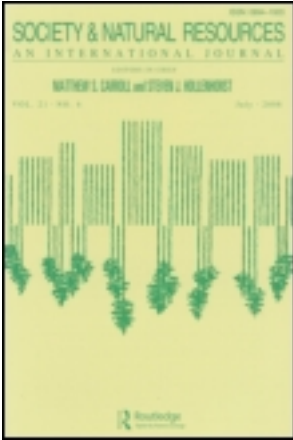


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Cameroon's Hidden Harvest: Commercial Chainsaw Logging, Corruption, and Livelihoods

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This article discusses the extent, impacts, and governance dynamics of illegal logging and associated corruption in the chainsaw milling sector in Cameroon and the implications for natural resource management theory and international initiatives, represented by the European Union's Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan. We show that state officials may be collecting some €6 million in informal payments each year, part of which is siphoned into a pyramidal system that manages careers not by merit, but by the price one can pay. We argue that corruption becomes a root cause of policy failures when disillusioned state officials perceive that those at the top of the pyramid do not have the legitimacy needed to promote reforms. Arbitrariness, mistrust, and contradiction then predominate, thus weakening the rule of law. We derive lessons for interventions addressing corruption and its impacts.

Keywords Cameroon, corruption, illegal logging, livelihoods, political economy

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Illegal timber harvesting and trade began to attract global attention in the 1990s, as concern about their negative impacts grew (e.g., Callister 1992; Barden 1994). “Illegal logging” first entered official intergovernmental discussions in 1997, when a G8 summit agreed to a commitment to eliminate it (G8 1998). Illegality was soon firmly established as a governance issue (Callister 1999; Tacconi et al. 2003), and in 2003 the European Union (EU) unveiled the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan (hereafter “the Plan”), arguably the most prominent international effort to combat illegal logging to date. Among the Plan’s main tools for promoting governance reforms in timber-producing countries are voluntary partnership agreements (VPAs) (European Union 2005). VPAs are essentially bilateral trade agreements under which producer countries commit to improving their governance and legal frameworks and to adopting a licensing scheme designed to guarantee the legality of their timber production and exports; in return, a FLEGT license is issued and timber can be exported to Europe (EU FLEGT Facility 2009).¹

Statements of commitment alone, however, are no guarantee of effective implementation. Examples abound of governments of tropical timber-producing countries making commitments merely to please international donors, while evading the actual implementation of effective solutions on the ground (e.g., Bayart et al. 1999; Hibou 1999; Smouts 2001). Achieving forestry-sector reforms requires a favorable political system and dedicated state officials (Tacconi et al. 2003). Governments may need external help to improve the technical means for detecting illegal forest activities (IFAs), as anticipated by the Plan, but strategies for reform will have to be tailored to the context, as “[It is] one thing to have a committed government trying to impose the law and perhaps failing because of lack of resources, and another [to have] a government that itself participates in breaking the law” (Contreras-Hermosilla 2002, 9). Indeed, several FLEGT countries present an apparent paradox, whereby a government promises to reform the governance of its forestry sector by signing a VPA, while in practice many of the state officials, whose role should be to promote and implement those reforms, are actively engaged in fostering IFAs through corrupt practices (for Indonesia, see Casson and Obidzinski 2002; for Cameroon, Resource Extraction Monitoring 2010; for Ghana, Eshun et al. 2010 and Hansen 2011; for Vietnam, Sikor and To 2011).

It would be tempting to ascribe the causes of such practices to the ignorance or incompetence of state officials, who seem to be expected to easily turn into stalwart forest managers thanks to the pressures and funds deployed by development partners in the name of FLEGT initiatives. However, such ignorance and/or incompetence are not the most likely root causes of policy failure, because state officials are often well informed and capable of engaging in complex political maneuvers (Ascher 1999; Bayart et al. 1999). Policy failures are best understood as the result of state officials pursuing illegal or politically strategic objectives for their own benefit (Ascher 1999; Bayart et al. 1999; Ross 1999). The dynamics of such strategies have to be understood in order to identify who might have the power and the legitimacy to provide genuine political backing to redress and improve the situation through policy reforms (Ascher 1999). Sikor and To (2011), for instance, suggest that the relatively recent discourse about illegal logging in Vietnam and policies aimed at stopping it (as part of broader processes aiming at reconstituting the state) served to enhance the legitimacy of the central government in the fight against IFAs.

