AFRICA CENTER
FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

ENHANCING FOREST DOMAIN AWARENESS IN CENTRAL AFRICA
Program Executive Summary

Overview

From 19-21 November 2024, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies convened "Enhancing Forest Domain Awareness in Central Africa," an experts' roundtable designed for military and civilian stakeholders involved in countering timber trafficking to discuss how to enhance and maintain reliable mechanisms to share existing data, analysis, and information about illegal logging, and about actions that the state and civil society can take to respond. The event was designed to provide a trusted platform for regional experts from the military, gendarmerie, police, forestry, justice, customs and civil society sectors 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 in their countries and throughout the Congo Basin.

The three-day roundtable included 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.

The proceedings included a mix of plenary sessions on specialized themes, interactive demonstrations of national and regional databases that are known for contributing to forest domain awareness, and an intensive half-day field site visit to the Timber Park and related offices and agencies working in the Autonomous Port of Douala. Through these methods of peer learning and experience sharing, the experts produced strategic and technical recommendations to enhance forest domain awareness to counter illegal logging and associated trade that these stakeholders and their colleagues can consider applying in their countries.

Key Insights from Plenary Discussions

1. Efforts to counter timber trafficking often require more than any single African state's "classic" defense and security sector or forestry sector ideas, strategies, and resources. When the West and Central African states, along with the Gulf of Guinea Commission, developed the Yaounde Code of Conduct to combat piracy and illegal, unregulated, and unreported fishing in their shared waters, the defense and security officials in these countries had to move away from their classic conceptions of national security, take a more holistic human security approach, and become committed to linking the geopolitics of the maritime domain to security strategy on land. The roundtable experts encouraged defense and security officials to push their colleagues at home to expand their thinking and action in a similar way to address challenges related to illegal logging in the forest domain. It also spans both land and sea, given that almost all wood that is exported from the Central African states passes through ports.

2. Enhancing "forest domain awareness" is key to addressing the security challenges posed by

illegal logging and associated trade in the region. 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 of 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 critical to progress in forestry security.

3. For countries to combat illegal logging effectively, there must be a deliberate effort to trigger and share information among national stakeholders and neighboring states. Ensuring a clear and consistent process for the military to share information with civilian actors involved in countering timber trafficking in forested communities was identified as a particularly challenging and complex (but necessary) element of the endeavor.

4. Regional organizations are also engaged in critical information sharing efforts through a wide range of databases, strategic planning, and implementation projects. The Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC), Central African Police Chiefs Coordination Organization (CAPPCO), Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), Interpol Regional Bureau, and the Organization for the Conservation of Wild Fauna in Africa (OCFSA) are all engaged in projects that could counter illegal logging, assuming that expanded forms of information and intelligence sharing are feasible.

5. The experts conducted in-depth analyses of existing regional information sharing tools and considered how they could enhance the usage and application of these tools to the work they are doing nationally to counter timber trafficking. Participants took 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 coordinating to counter timber trafficking: the Africa-TWIX platform (managed by the non-governmental organization, TRAFFIC) and the Central African Forest Observatory (OFAC) run by COMIFAC. They also examined the structure and internal workings of Ghana's national timber traceability platform, the Wood Trafficking System, and compared key features for information collection, sharing, and analytics, to their own countries' systems.

6. These database demonstrations and the requisite exchanges showed that there is a commendable effort to harness information and process information and data in ways that can inform state actors' decisions about how to counter and prevent illegal logging in Central Africa. However, one of the limitations presently inhibiting such efforts is that the data collection and applications that each type of database enables has yet to be scaled fully on national and regional levels. This suggests that further support for enhancing the interoperability of these databases and expanding the range of actors who have access to these systems could contribute productively to catalyzing existing strategic solutions that Central African actors are developing on the regional level.

7. Civil society experts in the room noted that the World Resources Institute (WRI) has developed an Open Timber Portal (OTP) that already includes independent observations that could be integrated into the regional and national databases that were discussed at the ACSS roundtable. In addition, the roundtable exchanges revealed that there is potential utility in

offering capacity building opportunities for the state and civil society actors who gain access to these databases so that they can leverage these systems to analyze data for decision-making. Adding independent observations to existing databases could also help to enhance efforts to address instances of corruption and mismanagement of resources that can enable illegal logging and associated trade.

8. A half-day visit to the Autonomous Port of Douala allowed roundtable experts to engage in field-based peer learning and experience sharing about the ways that information sharing platforms and projects are operationalized on the ground through existing inter-ministerial processes for ensuring the traceability of timber exports and for countering timber trafficking. The flow of timber processing from the timber traceability checkpoints, timber scanner, phytosanitary approval, customs processing, and container packing procedures, were reviewed in interactive format. The visit ended at the headquarters of the Autonomous Port of Douala, and thereafter each participant received a schematic overview of the Cameroon customs procedures and approaches – also enclosed in Annex 1. The visit generated questions about how to draw lessons about the use of information sharing to enhance inter-agency and inter-ministerial coordination to counter illegal logging in other countries. The Memorandum of Understanding that exists between Cameroon's Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Forests and Wildlife, which has facilitated collaborative aerial surveillance of forest domain activities, was a subject of extensive discussion in this context.

