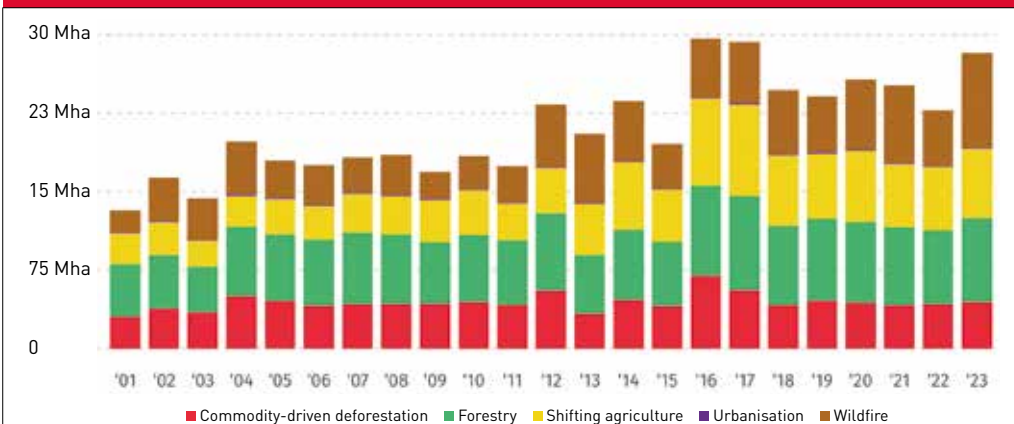


Global annual tree cover loss by dominant driver (in millions of hectares)



Note: The methods behind this data have changed over time. Be cautious comparing old and new data, especially before/after 2015.

Source: www.globalforestwatch.org

REDD projects (only avoided emissions from deforestation and forest degradation). However, this is in parts at odds with government-led national or jurisdictional programmes as negotiated under the UNFCCC. This approach has also borne a significant risk of over-crediting, for instance because of a lack of guidance on how to define conservative and robust forward-looking baselines that do not encourage results amounting to little more than hot air.

While REDD projects for the VCM do not reflect what was intended under the UNFCCC, they have partly filled the funding and implementation gap described above. Public scrutiny recently revealed considerable issues with some REDD projects and led to significant criticism, raising doubts among many stakeholders and investors. One major criticism related to REDD projects certified according to the old VCS methodology was

over-crediting through inflated baselines, i.e. the threat of deforestation was deliberately overestimated in order to generate additional credits. Verra has responded with revised methodologies, but the prospects for such projects remain unclear.

Other institutions, however, are making efforts to combine the original idea of state-led jurisdictional programmes with credits sold to the private sector, e.g. the Art Trees standard that is developing its first programmes in Guyana, Ghana and Vietnam. Just like Verra's VCS, Art Trees will certify emission reductions and, through certification, make them tradable in different emission trading schemes for the private sector. While there are differences, VCS and Art Trees share a common focus on enabling private sector finance for forest conservation to compensate the notable absence of public funding for REDD+ by governments.

Outlook

The impacts and threats of tipping points are well-known, but forests remain under pressure. Addressing forest conservation and restoration has declined in the global political priority list. Consequently, the options for mobilising public finance for forest protection and restoration are even worse today than when the forest finance debate was postponed to better times.

Despite all the design weaknesses of REDD+ and challenges associated with implementation – no matter whether at national level, in publicly financed jurisdictional programmes or via the VCM – REDD+ is the best and only means the global community could agree on to save the remaining intact forests, and to restore degraded lands. Unfortunately, there are no realistic alternatives for conserving forests, and it took 20 years to agree on the approach. Criticisms, even when justified, tend to overlook that climate change is a race against time, and that the state of play is dire. Thus, decisions to reject REDD+, rather than moving forward with implementation and improvements over time, imply accepting the loss of further forests and the prolonged fuelling of climate change.

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A call for action to protect agricultural lands

In discussing the factors negatively impacting food security and the livelihoods of the rural poor, one phenomenon is often neglected: the loss of agricultural land through urban sprawl and development. Building on experience from Ghana, our author calls for considering agriculture in spatial development plans.