In other cases, legitimacy and institutional improvements may be harder to achieve, especially where racketeering and predation are so institutionalized that they have become the normal *modus operandi* of the state, as is the case in several African countries that are considering participation in the FLEGT process (Mbembe 2010). We argue that in these countries corruption, defined as the misuse of entrusted power for private gain (Transparency International 2011), is more than just an “all too easy explanation” for policy failures as argued by Ascher (1999, ix). Rather, corruption may be the root cause of such failures—for instance, as argued by Lambsdorff (2007)—notably in relation to the fight against IFAs and to reforms planned as part of the adoption of the Plan. Corruption is an integral part of the complex political economic dynamics it serves. This article aims at providing a better understanding of those dynamics in order to support the formulation of policy options targeted at reducing corruption.

To elaborate our argument, we assess the political economy of commercial chainsaw logging in Cameroon. We adopt Cameroon as a case study because it has in place a neo-patrimonial system (Médard 2002)—which is characterized by the confusion of the public and private domains and which is not unique among the current African FLEGT countries (Mbembe 2010)—that, over several decades, has engendered a wide gap between a tiny elite of wealthy state officials and a large number of disillusioned local ones (International Crisis Group 2010a; 2010b). Furthermore, for many years the country has been at the center of global concern over IFAs and poor governance in the forestry sector (Brown et al. 2008; Lawson and MacFaul 2010). Nevertheless, Cameroon was among the first countries to engage with the Plan and it ratified a VPA in 2011.

The next section describes the Cameroonian forestry sector, with particular focus on the legal framework for commercial chainsaw milling and the domestic timber market. The methods used for researching the sector in Cameroon are then described. This is followed by the presentation of the results and the discussion of the strategies adopted by central- and local-level state officials to create and maintain the current system, together with the implications for the effective implementation of reforms. The final section offers lessons that could help guide future reforms.

Small-Scale Forestry in Cameroon

In 1994, the government of Cameroon adopted a new forest law with a particular focus on forest management and a greatly revised forestry taxation system that specifically targeted the large-scale, export-oriented industrial forestry sector (Brunner and Ekoko 2000; Carret 2000). However, small-scale chainsaw production, although receiving some legislative consideration, did not garner the necessary attention in terms of the implementing regulations needed to translate the letter of the law into a reality adapted to the needs of operators. At the time, when the country was struggling to recover from the economic crisis that hit hard in the 1980s, such neglect in favor of the industrial sector was understandable.

It was much less so, however, as the new century approached, when, despite improved economic conditions and rapidly growing domestic demand for timber (Plouvier et al. 2002; MINEFI 2006), the Ministry of Forests and Wildlife (hereafter “the ministry”) decided to illicitly suspend all legally available small-scale logging titles (Cerutti and Tacconi 2008). The suspension, initially adopted as a short-term, extraordinary measure, was in force from 1999 to 2006 and had three major

consequences. First, it made illegal harvesting the only option for thousands of Cameroonians, as domestic timber consumption continued to increase, from about 170,000 cubic meters roundwood equivalent (RWE) in 1993 (Lumet et al. 1993) to about 1 million cubic meters RWE in 2002 (Plouvier et al. 2002). Second, it kept small-scale forestry off the agenda of the official forest policy discourse (e.g., MINEF 1999, 2004), thus hampering the possible adoption of policies that could have better regulated it. Third, it provided a perverse incentive for many state officials to collect informal payments from chainsaw loggers across the country (e.g., JMN Consultant 2005; Koffi 2005), as the loggers' activities were officially illegal but continued because of the growing domestic demand, which the export-oriented industrial timber sector could not meet.

When the suspension was repealed in 2006, the new rules, instead of streamlining the functioning of the sector and contrary to the law (Articles 86 and 94, Republic of Cameroon 1995), centralized the allocation of small-scale logging titles, shifting the authority from regional delegates to the ministry in the capital city and requiring the signature of the Minister of Forests and the approval of an Interministerial Commission (Republic of Cameroon 2006). The new rules made it almost impossible for small-scale operators to gain a license. Unsurprisingly, of about 100 small-scale permits auctioned in recent years, only two have been requested by operators. At the same time, corrupt behavior by state officials continued unabated (e.g., Resource Extraction Monitoring 2009).

