VPAs for SDGs

How Voluntary Partnership Agreements contribute to global development goals

VPAs, governance and SDGs

Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) between the EU and timber-exporting countries are among the measures of the EU FLEGT Action Plan, which aims to tackle illegal logging by improving forest governance and promoting trade in legal timber products.

Key messages

• Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs) between the EU and timber-exporting countries can help countries achieve multiple Sustainable Development Goals, because of both the commitments that are agreed and implemented in a VPA as well as the process to agree those elements.
• VPAs reach far beyond the timber trade. They also have positive impacts on democracy and justice, jobs and welfare, peace and security, climate change and biodiversity conservation.
• VPAs achieve this by strengthening each partner country’s legal and regulatory frameworks, making them more accountable and transparent, by modernising and formalising the forest sector, improving business practices, and by building capacities and institutionalising multistakeholder participation in decision-making.
• Fifteen countries are negotiating or implementing VPAs. These processes show how an incremental approach can create the space and trust needed to overcome the longstanding challenges VPAs expose.
• VPA processes, however, take time. To change attitudes and overcome political challenges requires long-term commitment. Nonetheless, they are effective tools to contribute to SDG targets and are therefore interesting mechanisms for donors to finance and support.

VPAs are expected to have positive trade impacts as partner countries begin to issue FLEGT licences to consignments of verified legal timber products they export to the EU. This is because FLEGT-licensed timber from VPA partner countries automatically meets the requirements of the EU Timber Regulation, which promotes the use of legal, sustainable timber in the EU. Preparation for assessing trade impacts is underway, through an EC-appointed independent market monitor.
But VPAs don't only promote trade. They also address social and environmental concerns. And the multidimensional nature of VPAs means they reach beyond the forest sector.

VPAs drive change because:

• VPAs bring many interests to the table as, unlike other efforts to address illegal logging, they have implications for both the supply and demand sides of the trade.

• National stakeholders from government, civil society and the private sector decide the scope of each VPA, ensuring national ownership of commitments that target nationally-determined needs.

• Step by step dialogue leads to understanding, which enables stakeholders to identify solutions, isolate the technical challenges from the political, and address persistent governance problems and their root causes.

• VPA partner countries commit to develop timber legality assurance systems, reinforcing the institutional framework for government accountability to citizens and businesses.

• The accompaniment of the EU provides the visibility and support needed to push for reform on both supply and demand sides.

• VPA experiences show that throughout the process even before FLEGT licensing begins, the process can incrementally strengthen regulatory frameworks, modernise and formalise forest sectors, improve business practices, build capacities, and increase transparency, accountability and multistakeholder participation in decision-making. These are major milestones on the road to sustainable, inclusive economic growth.

Such gains underpin many aspects of sustainable development enshrined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). VPAs are therefore a useful mechanism for donors to support to help countries address multiple SDGs. In particular, VPAs directly address goals 8, 12, 13, 15 and 16 and their sub-goals listed in Table 1.

| VPAs for SDGs |
| VPAs directly address goals 8, 12, 15 and 16 and their sub-goals |
| Source: EU FLEGT Facility |

Table 1

1. No Poverty
2. Zero Hunger
3. Good Health and Well-Being
4. Quality Education
5. Gender Equality
6. Clean Water and Sanitation
7. Affordable and Clean Energy
8. Decent Work and Economic Growth
9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
10. Reduced Inequalities
11. Sustainable Cities and Communities
12. Responsible Consumption and Production
13. Climate Action
14. Life on Land
15. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
16. Sustainable Development Goals
Table 1: Sustainable Development Goals and sub-goals that Voluntary Partnership Agreements directly address

**SDG 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all**

8.3 ‘...encourage the formalisation and growth of micro and small medium sized enterprises’

8.4 ‘...decouple economic growth from environmental degradation’

8.8 ‘protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environment for all workers’

**SDG 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns**

12.2 ‘achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources’

12.6 ‘encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability’

12.7 ‘promote public procurement practices’

12.8 ‘ensure the public have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development in harmony with nature’

**SDG 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts**

13.1 ‘strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries’

13.2 ‘integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning’

**SDG 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss**

15.2 ‘promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation’

15.b ‘mobilize significant resources from all sources and at all levels to finance sustainable forest management and provide adequate incentives to developing countries’

**SDG 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels**

16.3 ‘promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all’

16.5 ‘substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms’

16.6 ‘develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels’

16.7 ‘ensure responsible, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels’

16.10 ‘ensure public access to information...’

