

Strengthening the capacity of non-state actors to improve FLEGT-VPA and REDD+ processes in Western Africa

Most Significant Change Stories



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From darkroom to limelight: advocacy and awareness changed Liberia's forest governance



Forest fringe communities in Ghana receive their rightful benefits



From informal to formal: small forest enterprises in Côte d'Ivoire organize to influence policy



Civil society organizations are collaborating to safeguard forest reserves in Ghana

Both *Forest law enforcement, governance and trade (FLEGT)* and *Reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+)* are international initiatives to control illegal logging, and conserve forests for their contribution to mitigating climate change, respectively.

The European Union (EU) is the leading proponent of FLEGT, and has sought to sign *Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs)* with a number of timber-producing developing countries. These are trade, development and environment agreements that provide a key innovation for achieving FLEGT objectives.

FLEGT, VPAs and REDD+ all recognise that involving local people through is a critical tool for sustainable and accountable forest resource management. To this end, between 2017 and 2020, the EU funded a project in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Liberia to *Strengthening the capacity of non-state actors to improve FLEGT-VPA and REDD+ processes in Western Africa* (the EU NSA project).

The project was coordinated by [Tropenbos International](#) and delivered through national Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in each country:

- In **Liberia**: Volunteers to Support Efforts in Developing Africa (VOSIEDA). Liberia [ratified](#) its VPA with the EU in 2013 but it is yet to be implemented.
- In **Ghana**: Tropenbos Ghana in collaboration with Nature and Development Foundation (NDF). Ghana [signed](#) a VPA with the EU in 2009 but it is yet to be fully implemented.
- In **Côte d'Ivoire**: Groupe national de travail de Côte d'Ivoire sur la gestion durable des forêts et la certification forestière (GNT-CI; the national working group of Côte d'Ivoire on sustainable forest management and forest certification). Côte d'Ivoire [commenced VPA negotiations](#) with the EU in 2013.

The EU NSA project has worked hard over the last four years to improve an inclusive approach to forest management, and these four stories highlight some of the successes in each country.



Story of Change

From darkroom to limelight: advocacy and awareness change Liberia's forest governance

Abraham Billy, Paul Kanneh, D. Kaihenneh Sengbeh and David Young

The formation of the Liberia Forest Media Watch (LFMW) group of investigative journalists, and the creation of an hour-long radio programme, "Forest Hour", in 2019, has enabled forest communities and civil society organizations (CSOs), to express grievances, advocate for benefits, and call for transparency in forest contracts and management. The regular, weekly programme, coordinated with in-depth newspaper stories by LFMW journalists, has shone a light onto the hidden issues in the forest sector and made it impossible for the authorities to ignore major issues in the sector as people are now talking, and rights can no longer be so easily compromised or ignored.

Since the Forest Hour was launched in April 2019, it hosted about 84 shows. The show has covered illegal logging, benefit sharing, the process to obtain Authorised Forest Community status, labour conditions, and environmental hazards. It has brought local and national forest stakeholders, journalists, CSO actors, and forest experts together to discuss and debate trending forest issues. In particular, it has looked at governance issues both within forest communities themselves and within the state institutions. The show has exposed forest illegalities including non-compliance with the forest laws, failure to uphold company-community agreements, policy failures and weak administration by both local and national forest leaders.

Where the programme has shone a spotlight, supported by associated stories in the print media, issues have played out in the communities, and often the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) has been on the back foot whilst forest communities and their leaders take decisions as enshrined by laws. As a result, key issues from the show have been discussed at internal FDA meetings. For example, in Sewacajua forest, the Community Forest Management Body was [replaced](#) for misrepresentation and mismanagement; in Gba forest two leaders were [arrested](#) for



misappropriation of US\$200,000; and the FDA are said to have suspended some staff in Sinoe County for taking ill-informed decisions.

Context: what did we set out to do?

The history of Liberian forestry and forest resource management is replete with conflicts, disenchantments, corruption and international sanctions. Bribery, collusion, environmental abuse and illegal logging are other grave attributes of the sector that have left devastating effects on a country where almost everyone is dependent on forest resources for food, fuel, building materials, medicines – all the basics in life. The civil conflict between 1989 and 2003 claimed an estimated 250,000 lives according to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, prolonged due to the timber trade being used to pay for weapons, but that was ultimately stopped by UN trade sanctions. As reported in 2016 by [Mongabay](#), “historically, the business of logging in Liberia has been tightly controlled by the central government. Contracts were handed out to companies in which few – if any – benefits were likely to trickle down to the communities that lived in the area”.

The post-conflict restart of the sector included a new legislative framework that, for the first time, gives communities a say in the management of their forests and a right to benefit from them. A 2017 Global Witness [report](#), however, demonstrated how all of Liberia’s large logging contracts are illegal on multiple counts. A more recent and authoritative review commissioned by the World Bank and Norway came to the same conclusion, and, according to LFMW [coverage of the report](#), stated that “holders of forest contracts are rarely held accountable for contravention of contractual and legal obligations. This is largely due to systemic lapses from regulatory bodies in discharging their monitoring and enforcement responsibilities”.

