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The European Union's forest diplomacy: a path toward ostensible environmental sustainability

A Diplomacia Florestal da União Europeia: um caminho rumo a pretensa sustentabilidade ambiental

La diplomacia forestal de la Unión Europea: un camino hacia una sostenibilidad ambiental aparente

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) has established itself as a leading actor in international climate governance, yet its performance in the forest sector remains constrained by tensions among economic, social, and environmental dimensions. Although EU primary law and instruments such as Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade and the Regulation on Deforestation-Free Products project an ambition for global sustainable leadership, practice reveals the predominance of weak sustainability — limited to economic balancing and minimal regulation of environmental impacts. This article advances socioecological justice as the theoretical framework for evaluating EU forest diplomacy, arguing that its legitimacy will be strengthened only through the effective incorporation of participatory parity, North–South equity, and the inclusion of vulnerable communities in decision-making. Without such adjustments, EU forest diplomacy risks reproducing Eurocentric models, undermining its mission of sustainable leadership at the global scale.

Keywords: European environmental policy; forest governance; strong sustainability; ecological justice; North–South relations.

Resumo

A União Europeia (UE) consolidou-se como protagonista da governança climática internacional, mas sua atuação no setor florestal permanece marcada por obstáculos existentes entre dimensões econômicas, sociais e ambientais. Embora o direito primário europeu e instrumentos como o Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) e o Regulation on Deforestation-free Products (EUDR) revelem uma ambição global de liderança sustentável, a prática evidencia a prevalência da sustentabilidade fraca, limitada ao equilíbrio econômico e à regulação mínima de impactos ambientais. Este artigo propõe a justiça socioecológica como marco teórico para avaliar a diplomacia florestal europeia, defendendo que sua legitimidade somente será robustecida pela incorporação efetiva da paridade participativa, da equidade Norte-Sul e da inclusão das comunidades vulneráveis na tomada de decisão. A análise sugere que, sem tais ajustes, a diplomacia florestal da UE tende a reproduzir modelos eurocêntricos, fragilizando sua missão de liderança sustentável em escala global.

Palavras-chave: *Política ambiental europeia; governança florestal; sustentabilidade forte; justiça ecológica; relações Norte-Sul.*

Resumen

La Unión Europea (UE) se ha consolidado como un actor principal en la gobernanza climática internacional; sin embargo, su desempeño en el sector forestal sigue limitado por las tensiones entre las dimensiones económica, social y ambiental. Aunque el derecho primario de la UE y los instrumentos como la Aplicación de las Leyes, Gobernanza y Comercio Forestales (FLEGT, por sus siglas en inglés) y el Reglamento sobre Productos Libres de Deforestación proyectan una ambición de liderazgo global sostenible, la práctica revela el predominio de una sostenibilidad débil, restringida al equilibrio económico y a una regulación mínima de los impactos ambientales. Este artículo propone la justicia socioecológica como marco teórico para evaluar la diplomacia forestal de la UE, sosteniendo que su legitimidad se fortalecerá únicamente mediante la incorporación efectiva de la paridad participativa, la equidad Norte–Sur y la inclusión de comunidades vulnerables en la toma de decisiones. Sin tales ajustes, la diplomacia forestal de la UE corre el riesgo de reproducir modelos eurocéntricos, debilitando así su misión de liderazgo sostenible a escala global.

Palabras clave: *Política ambiental europea; gobernanza forestal; sostenibilidad fuerte; justicia ecológica; relaciones Norte–Sur.*

1 Introduction

Sustainable development is recognized as one of the European Union's (EU) pillars, especially after the Treaty of Amsterdam in 1999, though its origins trace back to the 1987 Brundtland Report (Comissão Mundial sobre Meio Ambiente e

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Desenvolvimento, 1987). Since then, the international community has acknowledged the finitude of natural resources and the need for a civilizational paradigm shift, as already signaled in *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows *et al.*, 1972). The 2030 Agenda, with its 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs), consolidated a global normative framework structured around economic, social, and environmental dimensions (United Nations, 2015).

In assuming a leadership role in implementing the 2030 Agenda, the EU has sought to coordinate a set of domestic and external public policies, notably the European Green Deal, the New EU Forest Strategy for 2030, and the EU's Circular Economy Action Plan (Comissão Europeia, 2016; Santos *et al*., 2015). These instruments signal the Union's ambition to consolidate itself as a global actor in environmental and climate governance, exporting regulatory standards and setting the pace of multilateral negotiations. In this sense, scholars refer to the "Brussels Effect," whereby EU internal regulations spill over to third countries and become international reference points (Bradford, 2012; Eritja, 2020).

