

Chainsaw operators (Ghana)

From Global Informality Project

By Stefano Boni, University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

In Ghana, the term *chainsaw operator* is used to refer to an informal worker who uses a chainsaw to fell trees. The chainsaw is a symbol of siphoning off timber resources since the 1980s. While chainsaws were used by the legal industry for timber felling and sawing since the 1960s, illegal operators began draining the timber resources won in state concessions by formal businesses in the 1980s. The governmental attempt to regulate the chainsaws in 1990s by decreeing their mandatory registration through a system of permits (Marfo, Abankwa and Agyeman 2009) did not work. The formalisation process was either too difficult to implement or too simple to circumvent (Quartey 2010). The Ghanaian government succumbed to pressure from the legal industry and outlawed the use of the chainsaw for timber cutting altogether.

However, the de-legalisation was unable to stop illegal operations. By the third millennium, *chainsaw operators* fell approximately half of all timber harvested in Ghana, generating an estimated loss of 12.8 million dollars per year in public revenue (MLF 2003; Chatham House 2006: 2, 7; Darko Obiri and Damnyag 2009; Glastra 2009; Marfo 2010: 3, 16). As legal enterprises shifted their focus to the more profitable export market where they could exercise a monopoly, they left the internal demand almost entirely in the hands of *chainsaw operators* (Quartey 2010; Hoare 2014). Despite the intense police repression, the informal timber industry increased further. In 2010, an estimated 17,000 operators, employing 97,000 workers, were active in Ghana (Osei-Tutu et al. 2010: 16; Marfo and Acheampong 2011: 1).

Chainsaw operators ☐☐

Location: Ghana



Definition: Tree loggers removing trees by a prohibited chainsaw cutting technique

Keywords:

Ghana – timber – extractive industries – forest-fringe communities – subsistence – informal entrepreneurship – illegal logging – chainsaw

Author: Stefano Boni

Affiliation: University of Modena and Reggio Emilia

Timber concessionaires hold exclusive rights to saw trees both inside forest reserves and on farmland (Boni 2005) but often face opposition when felling on agricultural areas. Legal firms neither consult the villagers before timber is cut down nor pay them an appropriate compensation for the crop damage incurred by using bulldozers to move the logs (cf. Lartey 2009). Farmers therefore often

prefer illegal felling and find it helpful because *chainsaw operators* slice the timber on the spot and head-carry the lumber to the nearest road. Villagers tend to be more sympathetic to operators who have a close relationship with the community in which they operate, who agree to negotiate the terms of sawing operations and who will remunerate the farm owner with money or a share of the lumber (usually one third) (Acheampong and Marfo 2009; cf. Nutakor and Marfo 2009, Obiri e Damnyag 2009: 66-68, Obiri and Damnyag 2011).

The person financing illegal felling may be a chain saw owner, an operator, a wealthy farmer, the owner of a small-scale lumber mill, a carpenter, a building entrepreneur or a chief (cf. Marfo 2010: 14-15). The 'investor' bears the full cost of the operation (chain saw fuel and maintenance, distribution of benefits and compensation to employees and accomplices) but also pockets the timber sale profits. The informal timber industry also benefits chain saw sellers, villagers in charge of identifying the timber to be sawn, head-carriers, truck owners and drivers transporting timber to the market illegally (Obiri and Damnyag 2011: 54, Marfo 2006, 2010: 21-27), buildings firms and coal-producers (Darko Obiri and Damnyag 2009). Forest fringe communities requiring construction materials for development projects also benefit since, paradoxically, timber obtained illegally is cheaper and more accessible than that from the formal concessionaires who are legally obliged to provide it (cf. Obiri and Damnyag 2011: 54). Both public and private forestry personnel in charge of reporting illegal fellings are paid off to avoid doing so (Damnyag and Darko Obiri 2009: 153-154). Since the *chainsaw operations* are accepted as legitimate by the forest fringe communities, the informal timber industry prospers (Marfo and Nutakor 2009).