Over the last decade there has been a shift from concessions to community forestry. Nowadays, much more timber is coming from supposedly community-managed forests than the large concession areas, but as [reported](#) in 2018 “this community forestry permitting system is being hijacked by rapacious logging companies and a complicit Forestry Development Authority”. The concern that illegal acts continue to be perpetrated by top officials of government persist, with local communities having inconsequential inputs into what is happening to their forest resources. The decisions to award logging contracts to ‘investors’ are made in what many in Liberia describe as ‘dark rooms’ or ‘zoe bushes’. The only inputs by local people are when they are uprooted from their settlements to give way for a concessionaire to carry out his investment in extracting the natural resources and leaving the areas depleted.

The EU NSA project was the latest of many initiatives in Liberia to support more inclusive and deliberative multi-stakeholder decision-making. Project partners recognised from the outset that forest communities have had limited voices, and sought to change this through a number of parallel actions. At the start, it was recognized that people would not be able to advocate or talk about issues that they have limited or no idea of. Forest communities, in whose name a benefit-sharing agreement with a logging company had been signed, for example, could not demand these benefits if they had not been given details of agreements or did not fully understand them. In other instances, a lack of understanding about community-level governance structures for forest management led to conflict between different factions within a community, or with local political or business vested interests. So a programme of awareness raising about the ‘rules’ – the legislative and similar frameworks and guidance – was designed.

Linking forest community members to national media, including radio and print journalism, was the second component in the project. Giving people a voice in national and local media empowers them in taking control over their own forests. This would allow a direct sharing of experiences and perspectives between communities across the country, leading to joint learning and a better understanding of rights and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the forest sector. And, doing this in the public domain of broadcasting would enhance transparency and invite responsible government agencies to take note and act accordingly.

It was hoped that these two components would be mutually reinforcing. For example, nurturing the committees who represent communities, in an understanding of their role and of their accountability to the wider community, should give them the confidence to



Forest Hour host making in studio.
Photo by: Dioda Wreh, LFMW

speak out. At the same time, supporting the media to empower citizens to lead advocacy and raise red flags on non-compliance and rights issues would lead to a deeper understanding of rights and responsibilities.

The project set out to work with a range of partner and beneficiary groups. In the main, the partners were national-level CSOs, including the Civil Society-led Independent Forest Monitoring (CS-IFM) team, and the National Union of Community Forestry Development Committees (NUCFDC) and National Union of Community Forest Management Bodies (NUCFMB), both of which are umbrella groups that represent community interests in local forest management (CFDCs for forest concessions, and CFMBs for community forestry, respectively), and independent journalists.

The ultimate project beneficiaries were forest community members. Four CFDC and five CFMBs were identified to concentrate support on, alongside three women's groups and two youth groups – to encourage wider community engagement than only through these forest community committees. Alongside both these groups, training was planned for media practitioners to accurately monitor and report on forest related issues.

Other stakeholders identified at the outset were local and national county officials, state institutions such as the FDA, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Liberia Revenue Authority, and the Liberia Timber Association representing the logging industry. Each had a potentially pivotal role but within each institution it was expected there would be a mix of allies, opponents and waverers. In particular, those who had been conducting commercial operations in forests as personal or 'secret' projects, to the detriment of the people and country, were considered opponents. It was expected that these included some officials in the FDA, lawmakers and other top government officials, who would want to resist change as it would cost them the income and manipulation they were accustomed to. Similarly, companies with illegal operations or those failing to comply with their obligations to local communities would also make the list of opponents. Given the history of the sector, project personnel knew that they would be confronting some entrenched and powerful forces, and also that many years of similar initiatives had had limited impact in the face of this.

The experience of implementation

In the early stages of the project, about 60 community members, 18 media practitioners and 10 civil society actors, including representatives of women's and youth groups, received training in independent forest monitoring, advocacy and engagement. But it was the training for media practitioners in June 2019 that was a

turning point, when participants agreed at the end of the workshop to form a WhatsApp group in order to stay in touch. From this, the idea of a formal group of investigative journalists, Liberia Forest Media Watch, came about.

LFMW makes an important contribution to information dissemination and advocacy in the country's forest sector. Bringing together some 15 media practitioners who focus their attention on probing and reporting, the group has highlighted issues of conflicts and investigated reports of corruption that have provoked the government and stakeholder actions towards improved forest management. LFMW reports that it had over 20 stories published in different print and web-based media in 2020.

In contrast to many CSOs who are driven by a clear agenda, journalists pride themselves on seeking both sides of any story, and this reputation can make it easier for them to access officials. A good example of this, from soon after the formation of LFMW, is *Strengthening community forestry: what challenges FDA?*, published in [September 2019](#). This quotes the FDA head of community forestry, saying that she "dispelled rumours of bribery at the Authority noting she envisions an independent community forestry sector where logging companies will avoid dishing out money among local dwellers; something which causes confusion leading to chaos". The article goes on to give an authoritative summary of the three tiers of forest community governance: the community assembly, the executive committee, and the community forest management body.

A recent story published by LFMW relates the [allegation](#) in July 2020 that two representatives from these groups in Nimba County took over US\$200,000 from the community forestry pot for themselves. The money was intended for social infrastructure projects in 22 communities, demonstrating just how much money a forest community could potentially be able to invest.

Shortly before the journalism training, in April 2019, the project invested in a one-hour slot on one of the country's best-known radio stations, [OK FM](#). The weekly Forest Hour was set up as primarily a phone-in programme, but with a different key speaker – often community members themselves – interviewed in each episode. The show has also included CSO representatives with good knowledge of the sector, particularly in its early days. In April 2020, it also [featured](#) the FDA Deputy Managing Director for Operations.

