

ProCongo Component 1 Implementation Plan

Background

Component 1 of the ProCongo Programme aims to build a pipeline of commercially viable ventures that support forest conservation, climate resilience, and sustainable livelihoods in the Congo Basin. It addresses structural capacity gaps that prevent early-stage and growth-oriented enterprises from accessing ProCongo's blended finance instruments. The programme aims to address the structural capacity inadequacies in the Congo region that are hindering ventures and SMEs aligned with CAFI's Private Sector Investment Framework from achieving commercial success.

The initiative directly contributes to CAFI's private sector investment goals by strengthening the business ecosystem around nature-based solutions and in favor of CAFI principles. It emphasizes business capacity building, including incubation and acceleration support, delivered through a sequenced model targeting four stages of venture development: ideation, incubation, pre-growth acceleration (market validation), and finance mobilization. These activities will create the conditions for the development of CAFI's "*engine of growth*", which stimulates a form of economic growth compatible with deep sustainability, the protection of nature and the empowerment of people.

Various training solutions focused on technical, business, and financial capacity will be offered to forest- and climate-conscious entrepreneurs to support their commercial development, starting with ideation and planning. This support will be tailored to maximize these companies' ability to align with and benefit from Pro-Congo's finance lines, thereby creating the conditions for a robust business pipeline that supports CAFI's overarching objectives. The intervention strategy is built around interconnected technical assistance programs, each addressing a critical stage of business development.

Scope

The program will operate across Cameroon, Gabon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the Republic of Congo, and directly supports the objectives of CAFI's private sector window. It does so by strengthening the enabling ecosystem for nature-based solutions (NbS) through phased enterprise support and targeted investment readiness interventions.

The program is structured around two sector tracks. Each was selected based on its direct relevance to CAFI's forest conservation and sustainable development goals, as well as its potential to catalyze investment-ready ventures capable of scaling environmental and social impact in the Congo Basin.

Track 1: Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry

This track focuses on ventures engaged in regenerative agriculture, agroforestry, sustainable cocoa and coffee production, and forest-compatible value chains. These sectors are crucial to CAFI's strategy because they directly influence land use, biodiversity, and forest integrity. By shifting economic incentives toward sustainable agricultural practices and forest stewardship, the program helps reduce drivers of deforestation and land degradation while creating rural jobs.

Track 2: Wood Energy Alternatives, Eco-tourism, and Other Eligible Sectors

This track targets innovations that reduce the Congo Basin's dependence on unsustainable fuelwood harvesting and unlock new income streams based on ecosystem conservation. Key sectors include improved cookstoves and alternative fuel solutions, sustainable and community-led eco-tourism, and small-scale forest product valorization. These interventions align with CAFI's climate and social equity goals, especially in peri-urban and forest frontier zones, where pressure on natural resources is most acute.

Overall Implementation Structure

Component 1 follows a rolling annual intake model across two sectoral tracks.

Each track will launch one global call per year, the first in the second semester of 2025 and the second in the second semester of 2026.

Enterprises applying to these calls will undergo a standardized maturity assessment to appraise their eligibility and suitability to join the program. Based on this assessment, they will be directed either to the pre-incubation/incubation stream or the acceleration and finance access stream.

