forestry Development under MoA), EFD has been CIFOR-ICRAF's principal counterpart for legal drafting, institutional design and fund operationalization. From co-chairing technical committees on the 2018 Forest Proclamation to co-drafting the 2022 regulation (which defined the mandates of EFD), CIFOR-ICRAF embedded its expertise within EFD processes, providing comparative legal analyses and facilitating stakeholder consultations. As described throughout this contribution analysis, interviewees from EFD highlighted that CIFOR-ICRAF's continual presence through multiple restructurings maintained policy momentum and prevented loss of institutional memory.

Ministry of Agriculture (MoA)

Early engagement (pre-2013) focused on aligning forestry priorities within an agriculture-dominated ministry. CIFOR-ICRAF provided evidence to support the

REDD+ Readiness phase, to highlight the importance of dry-forest biomes and to emphasize the need to recognize community user rights to ensure that sustainable forest management was elevated in national sectoral strategies and plans.

Ministry of Finance (MoF)

From 2022, CIFOR-ICRAF partnered with MoF and EFD and contributed to the design of the Green Legacy and Landscape Restoration Special Fund, producing the rationale, eligibility criteria such as measurement, reporting and verification (MRV) requirements, and the fund management options that underpin Ethiopia's first dedicated restoration financing vehicle. MoF representatives noted that CIFOR-ICRAF's comparative analyses of international finance mechanisms were instrumental in securing early approvals for the Special Fund.

Environment, Forest and Climate Change Commission (EFCCC)

During its brief incarnation (2018–2021), the EFCCC benefited from CIFOR-ICRAF's research work on participatory forest management and community rights to design equitable community benefit sharing, which informed the 2018 forest law and the 2024 Forest Regulation. The latter entitled communities to 80% of carbon revenues from natural forests they manage.

Academic and research institutions

Wondo Genet College of Forestry (Hawassa University)

CIFOR-ICRAF co-developed two MSc programmes (dry-forest management and natural resource economics and policy), introduced action-research training, and supported visiting lectures and joint supervision of PhD candidates, permanently reorienting the college toward interdisciplinary, policy-relevant training. This built on CIFOR-ICRAF's earlier Dry Forests of Africa I and II projects (2006–2012), which produced policy briefs and management guides that underpinned the 2016 revision of Ethiopia's forest definition (FDRE 2017).

Ethiopian Environment and Forestry Research Institute (EEFRI)

As EFD's research arm, EEFRI received CIFOR-ICRAF mentoring on participatory methods, data collection protocols and policy brief formats. Joint field pilots (e.g., forest–farm interface project, fighting bush encroachment in the Borana rangelands) showcased how community-driven data could inform ministerial decisions.

Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (SLU)

In SLU-led CIFOR-ICRAF-supported action research initiatives (2004–2006), SLU was involved in providing methodological support for community-based pilots, helping establish the foundation for Ethiopia's first practical engagement in action research in a higher learning institution setting.

Professional associations and civil society

Ethiopian Forestry Society (EFS)

CIFOR-ICRAF advised EFS on advocacy strategies and structural reforms in 2013, strengthening its capacity to convene experts and amplify community voices in public consultations on the 2018 Forest Proclamation. Currently, CIFOR-ICRAF is actively engaging with EFS to bring to the attention of policymakers the challenges that higher learning institutions in forestry are facing following policy changes in student enrolment.

International NGOs (WRI, NABU)

Joint workshops and co-authoring mandates of platforms with conservation NGOs brought global best practices into Ethiopia's legal debates, reinforcing CIFOR-ICRAF's technical credibility and broadening stakeholder buy-in. World Resources Institute (WRI) staff noted that CIFOR-ICRAF's data on carbon rights underpinned their own REDD+ advocacy; and the Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Union (NABU) highlighted CIFOR-ICRAF's role in standard-setting for forest products to support biodiversity-friendly markets.

Development partners and donors

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

As implementing agency for multiple CIFOR-ICRAF projects (e.g., the Market Systems Development project with the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida), UNDP provided financial channels and convening power, hosting high-level dialogues at which CIFOR-ICRAF presented restoration opportunity maps and fund design proposals.

Norwegian Embassy

Norway's long-term funding supported CIFOR-ICRAF's REDD+ Readiness work and the recent establishment of a national Forestry Knowledge Management Center at Wondo Genet College of Forestry.

Sida, GEF, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)

Through successive project cycles, CIFOR-ICRAF drafted or co-authored concept notes for multi-million dollar grants – including the REDD+ Investment Programme Phase II project (REDD+ Phase II), a market systems development project financed by Sida, and the recently submitted Global Environment Facility (GEF)-funded restoration and adaptation projects by UNEP and UNIDO – and negotiated implementation frameworks with these agencies.

Regional governments and communities

Regional forestry bureaus

CIFOR-ICRAF trained regional staff on species–site matching tools, and on the requirements of the Special Fund to strengthen subnational capacity to prepare winning proposals for the Special Fund.

Local communities and forest cooperatives

Studies conducted by CIFOR-ICRAF and its national and international partners highlighted the need for legal provisions that clearly state community rights from carbon markets, feeding both legal reform and practical restoration guidelines.

Overall strategic engagement modalities

- Embedded advisers: CIFOR-ICRAF technical experts joined ministry drafting committees and EFD task forces.
- Low-profile 'backseat' support: Discreet one-on-one briefings and off-the-record workshops built trust without risking public politicization.
- Capacity workshops: Hands-on training in action research, proposal writing and communicating science to policymakers was targeted towards academia and NGO staff.
- Joint publications and policy briefs: Peer-reviewed studies and targeted briefs translated complex evidence into actionable recommendations.

Through these multi-layered engagements, CIFOR-ICRAF successfully navigated Ethiopia's evolving institutional landscape, ensuring that its scientific insights were not only heard but also institutionalized in laws, curricula and funding mechanisms.