Cursory monitoring of Facebook followers suggests the programme has the potential to reach up to 500,000 listeners, and reaches all corners of the country and beyond through the internet. More locally, it is regularly



Community forest monitors discuss the implementation of a Community Forest Management Agreement.
Photo by: Moses R. Quollin, LFMW

related to community radio stations in Liberia's rural areas, enabling local people to listen in the localities being discussed.

Among dozens of topics, Forest Hour has discussed illegal logging, poor labour practices compliance with legislation, forest management contracts, non-compliance by logging companies, environmental pollution, community forest management agreements, reviews of forest laws and regulations, corruption and revenue collection, more often than not putting pressure on government agencies to take action. An estimated 84 episodes have been held, highlighting many national forest issues, and indeed, the Nimba scandal mentioned above was also aired on [9 July 2020](#).

In this way, Forest Hour is contributing to information dissemination and awareness on the country's forest laws and policies. It is shedding light on forest concessions like never before, while at the same time serving as a platform for the exchange of ideas about effectively managing the country's forest and resources. These demands for accountability and transparency are particular to the sector and among forest communities. Bonathan G. Walaka, a facilitator of the National Union of Community Forest Management Bodies testifies that many people have learnt a lot from listening to Forest Hour: "The hidden facts surrounding forest contracts and how the people should benefit are now uncovered. It is an eye-opener. Now we are able to monitor forest operations, point out wrongs and advocate for change. This advocacy has even helped to reverse decisions and put to checks on government officials' reported meddling in leadership of forest communities".

In Sewacajua in Sinoe County, for example, according to research by the project, the community forest management body started receiving more than US\$ 100,000 for their land rental and cubic metre fees.

However, ordinary community members never saw this money, and in April 2019 there was a 12-count resolution including "allegation[s] of misrepresentation and mismanagement of entrusted funds" by the five-person management body. The following month, Sewacajua Community was [successful](#) in changing the entire community forest management body, and the new leadership is said to be doing well.

Forest Hour is often used to put matters like these on the table. Sam Kwennah, working for the Liberian NGO Save My Future and a member of the management team in the NGO Coalition of Liberia, commented for this story: "Issues are discussed there openly. People call from across the country and ask questions that are answered. This is putting pressure on government, concession companies and others stakeholders to play by the rule".

Over time, the Forest Hour and LFMW initiatives have worked increasingly closely together. Although the radio presenter from Forest Hour at the time attended the journalism training, they were conceived as separate innovations. However, in early 2020, LFMW took over from VOSIEDA as the coordinator of Forest Hour and this has increased the synergies between the two. Forest Hour – by tapping into a network of investigative journalists – benefits from a greater knowledge of forest issues, and the stories the members of LFMW are uncovering enjoy wider dissemination. More recently, LFMW has joined a group of CSOs leading on forest monitoring, engagement and advocacy, furthering its ability to raise the profile of critical issues affecting people and forests.

What makes these demands unique is that they are not brewing instability like violent protests that often lead to loss of lives and properties. This means that violence is the last option in calling stakeholders' attention to compliance from companies. These dialogues and radio

discussions on Forest Hour have, in contrast, promoted the peaceful settlement of disagreements and forest related conflicts, as it has helped improved awareness and education on complicated matters, said Mr. Kwannah. These two initiatives have also contributed to a greater sense of ownership by forest communities to take charge of the management of their forest resources, such as demanding compliance with social obligations, evoking stop orders on non-compliant logging companies, and changing their community forest management bodies.

Too often in the past, reporting on forest governance matters was done only when international organizations released reports, or when the UN renewed sanctions on Liberian timber. Today, local and national media practitioners are reporting on these issues because they have been trained to do so, and motivated by the popular interest in their stories.

The closer interaction between journalists – radio and print – and NGOs, has highlighted the importance of their different but complementary approaches. Whereas journalists work to tighter deadlines and briefer more accessible stories, NGO investigations are more thorough and deliberate. At the same time, journalists have the duty to report a story from different, perhaps opposing perspectives. They often have a greater degree of access to different protagonists, whereas NGOs can find it more difficult to obtain the views from some detractors. NGOs are also committed to supporting capacity building and seeking solutions, perhaps limiting their engagement to only a few communities in order to do so, whereas journalists generally have short-term engagements of this nature.

Sustainability

The sustainability of these changes depends on three things: the long term impact of the achievements to date (i.e. if no further progress was made); the sustainability of the associations formed; and the irreversibility of the any improvements. These are discussed in turn. By creating awareness, explaining rights, and providing education on major issues, this work has led to communities knowing better that the forest is theirs, and that they have a bigger stake in its management. Of course, not every problem has been solved, but these media initiatives have pointed to the challenges the sector faces, for example the issue of politically connected community forest management body members living in Monrovia and not really representing community interests. Lasting benefits include that communities now see the need to keep their community forest management body accountable, that people in Monrovia know more about problems in their communities, and that stakeholders see value in working together.