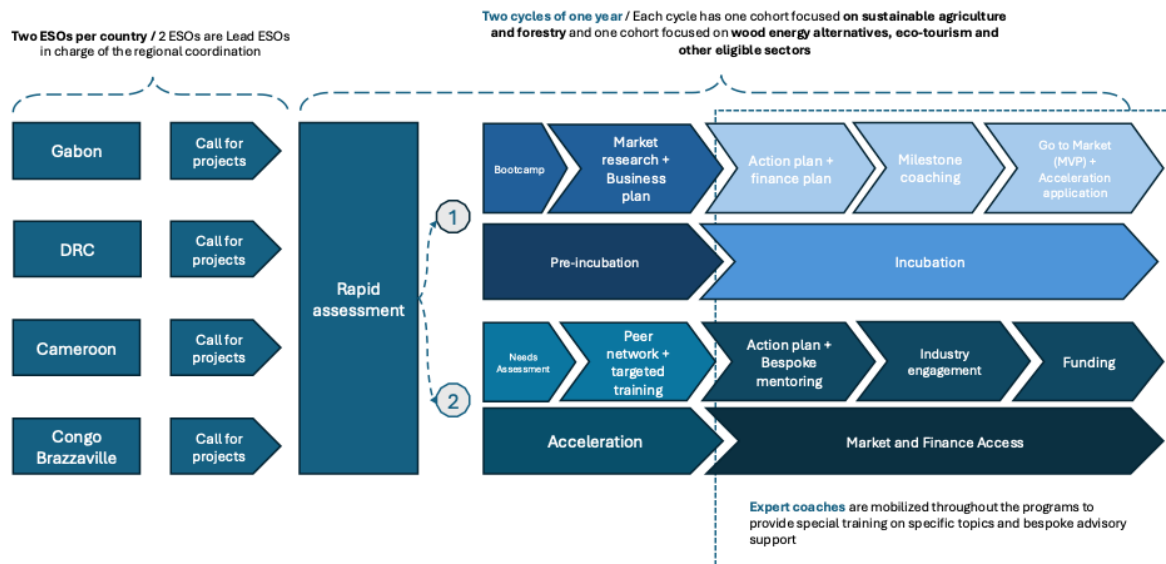
The pre-incubation/incubation stream is designed for early-stage ventures that show potential but require structured support to move from concept to operational business models. These ventures typically lack refined governance structures, market validation, or clarity on environmental and social safeguards. The stream provides tailored assistance to help entrepreneurs define their value proposition, test their product or service through pilot projects, and ensure alignment with CAFI's environmental, social, and gender safeguards.

The acceleration stream targets more advanced SMEs or ventures that have successfully completed the incubation phase and are assessed as investment-ready or near-ready. These ventures receive focused support on refining their go-to-market strategies, improving pricing and distribution approaches, strengthening their operational compliance, and packaging their investment cases. Where needed, they also benefit from expert coaching to address specific technical or financial gaps and are supported in engaging with investors under Component 2 managed by UNCDF.

National ESOs will implement activities at the country level, with each track having one ESO per country. In cases where feasible, the same ESO may oversee both tracks.

Each ESO will be responsible for scouting, intake, training delivery, coaching, expert coordination, and grant disbursement. One ESO per track will also be designated as regional lead, with additional resources to support coordination and learning.

A formal performance review will be conducted at the end of the first year to inform program adjustments and, if necessary, partner substitution



All participating ventures, across both sectoral tracks and support streams, will receive dedicated guidance and coaching on environmental and social safeguards, gender integration, and other critical sustainability considerations. This support will be provided by UNEP's Environmental and Social (E&S) project team as well as other expert organizations (e.g. UN Women), in close coordination with implementing ESOs. The aim is to ensure that each supported business aligns with CAFI's safeguard framework and contributes to broader goals of social inclusion, environmental integrity, and climate resilience.

Two regional knowledge events will be organized annually at the end of each cycle. One will focus on ventures from the incubation stream across the two sector tracks, the other on those completing acceleration. These events will gather entrepreneurs, ESOs, experts, and partners from across the region to facilitate peer learning, strengthen visibility, and create linkages to additional programs and financing mechanisms.

Incubation Program Structure

The incubation stream begins with a short, intensive **bootcamp**, designed to rapidly bring all selected ventures to a comparable level of basic knowledge and preparedness. This bootcamp also serves as a selection filter: it enables the early identification of ventures that are not yet in a position to benefit from the program's support. This helps prevent dropouts and inefficient resource use in later stages.

Ventures that pass this first gate move into a **structured incubation program**, delivered over 9 months. The core of this phase is the **implementation of a tailored action plan**, co-developed



with the support of the local ESO and technical experts. These action plans focus on achieving clear, measurable, and realistic milestones that validate the viability of the business model.