16.a ‘strengthen relevant national institutions’
8.3: ‘...encourage the formalisation and growth of micro and small medium sized enterprises’

VPAs aim to create a level-playing field for law-abiding companies. Recently, studies, dialogue and targeted financing have focused on small and medium enterprises to help them adapt procedures and capacities so they can comply with the law and participate in more scrutinising markets. More understanding needs to take place to identify the best, most effective approaches for their integration. VPAs provide the context and space for this to happen.

Most VPA partner countries to date have also included domestic markets under their national timber legality assurance systems. This often entails formalising an informal sector which for many countries has been a source of illegality and yet provides income for many households.

This is therefore a difficult challenge to address, but one that is key to sustainable forestry. VPA processes more than any other initiative are bringing this challenge to the forefront. Countries are no longer ignoring the issue, but trying to garner political support to find solutions.

• One reason Ghana entered into a VPA was to address illegal chainsaw logging and milling. Chainsaw loggers and lumber traders there formed a union – DOLTA - that engaged with the VPA process to press for reforms to decriminalise its members and bring them into the formal economy. Ghana’s Timber Industry Development Division has partnered with associations such as DOLTA to encourage legal trade. This is a first step in helping to formalise the different groups, and to do this jointly with private sector.

SDG 8: Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all
• Indonesia provided training and other support to accelerate the rollout of its timber legality assurance system to smaller companies that extract timber or make furniture.

• Such approaches will help countries continue to do business as the EU and other markets become more scrupulous. The goal is to secure market access but not at the expense of the resources or citizens’ rights.

Each VPA’s legality definition must include a combination of social, environmental and economic legislation

8.4 ‘...decouple economic growth from environmental degradation’

Consumers and markets are more scrutinising, encouraging growth that does not harm the environment or people’s livelihoods. VPAs reinforce this principle in practice. Each VPA’s legality definition must include a combination of social, environmental and economic legislation to strengthen the three pillars of sustainability. VPA processes have focused attention and enforcement efforts on aspects of environmental legislation that, pre-VPA, were often minimally enforced.

The legality definition of Liberia’s VPA, for instance, requires contract or permit holders to:

• Prepare maps to ensure they do not encroach on protected areas
• Maintain buffer zones between their operations and water courses
• Have procedures to ensure compliance with rules regarding wildlife conservation and to avoid trade in endangered species
8.8 ‘protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environment for all workers’

According to the International Labour Organization, in most countries, forest work is in the three most hazardous occupations. Often the agencies responsible for enforcing employment laws are among the weakest. They tend to lack the staff needed to verify compliance in forest areas.

VPAs bring attention to this deficit and attempt to address it through stakeholder dialogue on the VPA legality definition. Countries have as a result undertaken legal reforms and many are working to increase government capacity to verify compliance with labour laws. This highlights the power of taking an incremental approach without necessarily knowing the solution.

• The first step involves raising awareness of existing legislation, as before VPA processes, many stakeholders did not know what was in the law to protect them.

• The second step involves dialogue to decide what aspects of the law should be included in the legality definition. Legality definitions in VPAs signed to date have included minimum age and wage requirements, health and safety procedures, and freedom to organise and form unions.

• The third step involves building capacities to ensure compliance with the areas of labour law in the legality definition. Some countries have done this by improving Labour Department capacity, others have shifted the burden of control from labour departments to forest district officers or third party auditors.

Legality definitions in VPAs signed to date have included minimum age and wage requirements, health and safety procedures, and freedom to organise and form unions.

Local timber market in Kumasi, Ghana
Source: Tropenbos International
In Cameroon, FAO support is strengthening the capacity of the Ministry of Labour and Social Security to verify compliance with the labour laws in the VPA’s legality definition. See EU FAO FLEGT Annual Report Phase II, page 14 and page 167 for a full description of the project (in French).

All of this ultimately will make governments more accountable to ensure worker rights. Even though in many cases, these controls are not yet operational, the dialogue, visibility and understanding of what is required in law has set the stage for improving the situation on the ground.

