Toward formality and legality of small scale forest enterprise: evaluation of artisanal chainsaw operators in selected African countries

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The small scale forest enterprise (SSFE) in Africa has been extensively examined as a means to alleviating poverty among forest-dependent people. However, the enterprise is dominated with informal operators with mix of illegality, challenges and success stories. My study therefore review case studies on activities of artisanal chainsaw operators from selected African countries such as Cameroon, Ghana and Congo with the view to discussing lessons on their successes and challenges pertinent to development of the enterprise. This informal enterprise, and sometimes illegal, provides significant volume of timber as well as employment and income that surpasses those provided by industrial logging and community forestry. However, there is still lack of proper coordination and cooperation to work as a group by the individual operators. Despite the laws provided by the Cameroonian government in getting small-scale logging permit organised into formal groups, the vast majority of artisanal chainsaw milling remains informal and individual. Ghana banned the use of portable chainsaws in processing logs to lumber in late 1990s, and also signed the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the European Union (EU) under its Action Plan on Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) as an indication of the country’s determination to sanitise the domestic timber supply; however, due to the preference of the conventional mills to sell wood on the export market, couple with rural unemployment and weak law enforcement, chainsaw milling still remain source of lumber for the domestic market with some illegality. In Congo, artisanal logging permits is granted to individuals with Congolese nationality, holder of an agreement, whose long saw or chain saw constitutes the work tool and is valid only in a Community Forestry concession; still, legal framework related to artisanal logging is difficult to apply in Congo since texts are incomplete and sometimes contradictory. From my findings in specific case studies, the need for appropriate reform and legislation to meet the practical situation and operations of artisanal chainsaw and building of capacity for the operators through professional association or networks to enable members exchange market information, expertise and knowledge leading to viable SSFE in Africa are recommended.