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Our Forests Our Lives

Stories of hope and resilience from forest
communities around the world

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Stories of hope and resilience from forest communities around the world

Editors: Mark Olden and Richard Wainwright

Cover photo: Alexandra Benjamin

"This is our father's land that was taken away from us," says Rita Massquoi from Gbonyea, Liberia.

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Old ways of life are receding in rural Laos.
Photo: Mark Olden



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Photo: Alexandra Benjamin

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Introduction

Deforestation around the world is accelerating. Strengthening the rights of those who live in them is the way to end it.



In rural Laos forests are integral to peoples' survival. Photo: Mark Olden

From remarkable land rights achievements to the devastating Amazon fires, 2019 is the year forests moved up the global climate agenda.

In part, this is due to the growing realisation that deforestation affects us all.

Yet five years after a coalition of governments, businesses, civil society organisations and Indigenous Peoples' groups made a historic pledge to halve deforestation by 2020, analysts say that this goal is nowhere near being realised. In fact, forest loss is accelerating. ¹ If we continue to destroy the world's tropical rainforests at the current rate, they will disappear from the planet within 100 years.

The following stories, however, show a path to a different future: one in which the people most directly affected by deforestation are at the forefront of actions to tackle it.

From the Liberian women fighting to own and govern land that's rightfully theirs, to the Guyanese Indigenous Peoples resisting companies attempting to seize their forests, and from the rural Lao communities adapting to profound changes in lifestyles that have endured for generations, to the Ghanaians finally getting justice from the logging operators in their areas: these stories come from different parts of the globe, but are bound by a common thread.

It is the principle that to protect forests, the rights of those who manage and live in them must be strengthened. They are the ultimate guardians of the forests, and have to be at the heart of efforts to improve how they are governed.

The reportage in **Our Forests Our Lives** reveals concrete examples of what is being achieved in countries that the European Union (EU) has either signed, or is negotiating, Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) timber trade deals with. VPAs are a key component of the EU's pioneering Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade Action Plan (FLEGT), which aims to tackle the root causes of illegal logging, by giving forest communities and civil society a say in shaping new, more just forest laws, or clarifying those which are unclear.

This report highlights seven key elements that can improve the way forests are managed, and strengthen community ownership rights. Each of the stories focuses on one of those elements, highlighting the importance of **accountability, capacity, coordination, transparency and equity in benefit sharing, gender and participation**.

Combined, these elements can be the bedrock to protect the world's forests for future generations.

Alexandra Benjamin, September 2019.

'These stories come from different parts of the globe but are bound by a common thread: the principle that to protect forests, the rights of those who live in them must be strengthened.'

¹ Deforestation has risen by 43 per cent in the five years since the New York Declaration was signed, according to a progress report.



Fern's Forest Governance Campaigner **Alexandra Benjamin** has a decade of experience in the environmental and non-profit sector.

Alexandra grew up in Newport, Rhode Island and Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the United States. After studying tree climate science at the University of Colorado, she completed a Masters' in Forest Science at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and won a Fulbright Scholarship, both of which took her to India. There she lived and worked in agricultural villages in the eastern Himalayas for three years, climbing trees, conducting research on forest science and community awareness of climate change, and gathering data for reports for local communities and the Indian government.

Throughout her career, Alexandra has specialised in gender, environmental justice and forest science related issues. She's worked with women's groups in India and gender-based violence organisations in the USA, and mentored upcoming women scientists internationally.

At Fern, Alexandra focusses on forestry and forest peoples in Liberia and Ghana. She is on the management team of the UK NGO Forest Coalition, a coalition of leading NGOs working on forests in the context of climate change, biodiversity, development and human rights, and she is also the author of numerous reports and papers on forestry and related issues.

Alexandra lives in London with her husband Oscar and in her spare time loves volunteering for London Village Network, hiking,

and taking photographs of forests and people around the world.

"I can't imagine a life without natural areas," she says. "When you go to natural areas, you inevitably see and feel the world is much bigger than you and whatever problems you have at that moment. I'm a better person with nature around. I think other people, even those without access to natural spaces right now, have a right to have them protected for the future."

Alexandra tweets at [@alexjbenjamin](https://twitter.com/alexjbenjamin)

This land is ours

Alexandra Benjamin discovers how a new law could end the age-old injustices Liberia's women face.

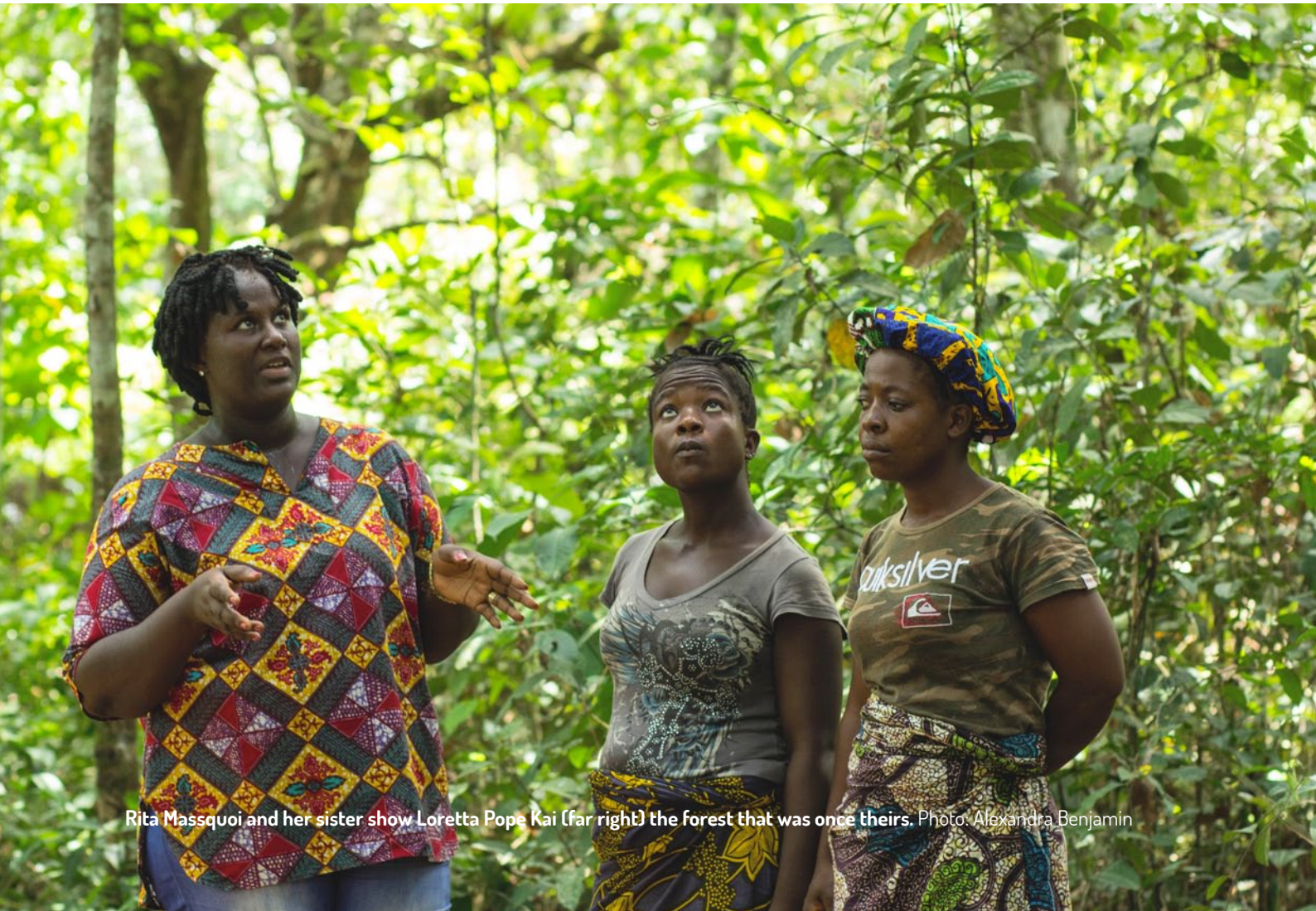
Lofa County, Liberia

Ten women are gathered in the open-air concrete slab building that serves as a community centre for Gbonyea, a village a few kilometres from Liberia's border with Guinea, and five hours drive from the capital Monrovia.