Forest Hour is hosted by an independent radio station which will always have to consider the popularity of its programmes when deciding what to air. Those running the show have seen the potential contribution it can make to people's lives and livelihoods, and this provides an impetus to maintain it. The journalists in LFMW have similarly seen that their stories are appreciated and acted on. However, the group is relatively new, has low organisational capacity, and is not yet fully registered as an NGO. It will also need to increase the number of active members if it is to be sustainable. At present, both initiatives rely on the continuity of funding, but their popularity should make attracting financial support easier. They also need to monitor and document their activities and impacts better, in order to make applications for continued funding more convincing.

When elite groups operate in secret, it is difficult to demand information from them, and other groups may not be aware of their right to this information. As a consequence, bad decisions, in the interests of a minority that exploit the majority, will continue to be made. To prevent this, community rights to information, decision-making power and equitable benefits from their forests, need to be actively sustained. A lowering of the ability of Liberian NGOs to remain effective and therefore to attract funds, and donor fatigue in supporting actions that do not show results, is the biggest threat to avoiding a reversal to the previous era of natural resource exploitation in the country.

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Photo cover: Discussions with a local community following a National Forest Forum. Photo by: Moses R. Quollin, LFMW





Story of Change

Forest fringe communities in Ghana receive their rightful benefits

Abena Woode, David Young, Mustapha Seidu, Mercy Owusu-Ansah, Doreen Asumah Yeboah, and Daniel Kofi Abu

Ghana's forest reserves provide invaluable ecosystem services to the communities around them, and also contribute significantly to the economy of Ghana. However, over the years, due to illegal logging, farming activities, mining in forest reserves and urbanization, these forests are rapidly deteriorating. All this is happening on the doorstep of forest fringe communities. So, involving local people through participatory forest resource management is a critical tool for sustainable and accountable forest resource management.

Since the inception of the EU NSA project in 2017, Tropenbos Ghana and NDF have trained over 500 people in four forest districts, in three of the high forest and transition-zone regions in Ghana, to act as watchdogs over their forests. Community forest monitors are dynamic groups comprised of chiefs, local assembly members, community based organizations (CBOs), opinion leaders and other community members, trained in thematic forest monitoring areas such as advocacy and policy influence, conflict resolution mechanisms, and reporting and addressing forest illegalities. To avoid duplicity, the project built on existing systems such as the [ForestLink](#) system to gather data on infractions from the community level, and to aggregate this information to inform their advocacy and stakeholder engagement.

The [ForestLink](#) system is a forest monitoring tool developed by Rainforest Foundation UK to send and receive 'alerts' – evidence of several threats to a forest, including illegal logging, illegal mining, bushfires, and non-compliance with [Social Responsibility Agreements](#). ForestLink employs a three-tier system of forest monitoring whereby community forest monitors, the first tier of the system, are trained to identify and report on these infractions and raise alerts. These



alerts are then pre-verified by intermediary CBOs, the second tier of the system, to ascertain the accuracy of the information received. The third tier consists of CSOs and the Forestry Commission on investigative missions to fully verify the alerts. About a third of these Community forest monitors have been equipped with smartphones that contain a real-time monitoring tool application to raise alerts and automatically transmit these to the ForestLink web-based database. The alerts the phone app generates and transmits to the online database are then followed up by the second and third tier, ultimately for proper actions to be taken by the Forestry Commission.

Towards the end of 2019, a total of 450 alerts had been received from community monitors, reporting on bushfires, illegal farming, illegal logging, illegal mining, timber transportation in breach of regulations, and large scale land acquisition for use other than forests, among others. Over 65% of these had been verified by CBO project partners, and many were subsequently investigated by teams from the Forestry Commission, CSO and intermediary CBOs.

To ensure accurate understanding of forest infractions and enhance knowledge on forest fringe community rights, Tropenbos Ghana and NDF have been educating community members, intermediary CBOs, small and medium forest enterprises and traditional leaders. The two CSOs have built the capacity of these stakeholders to understand their rights to an equitable share of benefits derived from commercial logging in Ghana's forests. This has been achieved through two mechanisms, social responsibility agreements, and the redistribution of royalties derived from a 'stumpage' fee paid for each cubic metre of timber cut. They have also equipped them with the skills to engage in the negotiation process of their social responsibility agreements and to better understand the laws governing the obligations under these agreements. These include the payment of an agreed amount, construction of community infrastructure, monitoring and evaluation of these projects, and respect for the rights and responsibilities of both the community and the logging company.

Tropenbos Ghana and NDF have trained over 50 communities to form local social responsibility agreement committees to engage logging companies operating in their areas on behalf of the communities. These committees have adopted a system to implement development projects on a rotational basis, including the renovation and construction of school buildings in Asempanaye, Sayerano, Nsinsem, and Aboagyekrom. Through the revenues generated from social responsibility agreement payments, one of the project communities, Sefwi Bedii, is utilizing social responsibility agreement funds

in the construction of a clinic to serve its inhabitants and neighbouring villages. The committee is also working in collaboration with John Bitar Company Limited, the logging company in the nearby Suhuma Forest Reserve.

The Tropenbos Ghana and NDF team have built the capacity of the local social responsibility agreement committees, including who can sign, the understanding of the differences between royalties and social responsibility agreement payments, when logging companies have to honour their social responsibility agreement commitments, and negotiations with beneficiary communities for more than the legal minimum of 5% of stumpage value. Of the 50 involved, 32 are currently receiving social responsibility agreement payments, of which 15 are first time recipients. Of these, 18 communities are also expected to start benefiting from social responsibility agreement payments in the next six months.