8.a ‘increase ‘aid for trade’ support to developing countries’

VPAs are good, but rarely-recognised, examples of ‘aid for trade’ as they enable partner countries to make greater use of trade as a lever for economic growth and poverty reduction. VPAs help partner countries improve system infrastructure including technology and data management, regulatory frameworks and productive capacity in order to boost their ability to trade in global value chains and make their exports more competitive.

While VPAs were envisaged in relation to the EU market, all of the VPAs ratified to date apply to all exports to all markets. This has exposed VPAs to other consumer markets, in particular China. China is interested in sourcing verified legal timber from Indonesia, a VPA partner, and the two countries have started a dialogue on cooperation. VPAs also address consumption by domestic markets in partner countries.

An independent market monitor (IMM) has been set up through EC financing to monitor how the EU and wider international markets for FLEGT licensed timber develops. The IMM is also to build on VPA efforts to improve the quality of timber trade statistics and effectiveness of timber market development programs.
12.2 ‘achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources’

VPAs lay the foundations for sustainable forest management by improving legal clarity, institutional capacity and company practices (see also sub-goals 8.4 and 15.2). One way VPAs do this is through their legality definitions. In each VPA negotiation process, national stakeholders identify laws and regulations relating to elements of sustainable forest management that the VPA legality definition should include. This means more oversight and control will be placed on these particular areas. VPAs signed to date have included requirements that:

- Species and harvesting quotas are followed
- Annual operational plans and forest management plans guide production
- Environmental impact assessments have been completed
- Health and safety standards are applied

12.6 ‘encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability’

VPAs are rare among development approaches in that they influence both production and consumption. They engage private sector actors from across the supply chain, from exporting companies in VPA countries to their buyers and traders in Europe and other markets. Together with broader FLEGT Action Plan elements, VPAs have increased the pressure for transnational companies to trade in legal timber.

Experience has shown in a number of timber-exporting countries, forest legislation is strong on paper, but enforcement is weak and compliance...
is therefore limited. Unless governments force all companies to improve their practices, companies that do so will be at a disadvantage because of the investments that they need to make. By contrast, companies that continue to harvest without regard for the law undercut the market price of legal wood.

By forcing all private sector actors to play by the same rules, VPAs work to level the playing field and create the economic space companies need to improve sustainability. Unlike voluntary certification schemes, which take effect at the level of an individual operator, VPAs apply to all companies in a country’s forest sector. They create a framework that makes clear to companies the requirements to operate legally, shows whether companies have followed the law and, if not, they prevent those companies from exporting timber products.

Through capacity building, VPA processes help companies to comply with the law, and for many this ultimately means changing their behaviour. VPAs have been successful in bringing to light the challenges small and medium enterprises face, in both the formal and informal sectors, with respect to legal compliance and sustainability. Projects are underway to address such challenges. VPAs encourage more efficient production of timber by, for example, promoting use of small-scale mills over chainsaw milling in Ghana.

Cameroon and Europe: Creating a partnership for legal timber
Source: EU FLEGT Facility
12.7 ‘promote public procurement practices’

VPA discussions in Ghana and Indonesia helped stimulate the development of a public procurement policy for verified legal timber trade on the domestic market. The FLEGT Action Plan, of which VPAs are one measure, also encourages EU Member states to adopt public procurement policies. Such policies are now in place in 19 EU Member states. Research published by Chatham House in 2014 described how public procurement policies are increasing market share for verified legal and sustainable timber.

12.8 ‘ensure the public have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development in harmony with nature’

VPA processes raise awareness about forest legislation and the harmful effects of illegal timber trade. They create knowledge, space and capacity for dialogue on key sustainable development issues from sustainable forest management, to access-rights and benefit-sharing.

By bringing in diverse points of view, VPAs aim to address the interests of different stakeholders. As VPAs develop, so does their potential to provide relevant information on forest sector challenges, approaches to sector reform and experiences of FLEGT licensing.

Within the EU, VPAs and the wider EU FLEGT Action Plan are helping raise public awareness about how illegal timber harms development, livelihoods and economic growth in developing countries. VPAs are also attracting attention from markets outside the EU. With VPA processes underway in 15 countries on three continents, regional and global dialogue has emerged about the principles behind FLEGT: participation, accountability, institutional clarity, legislative reform and transparency.

