

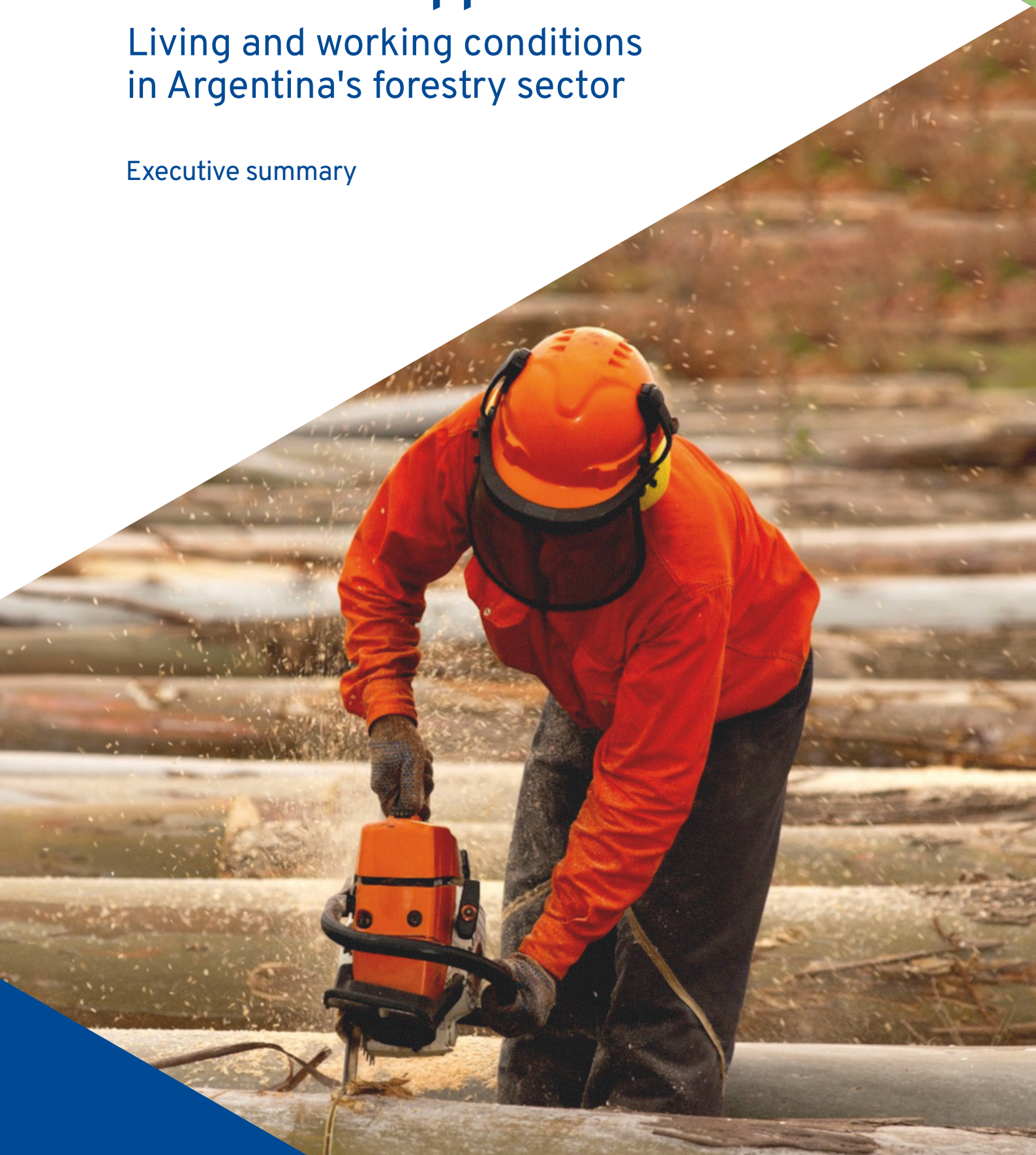


International
Labour
Organization

► **A forest of opportunities**

Living and working conditions
in Argentina's forestry sector

Executive summary





Executive summary

Background and objectives

Global estimates¹ regarding forced labour show that on any given day between 2017 and 2021, about 49.6 million people were victims of modern slavery: 27.6 million through forced labour and 22 million through forced marriage. Unfortunately, recent estimates show an increase of several million people who have been forced into labour or marriage, compared to 2016 values.