For an all-inclusive forest resource management system, community forest monitors have also been educated on the replanting of trees logged, tree tenure systems, the importance of the use of only legal timber, and the REDD+ benefit-sharing framework. NDF and Tropenbos Ghana have created many dialogue forums between communities and different sized timber processing companies in the area, the Forestry Commission, and the District Assemblies. The two CSOs have organized a series of town hall meetings, and exchange visits for key communities and other stakeholders to engage in sustainable forest management practices, efficient utilization of social responsibility agreement revenues, and community development.

The public forums organized by project partners have led to the settlement of disputes among forest fringe communities, logging companies, the Forestry Commission and District Assembly officials on the sharing of social responsibility agreement payments and royalties between communities and chiefs. One such dispute was between Adwumam, Old Adiembra and Aboagyekrom. It was revealed that irregularities existed in deciding the rightful community beneficiaries of the social responsibility agreement and the total amount of monies to be paid, resolved through a series of meetings facilitated by NDF and Tropenbos Ghana to foster dialogue between the aggrieved communities, District Forest Managers, logging companies and traditional authorities.

In an interview, Abena Woode, the capacity building expert of the project stated: "the engagement platforms created by the project among the various stakeholder groups ensure that state actors are more accountable regarding forest revenue usage, with improved benefit flow to communities, while communities have their



A community meeting in Sefwi Bedii. Photo by: NDF

capacities effectively built to advocate and receive information about how revenue is generated from the forest and utilized". Vincent Appiah, the Assistant Forest District Manager of Sefwi Wiawso, speaking during one such engagement, [stated](#) that the district received US\$74,500 in forest revenues, while the traditional council also received US\$25,000 as royalties in the first quarter of 2019. Also, "the Forestry Commission is paying social responsibility agreement monies to the communities. We are upholding good financial management practices to ensure there is an equitable distribution of funds from forest proceeds", he observed.

Nana Kwasi Bennie II, chief of Adwuman, stated that the project has helped community members and traditional leaders to gain immense knowledge and understanding regarding social responsibility agreements, and has helped them to establish local social responsibility agreement committees to utilize the revenues for development projects. He added that the project has helped communities build a more cordial relationship with state actors such as the Forestry Commission and the local District Assembly.

Clement Wulnye, the Certification Manager of John Bitar Company Limited, the major logging company in the district, indicated that the project has impacted positively on the relationship between them and forest fringe communities. He added that, through education and public forums, community members now have a better understanding of the role of the companies and social responsibility agreements. He further intimated that having project CSOs acting as an impartial and intermediary third party led to increased transparency, trust and cooperation between the two groups.

By participating in discussions about their right to receive social responsibility agreement commitments and royalties, forest fringe communities have also been able to gain an understanding of the invaluable ecosystem services that forests provide, and this has led to them committing to managing their forests more sustainably. Partner CSOs plan to continue to further engage these communities on various thematic areas such as the [Cocoa and Forestry Initiative](#), and it is hoped that this will continue to sustain the interest of forest-dependent people.

Speaking at an meeting in May 2019, Mr Appiah pledged the commitment of the Forestry Commission in upholding good financial management practices to ensure that there is more equitable distribution of funds from logging proceeds. This, he emphasized, will encourage community members to adopt good environmental practices to help sustain the forest and natural resources. According to Daniel Kofi Abu, the National Programme Coordinator for the EU NSA project in Ghana, such meetings have helped citizens to better understand how public funds are disbursed. He further added that the confidence of community members to safeguard remaining forests in the country has improved.

Participatory resource management depends on ongoing dialogue to jointly confront new challenges as they arise, but progress may stall if civil society, community members and other stakeholders are not able to continue working together. To ensure that gains made are not lost, some communities have come up with innovative means to sustain their forest monitoring systems put in place through the project. For example, in Nsinsiesem in Juaboso Forest District, the local social

responsibility agreement committee and chiefs have agreed to reserve 10% of every social responsibility agreement payment to support the work of community forest monitors.

Through EU NSA project initiatives such as the formation of local social responsibility agreement committees, equipping community members with devices to monitor and report infractions, and the creation of dialogue platforms among key stakeholders, communities now

better understand their rights and responsibilities regarding the forest reserves. “We understand the forest is ours, and can provide us with revenues to embark on developmental projects. Therefore we have resolved to secure it for posterity”, stated Afoka Rawlings, a community monitor from Bosomoiso. However, the improved benefit sharing and the awareness of legality and sustainability imperatives this work has strengthened, is yet to reach all forest fringe communities in Ghana.

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Photo cover: A community monitor using the Forestlink phone app. Photo by: NDF





Story of Change

From informal to formal: small forest enterprises in Côte d'Ivoire organize to influence policy

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Since 2019, small forest enterprises in Côte d'Ivoire have formed six industry associations, to have greater influence over sector reform processes. These include two associations of charcoal makers, two of carpenters, an association of wood resellers, and a woodworker's federation. The leadership of each of these have benefited from deepening their understanding of two key sets of forest reforms, and say that they are now ready to use only legal forest products in their trades, and to play their part in improving forest governance.

