

**Minutes of the Second
Meeting of the VPA Steering Committee
Held at the Board Room of the
Forestry Development Authority
LBDI Compound, Congo Town, Monrovia**

Tuesday, October 27, 2009

The meeting was called to order at approximately 10:12 a.m. by Mr. John T. Woods, FDA Managing Director who presided over the meeting. He welcomed everyone to the second meeting of the VPA Steering Committee. He then requested for a prayer which was led by Mr. Wogbeh. Thereafter, the agenda was read out by the Chair and adopted by the SC. The minutes were also read with corrections, observations and comments made for the Secretariat's prompt action.

Opening Remarks and Introduction

Mr. Woods highlighted the importance and objective of the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA). He indicated that the VPA process was launched in March, 2009 and thereafter, a roadmap was developed to enhance the negotiations process between the EU and the Government of Liberia. According to him, the VPA process is intended to ensure that the export and import of timbers between Liberia and the European Union (EU) is legal. Additionally, he informed the meeting that Liberia, unlike many other countries engaged in VPA negotiations is ahead in that, it has all its legality instruments in place except that, what is needed is to fill in the gap identified between what is available and what is missing. The Chair, however, noted that the Agreement was a voluntary arrangement but was necessary for Liberia to join. He also clarified the functions of the Steering Committee, Technical Secretariat and the Negotiating Team. According to him, the SC is to work with the Technical Secretariat (TS) to bring forth ideas that will inform the agenda of the Negotiation Team; in turn the SC members should report to their constituents. The Technical Secretariat (TS) will provide the needed technical support to the Steering Committee, take notes, provide documentation and ensure that discussions take place. The Negotiating Team will engage in VPA's negotiations on behalf of Liberia.

Mr. Woods, however, stressed that the Steering Committee does not have a legal status. He said an executive order is needed to give legal status to the committee in order for the Steering Committee to function as a legal body and to hold contracts with the Technical Secretariat. According to him, the Secretariat is presently holding contracts with the IDL group.

Immediately, following Hon. Woods' opening remarks, , a roll call was done to ensure that there was a quorum. Representatives from all stakeholder groups were present at the meeting though four community representatives for the steering committee had not yet been elected.

Mr. Wogbeh was interested in knowing whether Steering Committee (SC) members were informed of the meeting. The Technical Secretariat confirmed that all Steering Committee members were informed through email and follow-up telephone calls. Notwithstanding, some Steering Committee members claimed that they did not receive the citation sent to them through email.

Update on progress of action items agreed on during the 1st SC meeting

1. Executive order

Mr. John Woods provided an update on the Executive Order. He informed the body that a formal communication was sent to the President asking the President to issue a Proclamation that would give the SC status as a legal entity in Liberia. Secretariat Setup

The Technical Secretariat's Office and Finance Manager, Mr. F.Dadeh Harper, reported that with the assistance of Ms. Clare Brogan, an office space was secured and fully equipped to enable the Secretariat to begin work. According to Mr. Harper, the offices of the Secretariat are located in Mamba Point, Old CID Road, in the A-Z Building, popularly known as OSIWA'S Building. He said the Secretariat took office on October 19, 2009. Mr. Woods, noted the importance of the Secretariat and indicated that the Secretariat was put in place to be the brain behind the Steering Committee and drive the process. He then cautioned the staff of the Secretariat to be aggressive, vigilant, and proactive in the discharge of their duties. The FDA Managing Director advised the VPA staff to take time off to undertake research on other countries' VPA experience. He encouraged members of the Secretariat to be courteous and polite to all institutions/stakeholders of the VPA. Still on the discussion of office set up, Madam Julie Weah of the Foundation for Community Initiatives raised concern about the decision taken at the last meeting regarding discussions with LEITI about issuance of contracts to members of the TS while in the process of acquiring a legal status. Madam Clare Brogan told the gathering that LEITI management said that arrangement would have been complicated and so thus was not possible.

A question was asked as to who is providing the Secretariat financial assistance to operate; the EU advisor said the TS is being funded by DFID.

Community Representatives Election to the Steering Committee:

Ms. Nora Bowier of the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) informed the body that SDI facilitated one (1) platform election for Rivercess and Grand Bassa Counties where the community members themselves conducted their own elections for one representative to the Steering Committee. She said the two (2) counties have one slot on the SC and Mr. William Page was elected to represent those counties. The other election for the two representatives from Grand Cape Mount, Gbarpolu and Lofa Counties was facilitated by SDI. Ms. Bowier said, Bopolu, Gbarpolu and Grand Cape Mount counties were allotted permanent seats on the Steering Committee (SC) while Lofa County is an alternate and that all of the election processes in those areas mentioned were successful with George Kpawulu and Michael M. Roberts representing Gbarpolu and Cape Mount respectively. She mentioned that elections in the non-forested areas were to be facilitated by the FDA.

