

# Illegal Logging in Africa and Its Security Implications

By C. Browne, Catherine Lena Kelly, and Carl Pilgram

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*Illegal logging is a growing feature of transnational organized crime in Africa, often facilitated by the collusion of senior officials, with far-reaching security and environmental implications for the countries affected.*



Logging in a forest in Cameroon. (Photo: AFP/Michael Runkel)

African countries are estimated to lose \$17 billion to illegal logging each year. This is part of a global market with an economic value of \$30 to \$150 billion. The net profit from the illegal charcoal trade alone in Africa is estimated to be as much as \$9 billion, “compared to the [\$]2.65 billion worth of street value heroin and cocaine in the region.” High-value timber species are in immense global demand, with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reporting that Africa’s share of rosewood exports to China rose from 40 percent in 2008 to 90 percent in 2018.

Illegal logging also amplifies the effects of climate change by worsening deforestation and reducing biodiversity. This is especially apparent in the Congo Basin and peatlands, comprising one of the world’s largest carbon sinks. If disturbed, it could release the equivalent of 20 years of U.S. fossil fuel emissions.

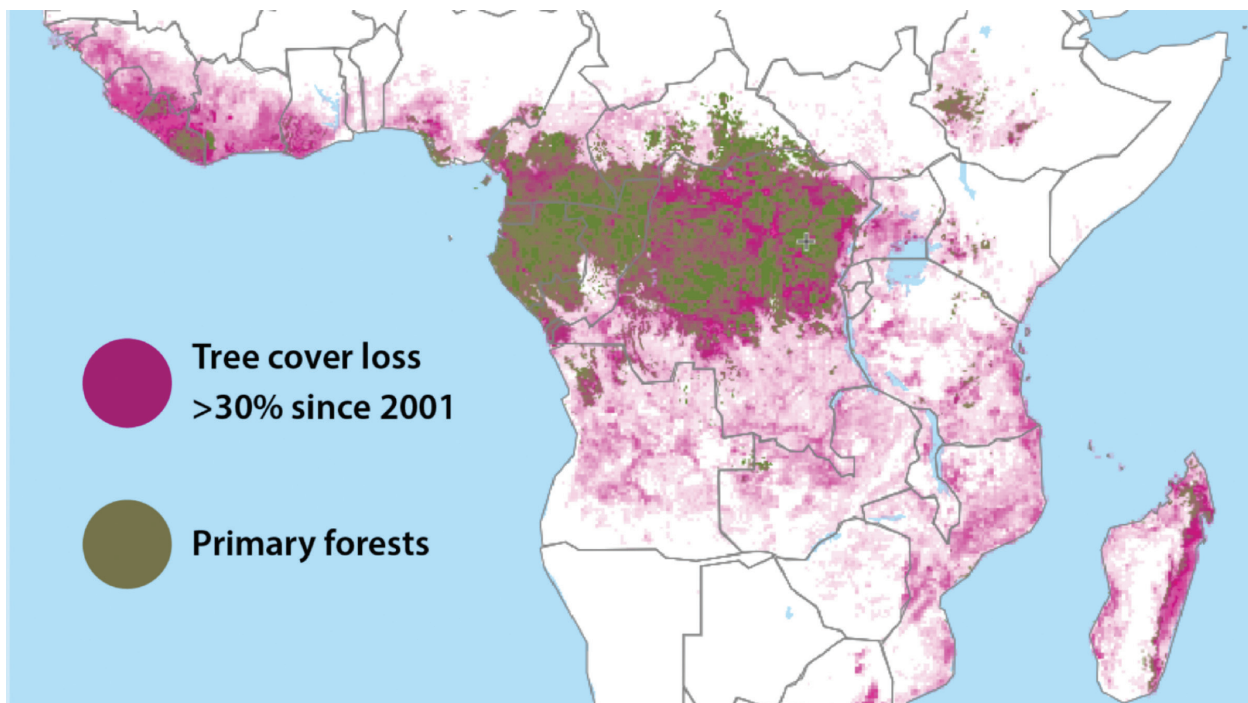
Timber trafficking has also fueled security threats from organized criminal groups and violent extremist organizations. Trafficking networks based in Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of the Congo linked to the Ahlu-Sunnah Wa-Jama and other militant groups in Mozambique, for example, were making an estimated \$2 million per month from illegal logging in 2019.

