RESEARCH AND PUBLICATIONS DEPARTMENT

Forest Sector Accountability in Cameroon and Ghana. Exploring the Impact of Transparency and Participation.

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The forest sector, like many others, depends on principles of good governance for more efficiency. Over the past 20 years, significant efforts have gone into increasing transparency and the participation of non-State actors in the forest sector. Some changes/ improvements have been observed in the availability and accessibility of law and policies, the disclosure of data on licensing, harvesting, trade, revenue and law enforcement, and the establishment of multi-stakeholder decision-making forum and cooperation between State and non-State actors in forest monitoring. However, have these observed improvements in transparency and participation had a positive impact on accountability? If so, through which process?

Accountability refers to the rights and responsibilities that exist between people and institutions that affect their lives, including governments, civil society and market actors. Two key aspects of this relationship are: answerability, this being the right to get a response and the obligation to provide one; and enforceability, that is, the capacity to ensure an action is taken, and access to mechanisms for redress when accountability fails. Accountability has both a vertical and horizontal dimensions. Through the vertical accountability, citizens or Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are holding their governments for account through elections for example. Horizontal mechanisms are those within government.

Transparency refers to making information available and accessible to people, while participation refers to the involvement of citizens in the decision-making process and implementation of policies. There is an interaction between transparency, participation and accountability which are among the six principles of good governance defined by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), others being effectiveness, efficiency and fairness/equity.

This research focuses on three case studies, two in Ghana: the country's Wood Tracking System (WTS) and the Social Responsibility Agreement (SRA); and One in Cameroon: the Independent Forest Monitoring (IFM). Both countries scored "good" for transparency in 2018 in the latest Chatham House assessment. They have both engaged in various reforms since 2007 in the Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade (FLEGT). These reforms have been dominated by the negotiation and implementation of the Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) with the European Union. Ghana signed its VPA in 2009 and it came into force the same year, while Cameroon signed its VPAD in 2010 and it came into force in

2011. Data were collected through interviews of various stakeholders, from August to December 2019.

Case study 1: Ghana's Wood-Tracking system and its impact on enforcement

The Ghana WTS is the main mechanism to manage the country's forest sector. It enables the government to control and supervise the flow of timber through the supply chain from harvest to consumption or exportation, and the monitoring of revenue payment. Digitalized WTS improved the quality and accessibility to information on forest sector activities, leading to more effective decision-making and better oversight by the government. It appeared as a key element of the VPA. It was established through a wide consultative process involving both public and private actors.

By improving the availability and accessibility of data within government, the WTS enables officials to fulfil their role of overseeing forest activities. It enabled a better understanding of timber operations by the staff, a better control by the government, a reduction of opportunities for corruption, more corrective actions requests applied to companies and local forest authorities, because of more audits. All interview respondents for this study believed WTS resulted in a dramatic reduction in illegal activities by companies. We hope that, the system will be sustained to enable better compliance, enforcement and governance of the sector.

In summary, the VPA initiated a process in which the government opened up its decision-making process to civil society and business sector. Through better participation, the relationship between the different stakeholders has improved dramatically, from initial mistrust to one of partnership. This has served to improve the accountability of government. The WTS has become a key transparency instrument for improving horizontal accountability. When operational, it will be a valuable tool for vertical accountability through increased scrutiny by civil society and industry.

Case study 2: Improved governance of SRAs in Ghana

In Ghana, SRAs are a form of contract in which logging companies commit to a code of conduct and to making payments to affected communities for use in social development projects. The payment should represent at least 5% of what companies pay to the State. SRAs are a result of a series of reforms between 1997 and 2003, to enable the communities affected by logging to share the economic benefits generated by this sector. The signing of SRAs is a precondition for the award of a logging permit. Negotiations between companies and local

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communities are carried out under the supervision of the Forestry Commission, which receives reports on their implementation. This activity was quite challenging, reason why the government introduced a series of reforms for the negotiation and implementation of SRAs. The Forestry Commission also increased administrative support to communities to strengthen adherence to the guidelines, including support for decision-making on the types of community infrastructure that an SRA might fund, and supervision during subsequent construction of this. Communities received specific training to improve their understanding of legal framework and SRA guidelines in general. More transparency and participation have been achieved, with a better collaboration of local communities. We witnessed an increase in the number of SRA concluded and paid. As progress has been made with the SRA system, CSOs have continued to work on this issue, seeking to build on the advances made. To improve monitoring of the SRAs, CSO are currently collaborating with the Forestry Commission to develop a database of SRAs, ultimately to be linked to the WTS portal.

Case study 3: Enforcement gains in Cameroon through Civil Society-led forest monitoring

In 2015, a group of CSOs that were engaged in independent forest monitoring (IFM) launched the Standardized System of External Independent Observation (SNOIE) that provides a rigorous approach for civil society to investigate and report infractions in the forest sector. The system has enabled CSOs to advocate more efficiently for government enforcement as indicated by an increase in responses to reported cases of non-compliance. The CSOs had been investigating illegal practices for years, before moving to a more standardized system to ensure more efficiency.

The SNOIE provides independent and documented evidence in a systematic and consistent way and use this as a basis to demanding government accountability. This leads to more transparency and improved enforcement response by the government. IFM depends on transparency and collaboration between CSO and Cameroon's Ministry of Forests and Wildlife, and accessibility to information. Since the signing of the VPA by Cameroon in 2010, the forest authorities have taken steps to improve the access to information, through for example the publication of valid logging permits, their geographic distribution and reports on infractions. IFM therefore led to greater accountability and better enforcement by government, though it remains weak.

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Conclusion and recommendations

There are indication of positive links between participation, transparency and accountability, and of reduced illegality in the forest sector. However, we should also consider other interacting mechanisms, due to the complexity of processes of change. Three important lessons derived from this research are:

1) Steps towards greater accountability are often incremental. Stakeholders have the opportunity to accept and adapt to new systems, and change approaches based on lessons learnt;

2) Both horizontal and vertical dimensions of accountability are important to improve governance, none of them should be neglected;

3) Capacity building is important both for those demanding accountability and for those being held to account. Increasing the capacity of CSOs through training and grant can be effective in improve government accountability.

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