

11 Kpokolo: A Form of Illegal Logging in Liberia's Forests



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Summary

This study establishes the significant difference between the sizes of planks traded on the domestic market and planks exported (kpokolo) to foreign countries. The size of the sawn planks by local chainsaw millers is 2 inches thick, 12 inches wide, and 14 feet long, while kpokolo was observed to be 6 to 8 inches thick, 10 inches wide, and 12 feet long.

The most common tree species harvested for kpokolo were iroko, Afzelia, and ekki. These species are amongst the most valuable and durable tree species. There is evidence of over 30,000 cubic meters of ekki, iroko, and Afzelia harvested and abandoned in the forests, following the pronouncement of the ban on the transport of kpokolo in February 2023.

Kpokolo dealers operated as chainsaw millers in unauthorized community forests. The idea of using local chainsaw operators was to make kpokolo operations appear to community people as chainsaw milling, hiding the true intent of the loggers from the community.

There was no evidence of the Forestry Development Authority (FDA) issuing permits to the loggers. The loggers verbally agreed on terms with them regarding the operations in their forests. This evidence represents a breach of the law and undermines sustainable forest management.

The main aim of this study is to inform decision-making by forest stakeholders to address the weak law enforcement and weaknesses in laws, regulations, procedures, or systems that may have allowed this unauthorized kpokolo operation.

Introduction

In the first quarter of 2023, the CS-IFM conducted field missions in Gbarpolu, Grand Cape Mount, Bomi, Nimba, and Grand Gedeh Counties to gather information on kpokolo operations in Liberia. The team interviewed community members, local officials, and chainsaw operators. As part of the study, they reviewed several media reports and alerts submitted by the Community-Based Independent Forest Monitors (CBIFMs) in the forested communities on the growing threat of kpokolo to Liberia's forests.

A structured questionnaire and an independent forest monitoring (IFM) tracker were administered to forest stakeholders in communities where these kpokolo operations have taken place, including in Gbayama, and Konigar in Gbarpolu County; Kanneh-La and Big and Small Jebeh in Bomi County; Gola Konneh and Kinjor in Grand Cape Mount County, and Zor in Gbehlageh District in Nimba County. The monitors interviewed town

authorities including Town Chief, General Town Chief, Paramount Chief, and ordinary community members (men, women, and youth). A total of 140 persons responded to the study questions.

Legal context

Liberia has formulated a progressive legal framework for the forest sector, stemming from the 1986 Constitution, which commits to managing natural resources in a way that ensures the maximum feasible participation of all Liberians under conditions of equality to advance the welfare of the Liberian people.¹

The National Forestry Reform Law (NFRL, 2006),² the Community Rights Law with Respect to Forest Lands (CRL, 2009),³ and the revised Chainsaw Milling Regulation (CMR, 2022), all state timber from both natural forests and plantation forests must be done through either a Forest Management Contract (FMC), Timber Sales Contract (TSC), Private Use Permit (PUP), Forest Use Permit (FUP), or Community Forest



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Management Agreement (CFMA). All logging must take place within one of the five Forest Resource Licenses. The processes of obtaining any of these permits (for timber or concession rights) in Liberia are enshrined in the NFRL and the CRL. Furthermore, timber in a CFMA can only be harvested under a Commercial Use Contract (CUC) or a Chainsaw Milling Permit.⁴

The revised CMR Section 5 (a) states that “no person shall undertake chainsaw milling unless in possession of a Chainsaw Milling Permit duly issued to him/her/it or his/her/its principal by the Authority in keeping with the provisions of this Regulation”.⁵ According to the regulation, the Chainsaw Milling Permits shall be issued for a renewable period of one year to harvest up to the maximum quantity of trees authorized by and under the FDA-approved Operations Plan for the underlying Forest Resource License. The regulation defines chainsaw milling as the means of harvesting and on-site conversion of logs using chainsaws, which are defined as “any portable chainsaw or similar cutting device, rendered

operative by an electric or internal combustion engine or similar means”.