Baseline: Laying the foundations of CIFOR-ICRAF's research and engagement in Ethiopia

Before CIFOR-ICRAF's active involvement in Ethiopia's forestry sector, the enabling environment for evidence-informed policy, inclusive forest governance and forestry education reform faced a series of systemic and institutional challenges. These constraints affected both the design and implementation of forestry laws, the orientation of academic institutions such as Wondo Genet College and the ability of the government to mobilize financing for landscape restoration. CIFOR-ICRAF entered this space against the backdrop of a forestry sector that was both structurally and politically marginalized.

Forest policy and legal frameworks: Fragmented and inadequate

Prior to the 2018 Forest Proclamation, Ethiopia's legal framework for forestry was outdated and insufficient to address contemporary environmental and community livelihood challenges. The 2007 forest law (Proclamation No. 542/2007) lacked clear mechanisms to prevent deforestation, failed to adequately define forest types (i.e., it excluded dry forests), and did not reflect global shifts toward participatory, rights-based forest management. There was little understanding or legal provision for participatory forest management (PFM), community tenure or benefit sharing from forest carbon. As one CIFOR-ICRAF representative noted: *"The 2007 forest law lacked clear mechanisms to prevent deforestation ... It didn't even include dry forests in the definition. CIFOR-ICRAF pushed for a new definition and in 2016 Ethiopia submitted one to the UNFCCC [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change] after workshops and comparative studies."* One representative of EFD added: *"Participatory forest management was not known before. It was practiced but this idea had to have a legal provision."* In addition, Ethiopia had no dedicated forest agency. Forestry was managed under the MoA, whose primary focus was food production, and as a result paid less attention to forest conservation. The institutional home of forestry shifted repeatedly, between ministry, commission and eventually EFD, resulting in institutional instability, staff turnover and implementation gaps.

Forestry education and research: Siloed, outdated and detached from practice

At the time of CIFOR-ICRAF's initial engagement, forestry education and research in Ethiopia were anchored respectively in Wondo Genet College and in the Forestry Department within the Ethiopian Institute of Agricultural Research (later upgraded to EEFRI in 2015). Forestry

research and education were primarily oriented toward timber production and forest conservation in highland/rainforest systems. Dryland forests, which dominate large parts of the country and are highly relevant to rural livelihoods and carbon sequestration, received limited academic, research and policy attention.

Forestry research was dominated by narrowly defined, experimental and discipline-specific studies aimed at academic publication, not real-world problem solving. According to a CIFOR-ICRAF representative: *"At the time, the university system did not encourage working in teams and addressing multifaceted societal problems. It promoted simple experimental research and sole-authored publications."*

Wondo Genet College had little exposure to interdisciplinary action research approaches. Curricula lacked content on forest governance, economics and community-based resource management, and there were no graduate programmes focused on management of dry forests for improving local livelihoods, and on natural resources economics and policy. Engagement with policy processes or communities was minimal, and professional isolation from government institutions further weakened the impact of forestry graduates on national reform agendas.

Financing and institutional capacity severely constrained

The forestry sector suffered from low investment, both financially and institutionally. Forestry had minimal visibility in national development plans or budgets, and there was no dedicated public finance mechanism to support restoration or sustainable forest management. Ethiopia had yet to establish a national strategy for forest landscape restoration. In collaboration with the Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA), a UK-based NGO, CIFOR-ICRAF assisted EFD and MoA to develop and adopt a national strategy for restoring Ethiopia's drylands. Most development finance, including REDD+ Readiness funding, had limited absorptive capacity at the national level due to weak project preparation systems and limited interministerial coordination. A representative of EFD indicated: *"There was very little capacity in the ministry to prepare or manage large-scale forestry projects No fund existed to channel government resources for restoration."*

The policy–research interface was underdeveloped, and EFD had limited capacity to formulate bankable proposals or absorb complex technical evidence in a usable form. This gap left Ethiopia at a disadvantage in mobilizing international climate finance and implementing evidence-based strategies for restoration and emissions reduction.



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Limited recognition of community rights and landscape restoration

Before CIFOR-ICRAF's involvement, the role of communities in forest stewardship was legally ambiguous. Despite examples of locally practised forest management, there was no legal foundation for community user rights or benefit sharing. Although concepts like carbon rights were mentioned in the 2018 Forest Proclamation, benefit-sharing mechanisms were undefined and poorly understood within government. Landscape restoration, while politically promoted under the Green Legacy Initiative, lacked structured finance mechanisms or measurable MRV systems. A representative at WRI indicated: *"Before, there was no legal framework [or] encouragement for the private sector to invest in the forestry sector. Tenure rights were unclear, with only two modalities that weren't inclusive. CIFOR-ICRAF contributed to clarifying tenure rights. Now the Proclamation includes several distinct categories of forest holding rights."*

CIFOR-ICRAF's collaborative research and engagement initiatives in Ethiopia

Over the past two decades, CIFOR-ICRAF has pursued a multi-pronged engagement strategy in Ethiopia, combining interdisciplinary research, capacity building,

policy advice and co-design of a financing instrument to catalyse systemic change in forestry governance, education and landscape restoration.

Key features of this approach include:

Action research and curriculum reform

Beginning in 2005, CIFOR-ICRAF contributed to the introduction of Development-Oriented Interdisciplinary Thematic Action Research at Wondo Genet College, training faculty and students in community-engaging methods that also bridged biophysical and socioeconomic dimensions of forestry research. This shifted local research away from siloed experimental studies towards problem-solving approaches tailored to farmers' needs. Between 2006 and 2012, the Dry Forests of Africa I and II projects further deepened CIFOR-ICRAF's evidence base on dryland biomes, informing later legal and educational reforms. A representative of CIFOR-ICRAF recalled: *"At the time, the university system did not encourage working in teams and addressing problems. It promoted experimental research and sole-authored publications. There were 60–70 teachers that needed to be trained in action research and some at PhD level to work on social aspects. This was not an easy task when the mindset at the time was not to work with communities, adopt action research principles, or work on livelihoods, policy, or forestry economics. Action research was totally new in the academic community"*.