Two associations have been established in Abengourou, in the east of Côte d'Ivoire. Bienvenue Kouadio, the head of the *Bo Waka* association (bush wood in the local language), whose members make charcoal from waste wood from industrial wood processing factories in Abengourou, [noted](#) at an event in July 2020 that previously dispersed and isolated traders, could, once organised, obtain a production operating permit "which allows our charcoal to be marketed anywhere in Côte d'Ivoire without too much hassle".

Similarly, Diarrassouba Yacouba, president of Abengourou carpenters group (*le groupement des menuisiers d'Abengourou*) [explained](#) at the same event that once they could "regroup and organize ourselves better, we have approval and now the authorities listen to us as a group".

In San-Pédro, in the southwest of the country, two groups have formed, and a third – a group of wood resellers (known as *L'organisation départementale des activités du bois de San Pedro*) – has updated its founding text so as to take into account good governance issues. The two new groups are the association of San-Pédro charcoal



producers and traders (*L'association des productrices et commerçant de charbon de San-Pédro*), and the San-Pédro carpenters association (*L'association des menuisiers de San-Pédro*). Media coverage of their work [commented](#), in July 2020, “the establishment of these inter-professional associations within a legal framework, constitutes a strategy to put an end to the systematic looting of the forest by fraudulent contract sawing operations. The objective being the preservation of the forest and the fight against climate change, these associations should contribute to the good traceability of wood sold on the local market by purchasing wood of legal origin”.

The sixth association is the Côte d'Ivoire woodworking federation (*la fédération des métiers de bois de Côte d'Ivoire*), [created](#) in August 2019. Its president, Siméon N'dri, observed “the formalization of associations of very small, small and medium-sized enterprises has meant that their voices are now heard by the forestry administration, decision-makers and technical and financial partners in forest reforms”.

Context: what did we set out to do?

According to a [study](#) conducted by the FAO in 2017, the total forest area in the country decreased from 7.8 million hectares in 1986, to 5 million in 2000, and 3.4 million in 2015. This represents an annual rate of forest decline of 3% between 1986 and 2000, and 2.7% between 2000 and 2015. And, whereas in 1986, 24% of Côte d'Ivoire was covered in forest, by 2015 forest cover was only 11%. Reacting to this dramatic decline, in May 2018, the government adopted a new [policy](#) for the preservation, rehabilitation and protection of its forests (*Politique de préservation, de réhabilitation et de protection de la forêt*), which aims to increase forest cover to 20% by 2030. The forest resource has diminished to the extent that the export of timber to the EU and other international markets is at the detriment of timber available in the domestic market, pushing local suppliers to source illegal timber. A clear contributor to low compliance with forest sector laws is that small businesses operating in the domestic market depend on informal timber sawyers and traders, which is an illegal activity, or buy left-over 'legal' timber from industrial sawmills.

GNT-CI's approach responded to the fact that some forest sector stakeholders – in particular those commonly accused of driving the kinds of illegality described above that focus on the domestic market – did not seem to be participating in the national policy process, yet they were destined to be directly affected by the outcomes. Despite the government and donors seeking an inclusive approach, discussions tended to include

national civil society organizations, logging companies, the government and donors, but not smaller and less formal operators.

Therefore, GNT-CI set out to train, inform and sensitize small, very small and medium-sized forest enterprises on forest law, sustainable forest management, climate change and international initiatives such as FLEGT and REDD+. They aimed energize the leaders of these sub-sectors so that they could participate effectively in the discussions and negotiations. Project activities were concentrated on centres of forest activity in San-Pedro in the southwest, and Abengourou in the east of the country. Both regions have a thriving forestry sector with many small entrepreneurs, providing informal employment to many, with strong local leaders. And with the dwindling of forest resources in these regions, these were a natural place to strengthen the organization of the sector.

Faced with the difficulty of obtaining and supplying legal wood to Ivoirian customers, it was expected that this class of enterprise would be motivated to explore ways to obtain supplies of wood of legal origin. It was also expected that success in this regard would be sustainable as beneficiaries would have improved income security through formalizing their networks and strengthening the representation of the problems they face and the solutions they seek. It would also be sustainable in the sense that their voice would be better heard in the development of any policy, legislative, or in international agreement such as the VPA that Côte d'Ivoire committed to.

Direct beneficiaries of this work were expected to be the very small, small and medium-sized forest enterprises, including charcoal traders, timber retailers, and small carpentry businesses. These groups participate in the domestic market for forest products but had previously been unable to organize around a clear agenda, and as result were often left out of policy processes that directly affected them. As a result of being organized into formal and acknowledged associations, they were expected to benefit from better market access as they negotiate collectively and would be less stigmatized as illegal. This should then lead to better prices for their products. Formalization was also expected to help them represent their interests in policy processes such as those associated with FLEGT and REDD+.

Beyond the direct beneficiaries, anyone interested in the rule of law and a level playing field in the domestic market in forest products, including the government, the private sector and consumers, were expected to benefit from the same formalization, regulation and transparency amongst traders.



caption and credit

As an umbrella association the Côte d'Ivoire wood-working federation has, since its formation in 2019, been a key ally that brings together all the woodworking trades to fight for the common cause. Through its leadership role, it was expected to pursue awareness-raising, knowledge-sharing and formalization activities for other players who were reluctant or hesitant. The larger forest industry, who make forest products available to these small and medium enterprises, are the biggest potential waverer or opponent. They could continue to refuse to collaborate with the beneficiary group, as if the associations had never been formed. They could also choose to prioritize trade with other enterprises not in these associations.