The launch of the FLEGT negotiations in 2007 offered new hope for a serious policy debate on commercial chainsaw logging, as discussions initially encompassed the entire national timber production. However, commercial chainsaw logging was for all practical purposes eventually excluded from the VPA ratified in 2011, as the latter does not include criteria and indicators to evaluate the legality of logging permits that could be used by chainsaw millers. Such narrow focus creates the risk that producer agreements will both fall far short of addressing the concerns that first brought illegal logging to international prominence and foster an all too easy public indictment of small-scale loggers and local-level state officials in producer countries—as can already be observed in the mainstream press (e.g., Chi Elvido 2010; Anonymous 2011). Numerous challenges are associated with creating a more inclusive VPA, as shown by the governance dynamics behind commercial chainsaw milling in Cameroon detailed below. However, such challenges could be tackled—and the situation possibly improved—through reforms that are informed by a better understanding of the behavior of operators and local state officials.

Methods

This article draws on research conducted during 2008–2011 by two of the authors on the domestic timber market in Cameroon (Cerutti and Lescuyer 2011). The initial objective of the research was to quantify and qualify the market and its dynamics through commodity chain analysis (Ribot 1998). Where necessary for explicative purposes, this article discusses the quantitative results in Cerutti and Lescuyer (2011), but the analysis is largely qualitative and focuses on the political–economic dynamics of the sector collected through about 200 semistructured interviews, anonymous and confidential, with members of various professional groups, such as sellers, brokers, timber carriers, and depot owners. Interviews were held after data collection had been underway for a few months and the necessary confidence had

been established with operators. Interviews began with questions on the functioning of the markets and on the relationships between professional groups and vis-à-vis state officials, and ended with the characterization and quantification of the informal networks of payments within the sector.

Information from operators was concurrently discussed in about 40 semistructured confidential interviews with state officials. Interviews started with a description of the preliminary findings on the domestic timber market, with a special focus on the informal payments collected by state officials, and then explored the possible *raisons d'être* of corruption networks and the use of collected bribes. Given the sensitivity of the issue, state officials were not randomly selected for interview. Rather, the first author chose interviewees based on relationships developed during his 8 years of experience researching IFAs in Cameroon.

The Long (Informal) Road from Forest to Market

Small-scale timber operators were very clear about the main difficulties they encounter in running their daily business: Three-quarters of the interviewees ranked administrative harassment aimed at the collection of informal payments as their top concern. For clarity, especially because a range of individuals and administrative bodies are involved, payments are best analyzed by considering three spatially separate locations and activities: (1) the village and council where the resource is located and harvesting takes place; (2) the roads via which timber products are transported from stump to market; and (3) the markets where products are sold.

Access

Payments requested by state officials to grant access to the resource average about €4.3 per cubic meter harvested. Such requests are not a recent phenomenon (e.g., Enviro-Protect 1997), but interviews reveal that after the suspension of all small-scale logging titles at the end of the 1990s requests for payment became systematic, as timber, impossible to access, harvest, and trade through legal means, became a profitable business for state officials.

The most common procedure used to legalize illegally harvested timber is to confiscate and auction it. The legal procedure is well codified (Decree 2001/1034/PM of 27 November 2001): after an auction, timber must be hammer-marked with the official government seal and provided with official paperwork to be transported and sold. It is common practice for state officials to confiscate timber from a logger and then “auction” it back to the latter on the spot. For such “auction” the logger must make an informal payment to state officials. Official paperwork (or even receipts for payment) to prove the timber’s legality is not issued in these “auctions.”

Transport

Once timber has been accessed (after paying the necessary bribes), further rounds of payments are made at regular and occasional checkpoints along the road, as transportation to markets occurs without official paperwork. Unlike in the forest, payments may be collected several times along the road, especially when trucks have to cross administrative borders (i.e., municipal, departmental or regional). Payments are also requested based on the size of the vehicle (i.e., small or large truck), although

the type of product (e.g., planks, formwork) and species still influence the final amount paid. Operators do their best to avoid known checkpoints, for instance, by traveling at night or using secondary roads. Similar payments are required around all major cities by state agents belonging to the same administrative body. For instance, around the capital city, Yaoundé, where the largest volumes of informal timber are traded, the most commonly reported values are around €38 per truck for the ministry, about €15 for the gendarmerie, and around €8 for the police.