Policy advice and legal drafting

CIFOR-ICRAF provided targeted outputs (policy briefs, comparative legal analyses and stakeholder workshops) to the processes of formulation of successive forest laws and regulations. Notably, CIFOR-ICRAF led consultations on community forest carbon rights and PFM, resulting in:

- 2016: Submission of a revised national forest definition (including dry-forest biomes) to UNFCCC.
- 2018 Forest Proclamation: First formal recognition of PFM, four ownership categories (state, private, community, association), and community carbon revenues.
- 2022 EFD Regulation: Clarification of Ethiopian Forestry Development's mandates and organizational structure.
- 2024 Forest Regulation: 80% carbon-revenue share for communities in state forests enshrined.

Capacity building and knowledge management

In parallel, CIFOR-ICRAF co-developed two new MSc streams at Wondo Genet College (dry-forest management and natural resources economics and policy), mentored PhD cohorts and, with Norway's support, established a Forestry Knowledge Management Center in 2024 to archive and disseminate forestry data, both textual and spatial data. According to a representative of Wondo Genet College, "CIFOR-ICRAF has been instrumental in the establishment of a centre of excellence and knowledge hub at Wondo Genet. It will give a new direction to the college, boosting its forest education, research and training."

Resource mobilization and fund design

CIFOR-ICRAF assisted the efforts of EFD in developing proposals for donors (e.g., REDD+ Phase II project, Sida-UNDP funded project), and submitted three projects to GEF in 2025. As of 2022, CIFOR-ICRAF also closely worked with MoF and EFD in drafting the articles of the 2024 proclamation that established the Special Fund to support FLR in Ethiopia. The proclamation was enacted in December 2024 and authorized the channelling of 0.5–1% of the federal government's domestic revenue to fund large-scale restoration projects in the country. CIFOR-ICRAF also contributed to drafting the programme framework document of the fund for the next five years, including minimum technical standards to be met by candidate projects.

Synthesis of the expected change logic

This assessment is based on a Theory of Change that unfolds several key impact pathways (cf. Annex). The change model narrative of CIFOR-ICRAF's engagement in the forestry sector over the past two decades can be summarized as follows:

1. **Invest** in local research capacity → 2. **Build** relational trust and legitimacy → 3. **Translate** evidence into precise policy inputs → 4. **Embed** reforms through institutional design → 5. **Mobilize** dedicated finances for restoration → 6. **Deliver** enhanced forest governance, resilient landscapes and improved livelihoods.

This cascading, interdependent sequence explains how CIFOR-ICRAF's holistic engagement, from the classroom to the council chambers, and from field research to forestry and finance ministries, has driven systemic transformation in Ethiopia's forestry sector.

Over the past 20 years, CIFOR-ICRAF's engagement in Ethiopia has followed a deliberate, cumulative logic:

1. **Build** local research capacity → 2. **Foster** long-term trust with government partners → 3. **Convert** local evidence into legal and institutional reforms → 4. **Embed** those reforms through strengthened agencies → 5. **Secure** dedicated restoration financing → 6. **Achieve** on-the-ground forest recovery and livelihood improvements.

The resulting four interlinked impact pathways are as follows:

Pathway 1. Capacity development and forestry education

Logic: By partnering with Ethiopia's premier forestry institutions to co-design and deliver locally grounded, problem-oriented training, CIFOR-ICRAF laid the groundwork for a trusted, home-grown evidence base. Graduates and faculty trained through these programmes became a network of 'champions' who bridge academia, government and practice, ensuring that CIFOR-ICRAF's research insights were context-relevant, rigorously applied and sustained, even through successive ministerial restructurings.

Key outputs:

- **New MSc programmes:** Established two master's tracks at Wondo Genet College (dry-forest management and natural resources economics and policy) to address critical gaps in the sustainable management of Ethiopia's diverse biomes.

- **Action research curriculum:** Development-oriented action research training helped integrate elements across the forestry curricula at Wondo Genet and in the research programmes of EEFRI, equipping 200+ students and 60+ faculty with community-engaging research skills.
- **Dry Forests of Africa I and II (2006–2012):** Co-led major comparative studies on dryland biomes, generating policy briefs and analytical tools that informed Ethiopia's redefinition of 'forest' and legal recognition of dry forests.
- **Student and faculty support:** Mentored and co-supervised over 30 PhD/MSc theses and dozens of applied research projects, embedding CIFOR-ICRAF's methodologies directly within Ethiopia's research and extension institutions.

Why it matters:

1. **Built trust:** Co-developing curricula and training Ethiopian researchers forged deep personal and institutional bonds. Rather than an outside critic, CIFOR-ICRAF was embraced as an invested partner – granting unfettered access to policy-making forums.
2. **Provided local legitimacy:** Action research ensured that evidence gathering reflected Ethiopian realities – soil types, land-use history and community priorities – making CIFOR-ICRAF's policy recommendations far more persuasive to MoA, EFD and regional bureaus.
3. **Fostered long-term leverage:** Alumni and faculty from these programmes later moved into senior technical and policy roles within EFD, MoA and regional agencies. As internal advocates, they accelerated the uptake of legal reforms co-drafted by CIFOR-ICRAF, of management guidelines and of the Special Fund investment framework – sustaining momentum even amid shifting institutional mandates.

Pathway 2. Forest policy and legal framework support

Logic: Once credibility was established, CIFOR-ICRAF's locally tested research could be translated into precise legal language and technical inputs to modernize Ethiopia's forestry laws.

Key outputs:

- Comparative analyses redefining 'forest' to include dryland biomes (submitted to UNFCCC in 2016).
- Technical briefs and stakeholder workshops feeding into the 2018 Forest Proclamation (PFM, four ownership types, community carbon rights).
- Drafting support for the 2022 EFD Regulation (mandates, organizational structure).

- Inputs to the 2024 Forest Regulation specifying that 80% of carbon revenues must go to communities.