The large number of beneficiaries of informal timber felling reveals an informal power structure and an alternative profit distribution ethics in comparison to legal firms. The formal businesses acquire their concessions from high profile public functionaries through legal and illegal payments and seek to impose the legitimacy of their operation on the forest fringe communities, often by bribing the chief. Yet Ghanaian peasants often regard the law as biased in favour of protecting the interests of large firms and therefore tend to support complex and patient negotiations of the informal industry that generate a long-lasting working relationship and a mutual recognition between parties (cf. Kotey et al. 1998: 43). The illegal timber felling, symbolised by the chainsaw, stands for the redistribution of benefits from the centre to the periphery, from institutions to ordinary people, and from the rich to the needy. To prevent exclusion from the timber benefits (see Kotey and others 1998; Ahenkan and Boon 2010a; Ahenkan and E. Boon 2010b; Oduro, Agyeman and Gyan 2011, Lund et al. 2012), forest fringe communities have opted out from the long, inefficient and costly legal disputes with timber firms and opted instead for the informal rebalancing of benefits.

Due to the complicity of forest-fringe communities, the illegal operations are not easily detected and repressed. Over the course of a couple of days, operators cut down the tree, saw it in lumber and move it. Forest guards notice most chainsaw felling only when the operations are over. If authorities manage to seize the felling equipment, operators often manage to escape. They are rarely arrested and seldom brought to trial. If operators are trailed and charged, they are often fined rather than incarcerated (Derkyi 2012). *Chainsaw operators* have recently become increasingly organised in concealing their activities and fierce in responding to state repression. Felling sites are located far from the road and operations are conducted at night, with villagers as lookouts. The wide network of accomplices renders the repression of illicit cuts difficult. Moreover, riots may break out if the police detect and try to seize the illegal timber in markets. The lack of Ghanaians' consent for the state forest resources management obstructs the state ability to enforce the rule of law and a gives rise to the chainsaw. In forest-fringe communities, moral arguments about meeting villagers' basic needs or providing informal income amidst the lack of labour transform what the law classifies as crime into a reasonable deed (Marfo 2004; Scott 1985).

References

- Acheampong, E. and Marfo, E. 2009. 'Forest and tree tenure, access to timber and their impact on chainsaw operations in Ghana', in Marfo E. et al. (eds.), *Developing alternatives to illegal chainsaw milling through multi-stakeholder dialogue in Ghana and Guyana project*. FORIG Research Report: 74-110.
- Ahenkan, A. and Boon, E. 2010a. 'Climate Change Adaptation through Sustainable Forest Management: A Case Study of Communities around the Sui River Forest Reserve, Ghana', paper presented at the 18th Commonwealth Forestry Conference, Edinburgh, 28 June - 2 July 2010.
- Ahenkan, A. and Boon, E. 2010b. 'Assessing the Impact of Forest Policies and Strategies on Promoting the Development of Non-Timber Forest Products in Ghana', *Journal of Biodiversity*, 1 (2): 85-102
- Boni, S. 2005. *Clearing the Ghanaian forest: theories and practices of acquisition, transfer and utilisation of farming titles in the Sefwi-Akan area*. Legon: Institute of African Studies
- Chatham House. 2006. 'Chain saw logging and milling in Ghana: background study report', <http://illegal-logging.info/content>
- Damnyag, L. and Darko-Obiri, B. 2009. 'Structure of the chainsaw lumber production enterprise', in Marfo E. et al. (eds.), *Developing alternatives to illegal chainsaw milling through multi-stakeholder dialogue in Ghana and Guyana project*. FORIG Research Report: 23-30
- Damnyag, L. and Darko-Obiri, B. 2009. 'Investment in chainsaw milling compared to improved chainsaw milling in eight forest districts of Ghana', in Marfo E. et al. (eds.), *Developing alternatives to illegal chainsaw milling through multi-stakeholder dialogue in Ghana and Guyana project*. FORIG Research Report: 140-158
- Darko Obiri, B. and Damnyag, L. 2009. 'Market and financial environment of chainsaw milling in Ghana', in Marfo E. et al. (eds.), *Developing alternatives to illegal chainsaw milling through multi-stakeholder dialogue in Ghana and Guyana project*. FORIG Research Report: 57-73
- Darko Obiri, B. and Damnyag, L. 2011. 'Socio-economic contribution of illegal chainsaw milling to the Ghanaian rural economy', *Ghana Journal of Forestry*, 27: 50-67
- Derkyi, M. 2012. *Fighting over forest. Interactive governance of conflicts over forest and tree resources in Ghana's high forest zone*. Leiden: African Studies Centre
- Glastra, R. (ed.) 1999. *Cut and run. Illegal logging and timber trade in the tropics*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre
- Hoare, A. 2014. *Illegal Logging and Related Trade: The Response in Ghana*. London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs
- Kotey, N. et al. 1998. *Falling into Place. Policy that works for forests and people*. London: International Institute for Environment and Development
- Lartey, E. 2009. 'Forest fringe communities' perspective on the socio-economic and land use impacts of granting timber rights: a case study of Ghana', *International Journal of Social Forestry*, 2(2): 167-184
- Marfo, E. 2004. 'Coping with illegality: Conflicts over chainsaw milling and coping strategies', paper presented at the workshop 'Chainsaw lumber production: a necessary evil?', Wageningen
- Marfo, E. 2006. *Powerful relations: The role of actor-empowerment in the management of natural resource conflict. A case of forest conflicts in Ghana* [PhD Thesis]. Wageningen: Wageningen University

