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Title: Independent Forest Monitoring and Timber Legality in the Congo Basin

The Congo Basin is the second largest tropical rainforest in the world covering a total of 6 countries. It contains relatively intact forest, however mining, commercial logging, charcoal, and bush meat hunting are significant threats. As with many forest rich regions; the Congo basin faces problems with forest law enforcement, poor governance (lack of transparency, corruption), timber legality (illegal logging), deforestation, degradation and lack of meaningful livelihood options for forest dependent communities. These problems have negative impacts on sustainable forest management, the fight against climate change and economic development. Timber exports from the Congo basin are generally viewed as high risk in terms of legality. In addressing these problems; Independent Forest Monitoring has come out as one of the key mechanisms developed to monitor forest law enforcement and timber legality. Independent Forest Monitoring involves the use of an independent third party (national NGO or CSO and/or communities) either by agreement with the state (or without an agreement with the state) to provide an assessment and verification of legal compliance and observation of forest law enforcement systems. The EU led Forest Law Governance and Trade (FLEGT) process has reinforced the role of independent forest monitoring as a mechanism for supporting timber legality verification requirements for international timber markets. FLEGT has also placed timber legality verification at the centre of efforts to combat illegal logging, deforestation and degradation thus linking independent forest monitoring with some of the regulations that affect global markets and forests. This paper draws on the work and experience of national civil society forest monitoring organisations in Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo and Gabon to highlight the contribution of independent forest monitoring in achieving timber legality. The paper also identifies some of the challenges that independent forest monitoring faces in meeting some of the timber legality verification requirements for international timber markets. It outlines potential solutions through innovations that are being applied to improve credibility, standards, reporting and access to independent forest monitoring reports by a range of stakeholders including the private sector and competent authorities in timber importing countries.