Illegal logging also accelerates corruption. In the Republic of the Congo, national legislation limits the export of certain rare hardwoods to just 15 percent of a logging company’s annual production. However, collusion between political and business actors has led to the rule often being flouted. Not only does this cost Congolese citizens the benefits of their natural resource wealth, the degradation of the forest also deprives local communities of a sustainable source for their economic livelihoods.

Illegal logging is part of a vicious cycle of opaque governance, exploitation, and insecurity that privileges the profit-seeking of select state officials and foreign actors. These patterns reduce the legitimacy of the government overall, further contributing to instability and violence.

## DYNAMICS OF ILLEGAL LOGGING

Illegal logging is most prevalent in the tropical rainforests of Africa, where demand by foreign actors for rare hardwoods has dramatically increased. The most significant driver of illegal logging in Africa is the Chinese market for teak, redwood, and mahogany. China’s trade with West African countries for high-quality hardwood soared between 1995 and 2010. After exhausting that market, demand extended to Central and East Africa, and countries like Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and the Republic of the Congo became major exporters. Currently, Uganda is a transit hub for approximately 80 percent of illegal timber from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) that passes through East Africa.



Source: Global Forest Watch

Illegal logging in Africa happens through both small-scale and commercial operations. The actors involved correspond to the four types of organized criminal actors tracked in the ENACT Organized Crime Index: criminal networks, state-embedded actors, foreign actors, and “mafia style groups” with well-known organizational identities and coercive control over territory.

Criminal networks are often aided and abetted by high-level state actors who use their positions to facilitate the illicit timber trade. Criminal networks may, for example, secure control of and profits from the artisanal trade by purchasing commercial concessions through their government connections, acquiring fake permits, or reusing legitimate permits.

Organized criminal activity can happen at any stage of the supply chain, during extraction, milling, transportation, marketing, or profit laundering. Artisanal or small-scale loggers are typically the extractors of high-value wood that supply trafficking groups, as their operations are more informal and have lighter regulations and oversight than those for commercial loggers. Porous borders help traffickers to launder illegal timber across borders where they falsely declare the tree species to pass it off as legal.

Political elites collude with foreign actors, enabling illegal logging, and using the international financial system to move the profits they make out of their countries and into private bank accounts. This contributes to the public losing out on an estimated \$88 billion in illicit financial flows that leave the African continent yearly.

## WHY ILLEGAL LOGGING MATTERS FOR SECURITY

First, the illicit timber trade can fuel conflict and instability by providing resources for violent actors and spreading corruption. During the civil war in Liberia, timber trafficking was one of warlord Charles Taylor’s prime means of financing. It also facilitated Taylor’s support to the Revolutionary United Front in neighboring Sierra Leone.

When the Seleka rebel coalition took over in Central African Republic (CAR) in 2013-14, international timber traders paid them at least 3.4 million euros in protection fees to continue their harvesting and exporting operations. This reinforced the rebels’ presence and also facilitated arms trafficking. After the Seleka lost power, Anti-Balaka militias were also reportedly paid to provide protection.

In the DRC, the Allied Democratic Forces and several other militant groups in the east have been involved in the illegal timber trade, which serves as a conflict financing mechanism.

In Senegal, where there has been a low-level insurgency since 1982, the Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MFDC) has sustained its operations almost entirely through profits from illicit logging of rosewood. The Gambia’s former dictator, Yahya Jammeh, used parastatal companies to illegally traffic timber from both the Casamance and Guinea-Bissau, supporting an insurgency in the former and bolstering political allies in the latter.



Timber logging storage area in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (Photo: jbdodane)

Second, government corruption and illegal logging are mutually reinforcing. Given that logging involves heavy equipment and networks of forest roads, illegal logging relies on high-level government collusion to persist. Illicit financial flows from timber trafficking, in turn, further entrench these senior officials as well as provide ongoing incentives to abuse public power for private gain. The illicit flows represent lost tax revenue that could have been used for public services. This creates a vicious cycle that threatens the rule of law and fosters mistrust between governments and citizens.

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Illegal logging, therefore, should be considered both an outcome and driver of government corruption. For example, in Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue, son of President Obiang, profited immensely from the transport and export of rare hardwoods. As the Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, he not only sold some of his country’s forests to private companies but also used a shell company linked to the ministry to charge fees for processing, loading, and transporting timber.