Typical milestones include:

- *completing a pilot with at least one paying customer;*
- *incorporating and formalizing the venture's legal structure*
- *formalizing basic governance structures;*
- *achieving a first round of product or service validation through user testing;*
- *demonstrating the ability to collect and report simple environmental and social performance indicators;*
- *and aligning key business activities with CAFI's safeguards (e.g. land use practices, inclusion of women/IPLCs, clean energy sources).*

Mentoring and support are highly individualized during this phase. Ventures benefit from milestone-based coaching, hands-on guidance from technical experts, and structured peer learning sessions. Each cohort concludes with a regional knowledge event, which offers a platform for exposure, feedback, and connection to partners and potential buyers.

Acceleration Program Structure

The acceleration stream targets ventures that are either graduating from the incubation phase or entering directly through a dedicated application process. These enterprises are expected to demonstrate a higher level of maturity, including early market traction, operational capacity, and partial alignment with CAFI's environmental and social safeguards. A rapid assessment process confirms their readiness before enrollment.

Once admitted, each venture works with their assigned ESO and a pool of sectoral experts to **refine their market and finance mobilization strategies**. The focus is on closing last-mile gaps that may block investment or commercial partnerships. This includes improving pricing and distribution strategies, preparing investment documentation, and ensuring compliance with legal, financial, and ESG requirements.

Acceleration support is organized around a set of concrete activities, tailored to each venture's go-to-market and financing objectives. Ventures receive individualized coaching and mentoring from experts, including professionals with direct experience in investment readiness, deal structuring, and scaling impact enterprises in frontier markets. This one-on-one guidance ensures that technical support is practical, targeted, and aligned with real-world investor expectations.

To complement the technical assistance, **catalytic grants of up to USD 5,000** will be provided to up to 30 of the 48 ventures in this stream. These funds will finance specialized services that directly improve the venture's investability or commercial readiness—such as preparing investment documentation, conducting ESIA pre-audits, pursuing carbon certification, securing legal advisory, or validating market access through product testing.

In addition to grant support, the cohort will benefit from targeted investor engagement efforts. Ventures will be actively supported in their preparation for pitches to investors' networks,



including those convened by UNCDF under Component 2, as well as relevant regional and international events. They will also receive help in identifying and applying for competitive awards, prizes, and non-dilutive funding opportunities, with tailored assistance to develop compelling submissions.

Cohort Sizing, Selection, and Grant Allocation Modality

Cohort sizing for the Incubation Stream

Each incubation cohort will comprise a **minimum of 8 and a maximum of 10 entrepreneurs** per country and per sectoral track. Final cohort size will be determined at the end of the bootcamp, which acts as a structured diagnostic and screening stage. Participants will be assessed on the basis of:

- Clarity and relevance of their business concept
- Alignment with CFI's environmental and social safeguards
- Entrepreneurial capacity and commitment
- Feasibility of execution within the program timeframe

Only ventures meeting a minimum quality threshold will proceed into the incubation stream and become eligible for grant support. In the event that more than 10 applicants successfully meet and exceed the thresholds, a scoring evaluation, conducted by the ESO and the PMU, will be used to select the 10 best projects. Participants will be informed at the beginning of the bootcamp of the list of criteria used for the evaluation, to ensure transparency and equitability in the selection.

Grant allocation Modality for the Incubation Stream

All selected participants will receive a financial subsidy to support the implementation of a concrete action plan, which will be reviewed and approved by the relevant ESO. This subsidy will encourage follow-through, strengthen business fundamentals, and support early field or market validation activities.

All selected participants in the incubation stream will receive financial support to implement a tailored business action plan, developed during the pre-incubation phase and validated by the implementing ESO.

Each participant will receive a **base grant** to support initial implementation. This will be disbursed in two tranches: the first (70%) upon validation of their action plan, and the second (30%) three months later, provided initial milestones have been met and reporting requirements are fulfilled.

In addition, approximately 25% of participants will receive a **performance bonus**. This will be awarded around the midpoint of the implementation phase (months 4–5), based on progress against the action plan, effective use of initial funds, and active engagement with coaching and learning opportunities. The criteria used for selecting the bonus recipients will be provided to the entrepreneurs at the beginning of the program, to motivate them to align their development with the project goals.

The performance bonus will reinforce commitment, will incentivize engagement and will provide critical financial support to achieve the business milestones. All grants will be managed by national ESOs under PMU oversight.