It is difficult to estimate the total annual average payments made along the road, mainly because the total payments made per trip greatly depend on the distance the timber has to cover from stump to market, that is, the number of checkpoints a truck has to pass through. Nonetheless, a rough estimate can be derived from the data collected by Cerutti and Lescuyer (2011) from 341 chainsaw milling operations across the national forested territory. On average, chainsaw millers paid about €5 per cubic meter transported to deliver processed timber from stump to market.

Commercialization

When the timber reaches the market and is offloaded from a truck, ministry personnel in town consider it illegal, as official paperwork is yet again missing, and seize it. Seizure of timber in the markets is rarely physical (i.e., the timber is left with the depot owner), but state officials often take the precaution of hammer-marking it with the wrong side of the hammer bearing the official seal, in a sort of territorial demarcation that signifies the right to collect payments to any colleagues who may inspect the timber afterward. The correct side of the official seal, indicating that the timber has been seized and auctioned in accordance with the law, is applied to the stock after the bribe has been paid. Only then can depot owners sell the timber to the final consumer as if it were of legal origin.

Interviews reveal that payments are regular and specific and are requested per product and per species. Payments may vary slightly from town to town and from market to market within the same town, but overall timber is consistently grouped in three broad categories: lighter hardwood (*bois blanc*), stronger hardwood (*bois rouge* or *dur*), and precious hardwood. The latter group includes species such as afrormosia (*Pericopsis elata*), wengué (*Millettia laurentii*), and bubinga (*Guibourtia* spp.), for which the largest payments are requested. On average, payments are about €6.6 per cubic meter sold by depot owners. Occasionally, seizing agents demand a payment in cash and another in kind (timber products that will have to be delivered to him or her on a regular basis).

Big Money and Big Challenges

As the annual consumption of timber sourced from chainsaw loggers is estimated at about 662,000 cubic meters (Cerutti and Lescuyer 2011), the total value of annual informal payments to access (€4.3 per cubic meter), transport (€5 per cubic meter), and sell (€6.6 per cubic meter) the resource is estimated at about €10.5 million. This amount probably overestimates overall informal payments, as negotiation of individual payments is a vital part of the underground economy.

Several factors may lead to a reduction in the payment, making an average rate difficult to estimate. For example, although payments are established per product and per species (e.g., one plank of bubinga), state officials often prefer to discuss

total payment per lot (e.g., a lot of planks of bubinga) or forestry operation (e.g., an aggregated payment for the operation in a given location), demanding a lump sum for the entire new stock without rigorously counting the pieces or making distinctions between species. Furthermore, if the road from stump to market is a long one with several payments required, the seller may be able to obtain a larger reduction on that particular lot when it reaches the market. Long-term, well-established relationships between the operator and state officials also create favorable conditions for larger reductions, and occasionally, the number of barriers and the amounts paid can be drastically reduced if a certain operation has the support of higher level army or government officials. All in all, a tentative average discount—based on the values that most interviewees reported—could be around 40% of the standard informal payments per product and per species. Applying that discount to the entire production results in an estimate of about €6.3 million in total annual informal payments.

Although it is a rough estimate, the magnitude of these informal payments indicates that careful consideration of the institutional and social dynamics behind the informal system is required in planning any reform. Ultimately, it is these same state officials (currently collecting bribes of the same order of magnitude as the €8.4 million budgeted as total salaries of the ministry in 2010) who will be tasked with implementing the reforms. We turn to those dynamics in the next section, where we examine the rules governing the system, particularly the ways that money collected through informal payments is used to maintain and perpetuate the system itself.

The Rules of the Game

When asked what they had done, or intended to do, to solve the problem of administrative harassment, operators overwhelmingly had the same response: silence, accompanied by a smile conveying feelings ranging from skepticism to resignation, as if they could not see any way that the situation could change, regardless of how much they struggled to improve it. Several state officials expressed similar feelings, substantiating them with examples of actions that they had initiated either alone or with operators to improve governance, but which the ministry subsequently thwarted.

