



DECLARATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS FROM FORESTED TROPICAL COUNTRIES

OCTOBER 2019

We, civil society leaders from forested countries in West and Central Africa and South East Asia are determined to stop forest destruction including the trade in illegal timber and commodities stemming from deforestation. We recently met with decision makers from the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Parliament, and the Belgian, French, German, Spanish, and UK governments.

We are all from countries engaged in or negotiating Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPA) to halt illegal logging. These are a central plank of the EU's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan. As a major global player, especially in terms of importing timber and providing development assistance, the EU has a responsibility to ensure that its policies do not have a negative impact on the climate, or lead to deforestation and environmental and human rights crimes.

The EU should live up to its commitment to fight illegal logging, halt deforestation by 2020, deliver the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and limit global warming to 1.5°C by providing strong support for forests and forest people including women, in its development, trade and climate priorities notably through the proposed Green Deal. This includes ensuring the new EU Multi-Annual Financial Framework delivers adequate financial resources for forest protection and rights-based restoration and enables civil society organisations (CSOs) to fulfil their monitoring role.

Forests, a political urgency

Forests are important for climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation and poverty alleviation. Three hundred million people worldwide live in forests and 1.6 billion depend on them for their livelihoods. From the forest fires in the Amazon, to persistent illegal logging in the tropical rainforests of Africa, and forest conversion for large-scale agriculture in South East Asia, deforestation is destroying habitats and livelihoods, and severely impacting women and other vulnerable groups. This trend could accelerate tropical deforestation, releasing carbon dioxide and worsening climate change.

Despite numerous international initiatives to address the problem, tropical forests continue to suffer the most from high rates of degradation. To solve this crisis, we need to overcome the division and lack of will and move beyond business as usual. This means fixing weak governance and poor policies, and irresponsible trade liberalisation.

But there is hope in sight — we are seeing stronger demand for bottom-up approaches to forest management which consider the differentiated needs of women and men, consumption patterns and agriculture practices are also improving.

Lasting solutions exist and we have laid them out in this briefing.

VPAs can end illegal logging

Demand for timber is unrelenting, and a main cause of deforestation. Forests are being degraded and destroyed at a rate of 13 million hectares each year and the illegal timber trade is worth US\$50-152 billion annually according to Interpol. The lucrative trade in wood and timber products from the global South to the EU creates economic incentives to cut down forests, exacerbating forest loss, and intensifying negative social and environmental effects. Therefore, the fight against illegal logging should remain a priority and must feature prominently in the Commission priorities for 2019-2023 through effective implementation of the FLEGT Action Plan. The plan is crucial for promoting legally produced timber whilst improving governance and the rights of local forest dependent communities. The Commission FLEGT Workplan is a step in the right direction and the EU should ensure it can be transparently monitored.

Civil society organisations in the EU and producer countries have supported FLEGT since its inception. Besides governing trade relations, its VPAs have also triggered governance and legal reforms. But progress is patchy, leading to political fatigue, and decreasing interest from stakeholders in some countries. It has also had limited impacts on community livelihoods, particularly that of women. The EU should continue to support positive change in partner countries to ensure that the VPAs and the EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) are brought to fruition. This requires effective interactions between government authorities in producer countries and the EU. Civil society has an important role to play in monitoring implementation and raising issues. The EU committed to grant FLEGT licenses privileged access to the EU market - we ask that this commitment be reflected in EU Member States' procurement policies.

Healthy forests require strong partnerships and activities

- **In Cameroon**, we need to strengthen support to independent forest monitors to control the agricultural and timber supply chains and inform relevant EU authorities. This will reduce the risk of illegal exports coming to the EU market. We must also strengthen the control of timber and derived products exported to and imported from Asian markets as they have become a major provider of processed products for the EU market.

- **In the Central African Republic**, the EU should reengage in the VPA process including helping to operationalise the forest policy and build coherence across activities that support the country's reconstruction.
- **In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, political will to develop a forest policy and revise the forest code is good news, and action must quickly follow. The EU and the government should resume VPA negotiations and ensure the Central African Forest Initiative (CAFI) is implemented effectively, including consideration of local communities' and Indigenous Peoples' rights and civil society's legitimate request to actively participate in decision-making bodies.
- **In Ghana**, the government is looking for the EUTR to be enforced across all Member States and for recognition that FLEGT licensed timber is equivalent to voluntary certification standards within Public Procurement Policies.
- **In Gabon**, with VPA negotiations at a standstill, EU funding should focus on civil society participation in the ongoing natural resource management processes including legal reforms, support to sectoral governance, certification initiatives, and CAFI to ensure that the rights of local and indigenous communities are respected.
- **In Laos**, the EU should encourage the government to promote community forest management and ensure that local communities benefit from the VPA. We also need the EU to offer continued political support for civil society engagement in reforms and to educate Laos government agencies on the importance of civil society involvement.
- **In Liberia**, capacity building and financial support should be increased, and the EU should promote more multi-stakeholder discussions on how to ensure communities are the main managers of community forests, not just receivers of benefits from logging companies. We would also like the EU to support incorporation of community forestry into the VPA legality framework.
- **In Republic of the Congo**, the EU should support effective participation of communities and indigenous groups including women in the VPA. This will enable them to advocate for stronger and more equitable access to benefits. The Congo government should accelerate legal reforms and improve law enforcement to tackle governance challenges as these hinder progress towards licensing and could jeopardise other governance initiatives such as CAFI.

- **In Viet Nam**, FLEGT licensing is planned from 2021 and national authorities are drafting a decree instituting the timber legality assurance system. However, the local VPA NGO network wants timber produced by forest-dwelling households and micro-enterprises to comply with legality requirements, and a greater focus on gender, since more than 50 per cent of the rural workforce and forestry workers are women. The monitoring and evaluation framework and bodies should also clarify civil society's role and their responsibility for enabling forest communities to be heard.

The EU is negotiating Free Trade Agreements with several highly forested countries in our regions, notably Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and the Mercosur bloc. The EU should look for lessons from VPAs that could help address deforestation in these discussions. For example, existing civil society monitoring mechanisms should be strengthened and properly resourced to ensure parties implementing environmental and social provisions can be held accountable.

Forests should not be destroyed to satisfy unsustainable consumption

Eighty per cent of global deforestation is caused by production of forest risk commodities such as soy, beef, palm oil, cocoa and rubber. In a recent Communication, the EU vowed to reduce its forest footprint by stepping up action to halt deforestation. This action should include regulatory measures to protect forests and respect rights and integrate lessons learned from FLEGT. Companies' voluntary efforts to tackle deforestation and human rights abuses have not achieved the intended aims and highlight the need for a binding regulation to make companies accountable. We also need monitoring mechanisms, empowered civil society and support to producer countries to improve legal enforcement and governance.

Forests matter for the climate and responsible trade

Forests have a key role to play in helping meet the Paris Climate Agreement. Several VPA countries have included forest-related targets in their Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) to the Agreement. The EU should support these countries to ramp up NDC ambitions by integrating forest governance goals and ensuring climate finance goes to forest protection and rights-based restoration models that include communities.

List of signatories

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 Civic Response, Ghana
 EcoCare Ghana, Ghana
 Fern, European Union
 Field Legality Advisory Group, Cameroon
 Foundation for Community Initiatives, Liberia
 Forêts et Développement Rural Foundation for Communities Initiative, Cameroon
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