The CMR prohibits the export of timber or planks sawn from chainsaw milling in Liberia. In Section 3(b), it states that timber harvested under a Chainsaw Milling Permit shall be used only on the domestic market, and are not eligible for export.⁶ The regulation says a method for getting chainsaw timber into the Chain of Custody system will be developed “in two years”.

Section 8 of the FDA Regulation on Abandoned Logs (No. 116-17) states that “a person commits an offense if that person intentionally or negligently causes any logs, timber, or timber products to become abandoned. The penalties for this offense include payment of a fine not exceeding US\$ 1,000; and forfeiture of the Forest Resources License or other relevant licenses. Additionally, the court may issue injunctive relief to redress the damage caused by the violation or to take action to prevent future violations.”⁷



Abandoned blockwood in Gbayama unauthorized community forest Gbarpolu County, March 2023 © CS-IFM

Findings

Planks versus blockwood/kpokolo

The study confirmed previous findings that the size of planks traded on the domestic market is smaller than the ones exported to foreign markets. The DayLight reported in December 2022 that chainsaw milled planks in Liberia are at most 2 inches thick, 12 inches wide, and 14 feet long, which is the conventional definition of sawn planks.⁸ The size of the planks sawn by chainsaw millers is determined by the demands of the domestic market. A 2017 survey by Building Markets also showed most planks produced for the domestic market were at most 2 inches thick, 10 inches wide, and 14 feet long.⁹

The same DayLight report cited above described kpokolo timber as about four times larger than sawn planks on the domestic markets. The domestic market does not

appear to demand blockwood/kpokolo and it can attract a higher price if exported, albeit it being illegal to do so. This is an incentive to cut such types of timber in increasingly large quantities. According to the majority (63 percent) of respondents, sawn planks that are larger than 2 inches thick are too heavy to carry and not demanded by the domestic market.

The DayLight report shows ekki tree species as the main target for Kpokolo dealers. Building Markets reported that the most common tree species harvested by chainsaw millers included abura, dahoma, iroko, kosipo, lovoa, niangon, sapele, sipo, and wawa.¹⁰ Most (76 percent) of respondents in this study reported iroko and ekki as the targets for kpokolo. The iroko and ekki wood is more valuable and durable than other tree species observed on the domestic market in Monrovia and other parts of Liberia.

Community knowledge of kpokolo

The community members interviewed, including the local leaders, had limited knowledge of kpokolo. They knew kpokolo as chainsaw milling that has been carried out by the local timber dealers. Leaders of the communities reported meeting several timber dealers who approached them for permission to operate in their forests.

Testimony 1: Knowledge of kpokolo

I have no idea about kpokolo even though a lot of people have engaged us about it. Some of our children have come to us with white men to do wood business in the forests. All of them left our communities in February 2023, because they said the government have stopped their operations.

During field interviews with community members and chainsaw operators, it was recorded that kpokolo dealers operated as chainsaw millers in unauthorized community forests. The loggers did not show any permit issued by the FDA, and the communities where these kpokolo operations were taking place had obtained no permit from the FDA. About 90 percent of the respondents said the loggers only verbally informed the community about the FDA being aware of their operations in the communities.

Many local authorities interviewed said the loggers verbally agreed with them on contract terms regarding chainsaw milling operations in their forests.

Testimony 2: Local official disappointed in loggers

We had only verbal agreement with the operators to harvest logs. We did not know whether kpokolo businessmen were registered with the government as a business/company or if they were given permits by the FDA to carry out their kpokolo operations.

According to the community members, chainsaw operators in the community were used by the kpokolo dealers. The idea of using local chainsaw operators was to ensure the kpokolo operations appear to community people as chainsaw milling. The actual intent of the loggers was never disclosed to the community. Community members did not know the destination of the timber extracted and how destructive the operations would be to the forests and the communities. Some local authorities reported that the loggers informed them that

the logs were being sold outside Liberia, but failed to indicate the foreign countries to which the logs were taken.

Some (25 percent) community members reported that the community leaders put their greed first while arranging deals with loggers. The majority of citizens reported not being knowledgeable of the agreement reached by the community leaders and the pit sawyers and loggers on the community's benefits.