Following Nora's summary report, the Chairman inquired about SDI's role in conducting the elections. He asked if guidelines were developed for the election of community representatives to SC. If so, were those guidelines properly carried out during the election process? Mr. Woods requested information concerning: how was the community election organized and who authorized SDI to facilitate meetings or conduct elections in those areas just mentioned. Victoria Cole also informed the meeting that SDI conducted the election without the inputs of FDA and questioned the credibility of the election. This resulted into an extensive discussion between Steering Committee members.

During the discussion, it was clarified by Mr. Moses Wogbeh of FDA and Kula Jackson of the NGO's Coalition who presided over the 1st meeting that indeed SDI was given that mandate by the Steering Committee to conduct community elections. It was also clarified that at the first Steering Committee meeting, the Steering Committee decided that every member organizations should conduct its own elections and submit names of elected representatives to the Steering Committee. It was also agreed that Community representatives should also have their respective communities submit their names to the Secretariat in a written communication.

Mr. Lawrence Satia of the Bureau of Concession/ Ministry of Finance suggested that FDA work along with SDI to ensure that the community's elections are credible because according to him, it is not advisable for SDI to conduct the community's election along.

In this respect, a multi-stakeholder committee including (FDA, Industry, SDI and the Secretariat) was set up and given the mandate to verify the elections conducted by SDI and ensure elections were held in those areas elections have not been conducted. The Chairman asked the committee to report to the Steering Committee at the next steering committee meeting.

Madam Julie Weah raised some concerns when the Presiding spoke of electing a deputy chair. She was interesting in knowing as to whether Mr. Woods was only presiding over the meeting or was the Chair of the Steering Committee. Mr. Mannah, said people should not show ingratitude to the FDA and that FDA is the appropriate institution with the requisite technical know how when it comes forest management. Mr. Mannah recommended and suggested that FDA is the appropriate institution to hold the Chairman seat. Dialogue ensued whereby Idella Cooper, the Ministry of Justice's representative suggested that the issue of the Chairman be postponed until the Steering Committee was fully constituted. The issue of some organizations receiving funding for the VPA's activities in Liberia was raised in the meeting. Mr. Woods expressed serious reservation about that kind of policy by donors to send funds directly to CSO or NGO's. He emphasized that all VPA's funding must be channeled through the Secretariat and not to fragment the whole VPA process by sending money here and there because it undermines the process.

Introduction of Stephanie Altman:

Ms. Clare Brogan spoke about her role in the VPA process in Liberia. She said, she had been working extensively to facilitate the establishment of the Secretariat. She said though the process was slow, she is happy that the Secretariat has got an office space in order to begin work. She asked her successor to introduce herself. The incoming VPA Advisor introduced herself as Stephanie Altman. She said she has been in Liberia for a year and had worked for the Ministry of Agriculture. Mrs. Altman said she was happy to be a part of the process.

Mr. Woods then welcomed Stephanie and indicated that anyone who wants to know about the VPA process can contact Mrs. Altman for more details.

Presentation of Secretariat Workplan and Budget for SC approval:

The Secretariat's Coordinator, , Mr. Amos T. Kofa, used the opportunity to briefly caution Steering Committee members about the folders which were given to them. He appealed to the SC members to take good care of the folders because it will help committee members to keep track of records. He however apologized to the SC members for the short notice accorded them for the meeting.

Overall the Steering Committee accepted the Secretariat's outlined workplan.

Mr. Woods thanked Mr. Kofa for his splendid deliberation and requested the SC members to make comments and observations on those items which they think cannot be implemented as a presented in the work plan.

Some of those items include:

- Creating the organization web site as earlier as possible
- Holding a workshop for legality definition and legality assurance system.

Mr. F. Dadeh Harper informed the body that the VPA web site will be developed in November.

Regular Meetings:

It was agreed at the meeting that the Steering Committee will have its regular meetings on the last Tuesday of every month, at 2:00 p.m. and that the venue will be arranged for each meeting by the Secretariat.

Budget:

Mr. Harper gave a summary of the budget that should be used to implement those activities as reflected in the workplan. He said taking into consideration the amount of meetings that have been proposed and agreed on by the SC, the budget for SC meetings must be increased.

The presiding Chairman said the budget, as presented, did not provide enough detail for the SC to comment. He requested that the budget be broken down in detail to reflect all that was within the work plan. The entire body agreed that the Secretariat should present a more detailed budget at the next meeting for review. Mr. Woods requested that the TS not underestimate members of the SC. He, however, thanked TC Finance Officer so far for his performance.

Formation of Working Groups on Legality Definition and Legality Assurance System:

Mr. Charles Miller, Deputy Coordinator of the TS, presented for the SC information relating to the formation of the Working Groups for the Legality Definition and Legality Assurance System. Mr. Miller emphasized the workshop which is scheduled for November 4th on the Legality Definition. He however referred Steering Committee members to the notes in the folders and encouraged them to make use of the detailed information for their own consumption about the Legality Definition and Legality Assurance.

Mr. Woods said the issue of timbers leaving the country illegally is the reason why the VPA process was launched in Liberia. The Chairman re-emphasized that Liberia's laws and Chain of Custody system placed Liberia far ahead of other countries negotiating a VPA.

The meeting was then adjourned.