9. Sectoral strategy development, legal harmonization, and policy frameworks for countering illegal logging and sharing information to counter timber trafficking were also identified as areas for future collaborative work. Different countries are at different points with forestry strategy development and revision, as well as with forestry code revision and harmonization with neighboring countries. For instance, Cameroon does not have a recently updated forestry strategy, but it just completed the revision of its forestry and wildlife laws to increase penalties for related crimes, facilitate more sustainable environmental governance, and account for forest communities' social and economic rights. In Gabon, there have been special courts in place for several years to apply laws to counter illegal logging. In Democratic Republic of Congo, the government held an "Etats Generaux des Forets" that examined the current state of application of the laws and policies, including in domains related to illegal logging, like timber traceability and forest policy development. The next step is developing a requisite forestry strategy.

10. There is need to develop more formally structured, consistent, and reliable communications mechanisms between the defense, security, forestry, and customs officials who make coordinated effort to counter timber trafficking, and the members and leaders of forested communities who are equally critical actors. The latter also have strategic interests in being part of the effort to address timber trafficking in ways that suit the on-the-ground realities of this form of organized crime in their communities. Citizens in forest communities and their leaders often serve as guardians of the forest. They also have the potential to be the eyes and ears of the state and civil society in remote locations where surveillance and intelligence gathering are difficult but critical. There is an opportunity to include traditional leaders and civil society in strategic and operational discussions about information sharing to counter illegal logging.

11. During this conversation, participants also discussed the importance of giving ecoguards the

professional status and the practical working conditions that are appropriate for them to be able to safely and legitimately gather information and engage in intelligence sharing with defense and security actors as well as forestry and customs actors in their countries.

Key Insights from Small Group Meetings

The experts present at the roundtable also meet in small groups to develop "theories of change" about how to enhance information sharing among military, police, gendarme, justice, forestry, customs, and civil society officials (including traditional leaders and citizens in forest communities) to counter timber trafficking. The detailed results of the small group meetings are enclosed in Annexes 2 and 3.

Post-Program Opportunities

The roundtable revealed additional desire among the experts for their countries to develop specific policies and detailed technical procedures for information sharing across military and civilian lines, and across interagency and interministerial lines, to follow the chain of custody in illegal logging. The group also identified multiple ways that they could work together to link existing national-level work into the regional-level initiatives that are underway to enhance information sharing to improve forest domain awareness.

Meeting with Experts from the Roundtable to Identify Ways Forward on the National Level: Many experts left the roundtable keen to continue working with their countries' leaders and with the USG as a supporting partner to take follow on actions to enhance forest domain awareness through improved information sharing. The U.S. Embassy staff who do work on security cooperation, defense technology, criminal justice and law enforcement, forestry strategy and governance, and related issues may find the experts who attended the roundtable to be useful and committed advocates for specific projects to advance strategic solutions to counter illegal logging. ACSS is available to connect the roundtable experts to other alumni or U.S. Government partners who would be useful for follow up.

Convening Military and Civilian Stakeholders on the National Level to Develop Concrete and Detailed Procedures for Information Sharing about Cases of Timber Trafficking: The experts suggested that each country may wish to convene the relevant actors in state and society who are involved in countering timber trafficking to define and create clear rules for implementing a deliberate process for comprehensive information sharing. These meetings would answer key questions like: What happenings, findings, or events should trigger this well-defined process for information sharing? What are the steps in that process that ensure information is fully shared and that existing data and analysis is used to maximal effect? To do this in a way that reaches their country's leaders and decision makers on forest security and governance, the roundtable participants could leverage the ACSS alumni community or alumni chapters that exist in their countries or approach the security cooperation officials at the U.S. Embassy in their country. In some cases, the ACSS alumni chapters entities provide an avenue to bring together high-profile defense, security, civil society, and academic actors who can influence defense, security, justice, customs, and forestry leaders' approaches to information sharing.

Enhancing the User Pool and the Interoperability of Existing Regional Databases: The roundtable participants also explored the idea of each of them encouraging the leaders and technical experts that they work with at home to request access to the regional databases on the forest domain that were discussed at the roundtable. Arranging access for a wider range of colleagues and for their training on how to use the databases would also enhance the utility of the tools that are already in

place on the regional level. Where possible, expanding the number and type of officials integrated into various databases to exchange information across all relevant ministries, departments, and agencies could contribute to enhancing interoperability and closing implementation gaps.