Loretta Althea Pope Kai, the charismatic Programme Director for local NGO the Foundation for Community Initiatives (FCI), asks the women a series of questions,

each one focussed on whether they own land. Virtually none of them do.

For around two hours, the women outline the challenges they face, and Pope Kai carefully steers them through their rights. As the meeting draws to a close, the group breaks into an impassioned rallying call: "We want land. We want land..."



Rita Massquoi and her sister show Loretta Pope Kai (far right) the forest that was once theirs. Photo: Alexandra Benjamin

Lofa county has vast swathes of fertile land, including rich, dense forest, and it was considered Liberia's breadbasket before the country's 14-year civil war, which affected this area more severely than any other in terms of population displacement and the destruction of infrastructure. Lofa was also the first county to be hit by the Ebola virus outbreak in March 2014.

Yet long predating these profound traumas is an injustice which has shaped the lives of women here, and across Liberia, for generations: the denial of their land rights. The reality of this becomes vividly clear straight after the meeting.

men who have always made the decisions about them."

While the 2003 Inheritance Law defined some land rights for married women (granting them just a third of their husband's property after death), married women still had no land rights outside of inheritance and unmarried women were not able to own land privately or collectively.

In practice, this means that unmarried women – who represent 62 per cent of Liberian women – can't own land or have their own house. This often leaves them having to squat with their families. These women are

We stop at a clearing, and one of the sisters, Rita Massquio, explains: "This is our father's land that was taken away from us."

Along with three sisters who were among those attending, we take a short drive, followed by a ten-minute hike through trails which cut through the thickets of lush forest around Gbonyea. We stop at a clearing, and one of the sisters, Rita Massquio, explains: "This is our father's land that was taken away from us."

After their father died, the land should have passed to their brother under customary law – but he was too unwell to look after it. Now, she says, the community are denying them their land, and a local landlord's son has planted rubber on it. "We don't have nobody that can help us so that we can get our land back," Massquio says.

The sisters' story is echoed in the interviews we conduct with the women of Gbonyea.

We hear of the mother driven off her land by her brother. Of the woman who is precariously sustaining her family on land she doesn't own. Of the daughter forced, along with her mother, off their land by her late father's wife.

Land is power

Pope Kai is all too familiar with such tales.

"Land is power, and men love power," she says. "Although women are the primary users of forests, it is



often unpaid labourers within their families, having to tend to the land and take care of relatives at the same time – yet they can't own or make decisions about the very land they stand on.

"In rural communities, women are seen as properties because when they marry, the husband pays a dowry, which means they buy the woman from their family and the woman becomes the husband's possession. As properties themselves, the wives cannot own a property," explains Pope Kai.

Liberia may have elected Africa's first female head of state in Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, but evidence is everywhere of the barriers that women face.

Agriculture and forestry are cornerstones of Liberia's economy, generating around 40 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Yet despite 80 per cent of agricultural workers and a fifth of forestry labourers being women, they have little control over land.

This mirrors women's position in society more generally: In 2018, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranked Liberia 155th out of 160 countries on gender equality, based on reproductive health, empowerment and economic activity.

It would be a mistake, however, to see women's predicament in Liberia as an aberration: according to studies, nearly half of the world's smallholder farmers are women, yet they own less than 20 per cent of the world's land.

Empowering women

Growing up in Monrovia with two brothers, Pope Kai was acutely aware of gender disparities.

In a nation where only 27 per cent of women are literate, compared to 60 per cent of men, she says she was lucky that her parents were able to support and encourage her education.



The Massquoi sisters' story of being denied their land is all too common in Liberia. Photo: Alexandra Benjamin



Photo: Alexandra Benjamin

“Most of my [female] peers were not able to complete their schooling, because their parents either didn’t have the finances or didn’t support them. Because of this I grew up with a passion to mentor other young women and advocate for their rights.”

Today, as Programme Director at FCI, which is based in Monrovia, Pope Kai is doing just this.

Her work focusses on increasing women’s confidence and their ability to participate in decision-making processes. A key aspect of this is educating women (as well as men and younger people) on the law – and in particular the Land Rights Act which President George Weah signed in September 2018.

A revolutionary Act

The Act, which is the first Liberian law to recognise women’s rights to land, is one of Africa’s most progressive land rights laws.

Under it, women are defined as part of their community, and are able to participate in how land is managed and run. Land can now be owned privately, jointly and collectively by management bodies, and all women, married or not.

“Land is power, and men love power,” [Pope Kai] says. “Although women are the primary users of forests, it is men who have always made the decisions about them.”

It’s not hyperbole to say that it has the potential to fundamentally alter Liberian women’s life prospects and create a more just power balance between the country’s men and women.

“This is a big step towards equality, but having the law is nothing if it isn’t implemented properly,” says Kai Pope.

If its potential is realised, then all Liberians will benefit.

A 2011 report by the United Nations’ Food and Agricultural Organisation outlined the immense wider gains that closing the gender gap in agriculture can bring, stating: “If women in rural areas had the same

access to land, technology, financial services, education and markets as men, agricultural production could be increased and the number of hungry people reduced by 100-150 million.”

The women of Gbonyea are only too willing to play their part in transforming their own society.



Tenets of forest governance: Capacity, and gender equity

“At FCI, I educate women, men, and youth about [the Land Rights Act]. Our training builds awareness about the law and increases women’s confidence and ability to participate in decision-making processes. This confidence building is essential. While 73 per cent of Liberian women are illiterate and therefore cannot read the Land Rights Act, you don’t need to be able to read the law to know your rights. Women who believe that they can make decisions about land and understand the land rights this law gives them, can fight for land ownership. Our training is slowly working towards these goals, but we need help from donors and the government in order to succeed. Laws are dependent on implementation – we need to ensure men aren’t allowed to use loopholes to avoid behaviour change”.

(Loretta Althea Pope Kai)

Capacity is achieved when:

- Most communities are managing their community forests effectively and legal, institutional and regulatory frameworks support capacity building activities.
- There are detailed guidelines, resources and mechanisms available to ensure capacity gains can be passed on.

Equity in Gender is achieved when:

- Forest and land use policies include objectives and measures to improve gender equity.
- Women and men are able to participate equally in community decision-making processes and have an equal say in how community forest resources are managed.



Gaulbert Sutherland has had a decade-long career as a journalist and now works as an independent researcher focusing mainly on development and the environment. Born in Karaudarnau, an indigenous village in Guyana, he saw first-hand how the stories and issues faced by Indigenous Peoples and others who live on the margins of mainstream society were rarely covered in the national media. Seeking to change this, he joined Guyana's leading newspaper, *Stabroek News*, where his work quickly gained prominence.

He has won a number of local and international journalism awards including two UNICEF Media Awards for Excellence in Journalism Coverage of Women and Children (2009/2010), the CARDI/IICA/ACM/CTA Caribbean Agricultural

Journalism Award for Best News Story (2011), and the United Nations Guyana Media Awards for Excellence in Coverage of Human Rights, as well as the Best Overall Journalist (2015). He has written for several local magazines as well as international outlets such as *Mongabay* and done research for local and international NGOs and agencies such as IUCN Netherlands.