The government of Côte d'Ivoire was regarded as a potential ally as it had expressed a desire for FLEGT and REDD+, and adopted an approach that was inclusive of all stakeholder groups. It also recognized some of the problems arising from the lack of market incentives to provide forest products to the domestic market, when the export market is more lucrative, and how this contributed to illegal logging by informal operators.

The experience of implementation

Between 2017 and 2019, a series of workshops were held with different beneficiary groups including carpenters, wood sellers, NGOs, informal and illegal sawyers, charcoal makers, traditional chiefs, the larger timber industries, and the forestry administration. The workshops deepened the understanding of FLEGT and REDD+ and the implications of each. Whereas REDD+ is further removed from the day-to-day realities of small and medium-sized forest enterprises, the expectations of FLEGT are potentially quite daunting for them. A [new Forest Code](#) was passed in 2019, alongside which the expectations of FLEGT include full legal compliance across the timber sector, for the domestic market as well as for export. A central component of this is the need for

a traceability system to provide assurances for the legal origin of all timber products. Yacouba Diarrassouba, president of Abengourou carpenters [commented](#), "It is our true wish that the state listens to us, and that we decide what is good for us, and not those who are not on the ground".

Other events reinforced concepts like [sustainable forest management](#) and independent forest monitoring. The former topic is central to any understanding of the sector, so training helps to ensure participating groups are autonomous and capable of discussing reforms relating to sustainable forest management. The latter is a methodology to identify irregularities in the implementation of forestry laws and other standards. The workshops also sought to build capacity for soft skills such as negotiation, representation and communication.

By 2019, these activities led to the establishment of the Côte d'Ivoire woodworking federation, and with its support, the creation of five other associations the following year, covering charcoal traders, wood retailers and carpenters because of their need to participate in discussions related to forestry reforms. Mr Diarrassouba told the [media](#), "Before, when we were not organized, we were always threatened by police officers who came to collect our materials and we did not know which way to turn. But today, with representation, we know whom to address and how to guide ourselves".

In the opinion of GNT-CI, key stakeholders who were previously somewhat neglected, have been well educated and are now equipped to carry out operations such as independent forest monitoring, to conduct consultations and to better explain the FLEGT and REDD+ processes. Furthermore, they are able to advocate and influence government forest policy. For example, some associations led by the Côte d'Ivoire woodworking federation successfully lobbied for the suspension of a tax on the installation and operation of carpentry or

cabinet-making businesses. They continue to advocate for the definitive withdrawal of the tax and for a stay of prosecution against carpenters for non-payment. Following numerous discussions, in early 2020, the Minister of Water and Forests issued a clarification on which timber processors across the entire Ivorian territory approved to supply the domestic market. This [decision](#) resolves the problem of the inaccessibility of legal timber to local small and medium enterprises.

Sustainability

Sustainability of these changes depend on three things: the long term impact of the achievements to date, i.e. if no further progress was made, the sustainability of the associations formed, and the irreversibility of the any improvements. These are discussed in turn.

GNT-CI can identify three long term impacts from the formation of these industry associations. The first is a direct economic benefit from the reduction in taxes imposed on the sub-sector. Although the tax has not yet been completely withdrawn, the associations are optimistic that it is a constructive dialogue with the state authorities and will lead to this. The improved performance by these small and medium forestry enterprises, both financially, and in their commitment to source only legal timber, should add impetus to the decision that withdrawing the tax has a net benefit.

Alongside this, the second impact relates to the relationship of these enterprises with the larger forest industry. The formalization and collective voice provided by the associations has begun to change the attitude of the larger industry, who typically supply these traders operating in the domestic market. Whereas previously they many have been regarded as 'insignificant', they are beginning to have easier access to the raw materials available from the larger industry.

The third long term impact comes from the improved relationship with the state. Whereas in the past, the inclusive approach espoused by the state may have been rhetorical, it has now become a reality for these six associations and the enterprises they represent. The state is seeing the benefits from these groups being knowledgeable and articulate in policy discussions, and this provides optimism that the dialogue will continue.

Sustainability is twofold. First, there is every reason to believe that the associations that have been established will see the benefits of their formalization and will be motivated to stay organized and engaged. Second, the impact would increase if similar groups in other parts of the country followed the lead of these groups from the east and southwest of Côte d'Ivoire, such as recent efforts made to empower groups in the central region.

These changes are nonetheless vulnerable to reversal. At present, many businesses in the timber sector are still operating in the informal sector, and if consumers, the larger industry, or elements in government, see a preference for this approach, the more progressive actors represented by these associations may be squeezed out. This could in turn, contribute to the government reimposing taxes that have been suspended, on the grounds of 'if you can't eliminate it, at least tax it'.

The achievements, and their adoption by others, is dependent on further funding and motivation of civil society organizations like GNT-CI to popularize the approach, support the formation of associations, and mediate discussions with other stakeholders, notably government and the larger industry. The Côte d'Ivoire woodworking federation is well-placed to continue this kind of work. Other areas of support desired by small and medium forest enterprises include better access to credit and more support from the state to require the larger industry to provide them with the raw materials they need.