The experts who attended the roundtable could also raise awareness and build support among their leaders and colleagues at home for the Mixed Brigades project of the Central African Police Chiefs Coordination Organization (CAPCCO), the National Environmental Security Task Forces (NESTs) that are being created by Interpol in each Central African country to facilitate access to the organization's 19 different crime databases, the Convergence Plan of the Central African Forest Commission (COMIFAC) that is implemented in conjunction with the Central Africa Forest Observatory (OFAC) database, and the work of the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) Commission for Environment, Agriculture, and Rural Development and the Organization for the Conservation of Wild Fauna in Africa (OCFSA).

For example, the roundtable participants discussed whether, as each country forms its National Environmental Security Task Forces for Interpol, those groupings could become part of the CAPCCO's Mixed Brigade coordination committees to further harmonize efforts.

Engaging the Regional Anti-Money Laundering Institution and the Regional Conservation Institution to Share Qualitative Data and Analysis: The roundtable experts emphasized the importance of engaging with regional anti-money laundering organizations like the Action Group Against Money Laundering in Central Africa (GABAC) even more than they have before. Namely, in 2025, GABAC will publish a study that details different types of money laundering that are used to commit environmental crimes. Information gathered from this study and others published by the GABAC could be integrated into the information sharing platforms and information sharing processes that participants from the roundtable will consider initiating in their countries, in coordination with each other across shared borders.

Similarly, the Organization for the Conservation of Wild Fauna in Africa (OCFSA), an equivalent regional institution focused on fostering coordinated strategic action in the region's protected areas and reserves, could be critical. Along with GABAC, OCFSA can help to connect relevant national actors who share borders that these reserves cross to share information and intelligence that their countries are generating on corruption and criminality in the forest domain. The work that OCFSA has done to address poaching issues in the TRIDOM area, for example, could be used to glean lessons learned and to develop innovative approaches to information sharing and coordinated actions in the related domain of illegal logging and associated trades. These efforts, the roundtable experts noted, are important to complement with projects that partners could support that work with civil society organizations and environmental investigative journalists to tackle the challenges posed by corruption in the forest domain.

Leveraging the Mobile Brigades Model in Security Cooperation to Counter Timber Trafficking: Given the initiative that leaders in Central African Republic and Gabon are taking in several countries to establish mobile brigades focused on illegal logging to operationalize intelligence sharing within their countries, leaders from the various sectors involved in countering timber trafficking have an opportunity to consider how they mobilize their own resources and those of external partners to ensure that these brigades can be supported to collect, analyze, and share information in the regional and national platforms.

Identifying Opportunities to Adapt and Expand Military and Defense Technology to Counter Timber Trafficking and Enhance Information Sharing: Roundtable experts in partner country

militaries and professional military education institutions suggested that external partners like the United States might consider (or re-consider)ways that existing military or defense technology in Central African countries – whether satellites that survey the forest, drones that are used to address the activities of non-state armed groups, or other tools – could be adapted and expanded for use by other actors in the government beyond the military who are key to following the chain of custody to effectively counter illicit timber trafficking.

Involving Forest Community Members and Leaders in the Information Sharing Process to Counter Timber Trafficking: As articulated by a traditional leader from one of the forest communities in the region, forest community members and the traditional leaders who often function as "guardians of the forest" are frequently excluded from policy conversations about how to counter timber trafficking effectively. Yet, when they have been included, states' efforts to share information to counter this form of trafficking have the potential to be more successful. Forest communities and their leaders are interested in understanding how state and civil society organizations work on these issues, and these state and civil society actors need forest communities and their leaders to better understand the dynamics of forest usage and timber trafficking that occur on the ground. Forest communities could provide important information that adds value to what already exists within national timber traceability systems. Their linkage to the defense and security services – in addition to ecoguards and forest service officials who work in communities – can help to bridge the gap in information and intelligence in efforts to counter timber trafficking.

Integrating Independent Observations of Forest Governance and Timber Traceability into Existing National and Regional Databases: Civil society experts at the roundtable explained the importance of the roundtable experts, their leaders, and external partners to Central African countries of exploring whether independent observations of forest governance and of forest concessions can be added into these existing databases, both national timber traceability platforms and regional platforms for sharing security and governance information about the forest. Adding independent observations into these platforms could not only diversify the sources they feature, but also enhance the extent to which they process information about the forest domain's usage that comes from civil society and forest communities.

Supporting Ongoing Long-Term Efforts to Harmonize Laws and Policies Across Countries in the Region: The roundtable experts underscored the importance of their respective countries continuing to harmonize laws and policies about timber trafficking in the forest domain. Several countries in the region have new forest codes, modified laws that have increased the punishment for forestry crimes, and forestry sector strategies (or the desire for the technical support to elaborate forestry sector strategies) that systematize roles and responsibilities in this critical domain. Further coordination, where possible, of the detailed content of these laws and policies across countries (including on what kinds of wood are forbidden for export, for example) could close loopholes that criminal actors can currently exploit.

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[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.