

A photograph of a person in a forest, looking upwards. They are carrying a large, woven basket on their back. The background is filled with green foliage.

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MAKING THE EU WORK
FOR PEOPLE & FORESTS

Voices from the forest

Dispatches from the frontline of the
fight against illegal logging

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Contents

Foreword	4
Cameroon – Frontline forest guardians	8
<i>Number crunching: forests, people and climate</i>	13
Indonesia – Mapping a brighter future	14
Liberia – Women on the rise	18
Central African Republic – After the storm	23
Honduras – Shard of light	28
Ghana – The wind of change blowing through Ghana’s villages	34
Conclusion	39

Bienvenu Gbelo interviewing villagers in the Lobaye district, Central African Republic.

Foreword

Fifteen years ago, the European Union launched a hugely ambitious programme to end the illegal destruction of the world's tropical forests: the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan. The challenge was immense, but the incentive to succeed was greater.



In Ngwei in Cameroon, villagers are taking on the logging companies who illegally remove raw timber from the forests.

Photo by Madeleine Ngeunga

At stake was a chance to disrupt a global trade in illegal timber worth up to \$100 billion a year; protect biodiversity; boost government coffers being deprived of tax revenues; reduce the carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by preventing forests from being ripped down; and improve the lives of the 1.6 billion people¹ who rely on forests for their survival.

The cornerstone of this plan, and its most ground breaking element, was offering countries that clarified and reformed their forest laws – and implemented them properly – privileged access to European timber markets.

Crucially, these new laws would not be imposed from outside, but evolve inside the countries themselves through consultation with all the key parties, including civil society organisations, forest community representatives, the timber industry and governments.

Through this deliberative process,² the power balance would shift in countries ravaged by illegal deforestation, while international demand for timber from well managed forests would grow.

Five years ago, the author Fred Pearce described these trade deals – known as Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) – as being “founded in concerns for justice and poverty as much as law and market economics”. They had, he concluded, “the potential to transform how the world’s largest tropical forests are run”. Neither Pearce nor anyone else were under any illusions about the magnitude of this task.

The intervening years – and various studies – have shown how great the challenges are.³

Yet there have been significant advances.

An independent review of FLEGT for the European Commission found that the VPA had created a space for civil society groups to “table issues that could not have been discussed before”. The independent policy institute Chatham House, meanwhile, found that illegal logging had dramatically reduced in some VPA countries.

As a result, the Commission reaffirmed its commitment to the programme, while stressing the need to adapt to the evolving threats to the world’s forests.⁴ These threats are principally the shifting pattern of the global timber trade, and commercial agriculture’s growth as a driver of illegal deforestation.

Other potential risks to the world’s forests and their inhabitants also loom.

1 Close to 2.5 billion people—a third of the world’s population—depend on community-held lands for their livelihoods and subsistence. See: Small, but many, is big: Challenges in assessing the collective scale of locally controlled forest-linked production and investment. IIED, London. Available at: <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/16615IIED.pdf>. Mayers, J, Buckley, L and Macqueen, DJ, 2016

2 The concept of deliberative democracy is that for a democratic process to be legitimate there must be authentic deliberation. “Emphasis is generally placed on the participation of civil society in government decision making (e.g. to define a problem, identify priorities, allocate resources or evaluate the implications of various policy options). Deliberation thus promotes not only conciliation between the various actors affected by a policy, the emergence of an informed and engaged public, and the taking into account of the public’s perspective, but also transparency, legitimacy and accountability in decision making.” See: What is a deliberative process? The National Collaborating Centre for healthy public policy, 2009.

3 For instance, in a 2016 paper the academics Christine Overdevest and Jonathan Zeitlin noted that successfully implementing a VPA is “extremely challenging” both politically and administratively: “In every [VPA] partner country, ensuring timber legality has turned out to be connected to thorny, deep-rooted issues concerning exploitation of natural resources, property rights, land use, and community relationships, which the VPA implementation process has progressively exposed to public scrutiny and pressure for remediation.”

4 In May 2016 the European Commission published its independent review of FLEGT, declaring it “fully relevant . . . innovative, comprehensive and futureproof” while also maintaining that it has “not been implemented in a sufficiently balanced manner”.

To limit global temperature rises to 1.5 degrees – the aim of the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement – scientists and policymakers are grappling for new ways to remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere; in the language of climate change, this is known as ‘negative emissions’.

Forests, which absorb carbon dioxide, are an obvious place to start. But trees require land – and the amount of land needed for plantations to sequester carbon from the atmosphere on the scale required would have grave consequences for rural livelihoods and biodiversity.⁵

Age of uncertainty

These threats – and the overwhelming one of climate change – have emerged at a time of dislocation and uncertainty; an age when the bond between many of the elected and their electorates has fractured; when the space for civil society organisations to operate in is being squeezed,⁶ and where support for traditional parties across Europe is waning as xenophobia rises; the age of Brexit and of isolationist governments in the USA, Hungary, Poland and elsewhere.

The need therefore for people to be able to influence the powers that control their lives, and to have the freedom to work together to tackle the challenges they face, is more critical than ever.

It is precisely this that the VPA aims to give to those directly affected by illegal logging and deforestation.

Forest tales

Yet the world of policy-making, especially at EU level, can be technocratic and steeped in jargon. This is understandable when complex issues are being negotiated by people who have built up their expertise over years. The consequence though, is that much of the language and details around VPAs are impenetrable to outsiders – and far too rarely are the stories heard of the people whose lives are being transformed by the policy.

The following pieces of reportage predominantly by journalists from countries which have signed – or are in the process of signing – VPAs with the EU are an attempt to redress this.

The need for people to be able to influence the powers that control their lives and to have the freedom to work together to tackle the challenges they face, is more critical than ever.

5 For a detailed analysis of the threats posed by negative emissions, see Fred Pearce's Fern report, Going Negative – How carbon sinks could cost the earth, in which he writes: “The warning bells should be sounding. In the name of negative emissions to halt climate change, the world may be on the verge of the biggest and most destructive ‘land grab’ ever. The push to lock up potentially hundreds of billions of tonnes of carbon on the land – most of it poor world land locking up rich-world emissions – is set to emerge as a major issue in climate politics, potentially pitting the requirement to fight climate change against other world priorities, such as food security, biodiversity protection, human rights and ending poverty, all recently adopted by governments in the 2030 sustainable development goals (SDGs). For further reading on how restoring natural forests can stem climate change and revive rural communities, see Return of the Trees also by Fred Pearce.

6 Ways in which the space for civil society is contracting in many countries, include restrictions on foreign funding for NGOs, the introduction of new barriers to them being registered, interventions in their internal affairs, as well as various forms of harassment. For further details and analysis, see: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/closing-space-for-civil-society>

They are dispatches from the frontlines of the struggle for land rights and against illegal logging, and snapshots of the lives of people dependent on forests for their survival.

- **We see villagers in Cameroon without electricity and little running water taking on companies involved in illegal logging – and winning.**
- **In Indonesia, where illegal deforestation was once endemic and where the first ever FLEGT-license was issued in 2016, we discover how indigenous communities are drawing up maps of their ancestral lands to prove what is legitimately theirs, and helping resolve the chaotic mapping system which has helped drive illegal deforestation.**
- **In Liberia, we learn of the women who are finally getting their hands on the levers of power in the forest sector – in a nation where a lack of access to education and low literacy levels have long impeded women from making decisions on land and resources.**
- **In the Central African Republic, we report on civil society's heroic efforts to overcome the legacy of a devastating civil war, and visit a village which is surrounded by natural wealth in the form of thick tropical forest, but whose struggles mirror those of much of the nation.**
- **In Honduras, where environmental defenders risk their lives every day, we see a rare example of how diverse interests and entrenched positions can be reconciled in a bitterly divided land.**
- **In Ghana, we report on how a new spirit of democracy has been ushered into remote villages as a result of changes in the country's forest laws.**

The challenges and progress in each of these countries varies.