By Peter Asare-Nuamah

Like in many developing economies, agriculture forms the mainstay of Ghana's socioeconomic development, having contributed to gross domestic product, employment, foreign income as well as food security since independence. Despite competition from other sectors,

particularly the service sector, in recent times, agriculture continues to play a crucial role in Ghana's development. The country's ability to halve hunger and tackle poverty under the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has largely been attributed to robust interventions

and development in agriculture. The sector is the main source of livelihoods among smallholder farmers and rural communities. Any threat to agriculture seriously jeopardises the food security of this population, which, while largely constituting the poor and vulnerable,

nevertheless covers about 80 per cent of the products for the nation's food security needs.

Yet the countries' smallholder farmers, especially in urban and peri-urban areas and fast developing rural communities, face a threat which has received little attention by policy-makers, the media and activists so far, but can seriously hamper future food security, poverty eradication and rural development targets enshrined in national policies and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Many smallholder farmers are bearing the brunt of urban sprawl and development. Rapid urbanisation is directly or indirectly facilitating re-zoning of land for development purposes. In a conversation with some community members in Ofaakor, a suburb of Kasoa (one of the fastest growing communities in West Africa) in the Awutu Senya East Municipality in Ghana, I learned that the phenomenon is pushing vulnerable and poor farmers (especially those who have been living in cottages and practised agriculture in the area) into the hinterlands in search of land for their agricultural and livelihood activities. However, land there may not support agriculture, e.g. because of aridity, poor soil fertility and limited access to water. Fertile land is mostly forested. Farmers deforesting such areas add to carbon emissions.

The problem was also highlighted at a workshop held in the context of the INTERFACES project in Tamale in Northern Ghana in August 2024 together with stakeholders from government institutions, civil society and farmer-based organisations, traditional authorities and academia. Here, it was stressed that many smallholder farmers in the Tamale Metropolis and its environs have been pushed far off from their agricultural lands. Often, vulnerable farmers are not even notified of the re-zoning of their lands. Pillars mounted on the land announce its having been re-zoned, and the farmers are evicted. Directly or indirectly, re-zoning of agricultural land implies a reduction in the total production area, translating into a significant loss of agricultural productivity and yields, and affecting food security in a country with considerable hunger and nutrition-related problems.

Inherently, the loss of agricultural lands to urbanisation is partly because of many development planners in Ghana's metropolitan, municipal and district assemblies (MMDAs) not recognising agriculture as an important aspect of spatial development. Most of them do not even include designated agricultural lands in their spatial development plans. This has to change. Dedicated and designated agricultural



Ghana's capital Accra. In rapidly growing communities in particular, farmers are losing their land and driven to the hinterland. Photo: artaxerxes_longhand/shutterstock.com

lands should be integrated into spatial development plans. Moreover, it must be ensured that such plans are readily available and accessible to local people who can then legitimise their desire to protect land from urban encroachment. Achieving this requires strong collaboration between MMDAs and traditional authorities, especially Chiefs and Queen mothers as well as clan and family heads who are recognised as custodians of lands in many parts of the country. The latter have to see to it that agricultural lands in their territories that support the livelihoods of their people are not forcefully converted into residential, commercial and industrial lands. This will compel and encourage MMDAs to champion agricultural lands as part of their spatial development



Agricultural land should be protected from being converted to other uses. Photo: Gerhard Petterson/shutterstock.com

plans. Additionally, tenancy agreements must be formalised between farmers and traditional authorities or land owners to ensure security of agricultural lands. This may not necessarily mean officially registering the land, which has been reported to be costly and characterised by excessive delays. Rather, written (official) agreements between farmers and land owners would suffice to secure agricultural land.

Also, state laws and policies are needed to protect agricultural land in fast developing communities across the country by granting them the status of protected agricultural lands – like in the case of protected forest lands, which are prohibited from being converted to other uses. This would secure and protect the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable farmers amidst urban sprawl and development. Designating agricultural lands can contribute to promoting green spaces, reducing carbon footprint and enhancing agricultural productivity generally.

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