He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Environmental Studies and as a 2016/17 Chevening Scholar, obtained a Master of Science degree in Climate Change, Development and Policy from the University of Sussex, UK.

"Journalism, to me, means giving a voice to the voiceless, a platform to those who would otherwise not be heard, and being a force for positive change, holding those with power to account," he says.

Passionate about climate change and development, Sutherland has reported from deep within Guyana's jungles, where people depend almost exclusively on forest resources to meet their needs, all the way to Oslo and Oahu (Hawaii) and places in-between. He shines a spotlight on what he believes are two of the most urgent issues facing developing countries at this time and what can be done to tackle them.

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John Williams examines a cassava plant at his farm. Photo: Gaulbert Sutherland

The forest is our life

Guyana's forests have sustained people for generations. Gaulbert Sutherland travelled deep into the country's hinterland to hear of the pressures that locals face, and their hopes for change.

Annai, Guyana

First, an American company came knocking. Then an Indian firm. A Chinese corporation soon followed. "Ten years doing logging? The amount of machines they wanted to bring... I said no, don't interfere with our jungle, that is our jungle, leave it there," recalled Mark George of one encounter with a company that was seeking approval to log the

forests surrounding Annai, an indigenous village in Guyana more than 400 kilometres from the capital, Georgetown.

"The people supported me," said George, who was then the toshao or village chief. Promises of US \$5,000 per year for the village and salaries for the village

council were made, an appealing offer in an area where poverty is rife and jobs are scarce. But, conscious of how much the forests contributed to their livelihoods, the people resisted, George said.

That resistance has come to the fore time and again over the past decade as companies sought to operate in the vast forests that surround Annai and its sister communities, with the indigenous villages often the last to know as various companies were granted concessions for logging.

Forestry is big business in Guyana. Forests cover approximately 87 per cent of the country's land or approximately 18.48 million hectares, much of it designated as State Forests and managed by the Guyana Forestry Commission (GFC). The sector contributed 2.27 per cent to Guyana's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2016, with total forest products exports valued at US \$41.9 million. Approximately 20,000 people, mainly in the rural and hinterland areas, are employed in the sector.

Nonetheless, Guyana has one of the lowest deforestation rates in the world. In 2017, forest loss was recorded at 0.048 per cent, the lowest since 2010, when the country began monitoring such changes under a REDD+ pact with Norway. Over the years, gold mining has been the main driver of deforestation, accounting for 74 per cent of the deforestation recorded in 2017.

Forced from their land

For indigenous communities, the destruction wrought by mining has been alarming. As has the granting of forest concessions close to indigenous lands. Guyana's laws provide for indigenous villages to obtain titles for the land they occupy and, currently, Indigenous Peoples own 14 per cent of the country's land. However, the process of gaining legal ownership has been cumbersome and villages have complained of mining and forest concessions being granted on land they have customarily used for farming, hunting, and other activities, all without them being informed. With farms as well as hunting and fishing grounds being impacted – and sometimes destroyed – people have been forced from the land, as it does not fall within the titled area.

Forests – as they have for generations – continue to sustain the lives of Guyana's Indigenous Peoples, who

Veronica Farias with the soaps and oils made from the seeds of the crabwood tree which are harvested from the forest. Photo: Gaulbert Sutherland



For indigenous communities, the destruction wrought by mining has been alarming. As has the granting of forest concessions close to indigenous lands.



account for 10 per cent of the population. In the rural areas, where most live, poverty rates range from 61 to 94 per cent. Jobs are scarce, and [according to a UNICEF report](#), “for most of the Indigenous Peoples, poverty is not only lack of monetary resources, but it involves access to land, culture, medicine, food, education and safety.”

Forests as a way of life

Annai is perched at the edges of the Rupununi savannah, where forest-covered mountains mark the beginning of the jungle, their peaks often adorned in fleeting wisps of clouds. Like other indigenous communities, the people here turn to the forest for the necessities of life.

Forests are essentially their “supermarket,” according to Mike Williams, the secretary for the village council and member of the board of the North Rupununi District Development Board, made up of 20 indigenous villages that collectively work on development issues, including those related to the forest.

“Each one of these villages depend on the forest for many things, for food, wildlife, fish, shelter, medicine, agriculture,” he said. And this can be seen the moment you arrive in the village as palm fronds form the roofs of many houses.

At her home in Annai, while preparing to extract the toxins from cassava to make cassava bread, a staple of Indigenous Peoples’ diets, Zalita Moses points out that



Abel Williams weaves a fan while his grandson Dylan Williams displays some of the products his grandfather produces using materials from the forest. Photo Gaublert Sutherland

“The forest is important because that is how we live, we protect it, we conserve it, and we also collect food from the forest...collect materials for the house, for the craft, medicines.”

the matapee (a type of strainer used to squeeze out the “cassava water”), the sifter, and other implements used in the process all come from the forest, while the cassava is cultivated in jungle clearings because that is where the most fertile land is located.

“I feel more comfortable in the forest than at home in the village,” said Mark George, as he paused from clearing his farm of weeds. His and the surrounding farms are located on state land, which brings him some unease as a nearby non-indigenous community claims it, but they have agreed that the indigenous farmers can use the land. “This is our farming ground from very long, our grandparents were here,” he said, disclosing that his sons and other relatives all farm in the area. Farming is their rotational livelihood and main source of income as they sell the excess produce.

“The forest is important because that is how we live, we protect it, we conserve it, and we also collect food from the forest ... collect materials for the house, for the craft, medicines,” said Veronica Farias, who, for the past 12 years, has led a group of women who produce various remedies for ailments.

The group, called Medicine from Trees, utilises plant materials including crabwood seeds, harvested from the crabwood trees located deep in the forest where logging companies have previously expressed interest. Crabwood is a commercially valuable timber species but is not abundant in Guyana, and Farias is concerned at the implications should logging companies succeed in gaining access to the area.

“If they touch that area where we depend on, and the crabwood trees, we would lose everything,” she said. “They will just extract the materials and where will we make ends meet for this project or for us?”

Creating Space for Indigenous Peoples

On November 23, 2018, Guyana initialled a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the European Union under the EU’s Forestry Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) programme.

The FLEGT programme aims to reduce illegal logging by strengthening sustainable and legal forest management, improving governance, and promoting trade in legally produced timber. The initialling of the VPA followed six years of negotiations that saw the involvement of multiple stakeholders in Guyana.

For Williams, who was involved in the process, the pact represents a new hope that the concerns of Indigenous Peoples would be treated with more seriousness. “The laws are there but it’s never really adhered to, but if we have to make the VPA work, all these things have to be abided with,” said Williams. He pointed out that if concessions are being allocated next to indigenous titled lands, the law says that the villages have to be informed, but this is not usually done. He said that changes have already been seen with extensive consultations and feedback and training.

“I think they have done a good job. They’ve been the only entity that have been interacting and meeting the people,” he said of the GFC and the VPA negotiation process. “I think our concerns will be listened to more because of this process.”

Laura George, of the Amerindian Peoples Association (APA), an NGO that advocates for Indigenous Peoples’ rights, said that the process created spaces for their concerns to be heard. “To an extent, we can say that the VPA that was initialled... created a platform from which we can work to enhance forest governance and respecting rights, improving the system and reducing illegality,” she said. George added that as the process moves forward, they hope that resources can be made available to ensure the continued engagement and protection of Indigenous Peoples’ rights.

