

African governments commit to fighting illegal logging

At a recent conference in Yaoundé, Cameroon, ministers and high officials from over 30 African countries, the European Union and the United States agreed to work together to improve governance for forest resources in Africa, marking an important step forward in the fight against illegal logging.

Neil Scotland*

The ministers, who were in Cameroon to launch the Africa Ministerial Process for Forest Law Enforcement and Governance (AFLEG)¹, adopted a declaration underscoring the urgent need for action to eradicate illegal logging and the associated trade in forest products.

The importance of this issue cannot be underestimated. Illegal logging causes enormous damage to the environment, and impoverishes local communities who depend on forest products for a living. It also robs governments of an estimated €10-15 billion in revenues every year.

Much of these losses are concentrated in developing countries. An analysis prepared for the World Bank suggests that (at a very conservative estimate) Cameroon is losing €4.5m annually because of weak regulation of timber production: losses in the Central African Republic are estimated at €2.6m, the Democratic Republic of Congo €3.6m, Gabon €8.5m and Ghana €32m.

Gabon aside, all these countries qualify as Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC), and are amongst the world's poorest nations. They can little afford to lose precious millions annually to illegal loggers.

A dismal pattern

Illegal logging is also closely associated with corruption. The lucrative profits shared by illegal operators and complicit officials fuel the cycle of bribery and graft which does so much to curtail growth and prosperity in the developing world. In turn, this corruption undermines the rule of law and principles of good governance, and threatens prospects for sustainable economic development in badly affected countries.

Paul Collier of the World Bank warns that misuse of natural resources forms part of a vicious cycle of corruption and profiteering which destabilises governments, exacerbates poverty, and provokes conflict and civil war.

Liberia and the Democratic Republic of

Congo are two countries where this practice has taken hold in an extreme form. But it also occurs in a more insidious, though no less corrosive, form in all countries where revenues from natural resources are not managed in a transparent and accountable manner.

Even in relatively peaceful and stable countries, powerful groups – such as a political elite or the armed forces – very often control these revenues, so that the country's national endowments of natural wealth come to be managed solely for their private gain. The private source of wealth this gives in turn renders them less accountable to the formal institutions of the state.

Cause for hope

A number of promising initiatives are working to address such failings of governance, particularly for diamonds, oil and mineral deposits. The AFLEG initiative offers an important chance to build similar commitment to tackle these issues in the forest sector.

According to Henri Djombo, minister of forest economics and environment in the Republic of Congo, and president of the Conference of the Ministers of Central African Forests (COMIFAC), "AFLEG represents an opportunity for our countries to exchange best practice on national and sub-regional levels to combat illegal logging and illegal trade in the forest sector, and to discuss concrete ways of working together on this issue".

The conference highlighted some of the many ground-breaking initiatives now under way in Africa, which in different ways are working to break the alliance of corruption and illegal behaviour behind illegal logging.

Forward-looking sector reform programmes in Uganda, Ghana and South Africa have succeeded in laying strong foundations for change and improved management of forest resources. Cameroon is piloting the ground-breaking use of an independent civil society monitor of logging operations (see box), greatly enhancing transparency and accountability in the sector. Across Africa, community-based forestry is making rapid advances, giving local people a greater say in managing and protecting forest resources.

Addressing the conference, Koos Richelle, European Commission Director-General for Development, said: "facing down the vested interests which benefit from illegal logging will not be easy, but it is a worthwhile challenge to take on. In doing this, we must learn from the many examples of good practice on the African continent, and take inspiration from these beacons as we implement the AFLEG initiative".

The European Commission is working to address this shortcoming through an Action Plan for Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT). The Action Plan sets out a new approach to tackling illegal logging, which seeks to link the push for good governance in developing countries, with the legal instruments and leverage offered by the EU's own internal market.

The plan proposes support for reforms to governance in wood-producing countries, and a scheme to eliminate imports of illegal timber to the EU market, to be implemented through voluntary (but binding) partnerships with wood-producing countries and regions.

"It is my sincere hope that this conference will mark the start of a process to build partnerships between the EU and Africa to make this a reality", said Mr Richelle.

The Courier

Partnerships for change

And it is not just in Africa where change is needed. The AFLEG declaration points to the need for consumers and producers of wood to work in partnership to end the trade in illegal timber.

Europe and other parts of the rich world provide a market for the illicit and destructive harvest of illegal timber in Africa. It follows that these countries must shoulder some of the responsibility for bringing this damaging practice to an end.

To set this in context, exports of timber products from Africa to Europe were worth over €3 billion in 2001, behind only petroleum and diamonds in importance. In central Africa, wood products account for 20 per cent of total trade with the EU. The greater part of this trade is legal, but large volumes of illegal timber are mixed in with the legitimate trade. If allowed to continue unchecked, this trade will undermine the process of reform agreed to in Yaoundé. But, at the moment, the EU is powerless to prevent the entry of illegal timber to European markets.

A firm step forward

But reinforcing demand-side measures in Africa, with supply-side side measures in Africa's major markets, will only help to tip the balance against the strong vested interests which profit from illegal logging where firm political will exists in wood-producing countries.

The AFLEG ministerial process is designed to galvanise this will, and its successful launch in Yaoundé marks an important step forward. Not least because it succeeded in harnessing the collective skills and energy of over 150 participants from 39 nations, African civil society, international NGOs and the private sector into a concerted and coordinated movement. This powerful demonstration of intent must now be translated into a successful and meaningful programme of work. ■

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1. The World Bank organised the AFLEG ministerial conference, with financial support from the European Commission, France, the UK, Switzerland and the United States.

Independent monitoring of logging operations in Cameroon

The Yaoundé declaration contains a commitment by governments to encourage independent monitoring of logging operations, a key measure to improve governance and transparency in the sector.

Cameroon is piloting one such initiative with Global Witness, a UK-based non-governmental organisation, acting as an independent watchdog under the auspices of the project for Independent Observation in Support of Forest Law Enforcement. The project was established in May 2001 at the request of the Cameroon government for an initial three-year pilot phase.

Although the relationship between the monitor and the monitored has not always been easy, the experience has demonstrated the sterling value of independent eyes in the field. In the short time the project has been operational, access to information has improved and a number of major violations of forest laws have been documented and reported to the authorities.

Providing information is only half the battle, however. Of 40 field checks where infractions were detected, only in 17 cases has an official statement of offence been issued by the Cameroon government. Major violators, who wield strong power and influence, have so far avoided facing due legal process in the courts.

Building the political will required to push gross offences of the well-connected through the courts is the next difficult step to be taken. The AFLEG process will help to reinforce this objective.