Addressing illegal chainsaw milling in Ghana using the FLEGT VPA: A Wishful Thinking or Reality? Stakeholders’ Perspectives

The practice of using fuel-powered chainsaw machines for harvesting timber and converting the logs in-situ into lumber, commonly known as chainsaw milling, has been banned and criminalized in Ghana since 1998. However, the implementation of the ban has been very difficult and largely unsuccessful. The activity still persists and has been identified as the most common form of illegal logging in Ghana. As a party to the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the EU, Ghana has a commitment not only to export legal wood but also source and trade in legal timber on the domestic market. However, the extent to which the VPA legality requirements can address the chainsaw milling problem and associated trade of illegally-harvested lumber on the domestic market remain unclear. Based on in-depth interviews with timber actors, this paper assess the views and perspectives of stakeholders on whether the FLEGT-VPA can address the chainsaw milling problem in the context of a failed ban, and the conditions required for this to happen. Our findings revealed mixed responses ranging from extreme pessimism to extreme optimism. While the policy makers and implementers were hopeful that the VPA could be effective in addressing chainsaw milling, the village level timber actors, domestic wood processors and sellers and the timber exporters were not. They questioned how the VPA can address an activity which continue to thrive despite been banned. The study uncovered several conditions that must be in place in order to address the chainsaw milling problem. These included regularization of the activities of chainsaw operators; revision of forest benefit sharing, crop damage compensation payment regulations and tree tenure arrangements; and devolution of forest ownership to local communities. These findings underscore the importance of dealing with the root causes of the chainsaw milling menace. Decision makers in Ghana’s forestry sector must confront the underlying governance issues that have perpetuated the chainsaw milling problem. Failing this, the quest to address illegal chainsaw milling and the associated trade of illegally-sourced timber in the domestic market of Ghana will remain a wishful thinking.