VPA processes underway in 15 countries on three continents
Source: EU FLEGT Facility
13.1 ‘strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards and natural disasters in all countries’

Forests have important roles to play both in mitigating climate change and in enabling communities, countries and companies to withstand climatic shocks and adapt to changing conditions. Forests can only play those roles if they are managed well and fairly. Forest governance therefore plays a crucial role to combat climate change, yet many national climate change plans do not address this.

These gaps in forest governance are likely to hinder nations’ efforts to address climate change. Ways to improve forest governance are therefore crucial. VPAs offer important lessons and tools. They have strong track records of addressing governance challenges in the forest sector, and their impacts will strengthen the ability of VPA countries to mitigate and adapt to climate change.

A VPA can make a country’s forest sector and its stakeholders more resilient to climatic shocks by improving forest governance and keeping the forest intact.

- VPA processes are unprecedented in the level of stakeholder participation and influence. Every VPA process has seen participation improve over time. Thus, VPAs not only foster participation, they create mechanisms to collectively find solutions to existing and emerging challenges.

- VPAs strengthen the regulatory framework to ensure strong management of the forest.

- VPAs have provided much-needed clarity about what is legal and what is not. Clarity is an important aspect of good forest governance as it enables stakeholders to understand rights, responsibilities and obligations.

- VPAs have strengthened capacity in partner countries for stakeholders to understand and comply with legal requirements, track timber and control supply chains, verify the legality of timber, enforce the law and hold people accountable.

- VPAs work to improve business practices of operators in the sector in particular domestic market operators.

- VPAs promote sustainable forest management goals by ensuring operators are following harvesting practices, management plans, and environmental requirements for example.
Many of the goals outlined in the INDCs are also in the VPAs. For example, the Central African Republic lists as an adaptation measure the “implementation and monitoring of forest management plans”, which is also a requirement of its VPA’s legality definition. VPA implementation will therefore help Central African Republic meet its climate change goals.

Guyana for example outlines plans to realise sustainable forest management and legal timber trade, through “ensuring compliance with the various Codes of Practices” and committing an increasing part of the Guyana Forestry Commission staff to field monitoring. The Guyana-EU VPA under negotiation will have a strong focus on increasing implementation of existing laws and regulations as well as field verification activities, both of which would serve INDC as well as VPA goals.

VPAs therefore help ensure forests continue to play important roles in flood protection and watershed management – both of which strengthen resilience to climatic shocks.

13.2 ‘integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning’

All 15 VPA partner countries have included forests in their climate change plans (Intended Nationally Determined Contributions; INDCs) they have submitted under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, and many of these INDCs refer to sustainable forest management practices, which VPAs promote.

Some VPAs have explicitly recognised the link between VPA objectives and climate change action. The VPAs of Indonesia and Liberia, for example note that VPA implementation will contribute to combatting climate change.

The INDCs of Guyana, Côte d’Ivoire and Laos refer to FLEGT, VPAs, or both.
15.2 ‘promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation’

VPAs work to strengthen sustainable management across different forest types from natural permanent forests, to plantations, non-permanent state forests and forests on private land as well as community forests. VPAs also cover many of the different permit types allowed on these forests. Many countries have included all forest types in their VPA legality definitions.

VPAs can promote sustainable forest management through dialogue that leads to action to improve both the regulatory framework and law enforcement. In Ghana, for instance, officials see the potential of such changes to improve forest condition. Through the VPA process, Ghana’s Forestry Commission set up a Timber Validation Department which audits district officers to ensure that they have performed adequate controls.

15.b ‘mobilize significant resources from all sources and at all levels to finance sustainable forest management and provide adequate incentives to developing countries’

VPAs have proven to be a useful way for partner countries to identify and articulate financing needs with regard to:

- Developing effective timber legality assurance systems
- Building capacity for verification, licensing, tracking and control
- Managing multistakeholder processes
- Ensuring small and medium enterprises are not left behind

Cameroon external independent monitoring
Source: FODER
VPAs therefore help governments and donors to target finance and to structure support around VPA priorities. Many partner countries find this targeting useful to mobilise resources from national budgets to address forest sector gaps and build government capacity to deliver their VPA commitments.

VPAs can promote sustainable forest management through dialogue that leads to action to improve both the regulatory framework and law enforcement.