In Guinea-Bissau in 2013, crackdowns on security sector officials involved in drug trafficking—including the head of the armed forces and the navy chief—led other military officials who had been trafficking narcotics to deal in timber instead. In 2019, Gabon’s Vice President and Minister of Forestry were part of a rosewood trafficking scandal that allegedly led to their sacking.

In 2021, the Zambian Anti-Corruption Commission seized 47 trucks illegally laden with rosewood bound for the Namibian and Zimbabwean borders. This seizure is just one of the latest high-profile instances of illegal logging that has allegedly been facilitated by certain ministers and family members of former President Edgar Lungu.

Third, illegal logging diminishes livelihood opportunities for ordinary citizens. For instance, illegal logging contributes to deforestation, which exposes communities to environmental degradation and economic hardship. Without viable legal options to earn a living, communities may face stronger incentives to engage in illegal logging. Furthermore, the clandestine nature of illegal logging operations at the local level can increase vulnerability to human trafficking, systems of debt bondage, sexual exploitation, and child labor.

## GOING BEYOND LOGGING MORATORIA

Through the establishment of logging moratoria—on timber exports, harvesting, or concessions—many African leaders have officially recognized the challenges that timber trafficking poses. These moratoria have generally not substantially improved the situation, but the ways in which they have fallen short are instructive.

Moratoria are often ignored or quickly repealed. Some countries such as Guinea-Bissau, the DRC, and Kenya have controversially ended moratoria allegedly in response to industry pressure. In other cases, like Mozambique, the government does not have the capacity to enforce existing bans.

At their worst, moratoria empower criminality. Moratoria are easily circumvented when state security and justice systems do not operate with transparency and accountability. Partially enforced moratoria can thereby have the unintended effect of hardening criminal networks while leaving the corruption and livelihood challenges that facilitate illegal logging unaddressed. Research from the ENACT Consortium has identified cases in which moratoria have empowered criminal capture of the logging sector with the complicity of certain senior politicians. There have also been cases where logging bans lead to an explosion in licit and illicit small-scale logging. In these cases, moratoria risk moving the forestry industry further into the black market rather than enhancing the attractiveness of any legal livelihood options that logging could offer.

Beyond moratoria, several innovative approaches in monitoring logging and forestry crime have been tried. These include the use of satellites or genetic markers to identify the cutting, harvesting, and transportation of various species of protected trees. The Kenya Forestry Service is pioneering an app that is intended to allow their officers to easily



A worker cutting a tree in northeast Democratic Republic of Congo. (Photo: AFP/Samir Tounsi)

infuse satellite and observation data into reporting and assistance for community-based forest monitoring and replanting initiatives.

Regional responses have additional potential to facilitate international cooperation against illegal logging and to make action by state-embedded actors involved in the logging trade more prohibitive. For instance, in 2008, the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC) established a subregional agreement involving the environment and forestry ministries of eight countries to facilitate law enforcement coordination on timber-related production and trade. The agreement underscores the value of cross-border and interagency coordination between security, justice, and forestry officials. Such harmonized forest management practices appear particularly promising in Southern and Central Africa.

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Despite the promise of these agreements and the value they bring in signaling and altering norms, few have led to comprehensive and consistent implementation. This highlights the political economy equation central to illegal logging. There is little political will to act against illegal logging because certain political actors responsible for overseeing

the forestry sector are benefiting financially. Some of the most relevant international agreements lack comprehensive enforcement mechanisms to hold parties accountable on obligations that are binding on paper.

A good example of this is the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Although CITES is a legally binding agreement about the international trade of certain timber products, its implementation depends on parties' good faith efforts to adopt relevant domestic legislation and policies. The Convention also does not cover domestic trade in prohibited products, which feed into supply chains that convert illegal into legal products, evade quotas, and avoid other formal mechanisms of monitoring and oversight.

Parties to CITES have sought to enhance its implementation through the joint creation of strategies and declarations on forestry. Some aspects of regional and national policy are now legally binding, like the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Protocol on Forestry, which requires the countries that have ratified it to commit resources to harmonizing relevant legislation, implementing community-based forest management programs, sharing information, and building capacity. Nonbinding instruments like the Zanzibar Declaration on the Illegal Trade in Timber and Forest Products and the Accra Declaration on Combatting Illegal Trade in Rosewoods, Timber, and Forest Products in Africa may signal a nation's intent to make good on these existing commitments, but without credible enforcement mechanisms, their implementation is often limited.