But the message is the same: if you want to keep forests standing, put local people in the driving seat when devising the policies that affect them.

Hannah Mowat, Fern campaigns coordinator
Brussels, March 2018

Frontline forest guardians

They have no electricity or running water and the forests they rely on have been under siege from illegal loggers for years. But now villagers in Ngwei in Cameroon are fighting back with modern technology.

By Madeleine Ngeunga



Madeleine Ngeunga is a Cameroonian journalist specialising in human rights and the environment. In 2017 she won the award for outstanding reporting on forest governance in the Cameroonian Forest Media Awards (ForMA), and in 2016 was among 25 Francophone journalists and civil society leaders selected for the prestigious Open Data Media course in Paris. She was born in Yaoundé, went to university in Douala –

where she currently lives – and has studied in Montreal and Dakar.

Madeleine is a correspondent for InfoCongo.org and blogs at madyngeunga.over-blog.com. She says her aim as a journalist is “to contribute to justice” and believes that that the best way to protect Cameroon’s forests “is to educate local people on their rights”. She tweets at: @NgeungaM



The Ngwei communities' defence of their surrounding forests is a vivid example of local people protecting their forests. Photo by Madeleine Ngeunga

Ngwei, Cameroon The village elders call it *SUHE*. In forestry, specialists call it *Faro*. This brown wood found in tropical climes, including the forests of Ngwei, in Cameroon's Littoral region, contains numerous therapeutic properties according to locals.

So for 70-year-old Luc Ndembè and others who live here, it made perfect sense to adopt the name *SUHE* for the association they started six years ago to heal the 'sickness' they see afflicting their forests.

"*SUHE* treats skin conditions. It's an antibiotic and has anti-poisonous properties. If you anoint yourself with its oil, you are protected. We want to protect ourselves against illegal loggers who pillage our forest resources", explains Ndembè, president of the *SUHE* association, which is otherwise known as "Land and resources for sustainable development".

These forest protectors live in Mapubi village in Ngwei, a locality within the Sanaga Maritime administrative district, which covers a surface area of around 93,000 km². Nearby is the main production centre for hydroelectricity in Cameroon, the vast Song lou lou dam. Yet despite their proximity to this major power source, residents have no electricity or running water, relying on rivers or wells for the latter.

These everyday struggles are compounded by a menace which has scarred the area for as long as anyone can remember: the logging companies who illegally remove raw timber from the forests of Ngwei on an almost daily basis.

CAMEROON

VPA negotiations started **November 2007**

VPA entered into force **December 2011**

“Before I was born, our forests were already being exploited. We can see the wood simply passing through, but the people have nothing. The hydroelectric dam is located on our territory, so there are wires that pass through the forest. And yet our village doesn’t have electricity, or running water. In our entire village [Mapubi] we only have a single functioning well”, says Ndembè, anger seeping into his words.

His claims are backed up by the data.

According to the national municipal forum, Communes et Villes Unies Association, “nearly 55 per cent of the 28 villages in this district have no source of clean drinking water. Most of the population in these zones still get their water from free-flowing sources or even rivers.”

Factory-style work

But rather than passively accept their fate, locals are defying the odds by changing it. And their main vehicle for doing so is the *SUHE* association.

SUHE members come from all sections of the community, including farmers and hunters. This groundswell of support is understandable given the considerable damage that these companies have inflicted on the wider Ngwei community’s 62,000 inhabitants.

Juliette Mandeng, wife of the Mapubi village’s main chief, is their eyes and ears, informing villagers of each new development.

“People from the logging companies cut down trees next to my field. When I enter the forest, the chainsaws fall silent. I only see Caterpillars [heavy machines]. As soon as I start working on my plot, I hear noises. If I’m not careful, a tree could fall on me, so I have to go work on another plot. As soon as I get home, I tell my husband that there are chainsaws and Caterpillars in the bush”, she says.

Sieur Mandeng, Juliette’s husband, explains how the men support the women through a vigilance committee. “Each of the 10 committee members monitors activity in the forest, as part of their daily routine. It could be chainsaw noises, abandoned logs in the forest or in the rivers or logging trucks that have fallen into waterways. As soon as they return to the village, they make a report”, Mandeng says. The information is then dispensed to him, and he passes it on to *SUHE* members to follow-up.

In Luc Ndembé’s living room, which doubles as the *SUHE* headquarters, members gather round on plastic chairs as Pascal Nlend Nlend, the secretary-general, registers the information they’ve uncovered. They follow a precise schedule, before community observers fan out over the territory to verify the allegations.

Wearing heavy boots and protective helmets, they criss-cross Ngwei’s dense forests, equipped with Global Positioning System trackers, digital cameras and smartphones to track down illegal loggers.

Wearing heavy boots and protective helmets, they criss-cross Ngwei's dense forests, equipped with Global Positioning System (GPS) trackers, digital cameras and smartphones to track down illegal loggers.

"Once we receive the information, we go out in the field to check it. We register GPS coordinates and take pictures so that verification teams can locate the infraction easily," explains Nlend Nlend, who as well as *SUHE's* secretary-general is an observer himself.

NGO support

The NGO *Forêts et Développement Rural (FODER)* assist *SUHE* with training and logistical support. "The struggle to protect the forests of Ngwei has intensified over the past four years", says Justin Kamga, FODER's Program Head.

"Ngwei's inhabitants verify the legal status of any company entering their forests. The community is highly sensitive to illegal logging activity and their dedication and will to protect their forests using new technology is outstanding", says Kamga.

In 2013, Ngwei residents first made contact with FODER, who have since helped train *SUHE* members, investing them with the knowledge and skills to better protect their forests.



One of the *SUHE* members inspects the nearby forest.

Photo by Madeleine Ngeunga

Powerful evidence shows that one of the best ways to keep forests standing is for local people to take control. The Ngwei communities' defence of their surrounding forests provides a vivid example.

Their story is also an illustration of one of the key features of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) timber trade deal that Cameroon signed with the EU in 2010, and which emphasises the roles of civil society and local communities in forest protection.

According to Luc Ndembe: "We've learned about the key issues that are part of the VPA with the European Union and about independent observation of forests. We now know about the role that communities can play in this process. We've learned how to detect illegal traffickers in our forests using intervention guidelines for a forest environment. Using these skills, our denunciations are bearing fruit, ranging from legal filings to fines."

Getting results

The *SUHE* association's achievements include around twenty documented alerts, a dozen official letters about the companies (known as denunciations) sent to government administrations, and at least three cases where illegal logging companies have been sanctioned.

Earlier this year, for example, *SUHE* members alerted FODER about presumed illegal logging near the village of Logbii, which is also in Ngwei.

A few days later, a joint FODER – *SUHE* verification mission was organised.

In the field, the team found a haul of valuable hardwood logs: 16 unmarked Ekopbeli trunks, 16 cross-cut, unhailed Ekopbeli logs, three unmarked Azobe trunks, and three cut-to-length, unhailed Azobe logs. FODER immediately alerted the Ministry of Forests and Fauna about this "unauthorised operation in a forest belonging to the National Domain".