For example, in 2006 operators reached an agreement with one of the ministry's regional delegates to pay volume-based taxes on harvested timber. The scheme ran for about 8 months: the delegate provided the official paperwork and operators paid around €55,000 into the state's coffers. As a result, these operators reportedly experienced considerably less harassment because they could show official receipts of payment. As easy to implement and effective as the scheme appears, it came to an abrupt end when the delegate was replaced. The new delegate reportedly preferred to benefit from direct payments, and the prior business as usual was swiftly reinstated. Timber operators were greatly frustrated because, despite several letters of complaint sent to the higher levels of the ministry, no sanction or notice to comply with the previous scheme was ever imposed on the new delegate.

Interviewees in different parts of the country recounted similar experiences and, although technicalities change, the strategy adopted by the ministry followed a recurrent pattern: an abrupt halt of the scheme put in place, normally coinciding with a swift change in personnel and return to business as usual. Interviews thus reveal two building blocks contributing to this strategy's effectiveness: a fuzzy legal edifice and a defense system.

The Fuzzy Legal Edifice

Operators recounted a host of reasons given by state officials for halting operations, whether they involved accessing and processing the resource in the forests, transporting the timber, or selling it in the market. Throughout these responses, the leitmotif was arbitrariness. That is, state officials across the country often apply locally and temporarily established ad hoc rules instead of the letter of the law. The use of ad hoc rules is a consequence not only of the 7 years (1999–2006) during which small-scale logging titles were officially suspended, but also of the active role the ministry has since played in increasing the confusion through a proliferation of contradictory legal texts. Indeed, in recent years, the ministry has adopted three different regulations on the allocation and management of small-scale logging titles (MINFOF 2006; 2007; 2009), one revoking another or carrying contradictory or unclear rules.

The proliferation of regulations serves two concurrent purposes: It nourishes discussions at the highest level—demonstrating to international counterparts that considerable political effort is being expended to solve the problem—and it increases arbitrariness on the ground. Frequency of change and artificially constructed legal complexity are fundamental to the system, as the less clear a rule is, the easier it is for a state official to demand a bribe.

The Defense System

The second building block of the strategy to perpetuate the collection of bribes while evading the serious implementation of governance reforms involves the mechanisms set in motion when a state official tries to halt a forest operation that has already been “approved” by powerful individuals. In this case, stalwart officials normally have to choose between allowing an illegal operation to continue or being threatened—usually by telephone—with personal or professional retaliation. Threats follow a hierarchical crescendo, from the initial, often anonymous, claim that timber “belonging” to a powerful individual is being blocked, to an eventual call from the self-proclaimed real investor behind the operation, in case the official exhibits a determination to enforce the law.

Most of the officials interviewed, many of whom also reported the behavior of several unnamed colleagues, admitted that the initial threat is normally sufficient to end any attempt to enforce the law. As they describe it, this is not because of lack of courage, poor knowledge of the law, or unwillingness to apply the law, but rather because of the absence of recourse if they do decide to remain stalwart. In other words, it is not worth risking one’s career in a system where only two options seem to be available: “with us” or “against us.” In such a system, challenging someone who hints at having connections higher up the hierarchy, whether in the army or in the ruling political party, is equivalent to gaining the reputation of a traitor, with consequences that may rapidly spread from one’s professional life to livelihoods and family. For instance, several of the officials interviewed explained how they had stopped timber reportedly “belonging” to top army officials. In the (few) cases where interviewees refused to comply when their superiors ordered to release the timber, they were reportedly not only demoted but also transferred to remote locations as further punishment.

In this context, it becomes clear why, even for those few reported cases when state officials did decide to stand firm against threats and accepted the negative

consequences of their actions, they did not consider recourse to the judiciary as an option. The judiciary is perceived to be just another part of the system where “traitors” are regarded as outcasts and judged unfavorably.

Unforeseen Consequences?

The two-pronged strategy just described is very effective when viewed from the perspective of the small number of powerful individuals at the top of the pyramid who receive a large share of the extorted payments. It is also perversely effective inasmuch as, with a proliferation of contradictory legal texts showing “political will,” the ministry can claim that the problems are rooted in a lack of means and capacity. This same “lack of means and capacity” mantra can be sold to donors, which may then decide to disburse funds to help make improvements, even though the claims would not withstand close scrutiny. For instance, while it is legitimate to claim that Cameroon’s large swathes of forests need more enforcement officers (e.g., MINEF 2004), it is less clear why more than 20 checkpoints are placed along the only passable road—such as the one connecting the East Region with neighboring Chad, where large volumes of timber are transported each year (Cerutti and Lescuyer 2011)—instead of being posted in the forest where they are sorely needed. Indeed, the “effectiveness” of the current system becomes apparent only when optimization of means and capacity is defined as giving priority to locations that enable the extraction of the largest amount of bribes, instead of the places where people and means are technically needed to manage the forest.