Out of the nearly 28 million people trapped in forced labour, 17.3 million—or 63% of all victims—are exploited in the private sector, in different sectors of economic activity. Although forced labour affects virtually all sectors of the private economy, high-risk sectors include services, manufacturing, construction, agriculture, fishing, and domestic work. Data show that no region in the world is free of forced labour; in the Americas alone there are 3.6 million victims. It should be noted that forced labour in the private economy has an important gender component, and that 12% of all victims of forced labour are children.

The forestry sector represents a source of employment and income for millions of people, especially in rural areas. Decent work is essential to ensure sustainable and productive forestry operations that are environmentally sound, safe for those who work in them, and beneficial to those who rely on forests for their livelihoods, food and shelter.

Despite its potential to promote economic growth and employment, the forest sector faces persistent decent work deficits, including precarious and unsafe working conditions, obstacles to freedom of association and collective bargaining rights, low productivity, low wages and lack of access to social protection, as well as a high levels of informality. Forests are hazardous workplaces, with multiple risks to the safety and health of those who work there.

The development cooperation project “Measurement, awareness-raising and policy engagement to accelerate action against child labour and forced labour” (MAP16 Project), managed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and funded by the U.S. Department of Labor, aims at building and applying the critical knowledge needed to inform policy choices to combat child labour and forced labour, and to support measures to address these challenges in key countries, regions, and sectors.

Within this framework, the Rapid Sector Appraisal (RSA) seeks to map ‘hotspots’ along the forest sector value chain where the risks of labour exploitation, human trafficking and forced labour are most pronounced. It also aims at analyzing violations of other Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (FPRW), as well as decent work gaps and deficits. To this end, this study focuses on Misiones and Corrientes, provinces with the largest area of implanted forest at the national level. The overall purpose is to contribute to a better understanding of the situation in Argentina and in both provinces, mapping and analysing local similarities and specificities in relation to the main global trends in the sector.

Human trafficking and labour exploitation in Argentina

Regarding existing data on the rescue of victims of trafficking, since the enactment of Law No. 26364 (2008) until December 31, 2022, a total of 18,497 victims of human trafficking were rescued and/or assisted. Out of them, in 2022, 60% (713) were victims of human trafficking for labour exploitation².

* Cover photograph: General Directorate of Programs, Sectoral and Special Projects (DIPROSE) Ministry of Economy.

¹ Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva, 2022

² [Yo digo no a la trata](#). Programa Nacional de Rescate y Acompañamiento a las Personas Damnificadas por el Delito de Trata, 2022 (I say no to human trafficking. National Program for the Rescue and Support of Persons Victimized by the Crime of Trafficking, 2022)

Between November 2019 and November 2022, the National Registry of Rural Workers and Employers (RENATRE) carried out 55 inspections in the forestry sector in Corrientes and Misiones. Among the activities in which victims were rescued, resin extraction stands out, present in 31 cases. The labour inspectorate found that workers live in isolation, in very precarious accommodation, with no access to drinking water and only one hour of electricity a day. There were reports of workers who had not eaten properly for six days because the employer, who sold them food, had not delivered it as agreed.

In turn, some of the complaints filed in recent years have already led to convictions. According to the statistical platform of the Prosecutor's Office for Trafficking and Exploitation of Persons (PROTEX), between 2009 and 2022, 496 convictions were recorded, of which 85.5% were convictions. Of these, 74 convictions were for trafficking for the purpose of labour exploitation, involving 129 convictions and a total of 521 victims. Concerning the activities involved, 30 correspond to agricultural or rural activities, including five in forestry.

Rapid Sector Appraisal Methodology

The RSA included a field data collection component using qualitative techniques. Sixty interviews were conducted with key informants, in particular representatives of the government, the judiciary, the private sector, workers' organisations, chambers of commerce, civil society and academia, as well as workers involved in forest production in the area.

Thirty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted with men and women workers and approximately 15 interviews were conducted with people from the forestry sector, including planted forest, native forest, resin, forest industry and transport/logistics. A further seven in-depth interviews and ten informal interviews were conducted with officials, trade union representatives and experts in the field.