Interconnection: The faculty and alumni trained in pathway 1 staffed or advised the technical committees that reviewed CIFOR-ICRAF's research reports, technical manuals and policy briefs, ensuring that evidence from local action-research pilots directly informed legal provisions.

Pathway 3. Institutional strengthening and governance

Logic: Clarifying and formalizing the roles of Ethiopia's forestry agencies embeds evidence use into routine governance, making policy reforms durable.

Key outputs:

- Co-drafted mandate and organizational design for EFD, enacted in the form of national regulation by the Council of Ministers in 2022.
- Reviewed national and international commitment and sectoral and related laws to identify mandates for the national forestry institutions. This led to the identification of 29 new mandates in addition to the 30 articles stated in the 2022 EFD Regulation. These new mandates are being unpacked into key functions to propose a new institutional structure for the forestry sector. This is hoped to lead to informed decision making in defining the organizational structure of the forestry sector in Ethiopia and to serve as an evidence-based argument to minimize frequent restructuring of the forestry sector, which has resulted in high staff turnover and loss of institutional memory.
- Establishment of a Forestry Knowledge Management Center at Wondo Genet College, in 2025, to collect and archive policy and practice-relevant research, and making it accessible to users remotely.

Interconnection: CIFOR-ICRAF's graduates and former trainees at EFD provided insider credibility, while institutional tools (mandate documents, knowledge management platform) ensured that the new laws and curricula were backed by accessible, up-to-date evidence.

Pathway 4. Finance and landscape restoration fund support

Logic: The best policies often stall without dedicated resources. By co-designing funding mechanisms that align government budgets with restoration goals, CIFOR-ICRAF closes the loop from research to action on the ground.

Key outputs:

- Co-authored concept notes and theories of change for REDD+ Phase II, Sida and GEF-funded projects.
- Contributed to the drafting of the proclamation, programme framework document, and project-selection criteria for the Special Fund (enacted in December 2024).

Interconnection: The credibility earned in pathways 1 to 3 gave CIFOR-ICRAF's financial models and MRV guidelines the weight needed for MoF and donors to commit funds. Meanwhile, policy and institutional reforms created the legal authority for the Special Fund to exist.

The change

Over 20 years of sustained engagement, CIFOR-ICRAF's research and facilitation have catalysed measurable changes across Ethiopia's forestry sector, transforming legal frameworks, education and research practices, institutional capacity, financing mechanisms and the attitudes of key actors. Below, each major change is described alongside a representative quote from our interviews.

Legal recognition of community rights and modernized forest law

Change: The 2018 Forest Proclamation and 2024 Forest Regulation now formally recognize participatory forest management (PFM), four distinct forest-ownership categories, and entitle communities to 80% of carbon revenues. As one representative of EFD pointed out: *"the role of PFM in sustainable forest management were [sic] not known before. It was practiced by NGOs, but PFM lacked legal backing. Thus it was not possible to take it to scale and enforce. Also, issues around carbon and the benefits of forest carbon are now addressed in the proclamation."*

Inclusion of dry-forest biomes in national definition

Change: In 2016, CIFOR-ICRAF's comparative analyses contributed to an expanded national forest definition that explicitly includes dryland biomes, unlocking new areas for restoration and carbon finance under REDD+ and the Green Legacy Initiative. A CIFOR-ICRAF representative indicated: *"The definition of forest didn't include dry forests, only rainforests. In 2016, after a series of formal and informal engagements with decision makers, Ethiopia submitted a new forest definition to the UNFCCC that finally recognized dry-forest biomes."* As also mentioned by a representative of EFD: *"CIFOR-ICRAF provided inputs to the drafting of the Proclamation that was passed in 2018 ... bringing ideas and quality technical and scientific inputs."*

Reorientation of forestry education toward action research

Change: Wondo Genet College launched two new graduate programmes (dry-forest management and natural resource economics and policy) in the 2009/10 academic year and integrated development-oriented action research in research, producing cohorts of graduates who can bridge science, policy and practice. Training in social science research as well as on how to communicate science to policymakers was also provided to senior EEFRI researchers by CIFOR-ICRAF in collaboration with the International Union of Forest Research Organizations. One EEFRI representative indicated: *"Wondo Genet became a pioneer in action research and community-oriented research. Thousands of students were involved in problem-oriented projects rather than purely subject-matter experiments, bringing the human element into forestry education for the first time."* One former Wondo Genet College lecturer recalled: *"Since CIFOR-ICRAF engaged with stakeholders, there are now additional steps to research, extracting key recommendations from publications and communicating them to targeted audiences. This was new to many scientists."*

Strengthened institutional mandates and governance

Change: CIFOR-ICRAF co-drafted the 2022 EFD Regulation, clarifying the Ethiopian Forestry Development's mandates, organizational structure and research-policy feedback loops – laying the groundwork for a stable, evidence-based forestry agency. One EFD representative said: *"The institutional environment related to forestry has been evolving since 2013, from ministry to commission to now the Ethiopian Forestry Development (EFD). EFD needed a clear legal mandate from the Council of Ministers. CIFOR-ICRAF supported us to draft that mandate, drawing on best practices and lessons learned from other countries, and facilitating consultations among key stakeholders."* As stated above, at present CIFOR-ICRAF has been building on this to better define the mandates of a national forestry sector institution to propose a new organizational structure for EFD.

