



Story of Change

Forest fringe communities in Ghana receive their rightful benefits

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Ghana's forest reserves provide invaluable ecosystem services to the communities around them, and also contribute significantly to the economy of Ghana. However, over the years, due to illegal logging, farming activities, mining in forest reserves and urbanization, these forests are rapidly deteriorating. All this is happening on the doorstep of forest fringe communities. So, involving local people through participatory forest resource management is a critical tool for sustainable and accountable forest resource management.

Since the inception of the EU NSA project in 2017, Tropenbos Ghana and NDF have trained over 500 people in four forest districts, in three of the high forest and transition-zone regions in Ghana, to act as watchdogs over their forests. Community forest monitors are dynamic groups comprised of chiefs, local assembly members, community based organizations (CBOs), opinion leaders and other community members, trained in thematic forest monitoring areas such as advocacy and policy influence, conflict resolution mechanisms, and reporting and addressing forest illegalities. To avoid duplicity, the project built on existing systems such as the [ForestLink](#) system to gather data on infractions from the community level, and to aggregate this information to inform their advocacy and stakeholder engagement.

The [ForestLink](#) system is a forest monitoring tool developed by Rainforest Foundation UK to send and receive 'alerts' – evidence of several threats to a forest, including illegal logging, illegal mining, bushfires, and non-compliance with [Social Responsibility Agreements](#). ForestLink employs a three-tier system of forest monitoring whereby community forest monitors, the first tier of the system, are trained to identify and report on these infractions and raise alerts. These



alerts are then pre-verified by intermediary CBOs, the second tier of the system, to ascertain the accuracy of the information received. The third tier consists of CSOs and the Forestry Commission on investigative missions to fully verify the alerts. About a third of these Community forest monitors have been equipped with smartphones that contain a real-time monitoring tool application to raise alerts and automatically transmit these to the ForestLink web-based database. The alerts the phone app generates and transmits to the online database are then followed up by the second and third tier, ultimately for proper actions to be taken by the Forestry Commission.

Towards the end of 2019, a total of 450 alerts had been received from community monitors, reporting on bushfires, illegal farming, illegal logging, illegal mining, timber transportation in breach of regulations, and large scale land acquisition for use other than forests, among others. Over 65% of these had been verified by CBO project partners, and many were subsequently investigated by teams from the Forestry Commission, CSO and intermediary CBOs.

To ensure accurate understanding of forest infractions and enhance knowledge on forest fringe community rights, Tropenbos Ghana and NDF have been educating community members, intermediary CBOs, small and medium forest enterprises and traditional leaders. The two CSOs have built the capacity of these stakeholders to understand their rights to an equitable share of benefits derived from commercial logging in Ghana's forests. This has been achieved through two mechanisms, social responsibility agreements, and the redistribution of royalties derived from a 'stumpage' fee paid for each cubic metre of timber cut. They have also equipped them with the skills to engage in the negotiation process of their social responsibility agreements and to better understand the laws governing the obligations under these agreements. These include the payment of an agreed amount, construction of community infrastructure, monitoring and evaluation of these projects, and respect for the rights and responsibilities of both the community and the logging company.

Tropenbos Ghana and NDF have trained over 50 communities to form local social responsibility agreement committees to engage logging companies operating in their areas on behalf of the communities. These committees have adopted a system to implement development projects on a rotational basis, including the renovation and construction of school buildings in Asempanaye, Sayerano, Nsinsem, and Aboagyekrom. Through the revenues generated from social responsibility agreement payments, one of the project communities, Sefwi Bedii, is utilizing social responsibility agreement funds

in the construction of a clinic to serve its inhabitants and neighbouring villages. The committee is also working in collaboration with John Bitar Company Limited, the logging company in the nearby Suhuma Forest Reserve.

The Tropenbos Ghana and NDF team have built the capacity of the local social responsibility agreement committees, including who can sign, the understanding of the differences between royalties and social responsibility agreement payments, when logging companies have to honour their social responsibility agreement commitments, and negotiations with beneficiary communities for more than the legal minimum of 5% of stumpage value. Of the 50 involved, 32 are currently receiving social responsibility agreement payments, of which 15 are first time recipients. Of these, 18 communities are also expected to start benefiting from social responsibility agreement payments in the next six months.

