

Civic Response and the EU-Ghana VPA: protecting forests, communities and the climate



In 2016, Civic Response successfully led a campaign to halt mining in forest reserves and biodiversity hotspots, saving 29,000 hectares of forest. We also successfully campaigned to get illegal ('special') logging permits cancelled. We trained over 600 community representatives from 70 forest fringe communities on forest laws and their rights, and how to monitor infractions. Twenty-five communities have now set up community watchdogs to report on illegal logging.

Civic Response is a Ghanaian NGO founded in 2003. We improve democratic governance in the forest sector by empowering communities to hold the government and companies to account, and ensure laws protecting the environment and community rights are respected. Besides our work with communities, we also conduct our own advocacy at government level to improve forest laws and implementation.



Civic Response work on illegal logging

In 2004 Civic Response put out a press release revealing that annually Ghana lost more tax revenues from illegal logging than it received in development aid. For example, in 2004 Ghana lost €900 Billion (\$USD 100 million). In 2006 Civic Response welcomed the EU Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) as a solution to this problem which could control illegal logging and improve forest governance.

Thirteen years later, we can see that by improving forest governance, the VPA process is reducing illegal logging and poverty. 34 communities – 22% of the 150 forest fringe communities that Civic Response has engaged with over the last five years – have now partially or fully received the logging benefits owed to them. FLEGT licenses, proving legality of timber exported from Ghana, are expected to come within one year. As a director in the Forestry Commission noted: "...the



managers and staff realise that they cannot do things like they did in the past anymore. If you falsify figures and manufacture trees, the system will immediately alert head office and you will be made to answer”.

A USAID evaluation of Ghana’s forest sector in 2011 also noted: *“in general, the story of forestry over the past 25 years is one of increased degradation, non-commitment and failed leadership... traditional hand-outs [such as] as aid for development do not work. It only works when there is national support for priorities and an active and informed civil society involved in the deliberative process”*. The VPA process has finally brought these necessary elements to the Ghanaian forestry sector.



Concrete successes of the Ghana VPA process include:

- In 2016, lobbying from Civic Response and other Ghanaian NGOs involved in the VPA process blocked the Minister for Lands and Natural Resources from issuing “special permits” that would have created a loophole for logging companies to bypass environmental and human rights protections.
- Action to address illegal logging in the domestic market through the introduction of legal guidelines for small-scale Timber Utilisation Contracts.
- Re-launching of the national forest law reform process which had been blocked for 20 years, raising logging tax levels that had not been updated for decades, and bringing old logging contracts in line with today’s higher environmental and human rights requirements.
- A 640% increase in the logging tax revenues received by the government and communities, through an upward review of stumpage fees charged on logging. This was thanks to a media campaign and lobbying from the NGO coalition led by Civic Response.
- National, local and community level civil society are strengthened and empowered, and have been demanding accountable forest management since 2003. This is largely thanks to the space created by the VPA, which centres around a multi-stakeholder committee where civil society is at the same level of decision-making power as the government.
- The 2012 introduction of a progressive Forest and Wildlife Policy, which entrenches high governance requirements for forests, and was developed with civil society in the driving seat.
- Draft tree tenure and benefit sharing arrangements that devolve ownership rights, control and benefit sharing to farmers and land owners. Ample evidence shows that forests are best-protected when they are owned by the people who live in and depend on them.¹

We have achieved these successes despite the fact that high-level politicians are involved in illegal logging and use their position to stop the Forestry Commission from acting.² They have even ejected forestry officials who tried to

¹ World Resources Institute, 2014, *Securing Rights, Combatting Climate Change*, available at <https://www.wri.org/sites/default/files/securingrights-full-report-english.pdf>

² Civic Response, press release, November 2016, “Halt illegal mining in forest reserves!” http://civicresponsegh.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/CR-Press-Release_November.pdf

enforce laws. In 2017, Civic Response will gather evidence to expose and possibly prosecute these politicians. We will continue to empower up to 100 communities to ensure they monitor logging in their areas and receive the benefits owed to them by logging companies.

Civic Response work on land rights

Existing tree tenure arrangements have driven deforestation in Ghana. The government owns all the trees in Ghana, meaning all profits from trees go to them rather than the local people who live on the land. This encourages local farmers to destroy trees rather than protect them. In 2015 Civic Response proposed a tree tenure and benefit sharing framework to rectify this situation, based on extensive fieldwork to understand local tenure practices. The government's new draft tree tenure and benefit sharing framework is largely based on Civic Response's work, and is now awaiting cabinet approval. If brought into law, this means local communities who nurture, grow and protect forests are also those who benefit. It is expected to improve communities' livelihoods and



be a major incentive for communities to maintain forest cover. Civic Response will focus on this in the coming years by advocating for cabinet approval of the framework, and developing simplified versions of the framework to educate communities and land owners about how to implement it well.

Civic Response has also begun a campaign to improve governance and community rights in large-scale land acquisitions, which have a history in Ghana of depriving communities of their land and rights.

Civic Response work on illegal mining

In 2016, Ghana's forest reserves saw unprecedented threats from surface mining. Companies who applied for permits to start prospecting jumped ahead illegally and began full-scale surface mining, destroying forests and ignoring local communities' rights. Civic Response and our community partners gathered evidence to reveal the powerful politicians behind these mining companies, whose involvement meant the regulatory agencies were neglecting to enforce the laws. Civic Response and others condemned the actions of those involved

and exposed them through media coverage. This led to a ministerial enquiry which halted the pillaging of forests, saving 29,000 hectares of high-biodiversity land. The battle continues this year to ensure this ban is made permanent.

As there are serious risks involved in campaigns which target powerful lobbies and politicians, Civic Response is one of the few organisations in Ghana willing to do this work. Despite the risks, Civic Response is committed to continue supporting communities resisting mining in forest reserves, by gathering evidence and exposing politicians involved.