“In this way,” observes Oda Almas of the Forest Peoples Programme (FPP), “the VPA could be a catalyst not just for enforcing existing laws, but for bringing Guyana’s national legislation into line with its international obligations on Indigenous Peoples’ rights.”

Research conducted by indigenous communities themselves, with assistance from APA, FPP, and

the Rainforest Foundation US, has documented how village titles granted by the state overwhelmingly leave out large areas of the communities' customary lands, and in many cases logging concessions have been allocated in these areas – because the national legislation allows this.

“The VPA could be very useful if it helps create a platform which leads to Indigenous Peoples' rights to their customary lands being recognised and protected both in law and in practice, so that concessions and logging operations could not be carried out on such lands without the free, prior and informed consent of the customary owners,” says Almas.

The VPA process has propelled changes that otherwise would have taken longer.

Kenny David, who heads Guyana's FLEGT Secretariat, pointed out that Guyana's overarching Forest Act was revised and codes of practice that govern forest operations were published. Laura Singh of Guyana's Forest Products Development and Marketing Council observed that some requirements for those involved in the industry were not enforced previously but said that, influenced by the VPA process, this is now being done “because people need to ensure that they are

legal in every sense, [including] the environmental, social and the economic component of it.”

Attitudes amongst stakeholders have also changed. “Many times, when we went, people said, ‘Listen, this EU thing is not for us, we don't wanna hear about it, we'll sell our wood to whomever.’ But then you understand that if you don't get it right... at the very start of that process, it's gonna affect [the entire sector],” said David. Greater understanding, he said, has fostered an increased willingness to comply with regulations.

In Guyana, illegal logging is not a major problem; improving governance and access to markets is seen as a bigger issue amongst stakeholders.

“We said [that] the VPA, for us, the motivation wasn't to curb illegal logging because illegal logging was always quite small, but it was rather to improve our systems and give us access to markets which were the things we lacked,” said David.

For stakeholders, the changes seen and promised, have engendered hope of positive change for governance, markets, and rights.



Zalita Moses prepares to extract the toxins from cassava meal in the process of making cassava bread. Most of the tools she utilises are made out of materials from the forest. Photo: Gaulbert Sutherland



Tenets of forest governance: Coordination, and participation

“The VPA could be a catalyst not just for enforcing existing laws, but for bringing Guyana’s national legislation into line with its international obligations on Indigenous Peoples’ rights.”

Coordination is achieved when:

- Forest policies are consistent with sectorial policies, national development or land use plans.
- Mechanisms exist to ensure forest policies are harmonised with other policies.
- Coordinating mechanisms function well across all national and local policy and practice areas.
- The forest agency effectively coordinates with other relevant agencies.

Participation is achieved when:

- The legal framework integrates community rights to free, prior and informed consent and provides opportunities for both public participation and stakeholder representation within relevant management bodies.
- Mechanisms to enhance participation of marginalised or hard to reach stakeholders have been established.
- Communities have a meaningful say in all relevant aspects of forest policy and decision-making.



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 New Statesman, The Daily Telegraph, The Daily Mirror 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 programmes such as Panorama, Dispatches and Channel 4 News.

In his spare time he runs (when his knees can withstand it).

He can be contacted at mark@fern.org

"Working with Fern's campaigners and our partners around the world is a chance to support those battling at the forefront of the planet's greatest challenge: the destruction of the world as we know it. Working with local journalists from forested countries, as we've done with this report, is also a privilege."

Adapting to change

Foreign investment and climate change are upending the lives of forest communities in rural Laos. Mark Olden travels to the country's northern uplands to witness it first-hand, and assesses the support people are receiving from different quarters.

Northern Laos

Around 50 kilometres from the Chinese border, a group of men sit in the fading evening light in their village, which nestles in the foothills of one of the heavily forested mountain ranges which cover vast tracts of the northern uplands.

The sound of crickets vibrates through the warm air and the flames of a log fire dance in the background, as the men take turns explaining how a way of life that's existed for generations is ebbing away.

Once people here – who belong to the Yao ethnic group – relied almost entirely on the natural resources around them to survive. Now change, in various forms, is pushing them to survive in other ways.

Among the first to talk is a softly spoken young man in a blue shirt and khaki shorts. He cradles his small daughter, who keeps turning his head towards her, vying for his attention. Lately, peoples' crops have faced a twin threat, he says through an interpreter: the late arrival of the rains and an increase in pests.²

"I thought the reason why the crops die, the reason why the rains didn't come was nature," he says. "But the local authorities came and gave us knowledge of how it happened. We understand that this is a human disaster and not something done by God." Climate

change, in other words. "We know that global warming is the work of humans. It is everywhere, but it didn't come from here [this village]" he says.

As a result, he has been forced to work on a nearby rubber plantation: "The crops die. I cannot feed my family. So I go out to work as a labourer."

The rubber plantations are themselves a harbinger of change. Their expansion in Laos was visible on our long, twisting journey to the village, and in the stripped patches of forest which have been replaced by rows of uniform rubber trees.

The arrival of the plantations is how the change begins, says the village head, a youthful-looking 52-year-old grandfather: "It starts with the construction of the road to China. The road comes because the [Chinese] rubber company needs transportation. So when the plantations come to the village, little by little the road gets bigger."

And inch by inch, the village is drawn into another world: edging away from a life purely subsisting off the land and forests around it, and into a more commercial existence.

This change is a microcosm of what's happening across rural Laos, and the transformations a changing climate and shifts in land use are bringing.

² See: Increase in crop losses to insect pests in a warming climate, Curtis A. Deutsch et al, Science, 2018 for evidence of how insect pests substantially reduce yields of rice, maize and wheat as temperatures warm. For background on climate change's impact in Laos and the wider Mekong Basin region, see for instance: Heavy rains preceded the Laos dam collapse. Was climate change a factor? and Climate change threatens many in Mekong region: WWF and Climate Change and its impact on the Lao and Cambodian people.



The rugged landscape and teeming vegetation of Laos' northern uplands have sustained people for generations.
Photo: Mark Olden

Rapid growth

The Lao People's Democratic Republic's (PDR) is saddled with immense challenges, past and present.

These include years of isolation; poor infrastructure; a tiny tax base from a mostly rural population; and the terrible aftermath of the United States' bombing campaign, (an average of eight bombs a minute were dropped on Laos between 1964 and 1973, making it the most heavily bombed nation on earth relative to its population).

Little wonder then, that Laos is ranked 139th out of 187 in the United Nations' Human Development Index. Or that in its attempt to relieve poverty and lift the nation from its Least Developed Country status, the government has sought rapid economic growth through foreign investment.

In practice, this has meant awarding concessions for banana and rubber plantations, and building hydropower dams to try to make Laos the 'battery of Southeast Asia' by exporting energy to its neighbours. Laos' biggest foreign investor is China, with a reported 760 projects valued at about US \$6.7 billion.

Yet all these projects require land – and there is a tension between economic development, and its impact on people and the environment.

One seasoned local observer outlines the dislocation that these projects often bring to people's lives, and their lack of awareness of what they entail.

"When a project comes, they [the local authority] often sends a message to the community: 'Tomorrow we have a meeting', without naming the topic. The people listen and accept without really knowing what it means [for their future]."

"These projects are primarily targeted at areas where there are natural resources – rivers and forests – and once a project comes in and resettlement takes places, people [are moved] outside their village, and into a poorer environment where it's harder to survive."

Yet significant efforts are being made to support rural people through these upheavals.

It is emerging from different directions: from the international groups working with Lao partners to help

And inch by inch, the village is drawn into another world: edging away from a life purely subsisting off the land and forests around it, and into a more commercial existence.

communities adapt to the climate crisis by embracing agroecological practices and use less pesticides, to those organisations supporting communities in cultivating and selling non-timber forest products, such as wild tea and cardamom.