Once verified, the Ministry ordered a legal case to be filed against the timber operator. The company's wood products were then seized and later sold at public auction.

A beacon

This story – of local people exposing the logging companies destroying their forests and the authorities enforcing sanctions against them – is not, however, one which extends across Cameroon.

Illegal timber from the country is still finding its way on to the international market and much remains to be done to stop Cameroon's forests disappearing at their current alarming rate.

The people of Ngwei, at least, are showing how it can be done.

Number crunching: forests, people and climate

Up to **2.5 billion** – the number of people on the planet who depend on community-held lands for their livelihoods and subsistence.

Around **1.6 billion** – the number of people who rely on forest resources for their livelihoods.

7 million hectares – the amount of annual net forest loss in tropical countries between 2000 and 2010.

Between €24 and €80 billion – the economic value of illegal logging, including processing.



Around 1.6 billion – the number of people who rely on forest resources for their livelihoods.

49 per cent – the amount of tropical deforestation from illegal clearing for agriculture. Around half of it is driven by overseas demand for commodities such as palm oil, beef and soy.

190 million metric tonnes – the amount of carbon estimated to have been released into the atmosphere in a single year from illegal logging in nine forested countries.

55 million metric tonnes – the amount of carbon stored above ground in tropical forests in territories collectively managed by indigenous peoples and local communities.

22,000 million metric tonnes of this is in collectively managed forests where the local people do not have legal recognition.

At least 50 per cent – the amount of the world's land claimed under customary law by indigenous peoples and local communities.

10 per cent – the amount of the world's land legally owned by indigenous peoples and local communities.

50 per cent – the reduction in deforestation rates in the Amazon on securely held indigenous lands compared to deforestation rates on similar land without this security.

0.24 per cent – the amount of annual forest cover lost on average in community managed forests. The same study found that forest cover loss for protected forests was significantly higher at **1.47 per cent**.

Mapping a brighter future

The grassroots movements protecting Indonesia's forests.

By Nabiha Shahab



Nabiha Shahab was born in Pekalongan, Central Java but grew up in Jakarta, where she currently lives. She has a master's degree in environmental management from Nottingham University (England) and is currently studying for a PhD at the University of Indonesia. Her academic research involves identifying conflict areas caused by overlapping maps and uncertain tenure rights and showing how it can be resolved from the ground up. "Participatory mapping is more than just a community mapping their own area, it places them as the actor and identifies with their legacy and culture. It also serves as way for the community to claim their land and dictate their plan for its development," she says.

Nabiha's work as a journalist includes being a senior editor at [Tempo](#) and a frequent contributor to the leading regional news agency, [Asian Correspondent](#). She also writes about science for the Centre for International Forestry Research ([CIFOR](#)).

"Deforestation is a complex issue that needs to be dealt with from all directions. One of the most striking issues is widespread corruption, almost the normalisation of it," she says. In her spare time she bakes bread and experiments making traditional Indonesian cakes. She tweets at: [@n_shahab](#)

INDONESIA

VPA negotiations started **March 2007**

VPA entered into force **May 2014**

Jakarta, Indonesia Flower arrangements decorated the Jakarta pier as containers filled with wood products were loaded on to ocean liners heading for Belgium and the UK. The heat was scorching, but the mood buoyant.

Government and company officials in light batik shirts congratulated each other for the long awaited day. It was 15 November 2016, and Indonesia had just become the first country in the world to be awarded a Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) license: guaranteeing that the wood products bound for Europe had been harvested, exported and processed legally.

“We hope [the Indonesian FLEGT license] will increase our competitiveness and open up new markets,” the Coordinating Minister of Economic Affairs Darmin Nasution said at a launch ceremony a week later.

During that first week alone, 845 licenses were issued for exports to 24 European destinations at a value of €20 million. Almost half of the shipments were wood paneling, and the rest were for furniture, handicrafts, woodchips, paper and other wood products. And in its first year, Indonesia exported more than €1 billion of legal FLEGT licensed timber products to the EU.

The Indonesian timber industry’s abject history added weight to the significance of the moment.

For many years the forests that dominate much of Indonesia’s archipelago of 17,000 islands were a hotbed of illegality and corruption.

It was previously estimated that three quarters of the wood used by the country’s timber industry came from illegal logging and Indonesia’s tropical rainforests were vanishing faster than those of any other country.

This epidemic of illegal deforestation can be traced back to the nationalisation of the country’s forests in 1967 by the late President Suharto, which led to a massive growth in the logging industry.

At the turn of this century, the tide began to turn: in 2001 at the first East Asia Ministerial Conference on Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (FLEG), Indonesia committed itself to “intensify efforts... to address forest crime and violations of forest law”, and in 2002 the country signed a memorandum of understanding with the UK government, which laid some of the groundwork for its subsequent agreement with the EU under FLEGT.

But the road towards legality has not been smooth. And serious obstacles remain.

A recent investigation by Indonesia’s Independent Forestry Monitoring Network (JPIK), found that Indonesia’s timber legality system – known locally as SVLK – is riddled with loopholes and has so far been unable to stop companies from using illegally sourced timber.

JPIK, which works with indigenous people and local communities to uncover illegalities in timber concessions areas, discovered that rogue companies were colluding with corrupt officials to launder illegal timbers into the SVLK system.

Muhammad Kosar, JPIK national coordinator, says: "We found evidence of illegal timber entering the SVLK supply. There are also cases of illegal logging in national parks and we suspect these logs enter the wood processing industries."

This is especially problematic since once an exporter qualifies for SVLK, they automatically obtain the FLEGT license and can export to the EU without the need for importers to conduct further due diligence checks.

One of the biggest barriers to ending this enduring illegality and corruption is the uncertainty over land ownership in Indonesia – including that caused by overlapping maps.

In a 2014 study, the Corruption Eradication Commission (KPK) found that "legal uncertainty [over tenure] in forest areas caused injustice in forest management and proneness to corruption." The study also pointed out that indigenous communities only manage one per cent of 41.69 million hectares of managed forest.

The KPK study showed that many conflicts over land tenure occurred within forest areas, and were between the state and local indigenous communities. Around 6.2 million hectares of mining concessions are located in conservation forests.

In 2013, Forest Watch Indonesia (FWI) found that the figure for overlapping licenses for forest concessions, industrial forest plantations and mining areas was 14.7 million hectares.

For forest communities this confusion can spell disaster.

Most indigenous communities in Indonesia have no written record of their customary land. So when their traditional forest areas overlap with mining, timber or palm oil companies' concessions or even national parks, their legitimate means of existence – and way of life that has often endured for centuries – becomes technically illegal based on national law.

A solution – and one which is not imposed from above but which, crucially, includes forest communities – is participatory mapping.

In the early 1990s the participatory mapping movement emerged from the community of Long Uli in Malinau, North Kalimantan. Today that movement has become national.

In essence, it works like this: community members use a scaled map to depict what they collectively identify as their territory, noting its relevant natural features.

Deny Rahadian, National Coordinator of the Participatory Mapping Network or JKPP, explains: "Mapping is used to confirm the community's management area. Our main objective is to document the community's existence in their ancestral land."

Most indigenous communities in Indonesia have no written record of their customary land. So when their traditional forest areas overlap with mining, timber or palm oil companies' concessions or even national parks, their legitimate means of existence... becomes technically illegal...