Forest exploitation

Before the community people realized that kpokolo is different from chainsaw milling, the loggers extracted large volumes of logs, mainly ekki and iroko, from their forests. During one-on-one interviews with community members and chainsaw operators, it was reported that kpokolo operations have lasted for over two decades, from 2000 to 2023 in Nimba, Gbarpolu, and Grand Cape Mount Counties. An estimated 30,000 cubic meters of these species were harvested and abandoned in unauthorized community forests. According to the local authorities the kpokolo loggers had more capacity than the regular chainsaw millers they knew, even though they too felled trees and sawed them in the communities and transported the timbers to Monrovia in pickups and sometimes in containers, but the quantity and size were larger.

Community benefits

Key informants reported that the citizens demanded financial and other benefits if their local authorities were to allow loggers to operate their forests. To operate in the communities, the loggers committed to road building, citizens' employment, construction of schools, clinics, etc. Even though not aware of the agreement between the community leaders and the loggers, the ordinary community members believed the logging operation would have brought development with a lot of opportunities, and kept them on the path with other communities with logging concessions. Many community members thought engaging in logging operations was worthy, which motivated them to enter into 'any form' of agreement with the loggers.

Unfortunately, the loggers were only interested in the logs, not improving the conditions of the community. According to some community members, the only benefit the community received from the loggers was the chainsaw registration and payment of tolls to people recognized as landowners.



Blockwood harvested outside Gola Konneh Community Forest in Grand Cape Mount County, March 2023 © CS-IFM

Testimony 3: Community expectations

In April 2022, we decided to open our forest to pit sawyers because Indo Africa, a logging company operating in Korninga A in Gbarpolu County, helped us to widen our road as they were using the road to transport their logs to Monrovia. We thought that opening our forest to pit sawyers was going to make us benefit.

Chainsaw registration fees

According to the staff of the Liberia Chainsaw and Timber Dealers Union (LICSATDUN), there is no fixed amount for registering chainsaws in Liberia. In most instances, the amounts paid by chainsaw operators have depended on the arrangement made between the community leaders and chainsaw operators or loggers. In 70 percent of the studied community, the community leaders had to force the loggers to register the chainsaws before harvesting any tree in the forests. The estimated annual registration fee paid to some (60 percent) community leaders to register a chainsaw was 3,000 Liberian Dollars (about US\$ 20).

Testimony 4: Registration fees payment

The chainsaw operators who are operating here are required to register their saws with the leadership of the town. Each operator or saw owner paid the amount of 3,000 Liberian Dollars for each chainsaw before one is allowed to carry on pit sawing operations here.

Toll payment

As part of the requirements laid down by the community leaders, the loggers were to pay a toll to the identified forest committees, and community leadership. In

communities where tribal certificates had previously been issued to family members, the toll was paid directly to those who had tribal certificates for the forest in which the loggers operated. Of the 22 community leaders interviewed, no local leader could state the actual total amounts paid as tolls to the community while the loggers operated their lands. In interviews with staff of LICSATDUN, it was revealed that almost all community leaders in Liberia demand 15 pieces of planks out of every 100 planks from chainsaw operators as a toll.

The toll paid to some community leadership or forest committee on behalf of the community varied from LD\$ 150 to LD\$ 250 (average US\$ 1.34) per piece. On the international markets, the volume of a 2 inches by 10 inches by 14 feet plank of ekki is worth US\$ 15, yet the loggers pay the community a maximum of US\$ 1.67 (LD\$ 250), and ekki planks would not internationally attract as much as US\$ 15 each. This calculation shows why loggers might be more interested to make bigger blockwood and export it.

Testimony 5: Payment of tolls

I'm not sure if he paid any toll because he did not carry any kpokolo. It was rumored that he was to pay LD\$ 250 per piece of kpokolo. The Paramount Chief warned the focal person of the loggers several times that before the wood they harvested is taken they will have to pay for it to the town people.

The community forest committees responsible for the collection and administration of the funds comprised a chairman, assistant chairman, secretary, and elders to steer the management of the forest. These committees are not officially recognized by FDA. They exist in forests that are not Authorized Community Forests.

