Cameroon’s hidden harvest

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CIFOR scientists have developed close working relationships at every level of the timber industry. Here, Paolo Cerutti (left) and Edouard Essiane (right) discuss trade issues with a market trader in Limbé. Photo by Leticia Pina Cortez

Contents

Acknowledgements iv
Why this matters v
Introduction 1
1. In search of the truth 5
2. Sharing the spoils 9
3. Market forces 13
4. Time for reform? 17
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I have used pseudonyms to protect the identities of some of the people in Cameroon’s domestic timber industry who were interviewed.

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Why this matters

• Since 1996, the amount of timber harvested in Cameroon to supply domestic and regional markets has increased by a factor of 10.

• The domestic timber market employs some 45,000 people, three times more than the number employed by export-oriented industrial companies.

• Approximately 75% of the timber harvested for domestic use is produced by chainsaw millers operating without title – in other words, illegally.

• Those involved in the illegal trade in domestic timber must routinely pay bribes to government officials to continue doing business. These bribes represent 9% of harvesting costs. Two-thirds of the chainsaw millers interviewed by CIFOR cited harassment by government officials as their biggest problem.

• The state derives no benefits from the domestic timber harvest. Attempts to legalise the trade have been thwarted by the government officials who are supposed to apply the law.

• Cameroon recently signed an agreement with the European Union under which it pledged that all harvested timber will be of legal origin by 2012. Without dramatic and far-reaching reforms, this will remain an unattainable aspiration.
Cameroon's hidden harvest
Introduction

Timber traders in Bertoua, the provincial capital of Cameroon’s East Region, face two main problems, according to Amadou, a local trader. The first – and you’ll hear the same complaint in markets throughout the country – is the shrinking supply of timber. During the past two decades, several local sawmills have closed down, which means that he and his colleagues have become increasingly reliant on timber supplied by small-scale chainsaw millers, most of whom are operating illegally.

‘But the biggest problem we face,’ says Amadou, ‘is harassment by government officials and their demand for informal payments.’ This is a polite way of saying ‘bribes’.

Some of the timber which passes through Bertoua’s Kano market is sold to buyers in Yaoundé, the national capital, but most is destined for Chad, more than 1,250 kilometres to the north. It’s an expensive journey.

Many thousands of families gain their livelihoods from selling timber for the domestic market.
‘There are about 20 barriers on the road between Bertoua and the border, manned by officials from the Ministry of Forests and Fauna (MINFOF), the gendarmes and the police, and the only way you get through is by paying them money,’ says Amadou. The officials know that most of the timber has been illegally harvested; if the merchants refuse to pay up, the officials refuse to let them pass.

Amadou estimates that informal payments at the road barriers can amount to 1.5 million CFA (€2300) a trip.

‘That wipes out all the profit on a load of 50 m³, so to make money we have to add another 30 m³ of timber, which means each load is far in excess of the legal weight limit,’ he says.

This provides another opportunity for government officials to demand money. To get past the five weighbridges between Bertoua and Chad, Amadou must pay a further 1 million CFA (€1500). This puts his informal payments for each journey up to 2.5 million CFA (€3850).

Listening to Amadou’s account of the journey are Paolo Cerutti and Guillaume Lescuyer, scientists based in the Yaoundé office of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR). Over the past two years, research by Cerutti, Lescuyer and their colleagues has revealed that the illegal harvest of timber for domestic and regional markets is just as significant, in terms of volume, as the legal, export-oriented industrial harvest. It provides a living for three times as many people, as well as a significant source of income for corrupt government officials. However, unlike the industrial timber harvest, it provides no revenues, in the form of stumpage taxes and other fees, for the state.

Before leaving the market in Bertoua, Cerutti does a back-of-an-envelope calculation. Approximately 68,000 m³ of sawnwood is exported to Chad each year from East Region, with half going by rail, half by road. Around 40% comes from industrial sawmills; the rest is from chainsaw millers operating outside the law.

