

Inter-African trade in **illegal timber** - an overlooked **cause** of **deforestation?**

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The tell-tale “trademark” of chainsaw milled timber on mahogany (*Khaya* spp.) from the Democratic Republic of Congo as seen in Nairobi, Kenya.
Photo N. Pasiecznik.

Demand for timber from developed countries is generally considered, especially within donor communities and environmental groups, as the main cause of tropical deforestation. However, the trade between African countries is rarely mentioned or considered significant. **Accepting and monitoring the reality of this trade, and reducing demand by supporting existing initiatives to increase timber production in “timber-deficient” regions, are suggested as parallel ways forward.**

Global trade in illegal timber is assumed to result in a loss of US\$5 billion annually and a further US\$10 billion to timber producing countries according to the World Bank (FAO, 2005), and is thought to be one of the main causes for the loss of tropical forests worldwide (HEWITT, 2005). The amount of illegal timber being traded has been variously estimated at between one half to the same quantity as the declared legal harvest in a number of countries. While the importance of this illegal trade in economic and environmental terms is not disputed, it is argued here that current initiatives aimed at reducing imports of illegal timber into Europe or North America may never achieve their desired impacts. This is because they do not consider the effects of the “hidden” internal timber trade within Africa, Asia or Latin America.

Box 1.**Where the Congolese forests are really going?**

Go into most big timber yards in Kampala or Nairobi and you can buy mahogany (*Khaya* spp.) or muvule/iroko (*Milicia excelsa*) hardwood from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Some of it may be called “Ugandan”, thanks to re-stamping when picked up from a “no-man’s land” between border checkpoints, but its source is often not even hidden. Most of it also carries the tell-tale markings indicating it was milled by a freehand chainsaw operator and suggesting an illegal origin. It is also resawn and sold as finished products such as furniture or flooring. Rough sawn mahogany costs about US\$150 per cubic metre in DRC and retails for US\$650 in Nairobi, the mark-up making it worth the risks and easily covering any necessary bribes on route. Timber from DRC is also found in timber yards in Tanzania and Sudan, with reports of it making it all the way across the desert to Egypt and Somalia, and is increasingly sold to overseas buyers via the internet.

What is the evidence?

Look at the trucks, containers or stockpiles at any border crossing between the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, or the Central African Republic and Chad for example, or visit any timber yard in Nairobi or N’djamena, and the significance of inter-African trade in timber becomes immediately obvious. However, look at books or reports on the illegal timber trade issued by many organisations, and it becomes paradoxically evident that this is being largely overlooked by those in the developed world working to reduce this trade and “save the rainforests”.

In the WWF’s recent report on the illegal timber trade, HEWITT (2005) repeated such myths, arguing that inter-continental export markets were driving deforestation, especially in the Congo basin. Other work has been undertaken by Global Witness, the World Conservation Union (IUCN-TRAFFIC) and Forest Monitor, though much more remains to be done and the idea that “most is exported” is still commonly reported. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that much illegally harvested timber never leaves the African continent, being traded from timber-rich to timber-poor countries, as well as to the rapidly expanding urban centres within each. This trade may well exceed the volumes of illegal timber exported outside the continent, with exports to Europe already tending to concentrate on timber from legal concessions.

There is clearly substantial traffic of timber from central African forests to East Africa, and from humid West and Central Africa to Sahelian and North African countries, and it is likely that similar trading patterns exist between neighbouring timber-rich and timber-poor countries throughout the tropics (Box 1). Because it is illegal, however, accurate figures are not available. The volumes involved must be considerable to achieve the profits quoted by the World Bank, but even these may be underestimated. With large amounts of money changing hands in transactions and bribes, some of the stakeholders directly involved are not open to discussing their business. As one observer on the Congolese border noted, “When you’re facing an AK-47, you don’t ask any questions or take any pictures”.

Such trade may be affected by different national tax regimes or other legislation, but as most of the timber is moving from forests to cities or deserts, it appears to be simply a case of supply and demand in an unregulated “open” market. Rapidly developing urban centres and timber-deficient regions all over Africa and the developing world are creating a “timber vacuum”, driving a trade in wood and wood products that are often illegally sourced from the nearest remaining natural forests.

What is being done?

Measures are being taken to make the international timber trade more transparent. The most important of these are the FLEG (Forest Law Enforcement and Governance) initiatives, including the European Union’s FLEGT Action Plan and regional AFLEG in Africa supported by the World Bank, while others exist in Asia and North America. However, these currently only involve voluntary agreements, although governments are under pressure from environmental groups and NGOs to make them legally binding.

Even so, measures like FLEG might not be enough, as they are still largely aimed at reducing only inter-continental trade in illegal timber, and in their present form are unlikely to have any significant impact on overland trade within regions or trade to other markets not covered by such agreements such as in East Asia. However, they may provide a valuable model of ways of making the timber trade transparent, but transferring such initiatives to porous borders, loose enforcers and lawless dealers will be a challenge indeed, and unlikely to succeed.

Also, as logs are increasingly being sawn up in the forest with chainsaws, timber-producing countries have also tried to restrict their use. It is a fact that almost all illegally harvested timber has been felled or sawn by chainsaw. The effects are not promising, however. In Guyana, 80% of the timber in local markets has been legally chainsawed, and likewise in Ghana, although the use of chainsaws is illegal in that country. Widespread corruption is another factor making similar regulations very difficult to enforce.

Ways forward

It therefore appears imperative that serious and reliable checks are made to assess the extent of the trade in illegal (and legal) timber across national borders within Africa, including volumes and markets, species and sources, pathways, prices and players, at least in approximate terms, and to compare this to equivalent data on inter-continental trade in both legal and illegally sourced timber. Defining the extent of the problem is required before any recommendations can be suggested and discussed.

More immediate environmental impacts may be possible if stakeholders in developing countries concentrate on improving monitoring of timber exploitation from legal concessions and ensuring it is sustainably managed, for example by enforcing the use of reduced-impact logging and similar practices.

The most advisable way of reducing the demand for timber from timber-deficient regions is to increase their capacity for timber production and processing. With natural forests being increasingly protected for the “global good” and plantations having to compete with agriculture, growing trees for timber outside forests is increasingly seen as a way forward (PASIECZNIK, 1999; WORLD AGROFORESTRY CENTRE, 2004). Farm forestry has huge potential to meet the demand for more wood, and the vast drylands can also be turned into productive agroforests when equipped with the appropriate skills and tools (FELKER, 2000; PASIECZNIK, 2000). This, and intensifying production from plantations, will reduce the pressure on natural forests and reduce illegal harvesting. But it will take the efforts of many committed individuals at all levels, and it must and will be done, at least in a forester’s time-scale.



Freehand chainsaw milling in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Photo C. Fehr.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Clemens Fehr, Jean-Marc Roda and John Palmer for providing information and commenting on earlier drafts.