Support is also coming via the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) timber trade deal that Laos is negotiating with the EU, a prerequisite of which is that civil society is involved in shaping the agreement.

While Laos is a single party state, civil society organisations (CSOs) can operate independently, although they are expected to follow government development plans, and explicit criticism of the government and its policies isn't tolerated.³ Against this backdrop however, civil society's role in ensuring that remote forest communities' voices are being heard, signifies something new.

Those involved in the VPA process are, among other things, acting as field researchers: gathering information on how villagers are using their forests, and helping them to reap the benefits from them.

Added to these advances, the VPA process has also given forest community representatives the chance to travel to the capital, Vientiane, to take part in meetings. And it has created the space for discussions on compensating communities affected by infrastructure projects, such as how to restore their livelihoods. Discussions too, have begun on

³ The legal foundations for Laos CSOs were set in 2006 when the Government of Laos drafted a Decree on Non-Profit Associations to provide the legal framework for their management. It was approved by the Prime Minister in 2009. See: https://www.fern.org/fileadmin/uploads/fern/Documents/briefingnote_laosFINAL.pdf

increasing transparency and improving civil society and community access to information.

All of this, and more, is needed if those on the frontline of the changes sweeping rural Laos are to adapt.

A different path

In the village in the northern uplands, change, however, is being driven not just by the climate crisis, foreign investment, or other external forces. It's also coming from within.

The morning after interviewing the villagers, we head into the countryside with a local farmer. At 50 years-old, Phaisone's wiry frame is a testament to a life spent intimately connected with nature. For the past 43 years – since the age of seven – this rugged landscape of precipitous climbs and teeming vegetation has been his workplace.

Each day he wakes early, feeds his chickens and pigs, then heads out, walking many kilometres as he tends to his rice and cotton fields, and gathers fruit and bamboo.



Efforts are being made to support rural people through the changes they are facing. Photo: Mark Olden

We wade after him through a knee-deep river, follow him as he hacks his way through the forest's dense undergrowth, and then as he seemingly effortlessly winds his way up a mountainside. Near the top we stop and shelter from the sun in a makeshift shack, which overlooks mountains whose emerald peaks are wrapped in clouds.

Two years ago, Phaisone's wife died. Now he does everything himself, including looking after the youngest of their five children. His greatest hope, he says, is to increase production and to get a better price for his products.

Yet while his life hardly differs from that of his forefathers', his older children have taken another path, away from the village. "The younger generation are moving away seeking something different," he says.

They, like people across rural Laos, are finding new ways to adapt to changing realities. With the right support, they will succeed.



Tenets of forest governance: Equity in benefit sharing

Equity in benefit sharing is achieved when:

- Legal provisions and protections for equitable sharing of forest revenues are robust. Community rights to a meaningful share of benefits from forest revenue are enshrined in the law with appropriate compliance mechanisms.
- Communities are involved and asked whether they are receiving benefits in a timely manner and whether they are broadly satisfied with the scale of remuneration.
- The government pro-actively ensures that communities understand and are able to claim access and use rights to their customary forests. Communities should also have access to support in managing these resources.

"Until fairly recently, locals would watch as vast profits from razing the tropical forests flowed out of their areas without trace. No longer."



In a career spanning more than 20 years, writer and broadcaster **Ama Kudom-Agyemang** has won numerous awards for her coverage of Ghana's environmental challenges. These include the Ghana Journalists' Association Award for Best Radio Reporter, Environmental Journalist of the Year, and a scholarship for winning a World Bank competition for her reportage of water issues.

Ama is based in Accra, where she is a columnist for the Business and Financial Times and The Finder. She is also the Ghana correspondent for the online newspaper EnviroNews Nigeria. For 12 years Ama worked in the Radio News Division of the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation (GBC), where she helped establish an environment desk.

She combines journalism with her work as a media trainer and consultant for clients including the United Nations University and USAID/ the Ghana Feed the Future Agriculture Policy Support Project. She is also currently writing her thesis for an MA in Communications Studies from the University of Development Studies, in Wa, in the north of Ghana.

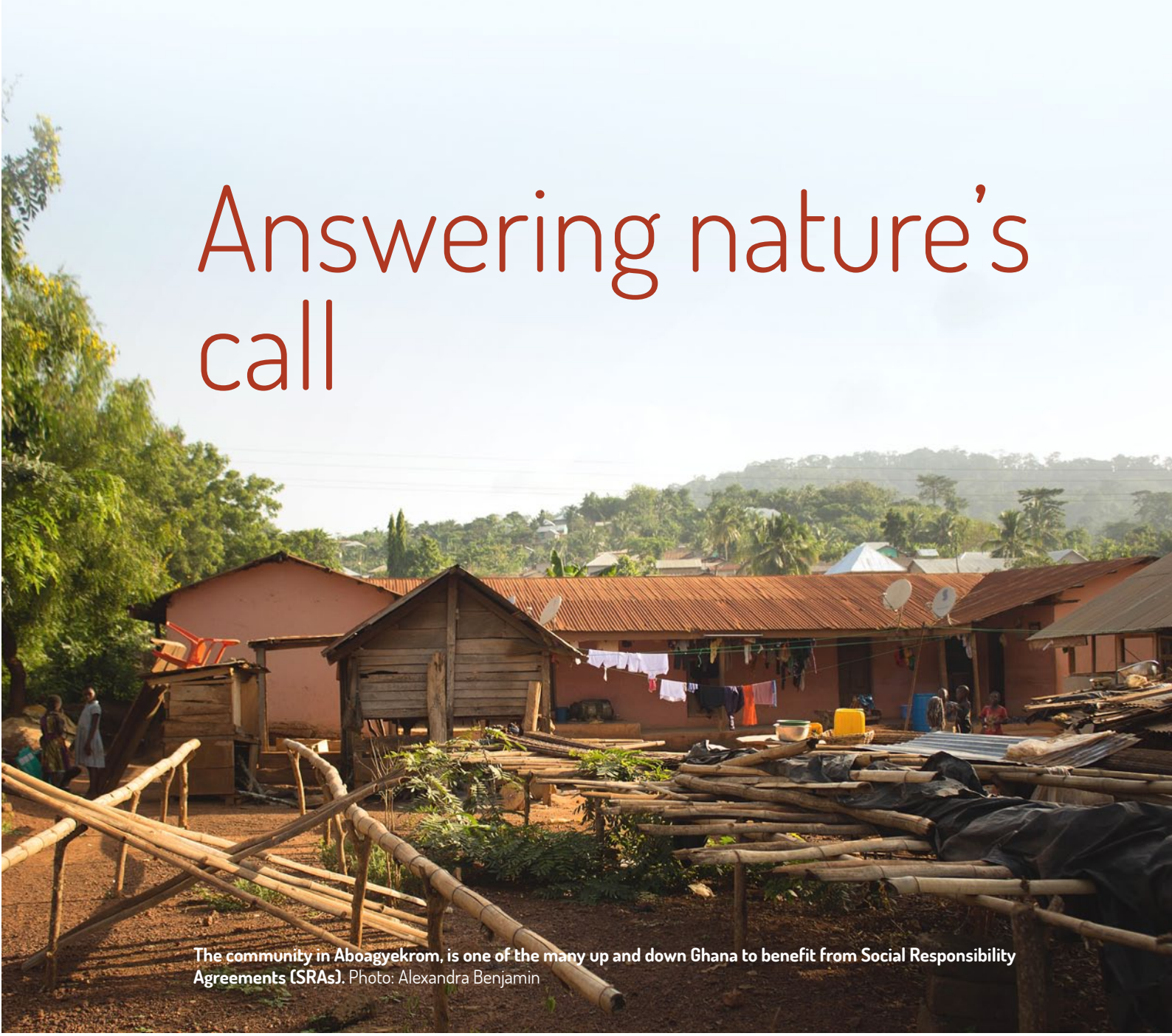
Ama says her commitment to environmental communications and journalism is "a calling and divine assignment... driven by the realisation that this earth is the only home for humans and all other living things."