The systems that VPAs are encouraging and the regulatory framework overseeing these systems aim to help governments capture revenue that was being lost to corruption or poor data management. As countries start to refine their data collection, they have identified areas where revenue loss was occurring and are addressing these leakages showing a recapture of significant revenue.

VPAs promote peace and inclusion in a sector long marked by conflict and acrimony. The participatory nature of VPA processes breaks down barriers between government, the private sector and civil society. By addressing longstanding conflicts and fostering consensus and cooperation among stakeholders, VPAs help ensure that decisions will be implemented and have lasting effects.
SDG 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies

16.3 ‘promote the rule of law at the national and international levels and ensure equal access to justice for all’

VPAs strengthen the rule of law by demystifying and making clear the legal and regulatory framework, the penalties for non-compliance, and the roles and responsibilities of government and other stakeholders in the forest sector. This is critical in contexts where day-to-day business operations often fail to follow the rules, or where rules are overlapping, vague or inaccessible.

VPAs are proving to be great tools to push for legal reform through national dialogue. In countries where the legal framework is inconsistent or unclear, VPAs have provided, in discussions about their legality definitions, clarity about what is legal and what is not. In Indonesia for instance, some 900 laws and regulations apply to the forest sector. This complexity makes it difficult for companies to comply with the law and for government agencies to enforce the law. Indonesian stakeholders deciphered this large volume of regulation into the clear, practical definition of legality in the VPA.
Through VPA dialogue on legality, stakeholders become aware of what legislation actually states and what it means for their activities. Because legal reforms are taking place within the VPA, more stakeholder participation is emerging. And when that is not happening, stakeholders are pushing for a more participatory process.

Experiences show the potential of VPAs to strengthen regulatory control through:

- Clarity on government procedures and roles, in some cases, new levels of control
- Independent audits
- Joint implementation committees (VPA partner country and EU)
- Civil society monitoring
- Commitments to transparency
- Commitments to develop grievance mechanisms

16.5 ‘substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms’

VPA processes have exposed corruption in the forest sector, even in countries where corruption remains rife in other sectors. VPAs have enhanced levels of control while being transparent about what the control procedures are.

In all VPAs, independent audits of the partner country’s timber legality assurance system are obligatory. Some VPAs have also given civil society a role in monitoring implementation or have bolstered internal controls. Ghana’s VPA has, for instance, led the government to initiate internal audits to check forest authorities are performing controls as required by the legality assurance system.

VPAs also strengthen institutional capacity for tracking and controlling flows of timber, other forest products and money. They improve coordination among law enforcement and other actors working to combat forest crimes, including independent forest monitors from civil society.

VPAs create channels through which forest crimes can be reported and dealt with.

- Indonesia’s VPA, for instance, recognises a formal role for independent forest monitors from civil society as part of the timber legality assurance system. This recognition is intended to facilitate forest monitors’ access to information and areas such as logging camps.

- In Liberia, the VPA process gave civil society an opportunity to challenge fraudulent allocations of logging permits and expose the issue internationally. This lead to investigations and a landmark court sentence. Five Forest Development Authority staff were found guilty of economic sabotage and theft of property through their involvement in the illegal issuance of logging permits. They face 5 to 10 years in prison and significant fines.
16.6 ‘develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels’

VPA processes are showing that even before FLEGT licensing begins, accountability, transparency and institutional effectiveness are being improved.

VPAs strengthen regulatory accountability and do this most profoundly through the multistakeholder dynamic. Commitments, concerns and challenges are put out in the open. Interests and political relationships are exposed. VPAs have unveiled this dynamic, and thus started to chip away at underlying governance problems.

VPAs are demonstrating their value in pushing institutional change, and strengthening capacity and practices, by developing and documenting the regulatory framework needed to verify the legality of timber products. VPAs clarify roles and responsibilities, and include mechanisms for independent checks, which promote legal compliance by companies and accountability from governments.

VPAs bring visibility to non-compliance and create opportunities for stakeholders to raise concerns. They provide mechanisms for governments to show how transparent they are – all VPAs include commitments by partner governments to make information publicly available on the forest sector that has traditionally been kept secret.

- In Ghana, the VPA process showed that social responsibility agreements, important documents to reinforce community rights, were not well enforced. Therefore, compliance was weak. As a result, representatives of government and civil society developed a checklist to improve compliance and enforcement. This checklist is now part of the government’s control procedures.