‘If you take Amadou’s figures, the merchants are required to pay bribes which amount to around 31,000 CFA (€47) per cubic metre,’ says Cerutti. ‘That means that the officials along the road are collecting around €1 million a year – a huge sum of money.’
None of this comes as a surprise to the CIFOR scientists, who have gathered testimony from more than 200 individuals about the way the informal payments system works. Although the payments are largely made to individuals working in the forests, at road barriers and in the markets, much of the money percolates upward in ‘brown envelopes,’ from the chef de poste and his officers to MINFOF’s higher officials.

CIFOR’s research suggests that corruption is now so deeply entrenched within MINFOF that any attempts to reform the law are likely to be vigorously contested by officials who supplement their income with bribes. The research has also highlighted other key problems related to the lack of any meaningful legal framework for the domestic timber sector. Uncontrolled harvesting could threaten future supplies of timber and, unlike export-oriented industrial production, the domestic trade provides no revenue for the state.

The significance of this story extends far beyond Cameroon. The government recently signed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the European Union under the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan. It has pledged that by 2012 all timber harvested in the country will be of legal origin – not just the timber for export from industrial concessions. CIFOR research has found that around half the timber traded each year is not recorded by the official data collection systems, as it is harvested without logging titles. Furthermore, acquiring information from chainsaw millers is difficult within the current regulatory framework. This threatens the integrity of the agreement with the EU.

‘The goal of our research has been to provide data and analysis which we hope will help the government to introduce reforms to the forestry sector,’ says Lescuyer. ‘These reforms, we believe, should enable people in rural areas to make a living legally – rather than illegally – from the exploitation of timber, in ways that do not threaten the resource and at the same time yield significant revenues for the state.’
Cameroon's hidden harvest
CIFOR began researching illegal logging in Cameroon in 2003. Originally, the focus was on the industrial timber sector, including comparing export figures with production on large-scale forestry concessions. However, it soon became apparent that something was missing from the reams of data gathered by MINFOF.

‘There was absolutely nothing about the domestic supply of timber, although you only had to travel around Yaoundé to see that this was significant,’ Cerutti says. ‘Roadside timber markets were springing up and expanding all over the city to satisfy the construction boom.’

CIFOR’s research also revealed discrepancies between harvesting and export figures. Exports frequently exceeded documented harvests.

‘When we began the research on the domestic and regional markets in 2008, there were three questions we wanted to answer,’ says Cerutti. ‘How much timber was being harvested? Who was producing the timber? Where was it coming from?’
Data collection began in Cameroon and Gabon, and was later extended to various large cities in the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In Cameroon the research involved a detailed analysis of trading activities in more than 1200 timber depots in 50 markets in Yaoundé, Bertoua, Douala, Kumba and Limbé, and interviews with 261 chainsaw millers operating in 70 councils. An army of hired hands – among them timber traders, students and MINFOF staff – gathered data which enabled CIFOR and MINFOF to gain a detailed understanding of how the domestic timber market works.

‘We were amazed by what we found,’ Cerutti says. ‘The amount of timber traded was much higher than we anticipated, with the entire sector operating as a parallel economy outside the law.’

Since 1996, the amount of timber harvested to supply the domestic and regional market has increased by a factor of almost 10. In 1996, the harvest was around 250,000 m³ a year RWE (round wood equivalent). By 2002, it had risen to 1 million m³ RWE. CIFOR’s latest data suggest that it is now 2.1 million m³ – roughly the same as the amount of timber legally harvested for export by major concession holders. Just over a quarter of the domestic and regional supply comes from industrial ‘scraps’: timber produced by large-scale concessions of insufficient quality for export. The remainder, equivalent to an annual harvest of 700,000 m³ of sawnwood, comes from chainsaw millers operating without any legal title.

The 1994 Forest Law, which governs forestry activities in Cameroon, primarily focuses on large-scale, export-oriented production. When the law was formulated, this made sense: the country was in the throes of an economic crisis and domestic demand for timber had fallen dramatically.

In addition to encouraging sustainable forest management on industrial concessions, the new law sought to promote greater participation of national interests in the timber industry. It incorporated measures to promote community forestry and redistribute some of the taxes paid by industrial logging companies to local councils and villages, and introduced several types of logging title reserved for Cameroonians. These included exploitation permits, to last a maximum of one year for a harvest not exceeding 500 m³, and personal logging authorisations, not to exceed three months and a volume of 30 m³. Of these, only the former
could be used for commercial gain. As it turned out, few chainsaw millers applied for exploitation permits during the 1990s, and most sourced timber from locations where they could claim some sort of user right, often negotiated with the true customary owners of the trees in question.