However, the notion of sustainable development remains in a conceptual "gray zone," which hinders its normative effectiveness (Kozien & Kozien, 2018). This is due largely to a disproportionate emphasis on the economic dimension at the expense of the social and ecological pillars. As Lehtonen (2004) observes, the social dimension continues to be the weakest link in sustainability policies — a weakness reflected in EU practice. In many cases, economic objectives take precedence over social needs, pointing to a logic of weak sustainability which, as Grossmann *et al.* (2022) put it, "assumes that social, ecological, and economic capital are interchangeable (or substitutable), and the goal is maintaining the overall amount of capital."

This pattern is amplified in the forest sector. The EU has no common forest policy, and governance remains fragmented among Member States and non-binding instruments (Zeitlin & Overdevest, 2021). Despite advances such as Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) and the Regulation on Deforestation-Free Products (EUDR), the emphasis falls largely on traceability and combating deforestation, sidelining the social dimension and the particularities of the Global South (Trevizan, 2024a). Moreover, the dominant values of the Global North once again shape global concepts, raising critical questions about the legitimacy of EU forest diplomacy and the risk of reproducing historical North–South asymmetries (Aragão, 2006; Soromenho-Marques, 1998).

Accordingly, this article examines EU forest diplomacy through the lens of socioecological justice, which emphasizes the integration of social and ecological dimensions, North–South equity, and participatory parity (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Barton & Román, 2012). The working hypothesis is that EU forest diplomacy — still marked by weak sustainability — must incorporate socioecological justice criteria to strengthen its global legitimacy and contribute to a just sustainable transition.

2 Analysis of the European Union's practices and intentions vis-à-vis global environmental sustainability

The notion of sustainable development has followed a path marked by conceptual ambiguities and practical implementation challenges. Since its enshrinement in the Brundtland Report (Comissão Mundial sobre Meio Ambiente e Desenvolvimento, 1987), the term has taken on different meanings depending on the political, economic, and cultural context in which it is applied. In the EU, although the Treaties of Lisbon, Maastricht, and Amsterdam expressly incorporate sustainable development as a Union objective (Article 3 of the Treaty on European Union [TEU]), its effectiveness faces significant obstacles.

Foremost among these is the predominance of a weak-sustainability logic, characterized by the assumed substitutability of economic, social, and natural capital. Under this view, the preservation of natural resources per se is not required; rather, the exploitation of nature may be offset by gains in other sectors (Grossmann *et al.*, 2022). This inherently anthropocentric orientation tends to privilege economic growth while relegating social and ecological dimensions. As Lehtonen (2004) notes, the social dimension of sustainable development is often the most neglected, lacking solid analytical foundations and effective institutional mechanisms for its advancement.

A review of both concepts and their application in legal instruments shows that the social sphere continues to be sidelined, particularly given the primacy of the economic dimension. In EU bioeconomy policy, for example, neither the environmental nor the social dimension prevails over the economic one (Ramcilovic-Suominen & Pülzl, 2018) — a pattern that typically repeats in sustainable development more broadly.

A similar dynamic is evident in the trade of chemical products, where only the precautionary principle is effectively applied, while prevention, remediation, and the polluter-pays principle remain marginal (Krämer, 2020). This is emblematic of how the Union, even in sensitive areas, still privileges economic flexibility over socioecological justice.

The EU's ambition to position itself as a global standard-setter is explicit in the 2019 Communication, *Reflection Paper Towards a Sustainable Europe by 2030*, which states that the EU "can set the standards for the rest of the world if it takes the lead in the implementation of the SDGs and the transition to a sustainable economy (…)" (Comissão Europeia, 2019, p. 16). The result is that public policies ostensibly designed to promote sustainability may reinforce social and regional inequalities — especially when projected beyond Europe's borders and onto the Global South. Countries often adopt weak-sustainability practices to keep pace with the EU's outsized influence. Trade agreements with Latin American countries, which prioritize environmental and commercial criteria over local social particularities, illustrate this asymmetry (Figueroa, 2013; García & Arantza, 2022).

Against these limitations, socioecological justice offers a recalibrated conceptual framework. Unlike weak sustainability, it integrates social and ecological justice as inseparable dimensions of sustainable development (Barton & Román, 2012). This model emphasizes North–South equity, shared global responsibility, and the inclusion of marginalized groups — especially those directly affected by environmental and forest policies (Jähnichen, 2022).