Marfo, E. 2010. *Chainsaw Milling in Ghana: Context, drivers and impacts*. Wageningen: Tropenbos International

Marfo, E. and Acheampong, E. 2011. 'Estimating the number of jobs created by the chainsaw activities in Ghana', *Ghana Journal of Forestry*, 27: 1-11

Marfo, E., Abankwa, V. and Agyeman, V. 2009. 'The Evolution of policy, legal and institutional framework of chainsaw milling in Ghana', in Marfo E. et al. (eds.), *Developing alternatives to illegal chainsaw milling through multi-stakeholder dialogue in Ghana and Guyana project*. FORIG Research Report: 7-22.

Marfo, E. and Nutakor, E. 2009. 'The social and political environment for the enforcement of the chainsaw milling ban', in Marfo E. et al. (eds.), *Developing alternatives to illegal chainsaw milling through multi-stakeholder dialogue in Ghana and Guyana project*. FORIG Research Report: 43-56.

Nutakor, E. and Marfo, E. 2009. 'Chainsaw conflicts and their impact on the communities and officials', in Marfo E. et al. (eds.), *Developing alternatives to illegal chainsaw milling through multi-stakeholder dialogue in Ghana and Guyana project*. FORIG Research Report: 217-231.

Lund, J., Carlsn, K., Hansen, C. and Treue, T. 2012. 'The political economy of timber governance in Ghana', in Broekhoven et al. (eds.), *Moving Forward with forest governance*, Wageningen: Tropenbos Wageningen: 117-126

Oduro, K., Agyeman, V. and Gyan, K. 2011. 'Implementing timber legality assurance regime in Ghana: a review of stakeholders concerns and current institutional constrains', *Ghana Journal of Forestry*, 27 (2): 1-10

Osei-Tutu, P. et al. 2010. *Hidden forestry revealed. Characteristics, constraints and opportunities for small and medium forest enterprises in Ghana*. London: International Institute for Environment and Development

Quartey, J. 2010. 'Chainsaw milling in Ghana: assessing its economic impact', in Wit and Van Dam (eds.), *Chainsaw milling: Supplier to local markets*. Wageningen: Tropenbos International: 159-165

Scott, J. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Heaven: Yale University Press

Retrieved from "[http://www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Chainsaw_operators_\(Ghana\)&oldid=3016](http://www.in-formality.com/wiki/index.php?title=Chainsaw_operators_(Ghana)&oldid=3016)"

Categories: Ghana | Timber | Extractive industries | Forest-fringe communities | Subsistence | Informal entrepreneurship | Logging | Chainsaw | Entry | 2018 entry

-
- This page was last modified on 5 October 2018, at 15:54.