In 1999, the government suspended all small-scale logging titles. The suspension was primarily introduced to tackle widespread illegal logging and corrupt behaviour by industrial companies operating with Timber Recovery Permits, which were designed to allow forest clearance before development activities.

‘Unfortunately, the government also decided to suspend the only logging titles which could benefit small-scale producers, even though the titles themselves hadn’t been the cause of the problem,’ says Cerutti.

The ban, which remained in place until 2006, did nothing to reduce the scale of the harvest. In fact, timber production for the domestic market rose dramatically.

When the suspension was lifted in 2006, MINFOF decided to auction approximately 50 exploitation permits. These were to be delivered by an interministerial commission based in Yaoundé, rather than by regional delegates, as in the past. This made little sense to chainsaw millers, many of whom operate hundreds of kilometres away from the capital, and no applications were made for the permits.

‘Can you imagine a chainsaw miller travelling all the way to Yaoundé to make an application which would take weeks to approve?’ asks Cerutti. ‘It was just never going to happen.’

The suspension of small-scale logging permits established new layers of corruption within the Ministry of Forests, according to Cerutti, as staff working in the districts and regions developed an extensive network of rent collection from chainsaw millers and timber traders.

‘It was now in their interest to retain a system from which they themselves were key beneficiaries,’ says Cerutti.

Their ability to extort money would be reduced by any system that encouraged chainsaw millers to apply for, and gain, legal titles to harvest timber. To understand precisely how the system works, and why reform will be so difficult, it is necessary to look at what happens in the forests, on the roads and in the markets.
Cameroon's hidden harvest

[Image: A man is using a chainsaw to cut a log surrounded by fallen trees and sawdust in a forest.]
Chapter 2
Sharing the spoils

CIFOR researcher Edouard Essiane has to shout to make himself heard above the noise of the chainsaw.

‘You can see what a dangerous occupation this is, now you’re out here in the forest,’ he yells. ‘There’s a big risk of injury, and we frequently hear of people being seriously wounded or killed, either by their chainsaws or falling trees.’

Most chainsaw millers, he adds, will be deaf by the time they are 40.

With rain streaming down his back, a young man from the village of Djemiong, in East Region, skilfully slices planks from the trunk of a sapele tree that he felled the previous day. It will take him and his assistant two days to transform the tree into around 100 planks, each 2 m long and 40 cm wide. Porters, hired in the nearby village, will then carry them to the road. The chainsaw miller wears a T-shirt, jeans and flip-flops, but no protective gear. Indeed, personal safety seems to be the least of his concerns.

Chainsaw milling is a skilled and frequently dangerous activity. Photo by Jean Pamphile Ondoua
‘The big problem for us is always the same – the officials from the Ministry of Forests,’ he explains. ‘Sometimes they force us to hand over some of the planks. Sometimes they demand cash payments.’

How much?
‘Il faut négocier.’ You have to negotiate.

You hear this phrase everywhere you go – in the forests, at the road barriers, in the markets. Often, forestry officials will begin by demanding 100-200 CFA (€0.15-0.30) a plank, but the miller will aim to get that down; if he succeeds then the truck loaded with this and other sapele trees will yield the officials around 40,000 CFA (€60). Compare this with their monthly wages of around 100,000 CFA (€150) and you can see what a profitable business this is for government officials. Once a deal is done, they often stamp the planks with a hammer embossed with MINFOF’s stamp, providing proof of ‘legality.’ In theory, this means that the timber can be dispatched without the chainsaw miller having to pay any further bribes. However, if a more senior official visits the work site, the miller will have to pay him off as well.

More than two-thirds of chainsaw millers interviewed by Essiane and his colleagues said that harassment by government officials was their biggest problem. Just 19% cited dangerous working conditions as their main concern and a mere 10% the difficulty in gaining legal title. The remaining 90% never even bothered to ask for a legal title. However, when you talk to the chainsaw millers it soon becomes clear that they deeply resent being forced to operate outside the law.