In the long run, a strategy such as this introduces strong tensions into the system, with rippling negative effects that extend from the morale and professional performance of state officials to the efficacy of state institutions. As clearly evinced by the interviews, the morale of many state officials is seriously eroded. Because of a very high unemployment rate, few can escape the system and find a job that, as one interviewee put it, allows the respect of their moral values. Those who remain must spend much of their days trying to find ways to collect money to feed the system, while constantly checking whether they are still in the right circle of power or whether they are doing something that will displease higher officials. Often, they opt for the safest option of not doing too much, which obviously has direct negative consequences for the basic performance expected from a functional ministry. It is telling, for instance, that despite the prominent role that forest revenues have assumed since the adoption of the 1994 forest law, fiscal control remains the ministry’s most underperformed task, resulting in great losses to the state (HTR and MINEFI 2005; Resource Extraction Monitoring 2010). This seems paradoxical to an external observer, given the relative ease and cost-effectiveness of performing a task that in some cases would require nothing more than comparing data held by two ministries. In fact, such controls could result in penalties that would have to be paid to the Treasury and could then less easily be diverted into the pyramidal system.

The system further undermines the efficacy of state institutions in two respects. First, because the main criteria for professional advancement are monetary in nature—each career has a price attached to it, instead of a job description with clear capacity requirements—the likelihood of getting a certain position is higher if one manages to please the right people at the right time. Second, as a further negative corollary of the promotion system, when passing part of the collected money up the hierarchical ladder, one can never be entirely sure of betting on the right people,

that is, those who will eventually be in a position to support the promotion case. Hence, officials at all levels tend to build their own local fiefdoms, whose prerogatives must be shielded as much as possible from the knowledge of other fiefdoms built by other officials and, above all, from the central hierarchy. In some cases, for instance, officials candidly admitted making good money from chainsaw millers, but were unwilling to report the value for fear that their superiors would demand larger sums if the confidentiality of the interview were to be broken.

When low morale and hopelessness about any future personal improvement combine with the difficulty of exiting the system and the relative ease of building and maintaining a local fiefdom, undisturbed by a hierarchy whose moral legitimacy to penalize is not recognized, bribes come to be perceived as a legitimate source of income for improving one's career and livelihood. Corruption may then become in itself the reason for policy failures, because a fundamental element in the policy implementation process—that is, the officials on the ground—has no *raison d'être* other than self-maintenance through the collection of bribes, regardless of how many new regulations are approved by a discredited upper hierarchy. In these circumstances, mistrust and conflict among state officials, whether belonging to the same ministry or different ones, become the rule on the ground, as individual state officials or networks of officials compete with each other to dismiss potential competitors for positions of power among fellow state officials and to extort money from operators wherever they see fit. Operators, stalwart officials, and the general population, for their part, see the state as a machine used by individuals with no legitimacy to enforce the law who are just intent both on stealing their money and on scrambling for political power. In the interviews, operators readily discussed possible changes to the legal framework that could improve their professional lives, but they demonstrated their belief that they have no serious and honest counterpart with which to engage. Indeed, their primary concern is how any legal text adopted by the ministry to regulate their activities might be enforced to extort money from them, and how best to avoid such extortion.

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that in Cameroon, the vast majority of the activities of commercial chainsaw loggers from stump to market are regularly and informally “taxed” by state officials collecting bribes along the production chain. Perpetuating the situation is the Ministry of Forests and Fauna's panoply of incomplete and/or contradictory legal texts that foster confusion and arbitrariness. Although the regulations respond to donors' requests to take action against illegal logging, they also nurture corrupt practices.

