



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations



International Institute
for Environment
and Development



Understanding Forest Tenure and Benefit Rights in Ghana



A simple guide for farmers, plantation developers, farmer cooperatives and groups, and forest fringe communities in Ghana

Preface

Sustainable forest management in Ghana evolves around good policies, regulations, well informed and empowered people. Farmers, forest plantation developers, forest and farm producer organisations, and forest fringe communities are at the center of managing our forests and landscapes. Their knowledge, rights, roles and responsibilities shape how forests are restored, protected, and used to support livelihoods now and the future.

This guidebook, ***Understanding Forest Tenure and Benefit Rights in Ghana***, has been developed by the Knowledge for World Conservation (KWC) under the Restoration for Resilience and Recovery (3R) of Sustainable Agri-Food Systems Project, with valued support of partners of the Forest and Farm Facility programme – **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), and International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)**. These organisations in their functions are committed to strengthening community rights, improving forest governance, and promoting fair and transparent benefit-sharing arrangements in Ghana.

Forest tenure seems to be complex and difficult to understand. Questions such as: Who owns the land? Who owns the trees? Who has the right to harvest, responsibility to protect, or to benefit from the trees planted, are not always easy to answer. Yet these questions directly affect farmers' incomes, community development, investment decisions, and long-term environmental sustainability. When tenure and benefit rights are clearly understood, conflicts are reduced, investments are encouraged, and communities are better positioned to claim what is rightfully theirs.

This guide simplifies these important issues using clear language, illustrations, and infographics. It explains land and tree ownership in Ghana, outlines rights within and outside forest reserves, describes benefit-sharing arrangements under plantation and carbon initiatives, and highlights legal safeguards available to farmers and communities. It also provides practical guidance on tree registration and steps to take when rights are violated.

Knowledge is power, therefore, making forest tenure information accessible and practical through this guidebook will empower farmers, community members, producer organisations and all other stakeholders to participate meaningfully in forest governance, negotiate fairly, safeguard their livelihoods, and contribute to resilient and sustainable agri-food systems.

All readers are encouraged to use this guide as a source of information and a tool for dialogue within communities, with traditional authorities, with government institutions, and with private investors. Together, informed stakeholders can build stronger partnerships, protect Ghana's forests, and ensure that restoration efforts deliver real and equitable benefits for all.

Acknowledgement

The development of this guidebook, ***Understanding Forest Tenure and Benefit Rights in Ghana***, was made possible through the collaboration, commitment, and shared vision of many partners and stakeholders dedicated to strengthening forest governance and community rights in Ghana.

The Knowledge for World Conservation (KWC) is especially grateful to the partners of the **Forest and Farm Facility** programme, the **Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)**, the **International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)**, and the **International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)**, for the funding, technical guidance, and continuous support in advancing secure forest and farm tenure for local communities.

We also extend our appreciation to Forest and Farm Producer Organisations (FFPOs), community groups, traditional authorities, farmers, plantation developers, and forest fringe community members who shared their experiences and practical insights. Their contributions ensured that this guide reflects real challenges and opportunities on the ground.

Finally, we acknowledge the contributions of field facilitators, the illustrator and communication specialist who worked to translate complex tenure and benefit-sharing frameworks into simple language supported by illustrations and infographics. Their efforts have made this guide accessible and practical for the farmers and communities it is designed to serve.

To all who contributed in diverse ways, we express our sincere gratitude.

List of Acronyms

CRMCS	Community Resource Management Committee
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
FC	Forestry Commission
FFCs	Forest Fringe Communities
FFPOs	Forest and Farmer Producer Organisations
iiied	International Institute of Environment and Development
IUCN	International Union of Conservation of Nature
KWC	Knowledge for World Conservation
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisation
REDD+	Reducing Emission from Deforestation and Forest Degradation
3R	Restoration for Resilience and Recovery
SRA	Social Responsibility Agreements
STV	Standing Tree Value
TUC	Timber Utilisation Contract
WB	World Bank



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1

What Is Forest Tenure?

Forest tenure is simply about who owns the land on which the forest is, who owns the trees (resources) of the forest, who can use the forest and its resources, who benefits from it, and for how long.



In Ghana, forest tenure is held by:



Traditional authorities (chiefs and families)



The government (Forestry Commission)



Farmers and communities



Private companies and plantation developers



2

Ownership of Land and Forest Resources in Ghana



Land Ownership



Most land in Ghana is owned under customary systems by stools, skins, families, or individuals.



Chiefs and family heads manage land on behalf of their people.



Individuals also own private lands (Freehold - indefinite) and (leasehold - temporal)



Tree Ownership

Among the prominent resources of the forests that FFPOs forest and farm producer organisations (FFPOs) and communities may own is forest trees used as timber.



Naturally growing timber trees usually belong to the state.



Trees planted by farmers in the community belong to the farmer who planted them.