A 40-minute drive down a dirt road from Djemiong brings you to a larger settlement, Mbang, and the headquarters of a 300,000-ha concession managed by a French-owned company, the Société Forestière Industrielle de la Doumé (SFID). Not long ago, SFID allowed local chainsaw millers to harvest and process any timber it had abandoned within its concession. However, MINFOF warned the company that this was against the law, and the practice was banned, much to the anger of loggers belonging to an association called Les Verts, or The Greens.

Now, the only way they can get any timber is by making deals with customary owners.

Mathieu Mbemouka is president of Les Verts, an association of chainsaw millers based in Mbang. Les Verts would much rather pay tax to the government than bribes to officials for the right to harvest timber.
‘We get an order from one of our patrons in the city, find a suitable tree, offer the owner a certain amount of money and then tell the local MINFOF official,’ explains Mathieu Mbemouka, president of Les Verts. The official gives the loggers a piece of paper attesting that they have the droit d’usage, or personal authorisation, to fell the tree. These permits are not for commercial use, but the local MINFOF official, and everybody else, knows that the timber will be sold. The loggers pay him a cash fee – after negotiation, of course – and the work proceeds.

But that’s not the end of the harassment.

‘Once the timber has been harvested, we have to get it to the market,’ explains Gustave Bengono, another chainsaw Miller in Mbang. ‘Every year, there seem to be more and more roadblocks, and the cost is passed down to the primary producers – which is us. That means that we get lower and lower prices.’

CIFOR’s research suggests that payments along the road vary not so much according to location, but according to which authority is demanding payment, with MINFOF officials charging around 25,000 CFA (€38) per truck.

The value of chainsaw milling to the rural economy is clear. Each team consists of four to five people – the chainsaw Miller, his assistant and two or three porters. CIFOR research suggests that some 45,000 individuals living in rural areas gain their livelihoods from the trade.

‘Approximately half the cost of doing business – equivalent to 32,000 CFA (€50) for every cubic metre of timber – goes on local wages,’ says Lescuyer.

Then, of course, there are the ‘informal payments’, which represent about 9% of harvesting costs, according to CIFOR’s research. These include payments to officials from MINFOF and other government bodies, as well as payments demanded by local administrations. For example, in Akoeman Council, to the south of Yaoundé, chainsaw millers pay the mayor’s office an informal tax of 40,000 CFA (€60) per tree harvested and an annual tax of 100,000 CFA (€150) per chainsaw. At any one time there can be as many as 150 chainsaw millers operating in the council area. These payments are greatly resented by the chainsaw millers – paying tax does not legitimise their activities – but they amount to approximately half of the municipality’s income. In short, illegal logging is helping to fund public services.
It is mid-morning at Montée Parc Market, the largest of the 25 timber markets in Yaoundé. A MININFO official sits on a large pile of planks, eating sandwiches and casually chatting with some of the merchants. He and two other officials who are doing their rounds are a familiar sight here, as they come every day to take their payments. You can tell which merchants have paid up, as their timber has been stamped with the officials’ hammer.

‘On average, we have to pay around 200 CFA a plank,’ one of the timber merchants explains. ‘If you don’t pay up, they’ll seize your timber. Sometimes, you end up paying twice, because MININFO’s Brigade Rouge will demand money as well.’

This story is repeated throughout the timber markets in Cameroonian cities. ‘It’s very annoying for us,’ says Etienne Bokagne, president of the merchants’ association in Manguier Market. ‘These informal payments represent a significant business cost at a time when our profits are already declining.’

Profits are declining for two reasons. First, the profitability of the sector has attracted large
numbers of individuals, thus increasing competition for timber. The number of depots in Montée Parc Market rose from just seven in 2003 to 260 by 2010; the number in Mimboman Market from 10 in 1997 to 60 today.

At the same time, timber has become scarcer in the countryside; you frequently hear of porters having to walk up to five kilometres to the nearest road to get timber out of the forests, rather than just one or two kilometres, as in the past. All of this has pushed up prices. In 1997, merchants in Mimboman Market paid around 75,000 CFA (€115) for a 6-tonne lorry of iroko; now the same amount costs 250,000–300,000 CFA (€380–460), although even with this increase, informal sawnwood remains up to 4 times cheaper than legal, industrial sawnwood.

