



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.



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

