

ENHANCING FOREST DOMAIN AWARENESS IN CENTRAL AFRICA

Experts Roundtable Read Ahead Document
November 19-21, 2024
Douala, Cameroon

The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) is pleased to welcome you to this experts roundtable, which seeks to:

- Convene military and civilian stakeholders involved in countering timber trafficking to identify lessons learned from current national and regional projects seeking to enhance sectoral coordination in security, justice, forestry, and civil society.
- Provide a trusted platform for regional experts to draft a solution framework that furthers collective action to enhance “forest domain awareness” through more information sharing, as well as data collection, processing, and analysis of trends that have implications for countering illegal logging and related organized crime.
- Catalyze discussion by Central African security stakeholders about how to enhance and maintain reliable mechanisms to share data, analysis, and information about illegal logging, and about actions that the state and civil society can take to respond.

The event seeks to foster peer learning and robust debate among experts from Cameroon, Central African Republic, Cote d’Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gabon, Republic of Congo, Ghana, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Central African Police Chiefs Committee (CAPCCO), the Central African Forests Commission (COMIFAC), the Action Group Against Anti-Money Laundering in Central Africa (GABAC), Interpol, and civil society organizations working on environment, security, and countering timber trafficking.

This read-ahead outlines the topics of discussion on which all experts will be asked to share their insights. It provides a general introduction to the roundtable content, offers recommended readings, and poses guiding questions that all participants are asked to reflect upon in advance of the meeting.

Genesis of the Roundtable

The roundtable will build upon demand signals that ACSS received during the multinational program on enhancing security sector coordination to counter illegal logging that it held in Libreville, Gabon in July 2023. At that program, [participants indicated interest](#) in leveraging different tools and resources of military, police, justice, forestry, and civil society actors to enhance “forest domain awareness” across countries. Doing so in Central Africa – with its center of gravity in the Congo Basin, the world’s second largest carbon sink – will involve enhancing mechanisms to share information about illegal logging and devise coordinated responses to counter it.

There are a variety of efforts underway at regional institutions to counter illegal logging in the region and beyond. While many types of data, analysis, and information are needed to counter illegal logging, the current challenge is that the knowledge from many different sources (forestry, military, police, gendarmerie, customs, justice, civil society, and regional organizations) is not

comprehensively shared or combined for use by the region's strategic leaders as they make decisions about how to coordinate across agencies and across national borders to counter illegal logging and related organized crime. The roundtable will examine multiple aspects of coordination, information sharing, and intelligence sharing that must be considered to catalyze strategic solutions on enhancing forest domain awareness.

Academic Approach

Experts from the military, gendarmerie, police, forest service, civil society, and regional organizations will have the opportunity to engage in a series of roundtable dialogues, watch demonstrations of regional and national databases that can facilitate joint analysis of the forest domain, and work in small breakout groups to recommend how to strengthen "solution frameworks" for enhancing forest domain awareness. Ultimately, the goal is for this diverse group to generate recommendations about how to adopt tools and techniques to enhance the sharing of data, analysis, and information about transnational criminal activities in the Central African forest domain. Lessons from within the region, as well as from several West African countries with strong linkages to timber markets and to the community of practice for countering illegal logging in Central Africa will be shared.

Each person will be asked to will be asked to reflect on their unique national, sectoral, and personal insights on each topic that is scheduled for Days 1 and 3 of the roundtable dialogue. Experts will also have the opportunity to ask questions in response to the database demonstrations that occur on Day 2, which are described herein. Instructions for the small breakout group sessions on Days 1 and 3 are provided in a separate document. Providing thoughtful and concise distillations of your knowledge and expertise on each session's theme will facilitate the generation of practical conclusions from the roundtable.

The forum will be conducted in English and French. A strict policy of non-attribution applies to all the roundtable proceedings, other than what the subject matter experts agree to include in the document reflecting the roundtable's conclusions and practical take-aways. These rules are binding during and after the roundtable. This read-ahead is an educational document intended to provide an overview of key ideas, debates, and policy issues at hand. It does not reflect the views or official position of the Department of Defense or U.S. Government.

Recommended Readings

1. Kelly, C., Pilgram, C. & Browne, C. [Illegal logging in Africa and its security implications](#), *Spotlight*, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023.
[L'exploitation forestière illégale en Afrique et ses implications en matière de sécurité](#), *Eclairage*, Centre d'Etudes Stratégiques de l'Afrique, 2023.
2. [Coordinating Security Sector Responses to Counter Illegal Logging](#), Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2023.
[Coordonner les réponses du secteur de la sécurité pour lutter contre l'exploitation forestière illégale en Afrique](#), Centre d'Etudes Stratégiques de l'Afrique, 2023.
3. Ojewale, W. [Terrorists and poachers take aim at the Congo Basin's guardians](#). ISS Africa, 2022 & [Balancing protection and profit in the Congo Basin](#), 2023.