Creation of a dedicated restoration finance instrument

Change: In December 2024, Ethiopia enacted the Green Legacy and Landscape Restoration Special Fund, co-designed by CIFOR-ICRAF and MoF, to channel 0.5 to 1% of government revenue into large-scale restoration, coupled with a programme framework document to guide investment in the next five years. One EFD representative shared: *"CIFOR-ICRAF guided the formulation of the Special Fund regulation and is leading on the forest-land certification aspects required for resource-based payments (RBP). We need clearly certified forest areas for RBP, and this technical work is being spearheaded by CIFOR-ICRAF."*

Shift in attitudes toward evidence-based policymaking

Change: Government officials now routinely solicit CIFOR-ICRAF analyses, convene small-group technical workshops and cite CIFOR-ICRAF's research results in drafting sessions, marking a cultural shift from reactive to proactive and data-driven policymaking. As one member of EFS mentioned: *"As a neutral research organization, CIFOR-ICRAF cannot criticize the government, while EFS can. CIFOR-ICRAF and EFS collaborate strategically, both advising the government on key issues."* One member of EEFR recalled: *"One particular research, the 'Bush thickening management for palatable pasture in Borana' was piloted on 20 ha. CIFOR-ICRAF helped communicate the results and parliamentarians were invited to see the sites. They were impressed and advised local agencies to replicate the approach nationwide."*

Together, these changes demonstrate how CIFOR-ICRAF's iterative cycle of high-quality research, low-profile facilitation, being on the backseat, not putting officials on the spot, capacity building and co-designing financing tools has delivered tangible benefits to government bodies (EFD, MoF), academic and research institutions (Wondo Genet College, EEFR), local communities and the broader restoration agenda in Ethiopia.

Counterfactual: What If CIFOR-ICRAF had not engaged?

Assessing attribution in complex policy environments is inherently challenging. Ethiopia's forestry achievements over the past two decades, especially in terms of legal recognition of community rights, institutional reform and restoration financing, are the product of leadership and commitment by national actors. Ministries, agencies, academic institutions and civil society organizations have played critical roles throughout this journey.

Yet interviews with stakeholders and review of the evidence suggest that CIFOR-ICRAF's presence made a distinctive, catalytic contribution. Without its sustained engagement, many of the sector's milestones would likely have emerged more slowly, with narrower scope, or in less operationally viable forms.

For example, while PFM was already being practised informally, several respondents noted that CIFOR-ICRAF's evidence-based policy briefs and advisory support helped translate it into law. CIFOR-ICRAF's technical support helped shape legal provisions in the 2018 Forest Proclamation and 2024 Forest Regulation.

Similarly, CIFOR-ICRAF's long-term collaboration with Wondo Genet College, including curriculum co-design and action research training, contributed to the emergence of a new generation of forestry professionals. These national

experts are now leading policy processes, implementing reforms, and bridging research and governance.

Finally, the creation of the Special Fund, now poised to mobilize substantial domestic resources, was also facilitated by CIFOR-ICRAF's technical and advisory input. Government counterparts emphasized that CIFOR-ICRAF contributed to the design of eligibility criteria, MRV standards and proposal templates that helped operationalize the Special Fund.

In sum, CIFOR-ICRAF's contribution was not to lead, but to accompany and reinforce national processes with timely evidence, trusted facilitation and targeted capacity support. The results on the ground (e.g., more inclusive forest laws, stronger institutions and new financing mechanisms) are a shared achievement. But they would likely have unfolded differently, and less effectively, without CIFOR-ICRAF's consistent presence at key moments in the policy cycle.

Impact

CIFOR-ICRAF's two decades of engagement in Ethiopia has demonstrably bridged science, policy and practice – reshaping legal frameworks, embedding participatory forest management and community rights, and catalysing largescale restoration efforts across millions of hectares. While qualitative evidence points to enhanced rural livelihoods through new forest-based income opportunities, a dedicated impact evaluation is needed to rigorously quantify those economic benefits and fully document long-term socioeconomic outcomes.

Evidence pointing towards the long-term impact of CIFOR-ICRAF's engagement is as follows:

Policy reforms driving expanded and better-managed forests

- CIFOR-ICRAF's research on Ethiopia's dry forests (2006–2012) demonstrated the importance of low-canopy woodlands to ecosystems and livelihoods. Drawing on CIFOR-ICRAF's comparative analyses, Ethiopia adopted in 2016 a revised definition of 'forest', lowering the minimum tree height from 5 m to 2 m. This more inclusive definition meant that the officially recorded forest area of Ethiopia was 23.6% (≈26 million ha) by 2023, providing a more accurate baseline for both conservation and restoration programmes.
- CIFOR-ICRAF led stakeholder consultations and drafted technical inputs to Ethiopia's 2018 Forest Proclamation – incorporating for the first time four forest ownership categories (state, community, association, private) and formally recognizing PFM and carbon benefits for communities. Through follow-on work, CIFOR-ICRAF also shaped the 2024 Forest Regulation, ensuring communities receive 80% of forest-carbon revenues.

- CIFOR-ICRAF's facilitation of the REDD+ Phase II project (mobilizing USD 40 million) and its central role in designing the Special Fund have established dedicated financing (0.5 to 1% of the domestic revenue of the federal government) for large-scale restoration and sustainable management.

Restoration and forest cover outcomes

- Since its 2019 launch, the Green Legacy Initiative (GLI) has managed to mobilize the public to raise and plant billions of seedlings. CIFOR-ICRAF's assessment showed that the GLI has positively impacted tree cover and biodiversity, with likely long-term impacts on soil health, water infiltration, carbon sequestration, agricultural productivity and community livelihoods.
- Between 2014 and 2016, CIFOR-ICRAF partnered with the federal government and five regional governments to identify effective forest management models, exclosures in Tigray, smallholder plantations in Amhara, PFM in Oromia, agroforestry in the Southern Region and dry-forest management in Benishangul-Gumuz. Each region endorsed CIFOR-ICRAF's scaling-up strategy documents, laying the groundwork for nationwide expansion of these proven approaches. The findings were used to inform the 2018 Forest Proclamation.
- CIFOR-ICRAF's partnership with EFD produced Ethiopia's first high-resolution national forest cover map for 2023, aligned with Ethiopia's 2016 definition

of forest – 2 m tree height and 20% canopy cover. This map has been endorsed by the government and will serve as baseline to monitor future changes, inform targeted restoration planning and improve accuracy in measuring annual forest gains across all regions.

