

Forest Governance and COVID-19

How can FLEGT support a green recovery from the pandemic

Summary report from a webinar on 14 October 2020

Human society is enduring one of the greatest global health crises of the past century: COVID-19. As the urgency of tackling the pandemic took centre stage, policy issues such as implementation of the Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan and the Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) moved into the background.

Meanwhile, logging, trade exports, manufacturing, and construction are continuing. Governments in Europe and VPA countries face tough choices in balancing the health and welfare of the population with meeting their governance and political commitments.

On 14 October 2020, Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Karin Karlsbro - in collaboration with Fern, the Centre for International Development and Training, University of Wolverhampton (CIDT), the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) and

the World Resources Institute (WRI) - hosted a **webinar on the importance of sustaining momentum for FLEGT as part of a green recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.**

Speakers from EU institutions, timber producing countries, the private sector and civil society debated how to mitigate any negative impacts the pandemic may have on governance and forest peoples' rights, and how FLEGT can play a positive role in recovery plans. They agreed that strengthening the FLEGT Action Plan and responsible trade are key to sustainable, just recovery. Leadership from the EU and concerted action by producer countries, the private sector and civil society actors are therefore needed to unleash FLEGT's potential in these troubled times.

The need for EU leadership

Opening the webinar, MEP Karin Karlsbro noted that the pandemic showed how fragile the global trade system can be. More international cooperation and better regulatory frameworks are needed to ensure supply chains and global trade are sustainable, resilient and contribute to greener growth and prosperity. The FLEGT framework is a crucial building block to achieve this and the EU must do more to reduce deforestation and forest degradation.

Chantal Marijnissen from the European Commission stressed that the design, scope, and infrastructure

of FLEGT and its focus on legality can help address the impacts of COVID-19. VPAs ensure that governance is maintained in the short and longer run. Creating a better environment for compliant and competitive companies and boosting environmental sustainability and tax collection are crucial to achieve a greener economy, resilient communities and take the pressure off forests. FLEGT also contributes to the European Green Deal - the EU's compass for building back better and addressing future challenges, including those linked to pandemics.

Focusing on governance and law enforcement

Dr Agus Justianto from the Ministry of Environment and Forestry of Indonesia said Indonesia is responding to COVID by relaxing some procedures, optimising the state budget and prioritising labour-intensive activities through forest rehabilitation and social forestry programmes. In the wake of the pandemic, the Government finalised the controversial “omnibus law” which he said aims to limit overlaps between regulations, simplify licensing and protection of small and medium enterprises and improve the business environment.

Vice-Minister Francisco Javier Escalante from the Forest Development of the Forest Conservation Institute (ICF) of the Honduran Government stated that despite the health crisis, his country made progress with VPA negotiations, involving all stakeholders including local communities, Indigenous groups, and the private sector. Fighting illegal logging remains a key objective and improving forest governance is at the heart of the government's development strategy. Because the forest sector is a major employer and contributor to the country's gross domestic product (GDP), the VPA should be part of its green recovery.

In the Congo Basin, logging activities continued, and illegalities spiked according to Horline Njike from the Field Legality Advisory Group and Essylot Lubala from Observatoire de la Gouvernance Forestière. Some governments sanctioned contravening companies, but all independent forest monitoring activities were put on hold. This resulted in civil society monitors having to “delocalise” data collection and rely on IT tools.

Obed Owusu-Addai from EcoCare Ghana called for a less restricted approach to forest management. The Ghanaian Forestry Commission cannot always be on the ground. Communities thus have a role to play in helping to control and manage forest activities particularly for the domestic market at a time when COVID-19 has reduced timber exports and ensuing revenues.

Strengthening community and private sector resilience

The forest sector is a major component in the GDP of many Central African countries. Benoît Jobbé-Duval from Association Technique Internationale des Bois Tropicaux (ATIBT) commented that the forest sector resisted the pandemic: logging companies continued to operate, pay their taxes, and employ most of their staff. Companies also provided a health support to communities in their areas of operations. In Honduras, thanks to budgetary support from the EU, communities are involved in decision making processes regarding forests and are empowered to manage them directly.

Looking ahead at positive solutions

Following questions and concerns from participants on political will in VPA countries, deregulation decisions and the role of the private sector vis-à-vis communities, the speakers responded that in the short term, it will be important to help impacted companies mitigate impacts on regional economies and social benefits.

The EU should not let its guard down and continue to lead the fight against illegal logging and deforestation in producer and import countries. This also means stronger implementation of the EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) and dialogue with Chinese companies.

In the context of its new multiannual financial framework, the EU is proposing an integrated approach to forests through “forests partnerships” underpinning poverty reduction. The EU's 15 billion Euro global response package to COVID-19 will support partner countries to build back better including through greater biodiversity protection.

COVID-19 has shown that communities are very

vulnerable to shocks. FLEGT should therefore ensure that benefit sharing mechanisms offering community access to forests and forest resources are reinforced.

Daphne Hewitt from the UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO)-EU FLEGT Programme insisted on the importance of modernising the forest sector and using technology better. Other mitigation measures include strengthening and expanding independent forest monitoring, maintaining civil society engagement, and facilitating e-commerce initiatives for legal timber.

In her final remarks, MEP Karlsbro concluded that we are facing a dual emergency that require adequate attention, the COVID- 19 crisis and climate change. The EU needs to provide a sustainable response to these challenges that promotes a green transition, and trade that works for the EU, partner countries and the environment.