For an all-inclusive forest resource management system, community forest monitors have also been educated on the replanting of trees logged, tree tenure systems, the importance of the use of only legal timber, and the REDD+ benefit-sharing framework. NDF and Tropenbos Ghana have created many dialogue forums between communities and different sized timber processing companies in the area, the Forestry Commission, and the District Assemblies. The two CSOs have organized a series of town hall meetings, and exchange visits for key communities and other stakeholders to engage in sustainable forest management practices, efficient utilization of social responsibility agreement revenues, and community development.

The public forums organized by project partners have led to the settlement of disputes among forest fringe communities, logging companies, the Forestry Commission and District Assembly officials on the sharing of social responsibility agreement payments and royalties between communities and chiefs. One such dispute was between Adwumam, Old Adiembra and Aboagyekrom. It was revealed that irregularities existed in deciding the rightful community beneficiaries of the social responsibility agreement and the total amount of monies to be paid, resolved through a series of meetings facilitated by NDF and Tropenbos Ghana to foster dialogue between the aggrieved communities, District Forest Managers, logging companies and traditional authorities.

In an interview, Abena Woode, the capacity building expert of the project stated: "the engagement platforms created by the project among the various stakeholder groups ensure that state actors are more accountable regarding forest revenue usage, with improved benefit flow to communities, while communities have their



A community meeting in Sefwi Bedii. Photo by: NDF

capacities effectively built to advocate and receive information about how revenue is generated from the forest and utilized". Vincent Appiah, the Assistant Forest District Manager of Sefwi Wiawso, speaking during one such engagement, [stated](#) that the district received US\$74,500 in forest revenues, while the traditional council also received US\$25,000 as royalties in the first quarter of 2019. Also, "the Forestry Commission is paying social responsibility agreement monies to the communities. We are upholding good financial management practices to ensure there is an equitable distribution of funds from forest proceeds", he observed.

Nana Kwasi Bennie II, chief of Adwuman, stated that the project has helped community members and traditional leaders to gain immense knowledge and understanding regarding social responsibility agreements, and has helped them to establish local social responsibility agreement committees to utilize the revenues for development projects. He added that the project has helped communities build a more cordial relationship with state actors such as the Forestry Commission and the local District Assembly.

Clement Wulnye, the Certification Manager of John Bitar Company Limited, the major logging company in the district, indicated that the project has impacted positively on the relationship between them and forest fringe communities. He added that, through education and public forums, community members now have a better understanding of the role of the companies and social responsibility agreements. He further intimated that having project CSOs acting as an impartial and intermediary third party led to increased transparency, trust and cooperation between the two groups.

By participating in discussions about their right to receive social responsibility agreement commitments and royalties, forest fringe communities have also been able to gain an understanding of the invaluable ecosystem services that forests provide, and this has led to them committing to managing their forests more sustainably. Partner CSOs plan to continue to further engage these communities on various thematic areas such as the [Cocoa and Forestry Initiative](#), and it is hoped that this will continue to sustain the interest of forest-dependent people.

Speaking at an meeting in May 2019, Mr Appiah pledged the commitment of the Forestry Commission in upholding good financial management practices to ensure that there is more equitable distribution of funds from logging proceeds. This, he emphasized, will encourage community members to adopt good environmental practices to help sustain the forest and natural resources. According to Daniel Kofi Abu, the National Programme Coordinator for the EU NSA project in Ghana, such meetings have helped citizens to better understand how public funds are disbursed. He further added that the confidence of community members to safeguard remaining forests in the country has improved.

Participatory resource management depends on ongoing dialogue to jointly confront new challenges as they arise, but progress may stall if civil society, community members and other stakeholders are not able to continue working together. To ensure that gains made are not lost, some communities have come up with innovative means to sustain their forest monitoring systems put in place through the project. For example, in Nsinsiesem in Juaboso Forest District, the local social

responsibility agreement committee and chiefs have agreed to reserve 10% of every social responsibility agreement payment to support the work of community forest monitors.

Through EU NSA project initiatives such as the formation of local social responsibility agreement committees, equipping community members with devices to monitor and report infractions, and the creation of dialogue platforms among key stakeholders, communities now

better understand their rights and responsibilities regarding the forest reserves. “We understand the forest is ours, and can provide us with revenues to embark on developmental projects. Therefore we have resolved to secure it for posterity”, stated Afoka Rawlings, a community monitor from Bosomoiso. However, the improved benefit sharing and the awareness of legality and sustainability imperatives this work has strengthened, is yet to reach all forest fringe communities in Ghana.

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Photo cover: A community monitor using the Forestlink phone app. Photo by: NDF