[Terroristes et braconniers s'en prennent aux gardes du bassin du Congo](#), ISS Africa, 2022 & [Trouver la juste équilibre entre protection et profits dans le bassin du Congo](#), 2023.

4. [Trade in Wildlife Information Exchange: Promoting Information Sharing and Cooperation to Reduce Illegal Wildlife Trade in Africa](#), TRAFFIC, 2022.
[Promouvoir le partage d'informations et la coopération pour réduire le commerce illégal d'espèces sauvages en Afrique centrale](#), TRAFFIC, 2022.
5. "Central Africa Forest Observatory," COMIFAC, <https://www.observatoire-comifac.net/?lang=en>
"Observatoire des Forêts d'Afrique Centrale," COMIFAC, <https://www.observatoire-comifac.net/ofac/observatory>
6. Momballa-Mbun, C., Mgaza, A., Floros, C. & Chen, H.K. [An overview of the timber traceability systems in the Congo Basin countries](#). TRAFFIC, 2023.
[Un aperçu des systèmes de traçabilité du bois dans les pays du Bassin du Congo](#). TRAFFIC, 2023.

Session 1 Forest Domain Awareness: Mapping of the Actors and their Roles

Tuesday, November 19 (1030-1200)

Session Objectives:

- Discuss and build consensus around Forest Domain Awareness as a concept.
- Take stock of the similarities and differences in the roles that actors in the security sector, forestry service, civil society and regional organizations play in whose sharing of information, data, and analysis to countering illegal logging and associated trades (ILAT).
- Identify the ways that each actor is dependent on the others to effectively counter ILAT, and what kinds of information, data, analysis, and intelligence is most useful for them to share for this purpose.

Background:

Alumni of ACSS's countering transnational organized crime programming have consistently stressed that enhancing "forest domain awareness" is key to countering illegal logging and associated trade (ILAT) in Central Africa. As a concept, forest domain awareness is modeled after maritime domain awareness, which is defined as "a process that collects, fuses, and analyzes data about activities in, and the conditions of, the maritime environment and then disseminates the data gathered and analysis results to decision makers."¹ Forest domain awareness therefore involves creating and maintaining reliable mechanisms to share information about legal and illegal logging, as well as the actions that state and civil society actors take to respond to illegal logging. Determining who should systematically share what information and why is also key.

A prerequisite for enhancing forest domain awareness is mapping the key stakeholders' roles and responsibilities in countering ILAT. Typically, the *military* and *gendarmerie* typically contribute to countering illegal logging by providing logistical support, surveillance, and rapid response

capabilities especially in remote forested areas; *the police* by enforcing environmental laws, conducting investigations, apprehending offenders, and performing community outreach to raise awareness; *the justice sector* by prosecuting illegal logging cases, ensuring that offenders face appropriate penalties and that environmental laws are upheld; *customs authorities* by inspecting imports and exports of timber and enforcing trade regulations to prevent the trafficking of protected species; *civil society* by advocating for environmental protection, raising public awareness, and holding authorities accountable; and finally the *forestry sector* by monitoring forest health and sustainability, as well as implementing projects and policies that deter illegal logging. The question is how to synergize all these activities, both within and across countries.

One avenue for enhancing forest domain awareness is to establish regional and cross-sectoral intelligence fusion centers, or augment the scope of the fusion centers that already exist, to create a platform that enables all relevant actors to share information and coordinate activities to counter illegal logging. Between regional organizations, local and international civil society, national government platforms for information sharing about timber, and commercial satellite imagery, there is already considerable information about the state of Africa's forests and the actors involved in illegal logging. Various organizations have developed innovative data tracking and information sharing platforms that are promising, but not fully aggregated, coordinated, and jointly analyzed. Furthermore, there are good examples of state-initiated "multi-actor working groups" to generate forest domain awareness through their audit of foreign-owned concessions and the inclusion of forest community leaders in that oversight. For example, [U.S. Forest Service](#) - sponsored teams in Republic of Congo are tapping formal and informal knowledge networks - including community leaders - to enhance locally legitimate forms of oversight. However, there is still a silo-effect as different entities generate information for disparate purposes.

Roundtable Dialogue Questions:

- What is the current state of forest domain awareness in your country and in the Central Africa region ?
- What are the information-sharing needs that key regional, national, and sub-national stakeholders have in the domain of countering illegal logging and associated trade ?
- Would the idea of enhancing forest domain awareness be useful to integrate into strategies and plans to counter illegal logging? Why or why not?