Socioeconomic benefits for rural communities

- Beyond ecosystem gains, the GLI has generated thousands of local jobs, from raising seedlings in nurseries to plantation and care, and has diversified incomes via new sources of timber, fruits, fodder and non-timber products. This has started improving food security and household resilience, although this assessment has not been able to quantify specific income changes.
- The formalization of PFM has legally empowered rural communities to manage adjacent state forests, unlocking access to forest products and carbon revenues, and fostering sustained local investment in forest protection.
- CIFOR-ICRAF produced a series of training materials on Development-Oriented Interdisciplinary Thematic Action Research at Wondo Genet College. This has contributed to strengthening Ethiopia's institutional ability to craft and enforce evidence-based forestry policy, though again, this assessment has not attached dollar-value impacts to those capacity gains.



Conclusion, lessons learned and recommendations

Over the past two decades, CIFOR-ICRAF's collaborative and low-profile engagement has enabled meaningful policy and institutional change in Ethiopia's forestry sector – from the legal recognition of community rights and participatory forest management to the creation of a dedicated restoration fund and the reorientation of forestry research and education. This success was made possible through consistent technical support, embedded partnerships and a commitment to long-term capacity building.

Yet CIFOR-ICRAF's engagement, despite its transformational impact, is not immune to structural fragility. As noted by multiple stakeholders, the organization's in-country presence is thin, often reliant on a small number of individuals. CIFOR-ICRAF's role is not always institutionalized in government processes and can be disrupted by leadership or political turnover, budget limitations or changing donor priorities. Without deeper institutional anchoring and expanded local staffing, there is a tangible risk that the influence built over two decades could erode, and momentum for reform could stall.

Drawing on collaboration, interviews and documentary evidence, the following lessons capture the key ingredients of CIFOR-ICRAF's success, along with practical recommendations to sustain and deepen impact:

Invest early and deeply in local capacity

- **Lesson:** Embedding action-research training and curriculum reform at Wondo Genet College built a cadre of locally rooted experts who understood both scientific methods and policy contexts.
- **Ingredient:** Co-development of graduate programmes (dry-forest management and natural resources economics and policy) and hands-on action research pilots created early trust and produced alumni who now populate key government institutions and high-level technical committees.
- **Recommendation:** Continue investing in local talent development and establish formal pathways to place CIFOR-ICRAF-supported alumni in strategic government and NGO roles.

Adopt a 'backseat' facilitation style

- **Lesson:** Maintaining low-profile, informal engagement allowed CIFOR-ICRAF to sustain relationships through transitions in leadership and institutional structures.

- **Ingredient:** Discreet one-on-one briefings and off-the-record workshops built rapport and avoided political sensitivities, positioning CIFOR-ICRAF as a trusted 'research wing'.
- **Recommendation:** While preserving this facilitation style, CIFOR-ICRAF should also formalize its roles through Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) and embedded advisory positions to reduce dependence on personal relationships alone.

Translate research into policy-ready formats

- **Lesson:** Peer-reviewed papers alone rarely shape laws. CIFOR-ICRAF's targeted briefs, annotated texts and field demonstration summaries ensured evidence was timely and actionable.
- **Ingredient:** Joint development of brief presentations for high-level decision makers and easy-to-understand and evidence-based recommendation options as with EEFR and EFD improved policy uptake.
- **Recommendation:** Scale up technical writing and communications capacity in-country and systematically archive influence pathways for institutional memory.

Leverage comparative analysis to open windows of opportunity

- **Lesson:** Comparative legal studies (e.g., on tenure systems, forest definitions, carbon revenue sharing) lent credibility to local reformers and opened space for progressive change.
- **Ingredient:** Cross-country forest definition analysis submitted to the technical team in charge of articulating a definition of forest to be adopted by Ethiopia assisted the country in submitting its definition in 2016 to UNFCCC, helping to legitimize inclusion of dry forests.
- **Recommendation:** Institutionalize this approach by developing a regular 'comparative policy lab' in partnership with national key partner institutions such as Wondo Genet College or EFD.

Embed technical experts within government processes

- **Lesson:** Embedding CIFOR-ICRAF technical staff in drafting committees ensured hands-on advisory input and built reform ownership among officials.
- **Ingredient:** Secondments to EFD and MoF proved highly effective in co-developing the Forest Regulation and the Special Fund.
- **Recommendation:** Secure long-term technical advisory positions through joint appointments or secondments in government agencies.

Build multistakeholder coalitions

- **Lesson:** By equipping civil society organizations (CSOs) and networks like EFS with credible evidence, CIFOR-ICRAF expanded the coalition pushing for reform, beyond government actors.
- **Ingredient:** Joint workshops and co-authored briefs with WRI, NABU and EFS helped translate science into public advocacy.
- **Recommendation:** Provide tailored technical support and re-granting opportunities to strengthen CSO capacities and local networks for forestry policy engagement.

Link policy reform to financing mechanisms

- **Lesson:** Legal and institutional gains require matching financial instruments to drive real change. CIFOR-ICRAF's co-design of the Special Fund closed the loop from research to implementation.
- **Ingredient:** Technical standards to be met by applicants, proposal templates and the programme Framework document for the Special Fund aligned restoration with public budgeting systems.
- **Recommendation:** Expand CIFOR-ICRAF's support to regional governments and communities to access the Special Fund and build decentralized project pipelines.

Institutionalize knowledge management

- **Lesson:** In high-turnover policy environments, structured knowledge management systems help preserve institutional memory and promote continuity.
- **Ingredient:** The new Knowledge Management Centre at Wondo Genet College provides a repository for policy briefs, laws and training materials.
- **Recommendation:** Scale up knowledge management tools (e.g., learning hubs, archives, trackers) in other institutions and link them to national education and policy planning systems.

Secure the sustainability of CIFOR-ICRAF's engagement

- **Lesson:** CIFOR-ICRAF's long-standing contribution is widely recognized, but fragile. A single-department footprint, lack of long-term institutional engagement to sustain engagement and visibility of CIFOR-ICRAF in the country, and donor fluctuations put its influence at risk.
- **Recommendation:** Institutionalize CIFOR-ICRAF's advisory roles within government through formal agreements.