"I hope my reportage helps empower both individuals and policymakers to make informed decisions about issues which affect us all," she says.

Away from work, Ama loves historical novels, family-oriented and historical documentaries, travel, and cooking and dining with friends.

She can be contacted at kudomagymang@yahoo.com.

Answering nature's call



The community in Aboagyekrom, is one of the many up and down Ghana to benefit from Social Responsibility Agreements (SRAs). Photo: Alexandra Benjamin

Benefit sharing agreements between timber companies and local communities are helping meet people's basic needs, as Ghana's forest sector embarks on a new era of transparency. Ama Kudom-Agyemang reports.

Ghana

Ghana's forests have historically been the domain of the government and the timber industry.

The often marginalised and impoverished communities who live in their vicinity had little or no say in how they were run. What's more, until fairly recently, locals would watch as vast profits from razing

the tropical forests flowed out of their areas without trace. No longer.

Today timber companies must share the benefits of the forests they log – either in cash or in kind – with communities who live within a five kilometre radius of their timber concession.

Although for a number of years companies have been obliged to commit some money towards local forest communities, in truth this rarely happened. The catalyst for change was the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) timber trade deal that Ghana signed with the European Union (EU) in 2009.

As part of the process of establishing the legality of its timber imports to the EU and elsewhere, Ghana overhauled its forest laws, passing regulations requiring companies to negotiate Social Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) with communities.

Fundamental to these agreements is gaining the consent of the whole community, not just the local chief, as frequently happened in the past.⁴ The impact of this change is now reverberating across Ghana – and people's lives are being transformed as a result.

“You see, we didn’t get proper education and we expect our children to do better than we have done in our lives,” he says. “Schooling is very important, so we wanted to ensure that we give to them whatever is needed to make them stay in school.”

⁴ SRAs are a contractual promise that logging firms make to provide benefits to a community in exchange for harvesting timber. SRAs are enshrined in the law that grants timber rights to operators – the Timber Resource Management and Legality Licensing Regulation, 2017.



Developments in Aboagyekrom fit into the wider story of Ghana's ongoing attempt to rid its timber industry of corruption and illegality. Photo: Alexandra Benjamin

Alleviating an age-old problem

Take for example the village of Aboagyekrom, eight hours drive west of Accra, in Sefwi Wiawso Municipal District, an area noted for its rich, fertile soil and lush forests. Here the SRA the community signed with a timber company has helped alleviate an age-old, widespread health hazard.

Aboagyekrom was once a community where school truancy was rife. The reason wasn't that children were lazy or didn't desire education. It was simply that the only Junior High School (JHS) around did not have a toilet.

The absence of toilets – which drives people to openly defecate – is of course not confined to Ghana. Yet it is an enduring issue in a nation where, according to the [World Health Organisation](#), about [5.7 million people](#) are forced to relieve themselves in the open, and the lack of access to basic sanitation is considered [one of the biggest threats](#) to the nation's socio-economic development.

But, following the astute use of money the community received from an SRA, Aboagyekrom now has a toilet for the school that serves four additional communities: Odjobikrom, Mensahline, Gyampokrom and Tutucamp.

The simple four room facility for the staff and pupils is a source of communal pride. The toilet's construction has removed parents' worst headache: getting the children to stay in school and focus on learning.

"Before this, we suspect the children were using the situation to play truancy, but there was nothing we could do about it," says Solomon Dziwornu, Chairman of the Aboagyekrom SRA Committee.

"You see, we didn't get proper education and we expect our children to do better than we have done in our lives," he says. "Schooling is very important, so we wanted to ensure that we give to them whatever is needed to make them stay in school."

Another member of the SRA Committee, Ofori Ernest, says that since the school got the toilet, pupils have stopped defecating on nearby farms, a practice that polluted the stream which people rely on for domestic water.

The Aboagyekrom initiative fulfils the Sustainable

Development Goals (SDGs) on [health](#) and [education](#), and is attracting wider plaudits, with the Executive Director of the Coalition of NGOs in Water and Sanitation, Basilia Nanbigne describing it as laudable. "Open defecation is one of the dangerous sanitation behaviours affecting the health, economic and social lives of people."

"[In Aboagyekrom] I see a beautiful picture of children who would otherwise have left the school premises to ease themselves, now staying and concentrating on learning, and girls who would have also missed school because of their menstrual period, are now in school uninterrupted," Nanbigne adds.

But answering the children's call of nature is not the only problem being alleviated by SRA money.

Aboagyekrom now also has a new storehouse from money from an SRA contract with a second timber firm operating in the area, while the Sayerano township, which is around 40 minutes' drive away, has constructed a one room quarter for a midwife to attend to the community's health needs.

Benefit sharing across Ghana

Developments in Aboagyekrom fit into the wider story of Ghana's ongoing attempt to rid its timber industry of corruption and [illegality](#), and instead, share the spoils of the nation's forests equitably, while enabling the public to scrutinise how the sector is run.

The local environmental and natural resources NGO, Civic Response, who are working in partnership with the government's Forestry Commission, are helping play a significant role in this.

Civic Response is currently documenting the benefits SRAs are bringing to forest communities the length and breadth of Ghana, to feed into the [public portal](#) of information on [forest governance](#). This website, launched by the government in March 2018, provides updates on various aspects of Ghana's timber sector, including logging permits, companies' areas of operation and exports.

Since 2017, 299 communities from 11 forest districts across the country have received a total of 758,380 Ghanaian Cedi (GHS) (the equivalent of around EUR 125,185) from SRAs, and it is making a real change to peoples' lives.

Elvis Oppong Mensah, a Programme Officer with Civic Response, says they decided to work in this area when they realised that there were conflicts within the process, with the key actors – namely the timber contractor, local communities, and Forestry Commission – often disagreeing on what had been negotiated for and how much had been paid.

Civic Response is impressed with the progress companies are making in ensuring they comply with the SRAs, although Mensah thinks that the percentage of money communities receive should be raised. “Compared to about five years ago, there has been a remarkable improvement now in companies signing SRAs with communities and fulfilling their promises. Wherever we have been to, communities are satisfied that at long last, they are also getting real benefits from their forests, instead of only strangers benefiting,” says Mensah.

Mensah explains that Civic Response goes to the District Forest Office to get information on timber contractors working on SRAs in the area, including on their estimated value, and the amount of money paid to communities. Afterwards, the team goes to the communities to validate the information. If discrepancies are found in the data, they organise a meeting with the contractor, the local community and the Forestry Commission, to resolve the differences.

If the data tallies, the team then investigate whether the money was used for the benefit of the entire community or whether it was hijacked by its elites.

Enhancing development

Dr Richard Gyimah of the VPA Secretariat at the Forestry Commission, underlines the legal principle SRAs are founded on. “If a timber company doesn’t have an SRA that has been negotiated and signed by the community and the contractor, they will not be eligible for a timber right and this is clear in the law. So the VPA is only reinforcing what is in the law,” he says, adding that SRAs are a good tool for development.

A consultant with Tropenbos Ghana, Kwabena Nketiah, notes that SRAs are evidence under the VPA that a timber contractor has the good will and consent of communities, and more importantly, they ensure that those who live close to forests also benefit from the revenue they generate.