‘Most of the merchants we’ve interviewed believe that there are now too many people involved in the business and they are particularly concerned about the growing scarcity of the resource,’ Edouard Essiane explains. ‘Mind
you, this is still a profitable business and each depot owner will make around 300,000 CFA (€460) a month.’

Cameroon’s 1994 Forest Law divided the forest estate into permanent and non-permanent domains. The permanent forest domain includes land which is allocated for permanent forest use, including sustainable timber harvesting and biodiversity conservation. The non-permanent forest domain includes forests which can be used for other land-use purposes, and this is where most of the small-scale chainsaw milling now takes place. However, Cerutti believes that the growing scarcity of timber makes it increasingly likely that chainsaw millers will seek to source timber in the permanent forest domain. Indeed, that is already beginning to happen in some areas.

‘At the moment, the main problem we face in terms of protecting our concessions comes from commercial poaching,’ explains Pierre Bertieaux, who manages SFID’s operations at Mbang. ‘However, there is also a problem with chainsaw millers operating inside our concessions, especially in areas close to villages.’ A six-man team is responsible for controlling illegal activities, but it can take a whole day to travel from one end of the concession to another and catching illegal chainsaw millers and poachers is far from easy. In any case, says the head of the control team, Amadou Ahidjo Akamba, MINFOF staff show little enthusiasm when they do receive reports of illegal logging.

‘I think the problem is getting worse,’ he says. ‘And it’s not just high-value trees like ebony they are targeting, but other species too.’

Once government officials have received their informal payments, or bribes, they stamp planks with an embossed hammer to provide proof of ‘legality’. Only then can traders shift their timber.
Cameroon's hidden harvest
In 1998, MINFOF’s powers to collect taxes from forestry operations were passed to the Ministry of Finance (MINFI), which now collects 15–20 billion CFA (€23–€30 million) a year in forestry taxes, largely from industrial timber concessions. The figure would be considerably higher if reforms were introduced for the domestic timber sector.

Isabelle Abouem, coordinator of MINFI’s Forestry Revenue Enhancement Programme, lists three compelling reasons why the government should consider formalising the domestic timber sector.

‘First, there is the fiscal argument,’ she says. ‘CIFOR’s research has given us an insight into how much timber is being traded for the domestic and regional markets and it is clear that even if we were to charge a modest tax – say, 3000 CFA per cubic metre (€4.60) – this would yield significant revenues for the state.’

CIFOR’s research and the testimony of those involved in the trade suggest that timber resources are declining in many parts of the country.

Aboubakar Goni is president of a traders’ association in Bertoua. He believes it is possible to establish a system that benefits harvesters, traders and the state – and cuts out bribery.
By formalising the trade, says Abouem, the government would be able to allocate small-scale permits in such a way as to ensure sustainable harvesting.

‘Finally, we shouldn’t ignore the psychological importance of introducing a system which gives people a legal right to harvest timber,’ she says. ‘If chainsaw millers and traders were issued with permits to harvest and trade timber, they would no longer feel the great weight of having to act illegally, or have to waste so much time and energy negotiating payments with officials.’

Talk to virtually anybody involved in chainsaw milling and the domestic timber trade and they will say much the same thing: they would like to operate legally; they would like to pay taxes to the state.

‘We want our activities to be formally recognised,’ explains Mbemouka, president of Les Verts in Mbang, ‘and we would much rather pay a tax per cubic metre than bribes to MINFOF officials. We even wrote a letter to MINFOF saying that that’s what we want.’

They never received a reply.

Sporadic attempts have been made to introduce a formal system of payments in the domestic timber sector, with varying degrees of failure. For example, in 2003, timber merchants in Messa Market, then the largest in Yaoundé, approached officials from MINFI and said they would be prepared to pay a tax on every cubic metre they sold. In return, they wanted paperwork which would prevent officials from MINFOF from harassing them and demanding bribes. MINFI welcomed the idea and traders agreed to a tax of 1,000 CFA (€1.50) per cubic metre.

‘In the end, this all came to nothing because people high up in MINFOF opposed the scheme,’ Cerutti says. ‘They argued that MINFI would be effectively legitimising an illegal trade, and I can understand their point of view. However, I think their real motive had nothing to do with that. They wanted to retain the status quo, which benefited MINFOF staff individually.’