- Expand core staffing and long-term funding to avoid over-reliance on project cycles or individual experts.
- Cultivate successor institutions (e.g., EFD, Wondo Genet College, EFS) to champion CIFOR-ICRAF's legacy and lead future forestry innovation.

By reinforcing its institutional roots and partnerships, CIFOR-ICRAF can ensure that the systems it helped build (laws, institutions, capacities) are resilient enough to carry forward the vision of equitable, community-driven forest governance and large-scale restoration in Ethiopia.

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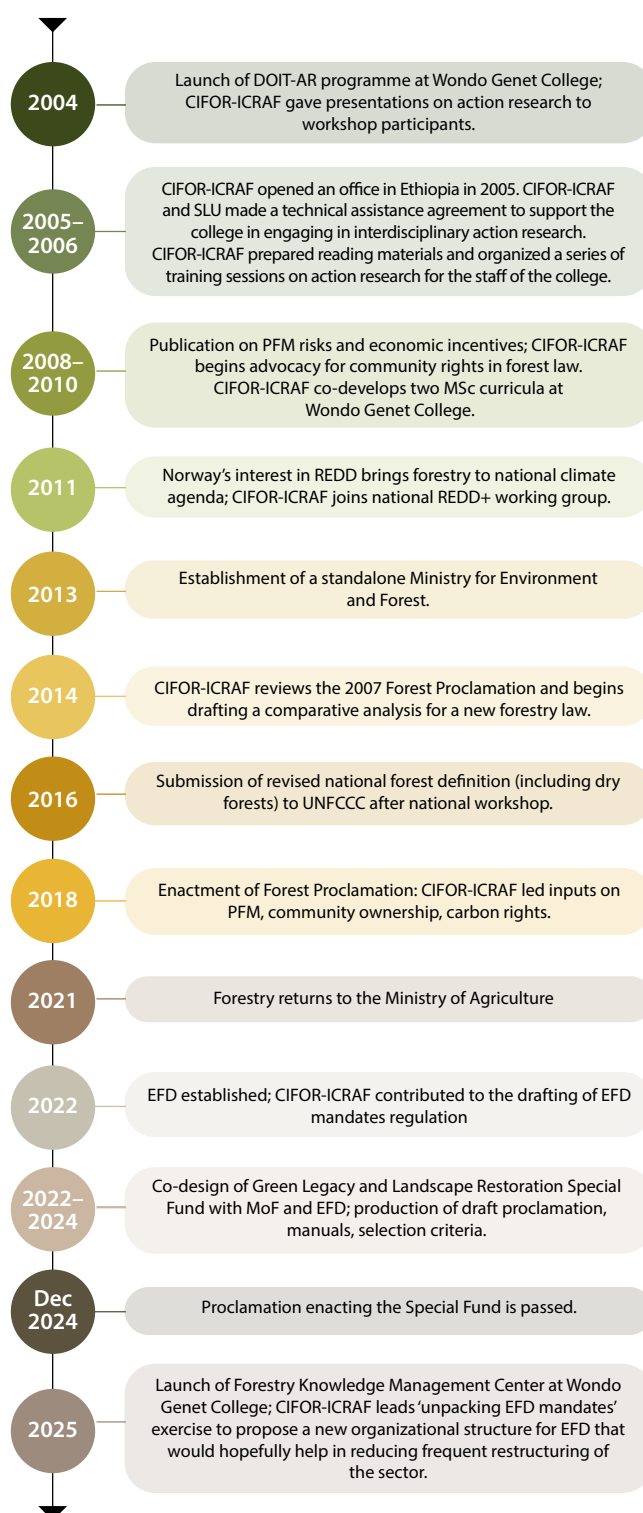
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Annex

Timeline of key events, milestones and products

This sequence demonstrates how CIFOR-ICRAF's iterative cycle of research, policy engagement, capacity building and financial innovation has progressively strengthened Ethiopia's forestry sector – a combination of evidence-driven technical inputs, trusted low-profile facilitation and strategic alignment with national priorities.