In Misiones, fieldwork covered the departments of Eldorado, Montecarlo and San Pedro, particularly the towns of Eldorado, Montecarlo, Colonia Victoria, María Magdalena, Puerto Mado, Puerto Delicia, 9 de Julio, Santiago de Liniers, San Pedro, and Colonia Siete Estrellas. In Corrientes, the departments of Santo Tomé and Ituzaingó were included, covering the towns of Gobernador Virasoro, Colonia Garabí, Puerto Valle and Ituzaingó.

Information triangulation was used for the analysis. First, at the level of men and women informants, data collected during the fieldwork were contrasted and compared. Secondly, the information collected through secondary sources was compared with the information gathered during fieldwork. In both cases, triangulation allowed to corroborate the information from autonomous sources, as well as the mapping of divergent points that required further attention.

Main characteristics of the Argentine forestry sector

Productive performance

The country has a forested area of 28,573,000 hectares (FAO. 2021. Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020. Main report. Rome) and an availability of at least 3.7 million hectares of land with high forest productivity that does not compete with agriculture or native forests (Forestry-Industrial Competitiveness Roundtable 2019). The importance of this chain for society also lies in the environmental services provided by forests.

Forest plantations —located mainly in Corrientes (38.2 percent) and Misiones (34.7 percent) — cover most of the industries' demand for timber and, at the same time, take pressure off native forests.

Forest-based industrial production averaged 66% growth among all products made in the country. In 2018, the three products with the highest production were sawn wood, paper and cardboard, and pulp.

International Trade

Argentina participates in international trade in primary products, products of first industrialisation and chemical products derived from wood. Two important products have gained prominence in the export agenda in recent years: essential oils and resinoids, and gums, resins and other vegetable juices and extracts. Although their share in the trade balance is not very significant, this indicates that international demand is increasing.

Labour Market

By 2021, the forestry sector formally employed around 105,000 workers, accounting for approximately 1.7% of total national employment. At the national level, the bulk of employment is distributed in furniture (36.1%), paper (30%), wood (26.3%) and forestry (7%). In Corrientes and Misiones, participation is higher in the first stages of the value chain.

Institutional Framework

From a conservation point of view, Argentina promotes land administration and classifies native forests according to different conservation categories (Law No. 26.331 on the Minimum Budget for the Environmental Protection of Native Forests, 2007).

The Government also supports forestry activities through Law No. 25,080 on Investments for Cultivated Forests (1999), extended and amended by Law No. 26,432 (2008), with instruments such as non-refundable contributions (NRC) and tax benefits. More recently, the Law for the Promotion of the Use of Renewable Energies has also been aimed at financing companies.

The regulatory framework and the certification system have both promoted sustainable forest management with environmental, social and economic requirements. There are two international certifications in Argentina: the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification (PEFC) label, which is recognised in the country by the Argentine Forest Certification System (Certificación Forestal Argentina, CERFOAR), and the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) label. In 2019 there were 13 certified forestry companies in Argentina, totaling 752,351 hectares between the two systems (PEFC and FSC), representing 55% of the planted area (Forestry-Industrial Competitiveness Roundtable 2019).

A part of the activities carried out by business organisations is strongly oriented towards the planning of sectoral policies for vocational training in spaces of social dialogue with workers' representatives and the government. At the same time, efforts are being made to encourage the adoption of sustainable management labels (PEFC and FSC) that include decent work requirements is promoted.

Work in the forestry sector: characteristics and main deficits

In the last decade, different actors have recognised the general progress made by the sector in labour issues. Numerous testimonies —collected from both the business and government sectors, as well as from workers— show a sustained trend towards formalisation, registration and improvement in working and living conditions in forest camps. However, there are still critical points and opportunities for improvement along the value chain.

Both globally and locally, employment in the sector can be characterised as highly informal and with low job security. This is evidenced by practices such as non-registration, piece-work payments, workers paying for their own travel, food and accommodation, lack of social protection, negative health impacts, among others.

In particular, these situations are more prevalent in certain segments of resin extraction, in the exploitation of native forests and in outsourced activities in planted forests.