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Photo cover: Cutting planks in a carpentry in San-Pedro. Photo by: Hilaire Yaokokoré-Béibro





Story of Change

Civil society organizations are collaborating to safeguard forest reserves in Ghana

Abena Woode, David Young, Mustapha Seidu, Mercy Owusu-Ansah, Doreen Asumah Yeboah, and Daniel Kofi Abu

In response to threats to Ghana's forest reserves, CSOs in the natural resource and environment sector have rallied together to help conserve and protect remaining forests. A central part of their strategy has been the formation of the Civil Society-led Independent Forest Monitoring (CSIFM) platform to coordinate the implementation of independent forest monitoring, lead advocacy, and engage the Forestry Commission and other stakeholders to address identified challenges in forest management.

In 2019, the CSIFM platform was formally [launched](#) by Musah Abu-Juan, Forest Technical Director of the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources, to harmonize efforts on forest monitoring, to spearhead independent monitoring of Ghana's forest sector, and to contribute the energy and determination of civil society to sector reforms, advocacy and capacity building.

According to Abena Woode, the capacity building expert at NDF, it was necessary to form the CSIFM platform, in order to improve collaboration on forest monitoring to lead to a broader base, create synergy between individual organizations, and build a united front when it comes to advocacy and efforts to influence national policy. The Ghana CSIFM platform includes NDF, Tropenbos Ghana, Civic Response, EcoCare Ghana, Rural Development and Youth Association, Rainforest Alliance, and Friends of the Earth Ghana, and remains open to organizations interested in achieving the objectives of independent forest monitoring.





A log abandoned after being cut illegally. Photo by: NDF

During the launch of the CSIFM platform in 2019, Mercy Owusu Ansah, Executive Director of Tropenbos Ghana, stated that the CSIFM would complement the Forestry Commission's enforcement efforts by providing the Commission with information on infractions for necessary corrective actions to be taken. In an interview for this article with Obed Owusu-Addai, the lead campaigner for EcoCare Ghana, he stated that "NDF and Tropenbos Ghana have been very influential in getting the Forestry Commission to collaborate with CSOs". Adding to that, he further acknowledged that the relationship with the Forestry Commission has improved considerably over the past three years with the latter requiring their district and regional managers to sign onto the CSIFM platform.

It is unprecedented to have government officials in a CSO platform, so this demonstrates the level of trust and cooperation that has been built. Attah Owusu, Technical Director in the Forest Commission, observed that this group of CSOs have supported the objectives of the Commission and the Ghana Wildlife Bill (2020). He reiterated that the ownership of Ghana's forests is vested in its people, and that the Forestry Commission only manages it on their behalf, "therefore collaborating with CSOs on forest monitoring is a step in the right direction."

In 2009, under FLEGT, Ghana and the European Union signed a VPA, to ensure that Ghana produces only legal timber for both the international and local market. In efforts to fully implement this commitment, all parties have increasingly recognized the importance of independent forest monitoring led by civil society. CSOs aim to incorporate the views of diverse stakeholders and promote participation in Ghana's FLEGT process. Tropenbos Ghana and NDF have supported this, by creating a dialogue between all parties to air issues such as social responsibility agreements, royalties and other payments, forest protection, and export of only

legal timber to European countries. "Ultimately, our initiative is to support the Forestry Commission, CSOs and communities, among others, to ensure sustainable management of forest resources and to ensure community dwellers benefit from the proceeds arising from the exploitation of forest resources", said Ms Woode.

The CSIFM concept had been previously piloted in Ghana by different CSOs and in various forms since 2010. Between 2010 and 2013, Civic Response, Friends of the Earth Ghana, the Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Organisational Development and Care International formed a consortium to undertake a different form of forest governance monitoring. They developed [Transparency Scorecards](#), which provided the Forestry Commission with feedback on the perceptions of forest stakeholders on public availability of information as a pillar in good forest governance. More recently, Friends of the Earth Ghana, the Working Group on Forest Certification, NDF and National Forestry Forum-Ghana, have all piloted one or another form of community-based forest monitoring in the last five years.

According to Elvis Oppong Mensah of Civic Response, before the formation the CSIFM platform, the Forestry Commission and CSOs working on forest monitoring were always at loggerheads. However, with the platform, a consensus has been built between the Commission and CSO roles in forest management, such as collaboration in the training and capacity building of Forest Service Division officials on forest monitoring. He observed: "to avoid duplication of effort in efforts on forest monitoring, CSOs such as Tropenbos Ghana consult Civic Response before selecting their project communities for monitoring", due to the collaboration that has been created among partner organizations on the CSIFM platform.

In 2017 Tropenbos Ghana and NDF consulted with other organizations working on forest monitoring and agreed to establish a the CSIFM platform, signing a memorandum of understanding with the Forestry Commission. CBOs and CSOs have had capacity built to conduct control and verification missions with the Forestry Commission, to examine the evidence collected to establish the authenticity of any reported infraction, and for the necessary corrective steps to be taken.

The formation of the CSIFM platform has also increased collaboration among CSOs, making them indispensable actors in forest management. This will go a long way to ensure forests are protected and managed more sustainably. Through the coordination of organizations in the CSIFM platform, they are able to ensure effective coverage of work and reach more forest fringe communities, thus guaranteeing a wider proportion of Ghana's dwindling forest reserves are safeguarded.

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Photo cover: IFM verification mission - forest cleared for cocoa plantations. Photo by: NDF – EU NSA Project