Indrianto, right, and Suratman of Yayasan Ekosistem Lestari (YEL) check a map at the healthy part of Tripa peat swamp forest in Nagan Raya, Aceh province, Indonesia, October 1, 2012.

Photo by Dita Alangkara/CIFOR / flickr.com

JKPP was founded in 1996 to assist communities to map their own land and to date, it has mapped around ten million hectares, including nine million hectares of customary land across the country.

As a consequence, indigenous people have been empowered to claim rights to their natural resources and dictate plans for its development. Collaboration between the government and communities has also been cultivated, and community-generated maps have helped inform both the national and local government in its spatial planning.

Another solution to securing tenure rights for forest dependent communities is social forestry schemes, in which communities living in and around forests are given legal rights to manage them.

There are currently five schemes in social forestry, including village forest and customary forest. "The community participatory mapping is also used in identifying and delineating social forestry borders," adds Rahadian.

As Indonesia moves through its second year as the world's first nation to be awarded a coveted FLEGT license, these grassroots initiatives show how to resolve the illegalities in Indonesia's forests that have been caused by land conflicts.

Indonesia has come a long way since the dark days when corruption and forest destruction were all-pervasive. But it has some way to go to before they are truly eradicated.

Women on the rise

In Liberia, women's voices have been largely absent in shaping how the nation's abundant tropical forests are governed. But things are changing.

By James Harding Giahvue



James Harding Giahvue was born in Monrovia and was inspired to become a journalist through his love of football and desire to analyse matches. After doing match reports for a local radio station he went on to get a degree in mass communication and political science at the United Methodist University. Since then he has become one of Liberia's leading print journalists, writing for local publications such as New Republic, National Chronicle and Catalyst. He is also a reporter for the Thomson Reuters Foundation, specialising in climate change and women's rights, and a print and photo stringer for Reuters.

James contributes to Reuters' New Narratives project, aimed at bolstering Africans' coverage of their continent and sees journalism as a way to contribute to his country's post-war recovery. "The laws governing Liberia's natural resource sector are flouted. Poverty is a major issue in remote, forested communities, making community participation in natural resource governance difficult, especially for women," he says. Shining a light on these issues is essential, but to write about them properly "you must have good knowledge of the sector – the laws, regulations, treaties, agreements and so on." He can be contacted via LinkedIn.

Grand Gedeh county, Liberia Grand Gedeh county lies some 300 kilometres south east of Liberia's capital Monrovia.

Its residents have had to overcome the legacy of the country's civil war, which ended in 2003 and saw as many as three-quarters of the area's young people recruited as combatants.

They have also had to confront the aftermath of the conflict in nearby Cote d'Ivoire, from where thousands of refugees streamed into the county after the outbreak of violence in 2011.

Little wonder then that the European Commission identified Grand Gedeh's health and education systems as Liberia's poorest.

Set against this backdrop, the eight-bedroom guesthouse, five classroom school and Palaver hut (meeting hut) in Zwedru, the county's capital, signify a real achievement for the woman who led the campaign to get them built.

Their existence is the result of one of Liberia's most innovative measures to reform its forest sector: Community Forestry Development Committees (CFDCs), ten member community bodies intended to represent forest people's interests.

And Grand Gedeh CFDC is the only one of 23 CFDCs across the country whose chairman is a woman: Ruth G. Milton.

Under regulations initiated in 2007, and which led to the establishment of CFDCs, communities must receive 30 per cent of the land rental fees that the Euro Logging Company pays to harvest part of the lush rainforest which flanks Zwedru.

When Milton took up the post in 2015, Euro Logging had not paid the affected forest community its portion of land rental fees for five years.

The 61-year-old mother of five rallied the towns within the affected area – Putu, Konobo, Gleo and Kannah – into setting up roadblocks. That protest or "reaction", as she prefers to call it, had the desired effect.

The company yielded to the community's demand and paid more than US\$86,000 for one of the five years it owed the community. It was with that fund and a US\$11,000 "forest product fee" that the projects were implemented under Milton's leadership.

"What is being done at that CFDC is a good example of how women can play a significant role in the resource management process," says Andrew Y.Y. Zelemen, National Facilitator for the National Union of Community Forestry Development Committees (NUCFDC), the body which co-ordinates the CFDCs.

Milton's guesthouse is the second most expensive development project linked to a CFDC, according to NUCFDC's reports.

In 2009 there were 32 women members in CFDCs across the country from a total of 190. Now there are 50, from a total membership of 230

LIBERIA

VPA negotiations started **March 2009**

VPA entered into force **December 2013**

Milton's leadership is characteristic of the gradual rise of women's participation in the forestry sector at the community level in Liberia.

In 2009 there were 32 women members in CFDCs across the country from a total of 190. Now there are 50, from a total membership of 230, according to NUCFDC. That's an increase of nearly one third.

In addition to Milton's milestone, NUCFDC statistics show that there is at least one woman on each of Liberia's 23 CFDCs, and that women occupy the position of co-chair in three of them: which means that while there is still a long way to go, significant progress has been made on gender equality.

Underlying this progress have been wider efforts to transform the way Liberia governs its forests.

Path to reform

Liberia has the majority of the largest rainforest in West Africa, the Upper Guinea Forest.

Warring factions used timber to fund the 14-year civil war in Liberia, which killed an estimated 300,000 people. As the result of a sustained outcry by campaigners, the United Nations imposed a logging ban on Liberia in May 2003.

Following the inauguration of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf in 2006, a new forestry law was enacted to reform Liberia's forest sector, focusing on community, conservation and commercial logging.

More than a decade later, this reform is well under way.

Since 2007 the international inspection and verification company Société Générale de Surveillance (SGS) has overseen the Chain of Custody (CoC) in which forest revenues are collected for the Forest Development Authority (FDA), so as to improve accountability and transparency.

In 2009, the Community Rights Law with Respect to Forest Lands was enacted.

Then in 2013 Liberia signed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the European Union (EU), the biggest importer of Liberian timber. This was followed in 2015 by Liberia signing a US\$150 million deal with Norway to tackle climate change and protect local people's rights to forests.

These positive developments have, unfortunately, been marred by other transgressions.

In 2012 a legal loophole was uncovered which involved the misuse of private use permits (PUPs) to secretively parcel out dozens of logging contracts covering a quarter of the country's land area, threatening Liberia's forests and the people who depend on them.

And more recently a Global Witness investigation found illegalities still existed in many of Liberia's large logging contracts.

Some communities are also still battling to receive the payments they are owed by logging companies.



Ruth G. Milton led a successful battle to get her community the benefits they were owed by logging companies. Photo by James Harding Giahvue

Women to the fore

The example of Ruth Milton in Grand Gedeh shows that women can play a vital role.

Figures from across the forestry sector say that greater women's participation could strengthen governance and accountability across the sector.

"Women are the main users of forest products, the lack of participation of a large number of resource users can lead to weaknesses in the performance of any organisation tasked with managing that resource," says Ikem Eronini, Knowledge Management Coordinator of the VPA Support Unit of Liberia.

"Studies undertaken in India show that the participation of women in forest committees has led to 25 per cent higher control on illicit forestry practices than in communities where women do not participate in these activities," adds Eronini.

Jonathan Yiah of the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) agrees.

"They are good managers, they are good stewards and they are able to account better than men," Yiah says. "Once we see more women in leadership, I think we will have the forward march, assuring development, assuring stability."

He adds: "Not only do they need to be given equal opportunities but...the needs of women are better articulated by women than by men. So, there needs to be always a good women's representation in forums about deciding about how they benefit or how they manage the resources they have."