In 2006, a scheme which involved timber traders paying volume-based taxes was launched in Bertoua. The Association des Transformateurs
Artisanaux de Bois de Lom et Djerem (ASTRABOLD) entered into a formal agreement with MINFOF’s regional delegate that its members would pay taxes to both MINFOF and MINFI in return for legal recognition of their trade.

‘We identified the timber we wanted to harvest – say, 100 m³ of iroko,’ recalls Aboubakar Goni, the current president of ASTRABOLD, ‘and told the regional delegate where it was, who it belonged to and so forth. We then agreed how much tax we would pay per cubic metre and the sum was deposited in the local Treasury. When we provided the evidence of payment to the regional delegate, he issued paperwork saying that we had paid the agreed taxes and had a legal right to proceed with the work.’

During an eight-month period, the timber traders paid taxes amounting to 36 million CFA (€55,000), divided between MINFI and MINFOF.

‘We were subject to much less harassment from the chef de poste and other government officials, precisely because we had the paperwork to prove that we were acting legally,’ says Aboubakar.

This all came to an end when MINFOF’s regional delegate, who had done so much to initiate the scheme, was transferred to the north of the country. When the new delegate arrived, Aboubakar and his colleagues visited him in the hope that the system would continue. The delegate said it was of no interest to him: the old way of doing things was swiftly reinstated.

‘At least the experience showed that it’s possible to establish a transparent system which benefits timber harvesters and traders, as well as the state,’ Aboubakar says.

Both at Messa Market in Yaoundé and in Bertoua, vested interests within MINFOF destroyed promising schemes.

‘It is true that there are some very powerful vested interests who will argue against change,’ says Cerutti. ‘But we shouldn’t ignore the fact that there are many good, honest people working within MINFOF who are not on the take.’

So what measures are needed?

‘First, the government needs to provide a new legal framework for the domestic timber industry, one which is adapted both to people’s needs in rural areas and to the availability of timber,’ Cerutti says.

He suggests that the current licensing system (agréement à la profession) be revised, as chainsaw millers are currently expected to apply for the same licences as large-scale industrial operators. This requires a lengthy bureaucratic procedure, making the licence difficult to obtain. CIFOR’s research also suggests that access to logging titles, and thus to the resource, should be decentralised, as foreseen by the original 1994 law. Regional delegates within MINFOF could be given powers to award a certain number of small-scale logging titles each year, depending on the local availability of timber resources. These permits, awarded for clearly defined areas, could be auctioned to local chainsaw
millers, and the process could be overseen by a commission made up of representatives of MINFOF, MINFI, the police, the gendarmerie, the territorial administration and local councils.

‘Whatever happens, officials from MINFOF – notably the chef de poste – and from other ministries will need to buy into the system, and it might make sense to give them more responsibilities in the allocation and control procedures, as well as allow them to take a premium out of the taxes raised,’ says Cerutti. ‘However, the new system must also hold them to account and apply strong sanctions when they take part in illegal activities.’
Any new legal framework will also need to be backed up by severe legal punishments of those who take or demand bribes. On the rare occasions when staff within MINFOF are subject to disciplinary measures, these generally involve nothing more than them being ‘relieved of their duties. More often than not, they are moved to similar posts in other regions and departments.

‘Much stronger sanctions are needed, including custodial sentences, if the government is going to successfully tackle corruption in the forestry sector,’ Cerutti says.

During recent years, Cameroon President Paul Biya and his prime minister have sent out repeated messages that corruption should no longer be tolerated in Cameroon. Visitors to Yaoundé for the 50th anniversary celebrations of Independence, in May 2010, were greeted by MINFI banners that read: ‘Corruption: a devastating canker worm against the development of our country.’

CIFOR’s research has shown that the domestic timber sector is controlled by an extensive network of corruption in which many MINFOF officials play an active role. In 2010, Cameroon signed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement with the European Union guaranteeing, among other things, that all timber will be legally harvested by 2012. Without significant legal reform of the domestic timber sector, and of MINFOF, that is not going to happen.
This and other publications from the Pro-Formal project can be found at www.cifor.cgiar.org/pro-formal.