There was no evidence of the loggers paying the full amounts of toll agreed with the community and/or

individual land owners. According to the community members, toll payment was done only during and after the log was transported (taken from the community) or shipped to foreign countries for sale.

The community members reported that the loggers were very aggressive in responding to their demands. Thus, it requires serious tension to get the loggers to respond to the demands of their commitments, even though the loggers were cutting valuable and durable trees.

Testimony 6: Tree species felled for Kpokolo

The tree species most of them cut down in our forests are ekki, Afzelia, and iroko. But most of the logs are still in the forest. Before they could carry some of the logs, the news of the ban on the kpokolo operation by the government reached us.

Who pays the toll for abandoned logs?

With the ban placed on kpokolo operations, most loggers have left the communities without paying the toll. In February 2023, the Government of Liberia reportedly banned Kpokolo operations in Liberia following criticism

that its operations were illegal. This study found valuable tree species harvested and abandoned in the forests. Some of the loggers left the communities without giving prior information to the community.

Testimony 7: Extraction and shipment of kpokolo

In 2022, I sawed for two investors in communities in Gbarpolu including Gbayama. They shipped 300 pieces of kpokolo in containers. I also saw some people in Small Jebeh Town in Bomi County. They paid me LD\$ 250 per piece. I was sawing 6X10X12. I alone sawed 150 pieces for them but they are still in the bush. Before coming here, in 2021-2022, I worked for some investors in Nimba and Grand Cape Mount Counties – sawing kpokolo – and I was paid LD\$ 450 per piece. I know my friends who sawed for other investors here in Gbarpolu County and other counties.

The kpokolo operations required many chainsaw operators. Some chainsaw operators stated that the kpokolo dealers hired about 10 to 15 operators to saw timbers. There are few individuals skilled in kpokolo sawing.



Blockwood harvested in Kanneh-La unauthorized community forest in Bomi County, March 2023 © CS-IFM

Conclusion

The sizes of planks traded on the domestic market and planks exported kpokolo to foreign countries are significantly different. The size of the sawn planks by local chainsaw millers is 2 inches thick, 12 inches wide, and 14 feet long, while the kpokolo was observed to be 6 to 8 inches thick, 10 inches wide, and 12 feet long. The distinction between sawn planks on the domestic and foreign markets and the kpokolo woods was seen in the sizes the thickness of the woods. The size of the sawn planks explains the market interest of the loggers. The kpokolo dealers were mostly interested in harvesting valuable woods like iroko, Afzelia, and ekki.

All permits issued by LICSDATDUN were only for chainsaw milling, not explicitly for kpokolo. There was also no evidence of the FDA issuing permits to the chainsaw operators. The loggers verbally agreed with them on contract terms regarding the operations in their forests. This evidence represents a breach of the law and undermines sustainable forest management. The chainsaw millers logged mainly in not authorized community forests. This provides important information for policymaking and the design of practical interventions. This study illustrates higher deforestation driven by kpokolo operations compared to chainsaw milling for domestic markets. The results of this study may be considered in the context of efforts to integrate chainsaw timbers in the chain of custody for sustainable forest management and improved forest governance.

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Recommendations

- ¹ That the Government of Liberia work with communities and the loggers to ensure communities receive their full benefits;
- ² That the Government of Liberia investigates the issues of kpokolo operation and penalizes those involved in any form of illegalities;
- ³ That the Government of Liberia should enforce 2022 revised Chainsaw Milling Regulation to address the issues of pit sawing;
- ⁴ That the Government of Liberia should not lift the ban placed on the transport of kpokolo wood until the chainsaw milling regulation is fully enforced;
- ⁵ That the Government of Liberia improve its monitoring of payments and other obligations loggers must make to communities, and help to enforce these contractual obligations so that community benefits are paid upon harvesting of the trees;
- ⁶ That LICSDATDUN, CSOs, FDA, etc. provide a coherent and consistent message to chainsaw operators, community leaders and members, dealers, checkpoint agents, local FDA authorities, etc. about the new rules;
- ⁷ That the knowledge of local leaders, forest committees, and ordinary community members be enhanced in sustainable forest management and governance, more specifically in contract negotiation.

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