'Backseat'

Liberia ranks 114th on the 2016 Global Gender Gap Index.

Gender equality is an ongoing debate in Liberia despite the leadership of President Sirleaf as the first female African President.



Liberia ranks **114th** on the **2016** Global Gender Gap Index.

The country still battles an African custom—mainly in rural communities—that women belong in the kitchen and are meant for childbearing.

"Many of the women are more engaged with farming and keeping the family happy," says Zelemen of NUCFDC. "They don't want to be embarrassed with this

CFDC work, where many times they have to travel to different communities...." He says women, especially in rural communities, will gradually leave the "backseat".

Eronini agrees with Zelemen but adds that women should be placed at the core of the forestry discussion, not at bottom.

"Traditionally, women have been greater users of the forest while the men were engaged in the productive aspects of forestry. While this placed an unequal burden on women, being more dependent on the forest, they were more at risk if it was improperly managed, their voice was not generally heard."

Forestry stakeholders are making efforts to meet the challenges confronting women's participation in the forestry sector.

In Grand Gedeh, Milton is already taking the lead.

Her CFDC is sponsoring women at the FDA Forestry Institute in Bomi County, something Yiah says is a step in the right direction.

"I think the area of training—where more women are trained—will help to address some of the current deficits and leadership challenges that they have," he says.

Eronini says the VPA "has worked to ensure that women take part in CFDCs." Adding women's participation into forest legislations is the right thing to do.

"In the future, perhaps guidelines could be included in the design stage of programs calling for the rotation of important posts between men and women, as well as the creation of more awareness and women participation in the sector..." he says.

The path to gender equality in Liberia might be long, but in the forestry sector at least, the first steps have been taken.

After the storm

The legacy of a bloody civil war and an ongoing humanitarian crisis have left the Central African Republic rock bottom of the world's development chart. Sharing the immense wealth of the country's tropical forests can help bring change, says Bienvenu Gbelo.

By Bienvenu Gbelo



Bienvenu Gbelo is a journalist and presenter specialising in the environment and climate change for Radio Ndeke Luka, one of the Central African Republic's (CAR) leading stations. He also contributes to [InfoCongo](#). Bienvenu has Master's Degree in Economic Sciences from the University of Bangui and has won recognition for his reporting, including as a finalist in the [African Story Challenge](#) (2014), winner of the [Africa Green Challenge](#) (2015), and winner of the [Global Water Partnership-Central Africa Media Award on Water and Change](#) (also 2015). He has reported internationally, including on the United Nations Paris Climate Change

Conference and African sporting events such as Afrobasket (Africa's continental basketball championships) in Dakar. He says that his journalism is driven by wanting to see "socio-economic development in the CAR; a better world to live in without hearing the noise of weapons; a world of meritocracy without corruption or intimidation." A first practical goal, he says, would be to successfully involve "local and indigenous communities in the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) between the CAR and the European Union." In his free time he enjoys sightseeing, nature and sports. He tweets at: [@Bienmoyen](#)

Lobaye, Central African Republic On February 6, 2018 André Zibè's wife gave birth to a baby girl on the floor of his hut in Bogani village. All six of the couple's children were born this way. The nearest health clinic, which is a difficult walk through six kilometres of thick natural forest, has no doctors, only first-aiders. "We are suffering," says Zibè.

Child mortality rates are desperately high here.⁷ In fact, life is precarious for all in Bogani, an indigenous pygmy village of around 100 huts – made mostly from bamboo and palm tree branches – which lies 146 kilometres south of the capital Bangui in the district of Lobaye.

Bogani suffers from the same lack of essential infrastructure – no electricity, no phone lines, no tarred roads, no schools and hospitals – as the rest of the Central African Republic, which has endured years of institutional decay and a devastating civil war.⁸

Yet while the people are desperately poor, they're surrounded by vast natural wealth in the shape of dense tropical forest. And every day they see that wealth ferried away along pot-holed roads on the back of lorries throwing up clouds of dust.

Michel Agnandjian, the wiry headman of the nearby Bobèlè village, speaks with bitter irony: "Foreigners export our timber to their countries. Locals don't get any profit. Look at my house. It's appalling." The house, outside of which we are conducting the interview, is made of uncooked bricks which are starting to crack, while the sanitary conditions are wretched.

The absurdity of being so close to natural wealth, but so far from its benefits seems lost on no-one. While timber is everywhere, many of the schools in the region don't have wooden tables or benches and the buildings are constructed out of palm leaves. Locals are frequently arrested for breaking the law if they cut wood to use for such purposes.

Even those who work for the timber companies, like André Zibè see little benefit: "I am tired of working for little money for logging companies," he said.

The work – frequently backbreaking – involves removing tree stumps and chopping large trees. Often, Zibè says, he has to ask several times before he is paid: an example of the enduring discrimination that pygmies face. For this reason, Zibè, like others in the village, is drawn back to the life of hunting and gathering that his people led for millennia.

Maurice Mondjimba, deputy headman of Bogani, also says his people are "marginalised", adding that: "Most of the time, we are not consulted before our forests are exploited."

"Foreigners export our timber to their countries. Locals don't get any profit. Look at my house. It's appalling."

7 In 2013, the United Nations Development Programme ranked CAR 185th out of 187 countries for child mortality, with the probability of dying between birth and the age of five being 129 out of every 1,000. See: <http://hdr.undp.org/en/content/under-five-mortality-rate-1000-live-births>

8 In Bogani there is at least a well – unlike other villages in the area, where people have to walk up to 10 kilometres laden down with containers to gather water.

CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

VPA negotiations started **October 2009**

VPA entered into force **July 2012**



André Zibè: "I am tired of working for little money for logging companies."

Photo by Bienvenu Gbelo

This daily struggle for survival is echoed across the country.

Despite its vast natural resources,⁹ in 2016 CAR was ranked last in the United Nation's Human Development Index, ranking 188th out of 188 nations. Meanwhile 2.5 million out of a population of 4.6 million are estimated to be in need of humanitarian assistance, and average life expectancy languishes at 51.5 years.

If the country is to be lifted from its plight, the forest sector must play a central role. The industry is the country's second largest employer (after the state), while timber is CAR's number one official export – its position assuming greater importance in the economy since the Kimberley Process cracked down on 'conflict' diamonds.

But for change to occur, the corruption that has plagued the forest industry for generations must end, along with the flow of illegal timber that still saturates the market.

To grasp the scale of the challenge, it's necessary to understand its context.

In 2012 the government took a major step in tackling the logging industry's ills when it signed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) timber trade deal with the European Union. This

⁹ "The Central African Republic is rich in high-value natural resources, including diamonds, timber, gold, uranium, possible oil deposits and endangered wildlife. Timber and diamonds are particularly essential to CAR's economy." See: <https://www.fcni.org/documents/27>



Life in Bogani village is precarious.

Photo by Bienvenu Gbelo

deal used the incentive of a favourable trading arrangement with the EU to encourage CAR to include civil society and forest communities in shaping new, and more just, forest laws and an inclusive new constitution.

But the process stalled abruptly in March 2013 as the country descended into civil war.

One of the war's causes was the deeply unequal distribution of wealth that attracted armed groups to combine under the Séléka banner. After they overthrew the government, violence reigned, with whole villages and towns pillaged and mass atrocities committed. Thousands lost their lives; many more lost their homes.