Farmers may register planted trees to prove ownership.



Tree crops (oil palm, rubber, coconut, etc.) are cultivated and owned by the farmer.



3

Tenure and Benefit Rights of FFPO and Forest Fringe Community (FFC) Members

A forest fringe community is a community that fall within five kilometers (5 km) radius around a forest reserve or in off-reserve areas, a community within a timber harvesting operational area.



3.1

Customary Rights (Outside Forest Reserves)



Community members can:



Farm and grow crops.



Collect non-timber forest products (NTFPs) e.g. mushrooms, snails, pestles, medicinal plants

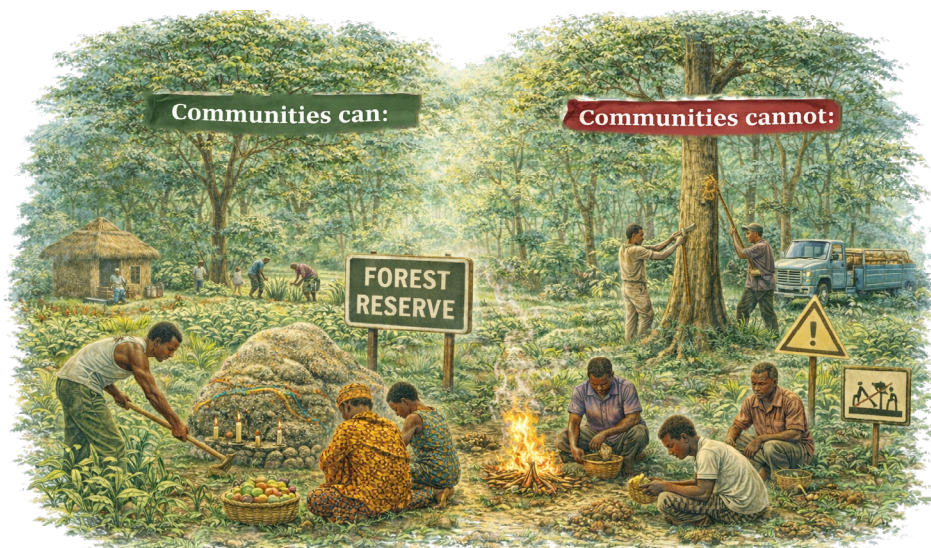


Own and use lands allocated by, or acquired from chiefs or families or individual owners for their private or commercial activities.



3.2

Rights Inside Forest Reserves (Limited)



Communities can:



Visit sacred and cultural sites



Collect some non-timber forest products for household use



Participate in Modified Taungya (MTS) or collaborative forest management programs



Farm on their legally admitted farms without ANY FURTHER BOUNDARY expansions

Communities cannot:



Harvest timber without permission from the Forestry Commission of Ghana



Convert forest reserve land to farms



3.3

Rights under Collaborative Forest Management



When community members join CRMCs or collaborative forest management groups, they can help improve forest governance. Their rights to participate in forest governance is expressed in the following:



Help manage forests



Monitor illegal logging, fire and other encroachments



Share benefits from the planted timber, or carbon projects

² CRMCs stand for Community Resource Management Committees. They are a decentralized, community-based natural resource management framework designed to give local people greater authority and responsibility in managing wildlife and natural resources.



4

What Benefits Can Communities and Farmers Receive from the Forest?

Timber and Plantation Benefits



4.1

Communities and farmers may receive:



Development projects through Social Responsibility Agreements (SRA) entered into with Timber Utilization Contract (TUC) holders



Financial benefit from nurtured or planted trees



Timber benefit shares from the revenue of plantation projects



Compensation for damage to farms or crops for individual farmers.



4.2

Carbon and Ecosystem Service Benefit



Communities and farmers may benefit from:



Carbon credit payments from restoration and forest conservation initiatives



Payments for protecting existing forests ecosystems such as rivers, soils, and trees



4.3

Plantation Investment Benefits



Although, investors receive most of the revenue from restoration or conservation of forests, the government, landowners, and communities also have their share



Ground rent may be paid annually for land used by plantation owners



Table 1: Benefit Sharing Plan for Plantation Development in Degraded Forest Reserves in Ghana.

Plantation type	Farmers or investors	FC	Traditional Landowners	Community	Remarks
MTS (On-Reserve but community-based)	40% + food crops for 3 years	40% (provides seedlings, technical support & logistics)	15%	5%	It is more community-oriented. It balances farmer livelihood (food crops + timber share) with government and landowner interests.
On-Reserve (Private Developer)/PPP	90%	2%	6%	2%	Attracts more private investment while ensuring landowners and communities also gain
Standard On-Reserve (FC led)	10%	60%	15%	15%	
Off-Reserve (Private/Community land)	100% (Tree planter)	0	Negotiated if on stool land	Indirect (employment)	Indirect benefit through employment and environmental services,
Standard Off-Reserve (Private/Community land)	10%	60%	15%	15%	This model applies to plantations established directly under the FC's management within forest reserves.
NOTE:	% = STV-standing tree value harvested at any time				

Source: Ghana Forest Plantation Strategy 2016-2040.