Grant envelopes will vary slightly with cohort size but remain within the program's overall allocation of **USD 150,000** for incubation support.

Disbursement Structure:

- **Universal base grant:**
 - Disbursed in two tranches:
 - **70% upfront**, upon validation of the action plan at the start of implementation
 - **30% after three months**, contingent on achievement of initial milestones and satisfactory ESO reporting
- **Performance bonus grant:**
 - Awarded to approximately **25% of cohort participants**
 - Disbursed **after four to five months** of implementation
 - Based on a combination of:
 - Documented progress against action plan
 - Quality of engagement with coaching and learning resources
 - Responsible use of initial grant funds

Grant distribution for scenario with 10 beneficiaries per cohort:

Category	# Beneficiaries	Grant per Person	Subtotal
All participants	160	\$ 750	\$ 120,000
Top 25%	40	+ \$750 bonus	\$ 30,000
Total			\$150,000

Cohort sizing for the Acceleration Stream

The acceleration stream will include ventures that either (i) successfully complete the incubation stream and demonstrate high investment-readiness or (ii) directly apply and qualify through a dedicated acceleration intake process. Selection into the acceleration stream will be based on the same triage mechanism used for the incubation streams and the same rapid assessment process. Ventures that demonstrate high level of business maturity, proof of market traction, operational readiness, and alignment with CAFI's environmental and social safeguards will be short-listed. If more than three applicants meet or exceed the eligibility threshold, the ESO and the PMU will conduct a scoring-based evaluation, potentially with input from UNCDF, to select the top three projects.

Grant allocation Modality for the Acceleration Stream

Acceleration support targets ventures with proven operational maturity and a high potential to secure finance or commercial partnerships within a short time frame. To complement technical assistance, a targeted grant mechanism will support up to **30 of the 48 acceleration-stage**

ventures, providing them with catalytic funding to address final-stage investment or market access barriers.

Each selected venture will receive up to **USD 5,000** to finance specialized services and activities that directly enhance their investability or commercial readiness. Eligible uses include:

- *Carbon footprint assessments or certification pre-audits*
- *Environmental and Social Impact Assessments (ESIA)*
- *Preparation of investment documentation, including financial models and investment memos*
- *Legal advisory for structuring deals or incorporating entities*
- *Market access services such as product testing or certification*
- *Support for alignment with CAFI safeguards and due diligence processes*

Grants will be awarded at the end of the acceleration phase, just before the market and finance access track begins. They will be contingent on the submission and approval of a market and/or finance mobilization plan by the venture. This plan must clearly outline the proposed activities, their alignment with eligible uses, and their intended impact on the venture's ability to secure financing or partnerships.

Disbursement will be split into two tranches: **80% upon approval of the plan**, and **20% upon submission of the final deliverable or output**.

All grants will be administered by the national ESOs, under the oversight of the PMU.

Operational Organization

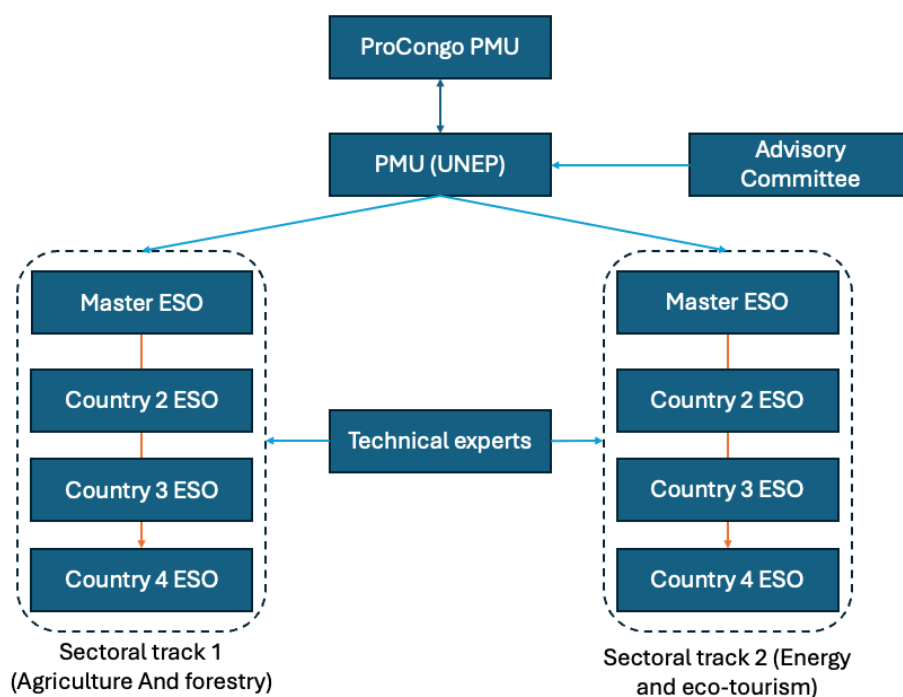
Project Management and Coordination: A Program Management Unit (PMU), hosted internally at UNEP CFU, will provide overall program governance for Component 1, as well as project coordination and alignment with the ProCongo's PMU. Component 1 will be led by a dedicated project manager.