## STRENGTHENING EXTERNAL CHECKS AND OVERSIGHT

To bridge implementation gaps, strengthening oversight of actors involved in natural resource governance is critical. Since illegal logging is a problem that springs from and reinforces opaque governance, in many cases whistleblowers, along with civil society, must take the lead in pressuring their own governments to address the issue.

In Gabon, civil society actors have played a vital role in expanding external oversight of logging regulations, leading to pressure on the government for greater transparency in logging contracts. Civil society organizations have also been successful in pushing for the independent monitoring of forest governance regulations, through entities like the Standardized System of External Independent Observation in Cameroon.

Civil society has also made inroads in facilitating advocacy and strategic litigation efforts brought by the communities most affected by illegal logging. Recently, for the first time in the DRC, an incumbent minister was charged for violating the country's forest laws. Legal cases filed by civil society organizations in Ghana could help to preserve its forests, and independent journalism on illegal logging has put additional pressure on government officials to curtail the illegal transport of rosewood. In addition, groups like the Platform to Protect Whistleblowers in Africa can help to support and protect whistleblowers who provide information that facilitates accountability for corruption and mismanagement in the forestry sector.



A panel during the twenty-second African Forestry and Wildlife Conference, Skukuza, South Africa. (Photo: FAO)

Civil society is also central for building community resilience to illegal logging and other forms of organized crime through local governance initiatives. In Tanzania, community control over land management has made legal livelihoods in the logging sector more feasible. Projects in the DRC suggest that community ownership is a powerful tool for alleviating poverty and mitigating financial incentives to be part of illegal logging supply chains. Mobilization of local actors in Uganda's afforestation projects has created a similar sense of community autonomy over the use and management of forestry resources, making illegal logging less desirable within the local economy.

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

To address Chinese and other international demand for illicit timber that is a significant driver of transnational trafficking, there is a need to dismantle not only the high-level criminal networks driving illegal logging, but also the government-embedded actors who facilitate it through their discretionary powers. Public trust in state institutions suffers when there is impunity for the well-connected officials who facilitate the illegal logging operations of criminal networks. When the use of public power for private gain by state-embedded actors is not checked by domestic oversight institutions and a strong civil society, these practices risk invalidating the idea that no citizen is above the law.





Cécile Ndjebet, of Cameroon, winner of the 2022 Wangari Maathai Forest Champions Award. (Photo: FAO/Pilar Valbuena)

Strengthening independent accountability mechanisms are vital for addressing Africa’s illegal logging challenges. Within the state, this could include the deployment of inspectors general, the creation of designated forestry prosecutors within the offices of attorneys general, or subregional judicial oversight bodies. These entities can help build and maintain the rule of law if they ensure that governments strategically shine light on kingpins at high echelons of criminal organizational hierarchies instead of focusing only on low-level perpetrators who are easier to prosecute. However, insofar as the complicity of state officials hinders the power of domestic judiciaries alone to deal with kingpins, strong external oversight is also key to following through on high-profile figures’ involvement in illegal logging. This can come through domestic civil society and, in certain cases, international cooperation on intelligence sharing and prosecution.

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This underscores that the monitoring and accountability required to implement people-centered policies to curtail illegal logging depends upon the advocacy and oversight activities of whistleblowers and local civil society. The work of these actors can complement that of independent judiciaries and national oversight institutions to reinforce checks and balances. In particular, robust civil society engagement is key to pressuring government officials for better governance, lawsuits monitoring, and local forestry management.

Experience combatting illegal logging in Africa has shown that community ownership of local forest resources is particularly important. As communities gain a stake in the sustainable management of these forests, they are more likely to find stronger short- and long-term incentives to invest in livelihoods other than illicit logging—and perhaps facilitate the work of government officials tasked with protecting forests.

Regional and national security actors concerned with the forest domain can further address the security-related intersections of illegal logging by enhancing cross-border, interagency, and national-to-local coordination between security, justice, and forestry officials. Various regional and international agreements are working in the right direction. If concerned African actors and their partners could fill the implementation gap between what exists on paper and what happens in practice, these cross-border frameworks could be an even more central part of the solution.