Within a socioecological-justice approach, participatory parity becomes essential: only when local communities, traditional peoples, and small producers are effectively included in decision-making can we speak of strong sustainability (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Excluding these groups reproduces social and ecological injustices and deepens historical inequalities. Moreover, socioecological justice underscores the centrality of preserving nature as a common heritage, rejecting capital-substitution logics and recognizing that natural capital cannot simply be traded off for economic growth (Kim & Kotzé, 2021).

In short, while weak sustainability is inadequate to confront the climate crisis and global inequalities, socioecological justice provides a more robust theoretical and normative basis to guide public and diplomatic action toward a strong, inclusive, and ecocentric sustainability.

3 The European Union's forest diplomacy

The EU has consolidated itself as a leading actor in international environmental and climate governance, taking an active role in multilateral treaties such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Paris Agreement, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (Parlamento Europeu, 2023). This leadership rests on a strategy of exporting its values and interests beyond its borders — a phenomenon described as the "Brussels Effect," whereby rules crafted internally become global reference points (Bradford, 2012, 2020).

In the forest sector, however, this ambition faces structural limits. The EU lacks a common forest policy in its founding treaties, and forest management remains a national competence. As a result, existing instruments are fragmented, largely non-binding, and often steered by predominantly economic objectives (Sotirov & Arts, 2018). This gap weakens coherence between the rhetoric of strong sustainability and the practice of weak sustainability centered on the economic use of forests.

Even so, the EU has developed notable mechanisms. The 2003 FLEGT Action Plan sought to curb illegal logging through voluntary partnership agreements with exporting countries. More recently, the EU Forest Strategy for 2030 and the EUDR have been presented as regulatory milestones to promote supply-chain traceability and restrict trade in products linked to deforestation.[1] Together, these instruments signal an effort to structure a forest diplomacy — still incipient — supported by experimentalist governance mechanisms (Zeitlin & Overdevest, 2021).

These legal tools were not designed in isolation; they form part of a broader suite of environmental and climate policies, such as the European Green Deal. The centrality of the climate agenda shows that forest diplomacy is conceived not merely as a sectoral policy but as a strategic pillar of the EU's commitment to combating climate change.

Yet significant weaknesses remain. First, emphasis falls mainly on environmental and commercial aspects, relegating the social dimension to a secondary place (Haider et al., 2018). Second, EU forest diplomacy tends to

[1] All of these legal instruments were developed within the forest policy domain and align with the Union's broader mission to confront climate change and lead that agenda.

reproduce Eurocentric patterns, imposing its own sustainability metrics on third countries, often without sufficient attention to local historical, social, and cultural contexts (Aragão, 2006).[2]

Practical implementation also produces unequal distributive effects. Large firms are better positioned — technologically and financially — to meet traceability requirements, whereas small producers, particularly in the Global South, face costs that can push them out of export chains (Walker *et al.*, 2013). This imbalance supports the critique that EU forest diplomacy, rather than promoting inclusion, can deepen socioeconomic inequalities extraterritorially.

Forest diplomacy thus emerges as a contested field. On one hand, the EU presents itself as a pioneer in combating global deforestation and advancing sustainable supply chains. On the other, it faces criticism over the coherence of its discourse and practice — especially the limited integration of the social dimension and the insufficient participation of those directly affected by forest policies. As Soromenho-Marques (1998) notes, the European project is driven by the export of values and norms, but the legitimacy of such export depends on recognizing context pluralism and avoiding unilateral imposition of models.

Accordingly, EU forest diplomacy remains a work in progress — showing regulatory advances but lacking fuller incorporation of socioecological justice as a criterion for legitimacy and global equity.

4 Discussion

An analysis of the EU's forest diplomacy reveals a mismatch between rhetoric invoking strong sustainability and practice that remains anchored in a weak-sustainability logic. Although the European treaties proclaim sustainable development as a core Union objective (Article 3 TEU), application remains fragmented — often reduced to soft-law programmatic instruments and policies narrowly focused on economic growth (Kozien & Kozien, 2018).

This incongruity is evident in the forest sector. EU mechanisms — innovative in traceability and trade regulation — do not fully incorporate the social dimension. The absence of a common forest policy, combined with fragmented national competences, produces governance that emphasizes the economic use of forests and prioritizes commercial interests over socioecological values (Sotirov & Arts, 2018). The result is the reproduction of weak sustainability that fails to address historical North–South inequalities.

Compounding this is the inconsistency between the EU's strong-sustainability discourse and its own practices. While imposing stringent sustainability criteria on trading partners, the Union maintains permissive internal policies, such as ongoing fossil-fuel imports and continued agricultural subsidies under the Common Agricultural Policy. Such contradictions weaken the EU's international credibility and fuel critiques of the instrumental character of its environmental diplomacy.