Advisory Committee: Strategic oversight will be drawn from a dedicated advisory committee made of expert profiles from the business development community, academia and experts with extensive knowledge of the CAFI priority sectors.

National Delivery Partners (ESOs): Each sectoral program will be delivered in collaboration with one selected Enterprise Support Organization (ESO) per country. The aim is to retain the same ESOs throughout the full implementation of both sector tracks, given the relatively shallow ESO ecosystem in the Congo Basin, hence prioritizing depth of partnership and institutional learning over turnover. These ESOs will be responsible for implementing the pre-incubation, incubation, and acceleration activities directly at the national level. In cases where an ESO demonstrates strong expertise across multiple sectors, it may be invited to implement both sectoral programs within its country. To ensure strategic coherence and regional alignment, one ESO among the four will be designated as the regional coordinator for each sectoral program cycle. ESOs will be competitively selected based on their proven capacity to deliver all three stages of technical assistance, their ability to engage relevant technical experts, and their capacity to manage and distribute grants to supported entrepreneurs.

Sectoral and Thematic Experts: Throughout the incubation and acceleration programs, a cadre of technical experts will be engaged to provide targeted technical lectures, webinars, and coaching. These experts will not only contribute to knowledge transfer during the training phases but will also support and coach selected ventures in the critical final stages of market and finance access, including linkages to UNCDF's financing instruments. Experts will be jointly appraised and selected by the PMU and the implementing ESOs, with contracts managed and administered by the respective ESOs.

Integration with the Joint Program PMU and Steering Committee: Component 1 will operate under the umbrella of the ProCongo Joint Programme. The Component 1 project manager will participate in all joint PMU coordination meetings and contribute to bi-annual progress reports prepared for the donor and the Steering Committee. Furthermore, Component 1 PMU will draw on the lessons from the incubation and acceleration programs to inform the non-bidding review of the investment originated by UNCDF. Similarly, UNCDF will provide a non-bidding technical



Timeline

The first phase of Component 1 of the ProCongo programme will be delivered over a two-year implementation period, from October 2025 to December 2027, with preparatory activities starting in June 2025. The deployment model is organized around two sectoral tracks—Track 1 for Sustainable Agriculture and Forestry, and Track 2 for Wood Energy Alternatives, Eco-tourism, and other eligible sectors. Each track will run two annual cycles, resulting in four total cohorts across the program duration.



Key Milestones

- **June 2025** – Project Launch and ESO contracting
- **October 2025** – Opening of the first global call for applications (Tracks 1 & 2)
- **November 2025 – October 2026** – First cohort implementation begins for incubation and acceleration
- **November 2026** – Regional Knowledge Event #1 and first cohort evaluation
- **October 2026** – Launch of the second global call for applications (Tracks 1 & 2)
- **January 2027 – December 2027** – Second cohort implementation (incubation and acceleration)
- **January 2028** – Regional Knowledge Event #2 and second cohort evaluation
- **March – June 2028** – Final programme evaluation and stocktaking exercise