Our findings corroborate Ascher's (1999) theory that rejects ignorance, incapacity, or incompetence of state officials as the direct causes of policy failures. We also find, however, that in some cases corruption may not be an “all too easy explanation” for policy failures that engender the mismanagement of natural resources (Ascher 1999, ix). Rather, corruption may itself be the root cause of policy failures, notably in relation to the fight against illegal forest activities that has rhetorical official support in many timber-producing countries. Our findings show that corruption is a way of life for an ever-growing base of disillusioned local-level state officials—key to the effective implementation of reforms targeting IFAs—whose primary objective is to keep the state weak or absent, in order to maintain the upper hand for bribes requested for no purpose other than their own enrichment.

In the long run, this sets in motion a vicious cycle likely to hamper any effort to redress and improve the situation through policy reform. The state loses its legitimacy to conduct meaningful reform vis-à-vis local state officials, while the latter lose their own legitimacy to implement reforms vis-à-vis timber operators and the general population. In the process, mistrust and conflict over the control of networks of corruption across the country increase while enforcement of the letter of the law remains a distant thought.

Also, mistrust results in state officials choosing to either not collect or not retain information as a way of maintaining their vested interests. As a consequence, even strategies at the upper levels of the state end up being based on unreliable data, with the risk that actions taken by the state and development partners could be misdirected and eventually fail. For instance, the recent “Strategic Document for Growth and Employment,” which sets the reference framework for the government of Cameroon’s actions over the period 2010–2020 (Republic of Cameroon 2009), states that the efforts in the forestry sector over the next decade will focus on stabilizing timber production around the current level of about 2 million cubic meters (Republic of Cameroon 2009). In fact, the actual current timber production is more than twice that figure. It is about 4.2 million cubic meters when commercial chainsaw logging is factored in (Cerutti and Lescuyer 2011).

Our findings carry implications for the recent international efforts to combat illegal forest activities, in particular the EU’s FLEGT Action Plan. While such efforts push for new or improved legal frameworks for forests in producer countries, they may risk reinforcing a system where higher level state officials use “law enforcement” to cut small-scale loggers out of the mainstream legal forestry sector—officially, because they do not comply with the law, but in reality because such a legal framework gives forestry officials a means to extract bribes. In the worst-case scenario, notwithstanding the intended objective to ensure a non-bifurcated market and policy, the Plan could even contribute to the deterioration of the livelihoods of the thousands of small-scale loggers currently feeding the domestic timber market, as their “illegal” situation under FLEGT exposes them to the risk of even greater harassment and bribes.

Solutions to dismantle the current system of corrupt practices are neither easy nor readily available. More research is needed to better understand and analyze the economic and social variables that sustain the long-term functioning of the system, as well as those that could cause its decay. Nonetheless, some lessons stemming from this research can help indicate a way forward for the state and nongovernmental partners willing to engage in governance reforms.

First, although it has been argued that transferring staff may be a strategy for disrupting corruption networks (Lambsdorff 2007), we find that staff have been moved with the opposite objective—to reestablish corruption. This indicates a need for further study of how corruption networks operate and whether there may be other ways to disrupt the system.

Second, reforms will need to involve a large spectrum of institutions. A focus on, say, forestry does expose thorny issues within the relevant ministry, but it may bear no tangible results if the necessary bridges to other relevant institutions are not built. This article has described how bribes are requested by state officials belonging to several ministries, as well as how stalwart state officials are forced to submit to the rules of the game because they have no hope that the judiciary will bring them justice in their efforts to apply the letter of the law.

Third, the institutions of the state would need to engage in a lasting campaign to increase its political power, intended as the “product not just of the resources and number of citizens it can command but also the degree to which the legitimacy of its leaders is recognised” (Fukuyama 2011, 43). Such engagement would certainly create political trade-offs to be settled at the higher echelons of the state, because, as shown in this article, powerful elites strenuously defend the status quo. Regardless of how difficult and long-term, such a campaign is fundamental if the battle against illegal logging is to have any chance of success, as the current biggest problem for the implementation of any reform targeting the forestry sector, and particularly those aimed at improving governance, is that neither operators nor many state officials, particularly those at the bottom layers of the pyramid, recognize the ministry as a legitimate counterpart with which those reforms can be discussed. Whether the present political class can carry out the changes mooted in the preceding discussion remains an open question.

Note

1. As of mid-2011, three countries—Ghana, the Republic of the Congo, and Cameroon—had signed a VPA with the EU, and the Central African Republic, Liberia, and Indonesia had concluded negotiations and were expecting the official signature.

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