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[Home](#) > [News](#) > [Cameroon axes illegal logging](#) > [Printer-friendly](#)

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Illegal logging has a devastating impact on some of the world's most valuable remaining forests. This is why the EU created the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) programme to combat the practice and trade of illegal logging. The latest country to sign up to the programme is Cameroon, which completed the agreement after a process that spanned several years.

The EU and Cameroon signed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement ^[1] (VPA) – which, although voluntary, is legally binding – on 14 May for FLEGT on forest products entering the EU. This signalled the successful conclusion of intense discussions between the two sides that started in 2007.

The agreement will provide a mutual response to the problem of illegal logging in Cameroon through linking good forest governance with a trade agreement, allowing the West African country access to the EU's internal market.

The agreement with Cameroon has encouraged it to implement a far more wide-ranging national system to deal with timber exports. The system will not only ensure legal compliance for exports to the EU, but for all destinations, including domestic. As a result, the EU will guarantee free access to its market for FLEGT ^[2] licensed timber goods, which should consolidate and improve Cameroon's market access.

As a key condition of the agreement, there is special focus on good governance, which would increase transparency and accountability in Cameroon's timber sector. "Signing the Voluntary Partnership Agreement is one more step forward in our efforts to strengthen forest governance," said Cameroon's Minister of Forest and Wildlife, Elvis Ngolle Ngolle.

Successful negotiations

Cameroon was praised for fostering an inclusive process during the negotiations, as multiple stakeholders were involved in the discussions, including from industry and civil society. Further monitoring mechanisms will also include more stakeholders.

With negotiations successfully completed, the agreement now goes to the Cameroonian Parliament for ratification on the African side, and to the Council of Ministers and European Parliament for ratification on the EU side.

The agreement with Cameroon follows similar successful outcomes with Ghana and the Republic of Congo. In the meantime, there are continuing negotiations with Liberia and the Central African Republic, with many more countries willing to get involved.

The first FLEGT licences for Cameroon are expected to be issued by the end of 2011.

Legal timber

The [FLEGT Action Plan](#) ^[3] was published in 2003 and set out a range of measures to tackle illegal logging. Once VPAs with partner countries are implemented, any timber heading to the EU without a FLEGT licence will not be allowed access. So, in addition to improving access to the EU market, VPAs can help partner countries carry out sectoral reforms and increase revenues in the timber market. The EU is also looking to create economic incentives to promote good governance by issuing FLEGT licences. The G8 Summit in 1998 recognised that illegal logging costs governments an average of \$10 billion a year in lost revenues.

In order for European consumers to be sure they are not buying illegal wood, and for partner countries to be sure they are in conformity with forest sector regulation, each VPA includes commitments to a regular audit. Only once this robust system is in place, complete with an independent organisation to scrutinise all the checks being made at source, can a FLEGT licence be issued.

This agreement goes a long way in supporting the Africa-EU Partnership on Trade, Regional Integration and Infrastructure, as it is strengthening African capacities to comply with the rules and standards needed to trade in international markets.

[Trade, regional integration and infrastructure](#)

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[1] http://ec.europa.eu/development/policies/9interventionareas/environment/forest/forestry_intro_en.cfm#F3

[2] http://ec.europa.eu/development/policies/9interventionareas/environment/forest/forestry_intro_en.cfm

[3] http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/com2003_0251en01_en.pdf