

Be careful with illegality numbers

Sir

Using a conversion factor of three for sawnwood (admittedly indicative of an inefficient industry) and 2.2 for veneer and plywood, official export data from the Cameroon Ministry of Forests and Fauna (MINFOF) suggest that about 2.1 million m³ of timber were exported from the country in 2003 and 2.3 million m³ in 2004. I'd like to stress the fact that, unlike past data, these figures are consistent with many other sources. In particular, they show minimal discrepancies with the data of the private company managing Douala port (1% for logs and 6% for processed products), as well as with ITTO and COMTRADE data series for the same years. FAO data record lower values.

Official production data in Cameroon are recorded for different purposes by different ministries. MINFOF records data in the SIGIF (*Système Informatique de Gestion de l'Information Forestière*) database, where only forest management units, sales of standing volume, and some officially delivered timber recovery permits are registered. The Ministry of Finance (MINEFI), on the other hand, registers any timber for which taxes are due. That is why, in recent years, values registered by MINEFI have often been higher than values recorded in the SIGIF: special permits and wood harvested in some community forests (generally not exported) must be added to the SIGIF data. In 2004, values registered in SIGIF have been very consistent with those recorded as exports.

Once you have looked at production and export data, take a look at import data: that is, volumes declared by those countries importing timber originating in Cameroon. The first thing you will note is that different sources show significant discrepancies compared to export data. This is no surprise, because there are many factors affecting these figures: conversion between kilograms and cubic metres, differences in the way timber is classified, confusion between timber produced and exported in Cameroon against timber leaving Douala but harvested in the Central African Republic or Congo (China is the best example of this), and many others (for a complete list, see Goetzl 2005¹). However, it is interesting to note that if you use the best available data from all the various sources, volumes reported by importing countries are lower than export data declared by Cameroon. The message is this: there is no clear sign that the world is registering more incoming wood than is registered as outgoing from Cameroon.

It must also be remembered that internal consumption is mostly absent from the above picture. Estimates do exist, but they are unreliable.

Why this letter? Because recent documents reporting the rate of illegal logging in Cameroon—timber that is

harvested, transported, processed, exported and imported illegally—are still using a 50% figure.

If half as much again of the official export volumes given above (which I invite you to cross-check) is illegal, this implies that more than 1 million m³ (more than 30 000 truckloads) of timber are harvested, transported, processed and exported without being registered in the SIGIF, without paying taxes at MINEFI, without being detected on the roads, without being registered at Douala (both by the government and by the private company managing the port), and finally without being registered by the importing country. All of this, at the same time!

Indeed, illegalities can be detected all along the production chain from the forest to foreign ports, starting with some forest management units which are up and running but which were never granted according to the law, or the four timber recovery permits (outlawed in 1999 by the same ministry delivering them) officially registered in the 2004 SIGIF data, or the more than 30 special authorizations already delivered in 2005. But if constructive solutions are what we are looking for, I believe it is time to break the production chain down into little pieces, clean the rings, and build it again. Then, perhaps, people won't find it so easy to wave around the "50%" number without demonstrating its veracity.

I'd be pleased to hear the views of your readers.

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¹ Goetzl, A. 2005. Why don't trade numbers add up? *Tropical Forest Update* 15/1.

International community must support Liberia

Sir

The most recent edition (*TFU* 15/3) was the best of the 2005. This is not just because it was partly focused on the forestry sector of my country (Liberia), but also because the other issues covered were of great interest to readers. The edition's emphasis on sustainable forest management, the achievement of which is still a major problem in most of the tropics, is commendable.

Having known the factors militating against sustainable forest management in Liberia, it is my sincere hope that the recommendations presented by the ITTO mission will be taken seriously by all stakeholders.

Abednego Gbarway

20 December 2005