

CIVIL SOCIETY CONTACT GROUP MEETING – 22ND MAY, 2014

Communiqué

Introduction

1. We, members of the Civil Society Contact Group, made up of 59 participants from Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), Community Based Organisations (CBOs), forest activists, Trade Union, Students Union, representatives of communities and media; at a Forest Governance meeting at Noda Hotel in Fumesua on the 22nd May, 2014 do hereby issue this communiqué.
2. The meeting focused on the forest governance reforms under the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) between the Government of Ghana and the European Union (EU) implementation in Ghana; the priority forest governance concerns of CSOs. This meeting was convened by Civic Response.

Forest sector Transparency

3. We have observed an improvement in access to information particularly at the district level offices of the Forestry Services Division for CSOs and communities. However limited, there is the need for greater and more proactive information sharing on the part of the FSD to provide communities with relevant information to strengthen their efforts to monitor and resist illegal forest operators.
4. Transparency in the use of forest revenues by District Assemblies and Traditional Authorities in many parts of Ghana has sadly not seen any significant improvement. Forest royalties continue to be misapplied and in some instances misused as recurrent expenses rather than for development projects in several Districts.

Consultation and participation

5. Stakeholder collaboration in the sector in relation to the VPA implementation has generally improved. Though invitations have not been consistent, CSOs continue to be interested and involved in the development of the Legality Assurance System. Processes such as Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) and the Forest Investment Program (FIP) however, have not seen any improvement in their consultation and participation of CSOs. Improved governance in the Forest sector is a key intent of the new forest and wildlife policy and therefore cannot be limited to VPA processes.
6. Decentralization of the forestry sector has not worked as effectively as we have hoped for. Forestry management has not yet been fully integrated into the District Assembly systems. Furthermore the top hierarchy of District Assemblies in many areas have not taken keen interest in forest forum processes.

In preparation for the VPA implementation

7. The revision of stumpage fees this year is an important progress. It is however sad that this is the first review in more than 10 years implying losses in potential revenue to the state and for forest management purposes. We would expect that quarterly revisions, regardless of amount, would happen quarterly as required of the Forestry Commission. Furthermore some low demand species such as Danta, Dahoma and Chenchen could be to be graduated to medium and high demand species to correspond with their movement on the market. Stumpage fees should be seen to be used as a tool for forest conservation.
7. We are alarmed that there are not enough forest management plans for all production forest reserves in Ghana. This is a key priority area in meeting legal compliance under the VPA, without which timber production from those areas would be illegal. We therefore urge the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources and our development partners to support the development these forest management plans.
8. Conversion of extant and expired concessions to Timber Utilization Contracts, as required by the Timber Resources Management Act, 1998 (ACT 547) is long overdue. We strongly urge industry and government to hasten efforts to redress this bottleneck. Without this conversion, timber exports from Ghana would obviously be illegal.

Forest Permits and ban on Rosewood harvesting in Northern Ghana

9. Allocation of forest permits, particularly salvage permits continue to exclude the larger segment of local communities where these rights have been given; hence local communities cannot distinguish between valid and legal permits and forged permits. We therefore call on the Forestry Services Division for greater transparency and publicity in the allocation of salvage permits to help communities detect fraudulent timber operators.
10. Harvesting and conveyance of Rosewood, Papao among others in the Northern Region is assuming a crisis situation. It is very contradictory on the part of forest regulators to allow for conveyance and removal of billets and logs of large volume of these timber species instead of concentrating on efforts to stem the destruction of this fragile ecosystem. It seems the ban on rosewood conveyance has again failed. We therefore demand an immediate cessation and termination of all timber logging activities and conveyance of lesser used species from the northern region. We further recommend the publication of the list of all valid permit holders and the exact areas and number of trees they are authorized to convey. We also believe quick fixes like the ban on rosewood exports need to be abandoned for a better solution arrived at through an open and participatory process.

Community role in Forest Plantation

11. We have again observed that local farmers who participated in plantations development under the Modified Taungya System (MTS) over the past 14 years do not have a signed agreement with the forestry commission which entitles them to benefits. We are also concerned that forest plantation has been privatised and the MTS discontinued, at the expense of local farmers in forest fringe communities who in many areas have demonstrated their efficiency and capacity in contributing to reforestation. We therefore demand a policy reversal to allow for community

participation and for the forestry services to provide extension services for the growing, and maintenance of community plantations.

Public procurement policy for timber

12. We acknowledge the steps taken by government to restructure the domestic market to make it more legal; hence the proposal of a public procurement policy for timber among other efforts. The policy development has stalled in its development. We therefore urge cabinet to expedite steps to pass and implement this policy. Furthermore we call on FORIG and other research institutions to find alternatives to timber products to reduce the high demand for timber locally. We also recommend a review of the Annual Allowable Cut of timber nationally to bring it in line with the low stocking levels of our forest resources.
13. We find the safeguard for communities and Small and Medium Scale enterprises (SME) as important for the successful implementation of the VPA in Ghana. We therefore applaud the current collaboration between the Forestry Commission and these SMEs in this regard. We recommend that these safeguards should be further elaborated and institutionalized in the legislative review process which has already delayed.

Commitment of the Contact Group

14. We, as members of civil society, commit to continuous constructive engagement and useful feedback to the Ministry of Lands and Natural Resources; and the Forestry Commission and its divisions and units; to ensure that we improve forest governance and forest resources for future generations. We also commit to sustain and improve our efforts to ensure that the forest management generate the perpetual benefits to all segments of society.

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