- In Liberia, communities used the VPA process to successfully lobby to receive a share of land rental tax from logging concessionaires that the government had long owed them.

VPAs cannot solve all governance challenges in the forest sector overnight. They have, for instance, struggled to bring greater accountability to the judiciaries of partner countries. Nonetheless, they can create the space for stepwise improvements in that regard.
16.7 ‘ensure responsible, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels’

VPAs are inclusive. A VPA partner country’s government cannot move forward without stakeholders. The private sector needs to find compromise with communities. Under a VPA, a country’s forest administration finds it difficult to take decisions without first discussing and perhaps making compromises with other affected forest stakeholders, be they other government departments, forest communities, NGOs, or chainsaw loggers.

VPAs bring all of these players into the same discussion. This is not easy—in many countries, governments have never before had to manage a multistakeholder process. As part of the inclusive VPA approach, the EC and EU Member states have targeted financing through FAO and their own direct support to strengthen the capacity of stakeholders to organise, understand issues and tools, develop positions and engage the political apparatus. This is particularly important for stakeholders that are not well-organised or familiar with this process, such as small and medium enterprises, civil society groups and indigenous peoples.

The requirement for VPA processes to include national participation and consensus building has led to structures being created for both national dialogue and for dialogue within stakeholder groups. In all countries that have signed a VPA these participatory structures have continued into the VPA’s implementation phase. Every VPA process has seen this improve over time. Thus, VPAs not only foster participation but also institutionalise it through such structures, which meet regularly and are the means by which trust and collaboration develop.

In some cases, structures set up for VPA dialogue have been used to address issues beyond the remit of the VPA, such as conversion timber in Cameroon and conflict timber in Central African Republic.

The impact of this aspect of VPAs on governance is unique. Stakeholder voices have led to many changes in the forest sector including changes in the regulatory framework (government control procedures, accountability, transparency), legislative reform, financial benefits flowing back to communities, exposing corruption resulting in the ousting of top officials, and finally, have also resulted in governments seeing stakeholders as allies not problems.

• In the Central African Republic, the government turned to stakeholders for an open dialogue and to collectively reflect on accusations from Global Witness regarding conflict timber - this amidst political turbulence. This is profound in a broken country that never talked to civil society before and which could have just as easily turned to the pre-VPA norm of unilaterally making decisions.
16.10 ‘ensure public access to information...’

All VPAs include commitments that outline what information will be made public, and how it will be made public. VPA experiences show that by anchoring such commitments in an agreement, it provides opportunities to increase transparency.

• In Indonesia, independent forest monitors took the Ministry of Environment and Forests to court to demand access to information on forest concessions that Indonesia had committed to make public in its freedom of information act and the VPA. The court ruled against the ministry, upholding the VPA commitment to transparency while securing the role of the independent monitors.

• In Cameroon, civil society has created a working group to outline how the documents listed in the VPA’s transparency annex can be made public.

Several VPA partner countries are developing strategies to improve communication with stakeholders or have set up websites to share information about the process. VPA annual reports, aide memoires and press releases also enhance public access to information.

VPA commitments are not the only means to encourage stronger transparency. The VPA process has itself greatly exposed governance challenges in partner countries, resulting in dialogue around these challenges. Political interests in the forest sector are being exposed as countries get closer to FLEGT licensing. In some cases, this results in two steps forward, one step back. Many see this has a setback, but actually it is a governance gain: VPAs are chipping away at challenges that rarely get exposed as they do in VPA processes.

16.a ‘strengthen relevant national institutions’

Government ministries and agencies with responsibilities for forestry, customs, labour, finance and law enforcement all have roles to play in VPA timber legality assurance systems. VPAs bring attention to these institutions, expose weaknesses and strengthen institutional capacity to deliver the commitments in the VPA.

• In Liberia, the VPA process exposed and helped to address the finance ministry’s overdue payments to communities, which were owed a share of land rental taxes logging companies paid to the government.
Resources


FLEGT Independent Market Monitoring (IMM) http://www.itto.int/imm/


EU FAO FLEGT Annual Report Phase II http://www.fao.org/publications/card/es/c/e0a6ae3934-46b3-411a-badc-a7bad7a0679b/


Projects of Tropenbos International in Ghana http://www.tropenbos.org/country_programmes/ghana/projects