What’s more, those Europeans and others exporting timber from Ghana, can be secure in the knowledge that the people at the other end of the supply chain – in the tropical forests where the wood is from – are prospering from their natural resources, rather than suffering the disruption to their lives that the arrival of the lorries and chainsaws brought for decades when timber operators moved into their areas.

Since 2017, 299 communities from 11 forest districts across the country have received a total of 758,380 Ghanaian Cedi (GHS) (the equivalent of around EUR 125,185) from SRAs, and it is making a real change to peoples’ lives.

Forest communities' lives are at last improving when logging operators move into their areas in Ghana.

Photo: Alexandra Benjamin





Tenets of forest governance: Transparency

Transparency is achieved when:

- Access to information is comprehensively supported by a legal framework.
- Relevant agencies have a legal obligation to pro-actively publish information in an easy to understand format and timely manner.
- Stakeholders have a clear shared vision enabling sanctions to be imposed when agencies fail to meet obligations to disclose information (including concession allocation and revenue collection).
- Civil society's right to monitor forest activities is protect in law and supported in practice.

“Civic Response goes to the District Forest Office to get information on timber contractors working on SRAs in the area, including on their estimated value, and the amount of money paid to communities. Afterwards, the team goes to the communities to validate the information. If discrepancies are found in the data, they organise a meeting with the contractor, the local community and the Forestry Commission, to resolve the differences.”



Indra Van Gisbergen is a Development and Consumption Campaigner at Fern, where she focuses on forest governance, human rights, corporate accountability and EU policy, while working closely with Fern's partners in Cameroon.

She is a former member of the Bar of Brussels and has 23 years' experience working in the fields of migration, business, human rights and social and environmental justice, particularly in Africa.

This includes her work for Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), where she helped launch and coordinate a campaign for access to essential medicines in Kenya, and for Lawyers Without Borders, in which she represented both the accused and the victims of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. She has also lived and worked in Burundi, the Democratic

Republic of Congo, Tanzania and Bosnia.

Indra has a Masters' degree in Law from the University of Ghent, and an advanced degree in photography from the Art Academy of Anderlecht. She has used her photography skills professionally, including for Fern, documenting the lives of forest communities in Cameroon, including women adversely affected by the expansion of palm oil plantations, the reality of 'benefit sharing' agreements in rural areas, and community forestry in the Congo Basin.

At Fern she sees her role as helping bring the voices of partners in tropical forested countries to EU policymakers.

"We try to build bridges between what our partners do and what we do, so that we have a common and complementary strategy that achieves the same goal: protecting forests and people," she says.

She lives in Brussels with her partner, a journalist, and two children, and in her spare time, enjoys hiking, photography and drawing.

Indra tweets at: [@IndraVGisbergen](https://twitter.com/IndraVGisbergen)

A large pile of logs is in the foreground, with several cranes visible in the background at a port. The sky is blue with some clouds.

Forest crimes in Antwerp

Ending the trade in illegal timber doesn't just mean tackling its root causes in forested countries. It means stopping it from entering the EU. Indra Van Gisbergen travels to the Port of Antwerp to see how the EU is enforcing its own laws – and makes an alarming discovery.

Port of Antwerp, Belgium

Photo: Indra Van Gisbergen

This is an age when you can buy or sell goods from almost any corner of the globe with a tap of a computer keyboard. When more than four billion of the planet's 7.7 billion inhabitants use the internet, and companies manage massively complicated supply chains via remote digital technology.

Yet on a bright summer morning at the Port of Antwerp, the overriding impression is not how much global trade has changed, but how little.

This sprawling complex with its endless terminals, 160 km of quayside and freight which handle 200 million tonnes of goods a year, may be unrecognisable from when the first dock was constructed here under Napoleon's orders in 1811, but the flow of merchandise in and out of Antwerp and across established ocean trading routes, follows the same essential pattern it has for centuries.

This port also remains – as it's always been – a repository of stories that shine a light on how the

world works. Stories which tell us about what we consume, where it comes from, who profits from it and who doesn't.

The rows of stacked timber stretching off into the distance, the metal containers packed to the brim with wood, the hulking great logs which dwarf the men in high-vis jackets shifting them around with forklift trucks, also tell a story. And it isn't uniformly happy.

The timber we see this morning is overwhelmingly from Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, Gabon and the Central African Republic (CAR) – and more broadly, the Congo Basin rainforest which spans those countries. The Congo Basin is the world's second-largest tropical rainforest, home to the world's second biggest reservoir of carbon in vegetation, and it directly helps support the livelihoods of more than 40 million people, many living in extreme poverty.

The provenance of the wood is clear from the writing on it, which along with numbers and other patterns, signifies its legality under the European Union Timber Regulation (EUTR).

This flagship anti-illegal logging legislation, which came into force in 2013, requires EU operators to conduct due diligence to ensure that there is negligible risk of the wood they import being illegally logged. We are not here to investigate breaches of the EUTR, but to get a sense of how it works at this key stage in timbers' journey from tropical rainforest to the European buyer.

But it doesn't take long before we see a consignment of timber whose markings stop us in our tracks.

Crimes against forests and people

Earlier this year the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) released undercover footage exposing (in their words), "the worst offender of crimes committed against the forests and the people of Gabon": the Chinese company, Wan Chuan Timber Sarl (WCTS).

The footage showed WCTS's deputy director shamelessly explaining how illegality is at the heart of the company's operations: how the company plans to overharvest its forest concession on a colossal scale, how it conceals the illegal logging operations it runs outside of its authorised area, and how its managers developed a complex scheme to launder its profits.

WCTS manages more than 150,000 hectares of forest in Gabon. In July 2017 a civil complaint was filed against the company over illegal logging and evading millions of dollars of taxes by the NGO Conservation Justice. The company's dismal record is easy to find for anyone willing to look.

So it is shocking to see a large cargo of precious tropical hardwood Padouk timber sitting in broad daylight in the port, with 'Made in Gabon' and 'WCTS' emblazoned in red paint on it.

After photographing the timber for evidence and alerting various concerned parties when we return from the port, the wheels of action swiftly turn.

The media picks up the story. Customs block the timber, which, it transpires, was imported by the Belgian company, Compagnie du Bois Anvers, who are placed under investigation for suspected violations of the EUTR. The company claims that their relationship with WCTS ended in 2018. The EIA says that our discovery is no anomaly, however.

Its director of forest campaigns, Lisa Handy, maintains that WCTS has been exporting timber to Europe every two months for four years. "Every WCTS shipment is illegal and involves elements of corruption, tax evasion, bribes and over-exploitation of tropical forest," she says.

Filip De Jaeger, the Deputy General Manager of Fedustria, the Belgian federation of textile, wood and furniture industries, says they immediately informed their members of the issues with WCTS, and took the case up with Compagnie du Bois Anvers (who are not a Fedustria member).

And on 8 August, after two years of stalling – and very likely prompted by the wave of bad publicity WCTS attracted – a tribunal in Gabon finally reached a decision in the civil case against the company in Gabon, finding it guilty of logging outside its concession area and issuing it with a fine.

The way ahead

The WCTS case underlines the obstacles those tasked with enforcing the EUTR face.

Among them, says De Jaeger, is that carrying out due diligence can vary widely from one country to



Timber lies in the Port of Antwerp from “the worst offender of crimes committed against the forests and the people of Gabon”: the Chinese company, Wan Chuan Timber Sarl (WCTS). Photo: Indra Van Gisbergen

another, with operators finding it difficult to track developments in some sourcing countries.

“Due diligence is not an exact science, nor is the procedure 100 per cent fixed. Importers would expect that authorities give clear guidelines on how it is carried out,” he says.