Logging companies were plundered, vehicles stolen, machines and other timber production equipment ransacked. The timber production chain was massively disrupted: just to reach the Cameroonian border, a timber cargo had to pass through a string of illegal barriers directly managed by warlords demanding payment. Meanwhile, the armed men who surrounded timber company offices, ostensibly to secure the premises, were usually there to loot them.

But remarkably, throughout the three years that the VPA process was frozen, the incipient civil society structures that it helped to create stayed operational – albeit in a severely restricted fashion – and clustered within the Sustainable Management of Natural Resources and Environment platform (GDRNE).

In the dangerous and chaotic environment they heroically continued to educate forest communities about their rights, carried out independent investigations into whether timber companies were respecting CAR's laws, and highlighted how warlords and armed groups were funding themselves through illegal logging. As a result, many members of the platform and their families were threatened.



The VPA process was revived in 2016. Since it was initially promoted by CAR's president Faustin Archange Touadera, there are hopes that it will be implemented properly. If it is, the GDRNE platform will deserve much credit: already it has managed to get two representatives from forest communities to directly participate in monitoring how forest laws and policies are implemented.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step, and this alone marks a significant stride in getting the concerns heard of those who have been abandoned for so long – like the villagers of Bogani.

A prerequisite, however, is ending the violence and insecurity that prevails across so much of the country, and helping the huge numbers of internally displaced people unable to return to their homes, which Parfait Onanga-Anyanga, the UN's Special Representative in the country recently said "darkens an already precarious humanitarian picture where the lives of nearly half of CAR's population would be unimaginable without emergency humanitarian assistance."

For the sake of André Zibè's new-born daughter Andrea – and all CAR's children – the mistakes of the past cannot be repeated.¹⁰ And failing to share the incredible natural wealth of the country's forests remains one of the biggest errors.

10 André Zibè wanted to call his new daughter after his father, also André, and it was at the author's suggestion (during their interview) that he chose the female variant, Andrea.

Shard of light

Negotiations around the Honduras timber trade deal with the European Union show how diverse interests can be reconciled in a divided land. Isolda Arita reports.

By Isolda Arita



Isolda Arita has had a varied and distinguished media career in Honduras, mostly reporting for national newspapers. She graduated in journalism from the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH) and since 1988 she has been the director of the publishing house, Editorial Guaymuras, based in Tegucigalpa, where she lives. She is the co-editor and a columnist for the political culture magazine *Envío-Honduras*, and has been a columnist for *El Heraldito* newspaper. She also served as the general coordinator for the Commission for the Defence of Human Rights in Central America (Codehuca) in San José, Costa Rica. In 2001 she was awarded the José Miguel Gómez Golden Crown Prize by the Foundation for the Museum of Honduran People, for her contribution to written culture in the country.

Isolda says she is motivated by the chance journalism gives her to “communicate with people, and share knowledge, feelings and ideas... When done well [journalism] contributes to democratising societies and knowledge.” She adds: “The situation of natural resources in Honduras raises many urgent issues, summarised in one word: sustainability... The country needs coherent policies that help build consensus on managing natural resources and the environment, and which eradicate corruption and impunity, both in the public and private spheres.”

Her hobbies include reading historical novels and conversations, which, she says, “is another way to interpret life... I am convinced that meeting up with friends and family is cheaper than paying a psychiatrist.”

Honduras is a nation riven by conflict, with the disputed presidential election in November 2017 and its violent aftermath a glaring example.

The dangers faced by those who defend their land and natural resources from the corporations and authorities bent on destroying them is another.

Honduras has the highest murder rate of environmental and land activists per capita. According to Global Witness, there have been more than 120 deaths since 2010 – including that of Berta Cáceres.

Cáceres was a champion of indigenous peoples' rights who led numerous campaigns, including some against illegal logging and hydropower dams. As a result, she was gunned down in her home in March 2016.

Her death sparked international outrage and today stands as a symbol of how corruption and human rights violations are deeply entwined with the exploitation of Honduras' natural resources.

Any steps to reverse this are therefore as vital as they are welcome.


The negotiations around the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) which Honduras and the European Union began in 2013, offer a glimmer of hope in illuminating a way forward. While

there are divisions over participation among indigenous groups, some of whom do not recognise the legitimacy of the Honduran government (more on which later), so far, the process has been remarkably free from the rancour and entrenched positions that define so much of Honduras' political landscape.¹¹

Given that forests are the country's most valuable renewable natural resource and play a key role in the lives of the indigenous peoples and agroforestry communities, much rests on the outcome of these negotiations living up to the expectations of those taking part – and culminating in a result that is both fair and robust.

Illegal logging costs Honduras dearly - both in the amount of forest lost every year, and

in the taxes which go unpaid. Over four decades, it's been estimated that an extraordinary 1.7 million hectares of Honduras has been deforested.



Illegal logging costs Honduras dearly - both in the amount of forest lost every year, and in the taxes which go unpaid. Over four decades, it's been estimated that an extraordinary **1.7 million hectares** of Honduras has been deforested.

11 For further detail on the controversy surrounding the election of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez for a second term, see: Amid fierce protest, Honduras inaugurates a president accused of stealing the election, Los Angeles Times, 27.01.18 <http://www.latimes.com/world/mexico-americas/la-fg-honduras-president-20180127-story.html>

What's more, illegal logging is heightening the impact of climate change, which Honduras is particularly vulnerable to.¹²

The underlying causes of this rampant illegality were highlighted in a 2013 study published by the Research Centre for Democracy (CESPAD), which states: "Fragile, weakened forestry governance persists, permeated by permanent abuses of power, breaches and violations of the law, anomalies in technical reports, complicity between local organisations and timber companies to gain logging permits, tree felling in protected areas, tax evasion and fraud..."¹³

Another pervasive crime is the logging of forests on the ancestral lands of indigenous peoples, using mechanisms ranging from bribing the local population to intimidation and violence.

It is within this profoundly troubling and fragile environment that the VPA aims to end the trade in illegal timber. And, against all odds, it seems to be working.

Within a profoundly troubling and fragile environment... the VPA aims to end the trade in illegal timber. And, against all odds, it seems to be working.

Carlos Pineda, secretary of the VPA Technical Unit at the National Forest Conservation Institute (ICF in Spanish), says the VPA process so far has been "highly inclusive and attained high levels of sustained participation from people involved in forestry across the country."

Pineda highlights the active participation of civil society organisations, the private sector, the indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples (PIAH in Spanish), academics, the agroforestry sector, and the public sector, headed up by the Secretariat of Environment (MiAmbiente) and the ICF, who lead the negotiations on behalf of the Honduran Government. But while Pineda might be expected to sing the praises of the process, he is not alone.

Striving for governance of the forestry sector

The participation and involvement of civil society organisations and indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples in the VPA discussions is a landmark in itself, albeit one not without some controversy.

Edgardo Benítez, of the Tawahka people of La Mosquitia, and Armando Córdova, of the Tolupán people, who are from Yoro, both stunningly beautiful and fertile – yet impoverished – areas in north central Honduras, are leaders of the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Honduras (Conpah), an organisation which has been part of the VPA discussions since the second round of negotiation.