Table 2: Benefit Sharing Plan for Carbon Credits in Ghana

Stakeholder	Share of Benefit	Remarks
Farmers & Local Communities	40%	Farmers and local communities receive the largest share, recognizing their role in maintaining forest cover and adopting climate-smart practices. This is designed to incentivize sustainable cocoa production, reduce deforestation, and ensure that those directly protecting forests are rewarded.
Traditional Authorities	15%	Traditional authorities are included to acknowledge customary land ownership and governance structures.
Government of Ghana (Forestry Commission, etc.)	20%	Government agencies retain a portion to support monitoring, enforcement, and administration.
Private Sector (Cocoa companies, investors)	20%	Private sector actors contribute to financing and implementation, so they are allocated a share.
CSOs & NGOs	5%	Civil society organizations receive a smaller portion to support advocacy, capacity building, and oversight.

Source: Ghana Cocoa Forest REDD+ Programme, 2016.



5

Tree Ownership and Registration: What Farmers Need to Know

Trees Planted by Farmers



5.1

Farmers who plant trees have the right to:



The full benefit of harvesting and sale of trees they plant.



Receive carbon payments if planted trees fall under a carbon project.

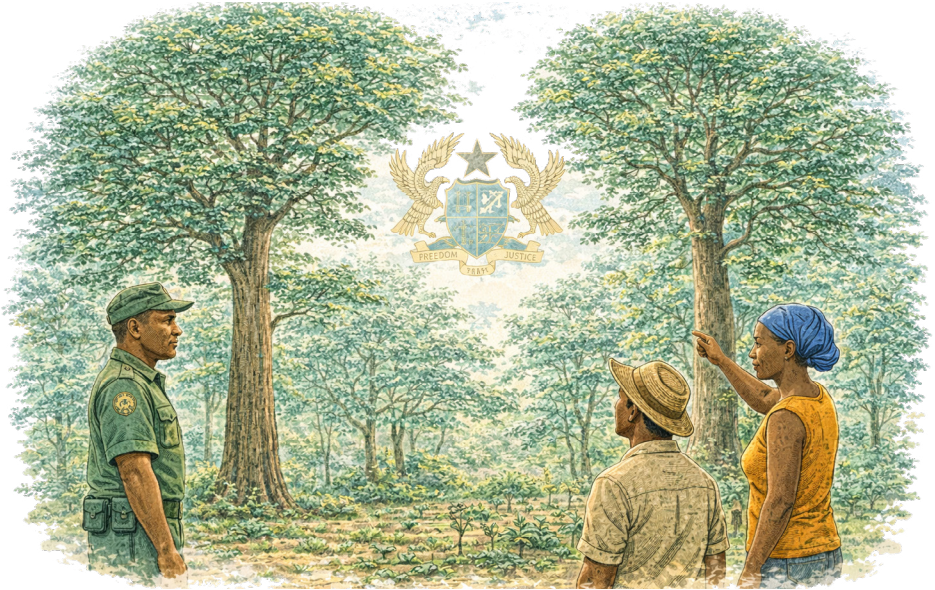


Claim compensation if crops are damaged during harvesting.



5.2

Naturally Growing Trees



Naturally growing trees are owned by the State (1992 Constitution of Ghana, Timber Resources Management Act , 1997, (Act 547)



5.3

Why Register Trees?



To prove ownership



To stop illegal logging



To participate in carbon and sustainability programs



5.4

How Farmers Can Prove Tree Ownership



By keeping and showing:



Tree registration certificates or digital records



Farm maps and tree inventories



Community members' verification



Records from projects or cooperatives



6

Legal Safeguards and Protections for Farmers and Community Members



Communities and farmers have the right to:



Be consulted before their land is put to any use



Receive and keep copies of any agreements entered into regarding their land, benefits etc. (SRA, CRMC, MTS, leases)



Report illegal logging and forest encroachment



Participate in decision-making, including women and youths and the physically challenged



7

What Happens When Rights are Violated?



Different actors can face penalties:



Farmers: fines or prosecution for illegal logging, illegal farming, illegal mining (galamsey) or any other form of encroachment



Traditional authorities: sanctions for fraudulent land allocation



Timber companies: fines, suspension, or loss of permits for illegal logging or damage to farms



8

Key Messages for Farmers and Communities



You own the land and crops, but not naturally growing trees.



Trees you plant belong to you so register them to secure full ownership rights.



Participate in SRA and collaborative forest management (e.g. MTS groups, CRMCs).



Keep records and maps of your farms and trees.



Report illegal activities and demand your benefits.



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