

VOLUNTARY PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT SUPPORT UNIT

ABOUT THE VPASU

2014—2015

Liberia still contains about half of the entire rainforest remaining in West Africa. About 45% of the country, 4.3 million hectares, is covered by forest. Liberia, with a relatively small population of about 3.5 million inhabitants, is blessed and rich in natural resources that can provide, if managed sustainably, income and opportunities for this and future generations. Recognizing this strategic opportunity, on July 27, 2011, the Republic of Liberia signed a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) with the European Union (EU), which aims to reduce illegal logging by strengthening sustainable forest management, improving forest governance and promoting trade of legally produced timber. In 2003 the EU adopted the Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan, under which the VPAs were created, to prevent illegal timber from entering the EU.

At the heart of the FLEGT VPA is the Timber Legality Assurance System (TLAS or simply, LAS) which verifies that wood products conform to national laws. The forestry Development Authority (FDA) is the executive government institution with responsibility to ensure that the Republic of Liberia honors its commitment to the VPA. The VPA seeks to prevent illegal timber and timber products from entering the European Union. In consideration of this, Liberia has embraced the Legality Assurance System under the VPA process as assurance to both local and international partners that timber and timber products originating from Liberia and placed on local and international markets have been verified to be legally sourced/produced in conformity to Liberian laws.

The Voluntary Partnership Agreement Support Unit (VPASU):

In 2013 the European Union and the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID) agreed to provide support to Liberia to meet its VPA commitments by establishing the VPA Support Unit to coordinate the capacity building for Liberian stakeholders including government Ministries, Agencies, and Commissions (MACs); the Civil Society and the Private Sector. The VPA SU aims to support Liberian stakeholders/institutions until they gain the necessary capacity to effectively and efficiently implement the VPA independently.

The VPASU is one of the three VPA implementation partners (SGS establish, implement and manage the Legality Verification Department (LVD) within the FDA and; FLEGT Facilitation coordinates activities of the implementing partners) also funded by DFID and the EU. The VPASU actively participates in donor coordination mainly with USAID, World Bank/Norway.

The Government of Liberia ministries, agencies, and commissions (MACs) being assisted by the VPASU include the Forestry Development Authority (FDA), Ministry of Justice (MoJ), Ministry of Finance and Development Planning (MFDP), Liberia Revenue Authority (LRA), Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), and the Ministry of Labor (MoL). The VPASU recently

initiated the implementation of the Forest Governance Capacity Building of the MoJ and FDA, led by the Environmental Law Institute, to strengthen law enforcement.

The VPASU assists the functioning of all VPA governing bodies in Liberia including the Joint Implementation Committee (JIC), the Liberia Implementation Committee (LIC), the National Multi-Stakeholder Committee (NMSMC), and the Inter-Agency Coordination Committee (IACC).

Regarding assistance to the FDA, the Support Unit is close to completing the renovation of the FDA main building in Monrovia, providing equipment, furniture, training and technical assistance to its different departments in main office and regional offices. Technical assistance has been concentrating in developing and updating 10 regulations and guidelines deemed relevant for the implementation of the Legality Assurance System approved by the Liberia-EU Joint Implementation Committee. Although the Ebola crises slowed down implementation, the VPA SU has started assisting the FDA's Commercial Forestry Department and the Community Forestry Department in developing their capacity to guide and control the implementation of sustainable forest management by the private sector and communities. Assistance also covers the Public Affairs Division, developing GIS capacity, strategic sustainable forest management planning, improving forest harvesting practices, low impact logging and forest monitoring.

On the other hand the VPASU is assisting the Civil Society by strengthening the NGO Coalition Secretariat, which coordinates actions from its NGO members, which is providing assistance to the National Union of Community Forestry Development Committees (NUCFDC) to revive its National Benefit Sharing Trust Board (NBSTB) to access funds recently received from the GoL.

Moreover, the VPASU is assisting the Liberian Timber Association to strengthen its recently established Secretariat to gain economies of scale in representing members in business opportunities, legal advice, receiving training and technical assistance, and to fully participate in the VPA process.

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