12 In 2004, the United Nations identified Honduras as being among the 20 most vulnerable countries in the world in terms of vulnerability to floods and the most vulnerable to hurricanes. Honduras was also identified as the most vulnerable country in Central America by the British Society Maplecroft in their study titled "Vulnerability Index to Climate Change". Agriculture is highly vulnerable to climate variability and weather extremes, this is coupled with problems of land degradation in the country. http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLACREGTOPURBDEV/Resources/840343-1319570618921/Agr_Honduras.pdf

13 CESPAD, La deforestación del bosque en Honduras: Entre la tala ilegal y una endeble institucionalidad, Tegucigalpa, October 2015, p. 6, available at: <http://cespad.org/hn/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Monitoreo-RRNN-oct-2.pdf>

HONDURAS

VPA negotiations started **January 2013**

VPA has not yet entered into force

However, while this important block of indigenous groups are taking advantage of the VPA process to push for recognition of their rights, and gain concessions that they would not otherwise have had, others have opted out of the process.

Some indigenous and popular movement organisations refuse to recognise it, including the Council of Popular and Indigenous Organisations of Honduras (COPINH), which Berta Cáceres co-founded.¹⁴

For Armando, the VPA is related to “a process of struggle for the liberation of indigenous territories” which is why they are taking consultation very seriously and making sure it meets their needs, because “the ICF has assumed governance from a Western perspective, but not from the perspective of the communities.”

For them, the VPA is already yielding positive results, even if the negotiations are still to be concluded and the agreement is yet to enter into force.

Proof of this is that stakeholders engaged on the VPA are already working with the communities on specific actions. For example, in La Mosquitia they are preparing a forestry protocol, referred to in the VPA, which “will inform the ICF about how forestry activity will be carried out in a given area, and in accordance with indigenous values and worldview.”

The VPA negotiation process has also given Conpah the opportunity to propose reforms to the Honduran legal framework.

Benítez explains: “We are requesting a reform to the Forestry Law in order to include the community, collective and inter-communal property regime of the indigenous peoples.

And, perhaps the most ambitious proposal is the approval of a law of title deeds, to reclaim the lands within our ancestral territories that have been unscrupulously titled in favour of third parties, a process which has been the cause of bitter conflicts.”

Conpah leaders are hopeful about the VPA, since it recognises indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples as distinct actors and right holders in the process, as established in the International Labour Organisation’s Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention (No 169), the American Declaration of Indigenous Peoples, and the Rio Declaration of 1992 .

Carlos Pineda remains optimistic. Another factor to be taken into account, he says, is that in parallel to the VPA there has been a negotiation process between the Government and the leaders of the nine indigenous peoples to adopt a Law on Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC).

In addition, he says, “the VPA will become the binding instrument that will govern the State’s investment in the processes to regulate the indigenous and Afro-Honduran territories”.

14 The fact that it has been their choice to opt out of the VPA process, rather than being excluded from it, can be seen as a positive.



In Honduras the VPA process has brought disparate parties together.

Photo by Fundación Democracia sin Fronteras

An opportunity to improve governance and competitiveness

But it isn't just indigenous and Afro-Honduran peoples who are seeing the benefits in the VPA process.

Norma Rodríguez Rueda, the president of the Honduran Federation of Agroforestry Cooperatives (Fehcafor) and a cabinetmaker by trade, says: "The lack of forest governance has enabled illegal logging to flourish. We believe that with the VPA this is going to change, and that there will be more opportunities for cooperatives to be competitive in the national and international markets".

Founded in 1974, Fehcafor brings together 96 cooperatives of men and women who extract resin and timber and turn it into added value products such as furniture or craftwork through carpentry.

Women are involved in all of this work, although they are most prominent in the production of resin and arts and crafts. In fact, the best producers of resin are women.

Crucially, these cooperatives are guardians of the forest. They take care of it because it is their livelihood and "they will not allow illegal timber to be taken from the forest and they will not allow the forest to be burned down", says Rodríguez Rueda proudly.

She says that illegal logging is stealing the market from them because “working legally is expensive. And that is where we lose competitiveness, because we buy legal timber, which is more expensive”.

Fehcafor has been involved in the VPA negotiation process since the beginning and is participating in several negotiating teams. Rodríguez Rueda is convinced that this alliance has already achieved success: “We have taken part in discussions with state institutions, with whom we did not even know we could and should be building relationships”.

She adds: “It has been an extremely important process because we have become aware of a ton of laws that we have to implement, and which through the VPA we will have to apply. We are going to have to improve many practices, because maybe we have not been working as we should.”

Through the process, she says, they have come to see that cooperation is possible: “For example, we saw ourselves as rivals of the private sector, but now we have seen that we can work together, provided that we always respect each other’s ideas.”

For Honduras, any compromise and consensus between diverse interests offers a break from the depressing situation of recent years. And while there remain some who are critical of the VPA, none can dispute that the process has so far been inclusive – to an extent that is almost unheard of in Honduras.

It is part of a long, arduous journey: one which is not yet over, but offers hope for the future.

“We have taken part in discussions with state institutions, with whom we did not even know we could and should be building relationships”

The wind of change blowing through Ghana's villages

How new laws are breathing democracy into the communities around Ghana's forests.

By Mark Olden



Mark Olden was born in London but grew up in Zimbabwe. He is Fern's press advisor and has been a journalist for more than two decades, writing for UK publications including *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Sunday Times*, *The Observer*, *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The New Statesman* and

The London Review of Books. In his previous incarnation as a TV producer he worked for the BBC and Channel 4, including on flagship strands such as *Panorama*, *Dispatches* and *Channel 4 News*, while specialising in current affairs and investigations.

Sefwi Wiawso, Ghana Sefwi Wiawso doesn't feature in Ghana's tourist guides. Its main town, Wiawso, is little more than a single road – albeit one bursting with vitality and colour, with hawkers selling their wares and people milling about in animated conversations.

But being off the beaten track – or more specifically, around eight hours drive west of Accra – is no measure of the district's significance.

“So many of our natural resources come from this area. Timber. Cocoa. Gold. Food crops. The region supports the rest of Ghana, but the people here aren't seeing enough of the benefits;” says Raymond Ennin, an enthusiastic 30 year-old community activist with local environmental and resources NGO Civic Response. “Until now a lot of money has gone into a few pockets,” he adds, as we drive out of Wiawso along undulating red dirt roads.

We pass tropical forests where the vegetation is so dense it seems to be in a state of rapture. Heavy trucks laden with timber rumble by, deepening the crevices in the already rutted road.



In 2004 Ghana lost more revenue from illegal logging – **US \$100 million (€83,271,000)** – than it received in development aid.

The trucks represent a tiny cog in the wheel of an industry that is crucial to Ghana's economic health, accounting for about 11 per cent of export earnings. For decades though, the timber sector has been rife with illegality and corruption.

In a single year – 2004 – it was estimated that Ghana lost more revenue from illegal logging – US \$100 million (€83,271,000) – than it received in development aid.¹⁵ Endemic illegality led to disappearing forests. Between 1990 and 2005, an estimated quarter of Ghana's forest cover vanished.¹⁶

Yet today the country is on the brink of becoming the first in Africa (and the second in the world after Indonesia) to issue a FLEGT license for timber exports, meaning that it has met the stringent legal standards required for access to the lucrative EU market.

Our drive through Sefwi Wiawso's hinterland is to gauge how the protracted process of strengthening Ghana's forest laws, which is integral to Ghana's timber trade deal with the EU, is playing out on the ground.¹⁷

15 See: Civic Response and the EU-Ghana VPA: protecting forests, communities and the climate http://loggingoff.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/civicresponse_ghana.pdf Also: Forest Watch Ghana (2004). Ghana Loses €900 Billion (\$100 million Dollars) Annually from Uncollected Timber Rights Fees! Daily Graphic. Accra: p.6.