Wiet Raets, Policy Officer at Belgium’s Ministry for Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment, the country’s competent authority for enforcing the EUTR, echoes this.

Due diligence, he says, involves “a certain margin of interpretation, and it is not obvious for both operators and competent authorities to deal with.” As such, he adds: “It’s a major challenge coordinating it at European level and to arrive at a uniform implementation.”

This is something, Raets maintains, that the European Commission’s Expert Group on FLEGT/EUTR has strongly focused on in recent years, and that should improve when observers are included in this group.

More rigorous enforcement, Raets says, could also come from scientific advances in identifying timber – such as DNA analysis, mass spectrometry and wood anatomy – which will assist operators to achieve due diligence and allow competent authorities to uncover fraud. He also says that having sufficient staff in all Member States will help reach a level-playing field and strengthen implementation.

It is shocking to see a large cargo of illegal precious tropical hardwood Padouk timber sitting in broad daylight in the port, with ‘Made in Gabon’ and ‘WCTS’ emblazoned in red paint on it.

Raets and De Jaeger agree that there are loopholes in the EUTR which need closing.

For instance, according to De Jaeger, extending the scope of the Regulation to all wood or wood-containing products “would close any loopholes that may exist, for example, when wood comes into the EU within products from importing countries that do not have specific rules or regulations in place, such as sofas with a wood frame from China.”

A [2018 EU public survey](#) reinforces this point: 72 per cent of respondents said that the current scope of the EUTR is inadequate to achieve its objectives.

One European timber importer we spoke to, however, identifies a broader problem: the rampant illegality he says exists among many operators outside the EU, which, according to him, undercuts his efforts, as well as his colleagues’, to achieve better practices.

A snapshot of enforcement

In its biennial report on EUTR implementation, published in October 2018, the European Commission noted that while there had been “significant progress” in EUTR enforcement in Member States, there was still uneven implementation. Between March 2015 and March 2017, it detailed how:

17,000 checks were carried out on operators placing domestic timber on the market, and **2,800 checks** were made on operators placing imported timber on the market. Of **80 operators** identified in ‘substantiated concerns’, **69 were checked** and **33 received penalties**.

Held to account

Examples of EUTR enforcement cases since the Regulation was implemented six years ago:

March 2016 The Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA) issues an injunction notice against Fibois BV for importing wood from a supplier in Cameroon called Compagnie de Commerce et de Transport (CCT), one of the biggest timber-exporting companies in Cameroon at that time, who had been exposed for their illegal operations by Greenpeace. The Dutch company was eventually sanctioned for breaching the EUTR. (It has since changed owner.)

November 2016 A Swedish court ruled that Almtra Nordic, was breaching the EUTR by importing timber for Myanmar, which it could not prove had been legally harvested. This was because the origin of the timber could not be accurately determined. The case set an important precedent requiring companies to fully trace their supply chains back to where the timber was harvested.

2016-17 The Danish Environmental Protection Agency revealed in its annual report that in 2016-17, they visited around 20 timber operators, issued 20 injunctions, and reported three companies to the police.

October 2017 Furniture seller Lombok becomes the first UK company to be fined for breaching the EUTR. The company was fined £5,000 for placing a sideboard on the market which was imported from India without carrying out the required due diligence assessment, breaking UK and EU law.

March 2018 UK timber operator, Hardwood Dimensions (Holdings) Ltd, was fined £4,000 for failing to ensure that timber from Cameroon that it placed on the market was legally harvested. The timber, which was Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified, was from legal sources, but the prosecution was based on deficiencies in the company’s due diligence systems.

“Focusing negative criticism only on the EU will not solve the problem,” he argues. “Timber will go increasingly to countries outside the EU. We must encourage EU importers to do their jobs in the right way, which in turn will encourage the good producers in the supplying countries.”

The EUTR nevertheless remains a strong tool in the fight against the illegal timber trade, says Łukasz Walter, a lawyer at ClientEarth, the environmental law charity. He adds: “Unfortunately, it is unevenly enforced in different Member States. It should be a priority to ensure that the penalties for infringements to the EUTR are dissuasive in all EU Member States and that NGOs have access to justice in EUTR-related cases. The scope of products covered by the EUTR should also be expanded. In April 2018, the European Commission finalised their public consultation on the EUTR product

scope, and we hope to see concrete steps taken to respond to this soon.”

It’s clear that without such improvements, cases like the one we stumbled upon involving WCTS – which, after all, is just one of many to be exposed in recent years – will inevitably recur, and illegal timber will still find its way onto the EU market, and into the making of our homes, buildings, furniture, and much more.

The cost of this will be entrenched corruption, as reputable timber operators are squeezed out of business, cash-starved countries are deprived of tax revenues, and income and livelihoods are stolen from local communities. All the while greater damage is inflicted on the environment, include intensifying the climate emergency.



Tenets of forest governance: Accountability

Accountability is achieved when:

- There are legal and institutional frameworks in the forest sector which define responsibilities of stakeholders.
- The legal responsibilities of the main forest agency is clear, agreed, well communicated and understood by communities.
- Those with agreed roles fulfill their responsibilities or proactively explain issues.
- There is a framework and robust mechanisms for the independent oversight of government agencies. This should include putting in place mechanisms to address grievances.
- Infractions are identified and corrective action is taken within a reasonable, agreed time period.

Recommendations for policy makers and governments

EU Member States should strengthen forest governance by providing adequate support for VPAs and EUTR implementation.

We urge the EU to consolidate governance gains from existing VPAs and look at how to use them to halt the deforestation and human rights abuses caused by forest risk commodities.

In forested countries, the EU can help to improve forest governance, by strengthening the indicators described in our country stories: **accountability, capacity, coordination, equity in gender, equity in benefit sharing, participation, and transparency.**



Villagers in Sefwi-Wiawso in western Ghana. Photo: Mark Olden

How the EU can improve forest governance

Accountability

Strengthen enforcement of the EUTR.

Adopt additional regulatory measures to tackle the deforestation crisis and protect rights.

Capacity

Ensure NGOs have the space and resources to participate, shape decisions and help local communities to engage with the VPA process.

Coordination

Work with national governments to ensure that countries' forest policies are consistent with other national policies and international agendas (such as SDGs).

Equity in benefit sharing

Encourage national governments to increase the proportion of benefits from logging received by communities and increase transparency of how the benefits are being shared.

Equity in gender

Ensure that the needs of women and men are given equal consideration when negotiating and implementing the VPA.

Open space for women to participate in policy process, by ensuring that women are equally represented, have a say, that there are gender sensitive objectives and that timelines allow for women to be involved.

Participation

Design timelines and open space for discussions around forest governance and laws with communities in mind, to enable communities and civil society to be more involved.

Increase community and NGO funding to allow for them to effectively participate in forest policy reforms, processes, and dialogues.

Incorporate a multi-stakeholder process in each legal process related to land and forests.

Ensure CSOs and communities can participate freely and independently and express themselves without fear.

Transparency

Encourage national governments to grant NGOs access to their wood tracking systems to share data and information on: forest permits, extraction, exports, imports, infractions and revenues.

In instances of forest conversion and development projects, allow NGOs and communities to have access to relevant information, such as environmental and social impacts assessments.

“Five years after an unprecedented coalition of governments, businesses, civil society organisations and Indigenous Peoples’ groups pledged to halve deforestation by 2020, forest loss is accelerating.

If we continue to destroy the world’s tropical rainforests at the current rate, they will disappear from the planet within 100 years.

These stories show a path to a future in which the people most directly affected by deforestation are at the forefront of actions to tackle it.”