Session 2 Legal and Policy Frameworks for Forest Domain Information Sharing and Coordination

Tuesday, November 19 (1330-1500)

Session Objectives:

- Assess recent developments in the participating countries' legal codes, policy frameworks, and strategies that relate to forest security and governance, and on coordination to counter illegal logging and associated trades (ILAT).
- Analyze the state of the implementation of existing protocols, strategies, and programs on the regional level that the Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Central African Monetary Community

(CEMAC), and other related organizations are engaged in to support information sharing and coordination to counter ILAT.

- Identify gaps in the legal and policy foundations for forest domain information sharing and, in their implementation, as well as opportunities to address these challenges.

Background:

Countering ILAT requires interconnected work that must be done by a combination of officials - from the military, gendarmerie, police, justice, customs, civil society, and forestry sectors - and will necessitate concerted efforts to share information to enhance forest domain awareness. Legal and policy frameworks are necessary components of the formal institutional architecture that is needed to facilitate information sharing. On the national and regional level, legal and policy frameworks that relate to security in the forest domain have been recently growing and changing. On the national level, several countries have updated their forestry codes to address the nexus of security, development, and governance that the ILAT problem set entails.

For instance, Cameroon just revised its forestry and wildlife law to increase penalties for related crimes, facilitate more sustainable environmental governance, and account for forest communities' social and economic rights. Gabon has set up special courts to apply laws to counter illegal logging. In Democratic Republic of Congo, the government held an "[Etats Generaux des Forets](#)" (General Survey of the Forests) that examined the current state of application of the laws and policies of the country, including in domains related to illegal logging, like timber traceability and forest policy development. In Central African Republic, a Mobile Brigade for Forest Oversight has been set up and has made several seizures of illegal timber and related products. Through civil society initiative and with government support, the Republic of Congo has set up an inter-ministerial working group to audit forest concessions. These are just a few examples of innovations that could be harmonized through more information sharing about the forest domain.

Information sharing is critical on the regional strategic level, as well. Regional organizations like the Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC), Central African Police Chiefs Coordination Organization (CAPPCCO), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), and Interpol's Regional Bureau are all engaged in projects that could counter illegal logging, assuming that sufficient information and intelligence sharing are feasible. To highlight one example, CAPPCCO is working with Interpol in the member states of the Central African Monetary Community (CEMAC) to establish "mixed brigades" of gendarmes, police, ecoguards, customs agents, and other officials to counter organized crime in priority border areas. These efforts could serve as "multipliers" of COMIFAC and ECCAS initiatives also underway in the Congo Basin.

Roundtable Dialogue Questions:

- Have there been any recent changes in your country's strategy, policy, or legal framework that could affect existing patterns of information and intelligence sharing to counter illegal logging? Please consider information and intelligence sharing on the inter-ministerial and cross-country levels.
- What are the current strengths and weaknesses of regional organizations' coordination with one another on the legal and policy level to counter illegal logging in Central Africa?

Session 3 Data Collection, Analysis, and Usage: Examples of the Africa-TWIX and OFAC Platforms

Wednesday, November 20 (0900-1030)

Session Objectives:

- Provide a strategic and technical overview of the Africa-TWIX and OFAC databases, taking experts inside of these databases to better understand how their users can enter, analyze, and visualize data to inform actions to counter illegal logging.
- Discuss the information-sharing and data analytics capabilities and limitations of the Africa-TWIX and OFAC platforms.
- Discuss how platforms like Africa-TWIX and OFAC can be integrated into broader country-level or region-wide strategies and plans to counter illegal logging.

Background:

There are already several regional databases owned by the COMIFAC that are designed to facilitate the collection and analysis of data about the forest domain. Roundtable participants will take an “inside look” at the features of two prominent databases that have complementary features, but that may not be fully accessible to or known by all security, justice, customs, and forestry officials who are working together to coordinate responses to timber trafficking.