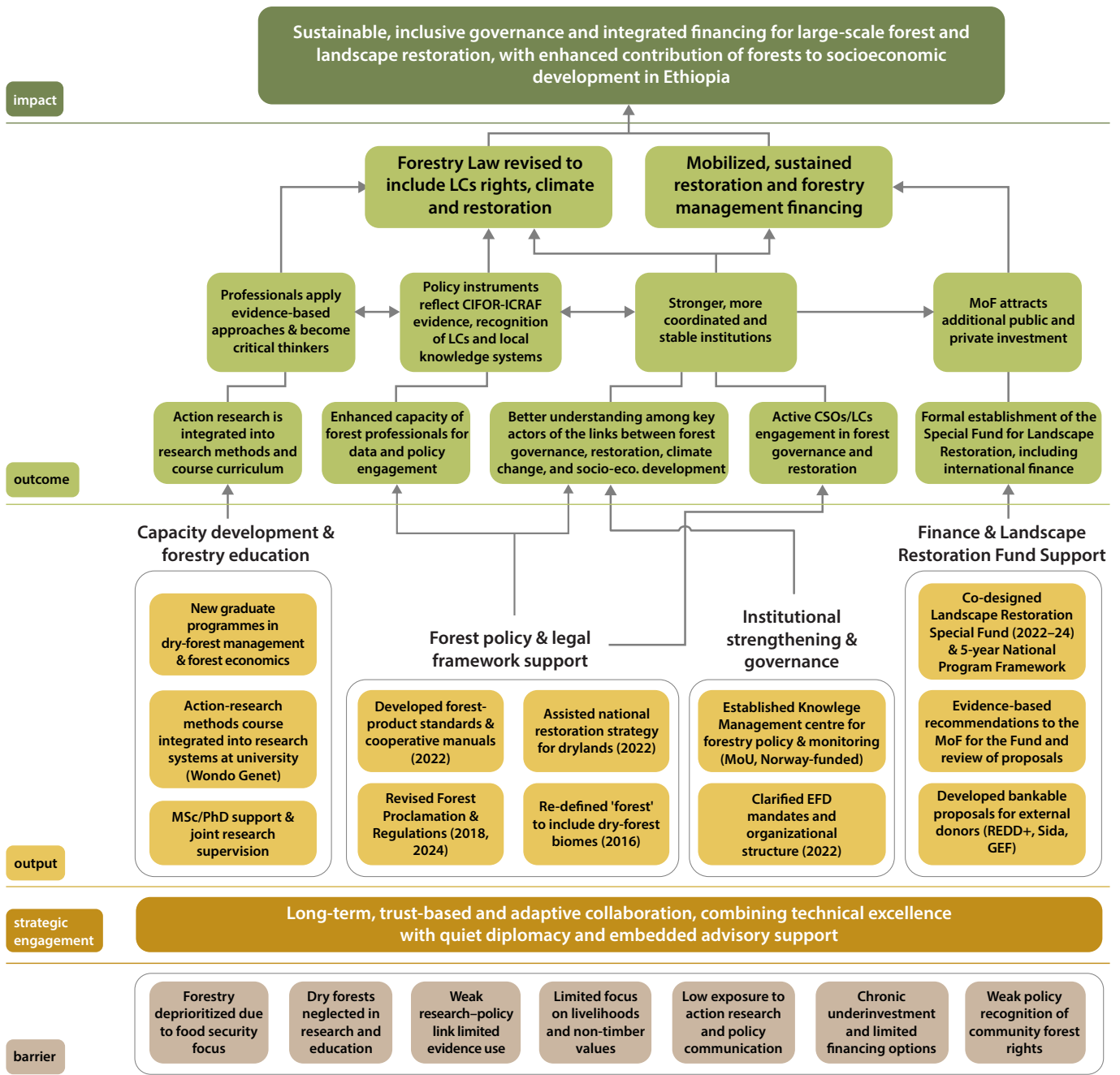
Stakeholder matrix

A stakeholder matrix, showing how CIFOR-ICRAF's strategic engagement with each actor and their mutual relationships helped drive the changes described above.

This matrix illustrates how CIFOR-ICRAF's tailored engagement, from discreet advisory support to visible capacity-building workshops, was amplified through strategic relationships among government agencies, academia, civil society and donors, creating mutually reinforcing feedback loops that underpinned systemic change in Ethiopia's forestry sector.

Stakeholder	Strategic engagement by CIFOR-ICRAF	Key relationships and interconnectedness
Ethiopian Forestry Development (EFD)	Embedded advisors in drafting committees; co-crafted mandate regulation; led technical workshops on legal drafting.	EFD staff include Wondo Genet College alumni trained by CIFOR-ICRAF; works with MoF on fund design; coordinate with EEFRI for research inputs and with regional bureaus for Special Fund roll-out.
Ministry of Finance (MoF) / Climate Resilient Green Economy (CRGE) Facility	Contributed to the design of the Special Fund Proclamation; its programme framework document to facilitate implementation, and proposal templates.	Relies on CIFOR-ICRAF's policy-legal credibility from EFD engagements; channels funds to regions that fulfil selection criteria and reporting and disbursements requirements.
Wondo Genet College (Hawassa University)	Co-developed two MSc curricula; delivered action-research training; prepared the foundation document for Forestry Knowledge Management Center.	Graduates serve in EFD, EEFRI, MoA and EFS; linkages with SLU and other universities; provide knowledge management platform for all forestry stakeholders.
EEFRI (Environment & Forestry Research Institute) – currently embedded into the structure of EFD	Mentored on policy brief writing; facilitated field day pilots; shared allometric and MRV methods.	Works with EFD on research-policy feedback; co-authors publications with CIFOR-ICRAF; field days connect EEFRI, parliamentarians and regional governments for technique adoption.
Ethiopian Forestry Society (EFS)	Provided advocacy and structural advice; co-hosted stakeholder consultations on education and legal drafts.	Serves as public advocate complementing CIFOR-ICRAF's government-privileged access; draws on CIFOR-ICRAF's technical outputs for media and expert forums; circulates briefs to wider civil society.
UNDP, UNEP and UNIDO	UNDP hosted CIFOR-ICRAF-implemented REDD+ and Sida-supported projects; funded Monitoring and evaluation and capacity-building components; co-authored proposals.	Coordinates multi-donor funding with MoF; links CIFOR-ICRAF with Sida, UNEP and UNIDO; worked with EFD and CIFOR-ICRAF; and submitted large-scale projects for GEF.
Norwegian Embassy	Major funder for REDD+, GLI assessment, and Forestry Knowledge Management Center; participates in steering committee meetings and validation workshops.	Aligns CIFOR-ICRAF's research with Norway's climate finance goals; connects MoF and EFD to bilateral funding; helps legitimize CIFOR-ICRAF's policy dialogues at ministerial level.
Sida and SLU	Co-financed action research pilot (SLU); co-developed Market system development project (Sida); supported faculty exchanges and workshops.	SLU's methods reinforced CIFOR-ICRAF's action research at Wondo Genet College; Sida-UNDP-CIFOR-ICRAF triad delivered market systems and proposal pipelines bridging research and finance.
NGOs (WRI, NABU)	Co-authored platform mandates; ran joint workshops on carbon and biodiversity; supported public consultations.	Amplified CIFOR-ICRAF evidence in international forums; influenced EFS advocacy; connected communities with global conservation networks.
Regional forestry bureaus and local governments	Trained on MRV and species-site matching; pilot site support; proposed review criteria for the Special Fund.	Implement CIFOR-ICRAF-MoF-EFD Fund guidelines; rely on EEFRI and Wondo Genet College for technical backstopping; provide community feedback to EFD and CIFOR-ICRAF.
Local communities and forest cooperatives	Facilitated community-engaged action research pilots; provided carbon-rights modelling; co-designed PFM templates.	Serve as on-the-ground beneficiaries whose management successes validated legal reforms; advise EFS and regional bureaus through CIFOR-ICRAF's participatory processes.

Theory of change



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