Another factor is the absence of a dedicated international treaty on forests, which leaves space for actors like the EU to fill the normative void with their own standards. By adopting extraterritorial regulations, the EU seeks to consolidate leadership, but risks turning leadership into hegemony — especially if there is no genuine dialogue with countries in the Global South (Trevizan, 2024a). Forest issues span multiple biomes and complexities, and states exercise forest sovereignty through technical knowledge specific to each biome, including ancestral and practical knowledge in territories with vast tropical forests and biodiverse ecosystems—contexts distinct from those of the EU.

As Aragão (2006) notes, ecological justice requires accounting for the differentiated impacts between developed and developing countries, particularly regarding the exploitation of natural assets. Yet the Union often leverages its power to impose its own models, which can amount to a contemporary form of legal colonialism in the environmental domain (Trevizan, 2024). These imposed standards generate disparities, especially when small producers and local communities are excluded from global supply chains because they cannot meet the technological and financial demands embedded in EU regulations (Walker *et al.*, 2013).

This scenario underscores the urgency of adopting socioecological justice as a critical lens and guiding framework for forest diplomacy. Unlike weak sustainability, socioecological justice rejects substitutability between natural and economic capital, recognizing ecological preservation as a collective and irreducible good (Kim & Kotzé, 2021). By emphasizing participatory parity (Fraser & Honneth, 2003), it demands the effective inclusion of affected

[2] As noted above, an example of this disconnect from historical, social, and cultural contexts occurred in the pressure the EU exerted on Latin American countries — such as Ecuador and Colombia — during trade negotiations, when economic benefits were conditioned on the adoption of European regulatory models (García & Arantza, 2022).

communities in policy design and implementation. Excluding these actors yields unjust and unsustainable policies, perpetuates inequalities, and undermines the EU's legitimacy on the international stage (Gebara *et al.*, 2019).

EU forest diplomacy can consolidate itself as legitimate global leadership only if it advances along three fundamental axes: i) participatory parity, ensuring voice and decision-making power for local communities and Indigenous and traditional peoples; ii) North–South equity, acknowledging historical and cultural asymmetries between temperate and tropical forests and respecting the specificities of Global South countries (Trevizan, 2024b); and iii) intergenerational, ecocentric justice, safeguarding nature beyond anthropocentric and economistic logics and responding to planetary boundaries (Jähnichen, 2022).

If the current path persists, EU forest diplomacy risks solidifying into an instrument of normative hegemony, weakening genuine international cooperation and reproducing structural inequalities. Guided by socioecological justice, however, it could become an innovative model of forest governance — more inclusive, more equitable, and better equipped to address sustainability challenges systemically.

5 Conclusion

The EU's trajectory as a leading actor in international climate governance shows notable advances but also structural contradictions. In the forest sector, these contradictions are particularly visible. On one hand, the EU positions itself as a regulatory leader, setting standards for traceability and combating deforestation. On the other, it exhibits weaknesses stemming from the absence of a common forest policy, fragmented national competences, and the persistence of a weak-sustainability logic.

Moreover, EU primary law does not give full, holistic weight to the concept of sustainable development, often confining it either to the economic domain or to environmental protection. This normative gap undermines coherence between discourse and practice and helps explain why EU forest diplomacy still rests on weak sustainability.

Although innovative in some respects, EU forest diplomacy has not overcome the historical asymmetries that shape North–South relations (Trevizan *et al.*, 2025). The imposition of Eurocentric standards and the marginalization of small producers and local communities reveal limits to the legitimacy of its external action, especially when presented as a model for third countries to emulate. The longstanding primacy of the economic dimension in the EU's founding treaties echoes through its forest diplomacy: by privileging market and trade standards, the Union reproduces an economically centered sustainability that relegates the social and ecological to secondary status.

Nor can one ignore that the EU's ambition to export its regulatory models, when applied to the forest sector, creates scope for a contemporary form of legal colonization, now projected onto environmental and climate governance.

The working hypothesis is confirmed: without incorporating socioecological-justice criteria, EU forest diplomacy will remain constrained to a normative project of weak sustainability. Socioecological justice offers a more suitable theoretical framework by integrating social and ecological dimensions, ensuring participatory parity, and recognizing planetary boundaries from an ecocentric perspective.

Only by adopting this perspective can the EU consolidate itself as a legitimate global leader capable of inspiring forest policies that are truly sustainable and just. The future of its forest diplomacy will depend on translating discourse into practice—moving from a model of normative imposition to a paradigm of equitable, inclusive cooperation.

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