Some common characteristics are:

- Productions located in isolated places, difficult to access and with poor connectivity.
- Long working hours, with no scheduled rest periods.

- Difficulties in unionisation and, in some cases, union persecution.
- Unregistered employment and non-compliance with collective bargaining agreements.
- Inadequate or non-existent labour and protection elements.
- Very poor living conditions in camps and during transfers.

Trade unions have in turn developed various actions against the situations described above, participating in their mapping and in joint inspections with official bodies. These organisations are a valuable source of information for this study.

The fieldwork made it possible to map at least five problem areas related to decent work gaps and signs of labour exploitation in the sector:

- **Health and safety at work:** precarious situation, high rate of accidents and occupational diseases.
- **Labour relations and freedom of association:** several cases of non-registration and subcontracting. In some cases there were difficulties in union organising and action.
- **Transfers of workers between provinces and/or distant locations:** recruitment processes based on deceptive practices or unfulfilled agreements, as well as travel in inadequate vehicles.
- **Working and living conditions in the forest:** basic standards are not respected in the working environment, transport and camps.
- **Teenage labour:** cases of unprotected teenage labour, hidden under subcontracting or family labour arrangements.

The fieldwork carried out made it possible to map numerous situations of irregular or precarious work in the selected territory, but from a statistical point of view, it was difficult to map situations of forced labour according to the technical specifications defined by the ILO. Of the three elements to be taken into account in identifying these situations —the existence of a profit, the existence of a threat and involuntariness— the last is the most difficult to verify.

For this reason, this report examines in more detail those situations in which other elements are added to regular precariousness, such as the impossibility of leaving the workplace or the non-respect of verbal agreements on pay and remuneration. It could be argued that, in some cases observed in the native forest and resin sectors, as well as in certain outsourced links of the implanted forest, the combination of workplaces with notable inaccessibility, extreme dependence on the employer for the provision of food and supplies, and serious non-compliance with agreements on working conditions, storage and pay, could, from a statistical point of view, be indicative of situations of labour exploitation or forced labour.

Recommendations

Preventing and combating labour exploitation must be addressed through a systemic approach that links different government sectors. At the same time, these actions —based on specific territories— require multi-level coordination at national, provincial and local levels.

This approach also involves working along the value chain, taking into account the different productive activities and actors involved. The roundtables, clusters or associations that make up the forestry sector are valid working bodies for addressing different issues.

In addition, the institutionalisation of social dialogue bodies —with the participation of government, employers' and workers' organisations— is essential to reach sustainable agreements to promote decent working conditions. Among the policies and actions recommended for the sector are:

- **Policies for productive articulation:** although they are focused on productive and technical aspects, they can promote social dialogue and decent work.

- **Good forest management practices:** aimed at preventing or reducing negative environmental impact and ensuring the sustainability of forest resources; they can have a positive impact on working conditions in the sector.
- **Tools to facilitate the registration of workers** engaged in rural activities and ensure their access to protection and social security schemes, and to enable appropriate risk management by enterprises and employers.
- **Training and certification of skills:** these are effective measures to promote the development of the skills required by the productive activity and to incorporate good practices to reduce the incidence of accidents in the workplace. In both cases, they have a positive impact on productivity and yield higher incomes for workers.
- **A safe and healthy working environment:** increased training, awareness campaigns and inspections to ensure adequate personal protective equipment and work tools. These measures usually have a positive impact on productivity and accident reduction.
- **Protection of adolescent workers:** ensuring that the work of 16- and 17-year-old adolescents complies with the protection requirements set forth in the labour legislation, allowing for appropriate risk management by companies and employers.
- **Discrimination in the workplace:** promote initiatives to reduce gender segregation in the workplace and the involvement of women in forestry activities. At the same time, the involvement of indigenous communities in the sector's activities can have a positive impact on local development.
- **Working environment, transport and forest camps:** implement measures to ensure decent housing and working conditions, as well as safe transport for people working in the forest sector, with benefits for workers and productive activity.
- **Recruitment and labour mobility processes:** mapping of direct recruiters, along with workers' places of origin and destination to ensure the enforcement of labour regulations among those who move for different tasks in the sector.





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