16 Forest loss in Ghana is no recent phenomenon. In 1909 the first permanent forest estate was created in the country following concern over the expansion of cocoa and increased felling of timber in the high forests. See: HN Thomson Forests of the Gold Coast, Bulletin of Miscellaneous Information (Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew), Vol. 1910, No. 2 (1910), pp. 60-64. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4114327?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

17 Ghana's VPA with the EU was ratified by both sides in March 2010. Some of the struggles in reforming Ghana's forest laws are highlighted by Zeitlin and Overdevest: “In Ghana . . . the legality review process initially sidelined civil society groups. In response, local and European NGOs (led by Fern and Global Witness) coordinated an effective accountability campaign, threatening legal action, using the media, and pointing to the EU's own statements about the importance of stakeholder participation, which successfully pressured the Ghanaian government into opening up the process to greater civil society input.” See: Experimentalism in Transnational Forest Governance: Implementing EU Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (Flegt) Voluntary Partnership Agreements in Indonesia and Ghana, June 2016 https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2802659

GHANA

VPA negotiations started **March 2007**

VPA entered into force **December 2009**

Sharing the spoils

For generations those who lived by forests invariably saw their lives get tougher when timber companies arrived in their areas: access to the forests they relied on was restricted, while the wealth generated from the logging eluded them.

Overhauling Ghana's forest laws has meant trying to resolve this through new regulations that require companies to negotiate Social Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) with the communities living within a five kilometre radius of a logging concession. Under these SRAs, the timber companies must share the benefits of the forests they exploit with the people who live there.¹⁸

Civic Response has been ensuring that these agreements are respected by being a conduit between communities, timber companies and the authorities across Ghana. They have also been training people to effectively monitor and protect forests.

To this end Raymond Ennin, who was born and raised in Sefwi Wiawso, spends his days traversing the scattered villages which lie on the fringes of the district's dense forests.¹⁹

Our first stop is Aboagyekrom, a cluster of brick dwellings with corrugated iron roofs and a church: an inevitable feature in a country where there seem to be as many churches as petrol stations and religion is central to people's lives.²⁰

Around 20 residents gather in the community meeting area, an open building shaded from the tropical sun.

Ennin translates, and their prime grievance is made immediately clear.

Cocoa farming is the lifeblood of this community, who number around 3,000 people if those living in the outlying areas are counted. But it is failing to deliver enough money for them to live on.

The main cocoa season runs from October to December. In the off-season farmers are forced to take out loans to get by, which they constantly struggle to repay – locking them in a vicious cycle of debt.

The SRA that that the community has negotiated with the two timber companies operating nearby hasn't broken this cycle – and couldn't realistically be expected to.

It has however, brought notable gains.

18 The SRA obligates the contractor to provide amenities, services or benefits to assist the communities and inhabitants of the area, at a cost of 5% of the value of the stumpage fee of timber that is harvested. See: <https://www.documents.clientearth.org/wp-content/uploads/library/2015-06-01-when-are-social-responsibility-agreements-a-legal-requirement-coll-en.pdf> Samuel Mawutor, Programme Officer at Civic Response, explains further: "SRAs come as a service delivery by the contractor (community amenity) or a cash payment by the contractor, or provision of materials by the contractor to be used for a community identified priority. These are the three popular forms SRAs take. There is also a code of conduct negotiated as part of the SRA, which stipulates the behaviour expected by the community of the contractor. This could include respecting ritual /taboo days (days communities don't go to the forest because they believe the 'gods' of the land are having a rest), not logging from community sacred sites, and employment opportunity for some in the community. This part of the SRA is glossed over, but remains a major component of the SRA."

19 34 communities – 22% of the 150 forest fringe communities that Civic Response has engaged with over the last five years – have now partially or fully received the logging benefits owed to them. See: http://loggingoff.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/civicresponse_ghana.pdf

20 More than 70 per cent of Ghana's 26 million population is Christian.



Villagers in Aboagyekrom, western Ghana, by the school toilet paid for by money from a local logging company. From left: Martin Dabedo, Grace Tetekey, Solomon Dziwornu and Atta Godfred. Photo by Mark Olden

“Previously we saw no benefits [from the timber companies],” says cocoa farmer Solomon Dziwornu. “Now because of revenues from our agreement with one of them we have built a toilet for our school [which previously had none], and constructed this building [where we are seated]. We’ve also been promised a computer lab.”

After the meeting, Solomon and three others walk a couple of hundred metres to proudly show us the new toilet. In the small brick classroom opposite, children in intricately patterned green uniforms are engrossed in their studies.

Power sharing

Beyond such material advances, the SRA has brought something less tangible – but surely more far-reaching – to the people of Aboagyekrom.

In the past, any agreements between timber companies and local people were conducted by the local chief. This left the door open to chiefs enriching themselves by capturing rents at the expense of their communities.

But an SRA needs the consent of the entire community. And when people have a voice in the decisions which effect their lives, the power starts to spread.

This is evident on our next stop, a small farming community 40 minutes' drive away, nestling in the shadow of the rolling hills of the Sui forest reserve.

This time, the group of residents we speak to is smaller, but the message is the same: "Before the companies would give money to the chiefs," explains cocoa farmer Emmanuel Gyebi, "now it goes to the community."

The community has spent the money they're entitled to under the SRA on buildings which will significantly improve their lives: accommodation for a midwife, renovating the village market stall, and completing work on a previously abandoned police station.

Yet the negotiation process has not been entirely smooth, and challenges remain.

"We are educating the community, but the Forestry Commission [responsible for regulating forests and wildlife] aren't responding when we tell them that contractors are harvesting more timber than they should," says Gyebi. If, as Gyebi suggests, some timber is being illegally logged, then the rules governing the protection of the forest start to break down.

Yet the fact that he – and the rest of this community – not only know their rights, but are trying to exercise them, marks a radical departure from the past.

It is part of a democratic wind blowing through the villages around Ghana's forests. One which, if properly nurtured, can signal the end of the illegality and corruption that have defined Ghana's timber industry for so long.

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Conclusion

Against all odds, shoots of hope

Historically the hopes and interests of those living in and around forests have been ignored, or simply been ridden roughshod over. This is despite growing evidence that the best protectors of forests are the communities who depend on them.

The stories in this report though, offer glimpses of a different fate for the world's forests and their inhabitants.

The European Union's VPAs with timber producing countries may not be the panacea to all the ills that continue to see forests disappear at such alarming rates around the world. But by including forest communities and civil society groups in democratic processes, the VPA offers a blueprint for a way forward in which forests continue to support those who have protected them for millennia.

The EU has committed to ending deforestation by 2020 by signing up to the [Sustainable Development Goals](#). This is no easy task. Over the past decades the EU has been the largest driver of deforestation through the consumption of '[forest risk commodities](#)', meaning commodities heavily-linked to deforestation, such as beef, soy and palm oil.

Much of this produce is illegally sourced. And since so much deforestation is illicit, the problem of forest destruction cannot be effectively tackled until forests are better governed. For this to happen, the people closest to the problem – forest communities and local civil society – need to be involved and be able to hold their governments to account.

The EU must, at the same time, regulate the imports of forest risk commodities to ensure only legally and sustainably produced commodities are being consumed.

As threats and opportunities facing the world's forests shift, the same values which have driven the VPA agreements should guide any new EU initiatives to tackle deforestation and be integrated into all EU trade and climate policies that impact forests.

The need for people to be able to influence the powers that control their lives and to have the freedom to work together to tackle the challenges they face, is more critical than ever.



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