Launched in 2016, the Africa-TWIX platform seeks to promote information exchange among law enforcement agencies to combat wildlife trafficking and illegal logging regionally. It has been a valuable tool for implementing the COMIFAC Plan for Strengthening the Enforcement of National Wildlife Legislation (PAPECALF) and is accessible to stakeholders who are committed to sharing confidential information about timber trafficking in the region. The seizures database and the mailing list for Africa-TWIX provide two interlocking tools to foster effective communication and coordination. Actors from the police, gendarmerie, judiciary, forestry services, and other national entities enforcing the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) convention – along with select regional and international organizations – are the prime users of the database. Security, judicial, forestry, and civil society actors can thus exchange real-time information that could facilitate nimble, multi-sectoral responses to counter ILAT.²

The Central Africa Forest Observatory (OFAC) database is a regional platform that tracks many aspects of the state of forest ecosystems, as well as countries’ legal and policy frameworks for governing the forest and countering illicit exploitation of them. As the scientific and technical branch of the COMIFAC, OFAC maintains a database contains an interactive platform that culls information from the regional, national, and local level, tracking key features of the forest domain that allow policymakers to understand forest governance dynamics, identify possible challenges to human security and resilience to climate change in the forest domain, and track the progress of projects being implemented as part of the COMIFAC’s Convergence Plan. Several of its axes hinge upon security sector coordination with forestry, justice, and civil society actors to counter timber trafficking. The database tracks, for example, the percentage of protected areas that have ecoguards by country and serves as a repository of forest-related legal and policy documents. OFAC experts provide analysis that could be useful to security sector officials in multiple resources that analyze data from the OFAC platform, including the *State of the Forests* report, policy briefs, and other publications that are intended to inform high-level decision-making.³

Roundtable Dialogue Questions:

- What aspects of the data that are collected through the Africa-TWIX and OFAC databases are you using (or would you consider using) in your work to counter timber trafficking?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of these databases for facilitating more data collection, analysis, and information-sharing about timber trafficking between yourself and your counterparts in other ministries, agencies, or organizations?
- How can the roundtable participants further leverage these databases to enhance coordination to counter timber trafficking?

Session 4 Data Collection, Analysis, and Usage: Examples of National Timber Traceability Platforms and the Interpol I-24-7 Database

Wednesday, November 20 (1045-1200)

Session Objectives:

- Provide a strategic and technical overview of Ghana’s national timber traceability database, discussing how it contributes to inter-agency coordination on countering ILAT, as well as the challenges that were encountered in its development and implementation.
- Discuss how timber traceability platforms in Central Africa have been designed and used to counter ILAT, and how the regional trends are shaping the needs for these tools.
- Consider the ways that the potential expansion of state actors who can access databases like Interpol’s I-24-7 system could facilitate further inter-agency coordination and information sharing to counter ILAT in conjunction with other databases and platforms.

Certain regional databases with relevant information to counter timber trafficking also have significant decentralized, national-level components that are critical to account for when strategizing how to enhance information sharing on security challenges in the forest domain. For example, Interpol maintains 19 databases that police can consult at their country’s National Central Bureau at any time during their investigations related to illegal logging and associated trade. I-24/7, Interpol’s global police communications system, enables such access. The information is provided on a voluntary basis, which is “subject to a strict legal framework and data protection rules in order to foster trust and ensure the quality of the information.”⁴ Expanding the types of government officials who can participate in or access this system, within the realm of what is legally possible, could further push the frontiers of information sharing to counter illegal logging.

Enhancing information sharing to counter illegal logging will require leaders to consult and coordinate on the basis of data and analysis that comes from not only regional databases, but also national ones. In the latter domain, national timber traceability systems play a vital role in curbing illegal logging, promoting legal timber trade, and supporting sustainable forest management. Such databases exist in Cameroon (the Computerised Forest Information Management System, SIGIF II), Central African Republic (Legality Assurance System, LAS), Democratic Republic of Congo (Timber Traceability and Legality Management Platform, TRABOIS), Gabon (Forestry and Timber Execution Agency database, SMINTEF), and the Republic of Congo (Computerised Public Timber Traceability System, SIVL). Many have done so under the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade initiative supported by the European Union. These national timber traceability systems are in some cases inter-operable with other national databases that customs officials use to collaborate effectively with forestry authorities to track timber from its harvest on the forest floor

all the way to its export. However, there has been varied progress in implementation overall. Maximizing the utility of these databases to counter timber trafficking remains challenging due to infrastructure weaknesses, high operational costs, and political limitations of the technical implementation needed to achieve higher levels of transparency and legality in the timber trade.

The experiences of Ghana and Tanzania are useful to examine in comparison. TRAFFIC has published a case study of the strengths of Tanzania's Forestry Resource and Information Management System, which highlights how leaders there "developed the timber tracker system through a series of small steps to solve specific problems and take advantage of opportunities from evolving technologies," and eventually devoted national financial resources to sustaining the system.⁵ Ghana has made strides with its Legality Assurance System (LAS) and Wood Tracking System (WTS), which track the legality of timber from the point of harvest through to export, using barcodes and real-time monitoring to trace timber through the chain of custody⁶. Ghana's system stands out for its integration of both legal compliance and environmental safeguards. Forestry officials are also working with police and customs officials to coordinate usage of this data to intercept illegal timber, including through mobile phone technologies.

Roundtable Dialogue Questions:

- What aspects of the timber trafficking trends in the region are your country's national timber traceability databases best positioned to counter or prevent?
- How could the information about timber trafficking that national authorities can obtain from the Interpol I-24-7 database best be combined, analyzed, and operationalized to maximize inter-agency coordination to counter timber trafficking?

Session 5 Intelligence Sharing in Forest Domain Awareness

Thursday, November 21 (1030-1200)

Session Objectives:

- Discuss methods of intelligence gathering and intelligence sharing on the national level for countering ILAT, as well as their current strengths and weaknesses.
- Analyze how financial intelligence sharing and related analysis on the regional level has contributed to countering ILAT, and how it could be enhanced.
- Consider how military and police intelligence work – with ecoguards and with citizens in forested communities – can be part of strategic solutions to counter ILAT within and across countries in Central Africa.

The African countries focused on countering illegal logging have a wide range of intelligence sources that they can use to inform their strategies, as well. Ideally, well-coordinated strategies to counter illegal logging within countries and across borders would be based on a layered approach that combines different forms of information sharing and intelligence sharing. While information sharing would generally involve open source or unclassified forms of data and analysis, intelligence sharing (whether it is military, police, financial, or civilian security sector intelligence) would involve closed and open sources, with the information from these sources being subject to the government's procedures for processing, analysis, and dissemination.⁷

Some intelligence is shared strictly on a need-to-know basis within agencies and their partners, while other intelligence is made available to a wider cross-section of stakeholders. There are tradeoffs to both. Classification is critical when national security is at risk, but overclassification can lead to a lack of transparency, reduced cooperation with external stakeholders, and a limited perspective on the problem set. Disclosing less sensitive intelligence could, under the appropriate conditions, foster broader collaboration and inclusivity.

The military, gendarmerie, police, justice, customs, civil society, and forestry sectors engage with intelligence, though the security forces are more associated with covert action and clandestine activities resulting in highly classified intelligence. For example, an operation in which the ecoguard need to establish actors and infractions related to illegal logging in a National Park would often require surveillance. Successful operations could use a variety of methods for gathering intelligence, to include engagement with local populations which requires trust-building, premised on the understanding that the personal information of individuals would be protected. This intelligence can be kept internal, shared with partners, or even released to the public if properly anonymized, but each requires an evaluation of the impact on those involved, security consequences, and end goal.

Regional organizations designed to enhance financial intelligence related to security threats like organized crime are another important part of the institutional landscape. The Action Group against Money Laundering in Central Africa, for example, aims to enhance cooperation among member states by promoting the implementation of effective legal and regulatory frameworks, conducting evaluations, and providing technical assistance.⁸ Its efforts are important in closed and open source domains, and the research that it conducts reflects this diversity of analytical methods that it employs to facilitate both information sharing and actionable intelligence.

Roundtable Dialogue Questions:

- What kinds of intelligence gathering and intelligence sharing are most needed to enhance forest domain awareness and counter illegal logging in your country, and why?
- What is the current state of legal and policy practices for intelligence sharing on the regional level, and how can organizations like GABAC be further leveraged to enhance forest domain awareness?
- Can strategies to enhance information sharing in the forest domain to counter timber trafficking be effectively layered with strategies to enhance intelligence sharing for the same purpose? What guidelines should be followed to make this layering successful?

¹ Nimmich, J. & Goward, D. Maritime domain awareness: The key to maritime security, in Michael Carsten, ed. *Global Legal Challenges: Command of the Commons, Strategic Communications, and Natural Disasters*, *International Law Studies* 83, p. 63.

² For more information, please see "EU-, Africa-, SADC- and East Africa TWIXES," TRAFFIC, <https://www.traffic.org/what-we-do/thematic-issues/supporting-law-enforcement/twixs/>

³ For further information, please see "Central Africa Forest Observatory," COMIFAC, <https://www.observatoire-comifac.net/ofac/observatory>

⁴ Databases. Interpol, 2024, <https://www.interpol.int/en/How-we-work/Databases>

⁵ Constant Momballa-Mbun, Allen Mgaza, Camilla Floros & Hin Keong Chen. [An overview of the timber traceability systems in the Congo Basin countries](#). TRAFFIC, 2023.

⁶ Alison Hoare. [Illegal logging and related trade: the response in Ghana](#). Chatham House, 2014.

⁷ Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces, "Intelligence Oversight", SSR Backgrounder Series (Geneva: DCAF, 2017).

⁸ The latest activities of GABAC and its publications can be found at <https://gabac.org/>.