

## **Bridging the tropical communication gap**

An 80m ekki bridge made a fitting programme illustration for the international forum of the Association Technique Internationale des Bois Tropicaux (ATIBT) in Amsterdam last week. The bridge uses wood from the FSC-certified Cameroon concessions of Dutch producer trader and construction specialist Wijma, and now features in a YouTube video ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZA823Uwy\\_g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-ZA823Uwy_g)) highlighting the sustainable credentials and technical strengths of tropical timber.

The theme of the ATIBT conference itself was 'Strengthening Trust in Tropical Wood'. This, said Director General Ralph Ridder meant bridging the gap between persisting popular misconceptions about the tropical industry, notably its automatic association with deforestation, and the reality of latest developments in sustainable forest management, legality verification and industry monitoring and tracking. It also required education of the market about tropical timber's technical potential, and how using sustainably produced material can combat deforestation by incentivizing forest maintenance.

"This means greater coordination across the sector, and, critically better communication, something we've been traditionally very poor at as an industry," Mr Ridder said. "We must get the facts and positive stories out to customers, specifiers and the media."

The good news, underlined by the two-day conference, was that the sector is getting better at telling its story and developing strategies and tools that make it more transparent and provide better, more accessible data about its operation, and particularly its environmental performance.

### **Pan-industry co-operation is growing**

The forum also demonstrated that pan-industry co-operation is growing. The 150-strong audience was drawn from consumer and producer countries worldwide. Besides the private sector, there was also strong representation from government bodies, NGOs, monitoring organisations and initiatives such as REDD+ and FLEGT.

Mr Ridder also stressed the broad spread of donor bodies and other supporters backing the meeting. These included key sponsors the European Timber Trade Federation and IDH - the Sustainable Trade Initiative. The latter is the Dutch body behind the Sustainable Tropical Timber Coalition (STTC), the international industry, NGO and government initiative focused on boosting European certified tropical timber sales.

Among other supporters were ITTO, UNFAO, the EU FAO FLEGT Programme, Central African Forest Commission and GIZ, the German international cooperation body.

The importance to producers of communicating the case for using tropical timber to consumer countries was stressed by Doplé Claude Soro of the Côte d'Ivoire Forestry Ministry.

"Forestry and timber are main foundations of our economy, so it's vital our commitment to sustainability is publicised," he said. "We're strengthening transparency and governance, with new anti-corruption guidelines, bans on exporting certain species, interdictions on logging above the 8<sup>th</sup> parallel and our 20% 2020 target for increasing tree cover. We're also aiming to complete our EU Forest Law Enforcement Governance and Trade Voluntary Partnership Agreement (FLEGT VPA) negotiations by 2016. Working with customers, we

need to communicate such initiatives to increase confidence in tropical timber. It's a priority if, as a developing country, we're to emerge onto the international market."

### **Pro-active measures to generate demand**

Kees Rade, director general climate and environment at the Netherlands Ministry for Foreign Affairs, said that besides insisting that tropical timber producers supply sustainable, legal material, the industry must generate demand.

"Tropical timber is losing ground as consumer country companies, without all the facts, believe corporate social responsibility dictates they must substitute it with alternative materials," he said. "That's why the STTC and the Netherlands Green Deal, an alliance between the timber sector, NGOs, government, end users and retailers, were formed. The goal is to educate consumers about sustainable tropical timber and help rebuild the market. It must be a dual strategy; increasing sustainable tropical timber production and sales."

IDH Programme Director Ted van der Put said that mounting pressure on tropical countries to convert forestland to other uses, notably growing plantation crops, made the task of supporting the international tropical timber market even more urgent.

"We must create a strong business case for sustainable tropical forest management and timber production because the case for conversion is huge," he said.

Key tools for this identified by the STTC were public and corporate procurement policy, and, Mr van der Put agreed, market education. "Fear of tropical timber still persists, from governments down," he said. "It's the biggest enemy, not just of the timber trade, but of the forest. If there's no demand as a result, forest conversion increases."

### **Targeting architects and designers**

Various presenters highlighted the role architects can play in strengthening the tropical timber market. Not only could they increase use in construction, their work could also showcase tropical timber's aesthetic and technical possibilities more widely.

An architect, Machiel Spaan of Amsterdam-based M3H, was among the speakers and delegates visited one of his housing projects in the city, featuring untreated batibatra (Sucupira Amarela) cladding.

"Sustainability is a core focus of my profession, so you must engage us in dialogue about sustainable tropical timber production," he said. "We also need to know about carbon footprint and specific use benefits, and to be shown existing inspirational projects incorporating it."

UN FAO senior economist Adrian Whiteman suggested that fiscal measures could also boost the tropical timber business. Lowering VAT on certified sustainable material would be complex, while use of tariffs might be considered protectionist. "But tax breaks for companies to set up sustainable timber supply chains may be a viable option the industry could lobby for," he said.

### **VPA and EUTR: problems and progress**

The forum also addressed problems and progress in implementation of the EU Timber Regulation (EUTR) and EU FLEGT VPA programme. Chris Beeko, timber validation director at the Ghana Forestry Commission, acknowledged his country had found the VPA process more

complex than anticipated. “We thought it would take two years,” he said. “But we had no example to follow and we’ve been trialing entirely new systems and tracking technologies. Compulsory involvement of a wide spread of stakeholders is also time consuming.”

Mr Beeko would not commit to a date when Ghana, one of the front-runners with Indonesia in the programme, would be issuing FLEGT licences. But he said major progress had been made. “For example, with experience and use of new monitoring approaches and IT, we’ve cut time taken for VPA legality assessments from three weeks to two days,” he said.

While issuing licences was a key goal, he added, it was also important to stress the value of the entire FLEGT process and what it has already achieved in signatory countries in terms of improving forestry practice, and increasing transparency and stakeholder engagement.

### **FLEGT needs to engage private sector**

Francois Busson of the EU Development and Cooperation Directorate General agreed, but said there were still shortcomings in FLEGT implementation. “The private sector has to be more involved,” he said. “They need to be engaged more in negotiations and given more technical assistance.”

ATIBT echoed this view and FLEGT specialist Bérénice Castadot described its private sector engagement work with the UNIBOIS alliance of small to medium sized enterprises in Congo. This is an ongoing EU-FLEGT FAO backed project to help SMEs meet VPA requirements, which, said Ms Castadot, has potential to be applied elsewhere.

The private sector and particularly SMEs also need greater support satisfying the requirements of the EUTR, according to speakers and delegates. Reporting on her EUTR impact study in Congo Brazzaville, consultant Caroline Duhesme said a key issue for timber suppliers was inconsistency of due diligence approaches taken by European companies. “There’s still a lack of understanding of the regulatory framework in the EU trade, so suppliers face a huge variety of requests for information, and details that aren’t required under the EUTR,” she said.

Le Commerce du Bois director Eric Boilley agreed that more central EUTR guidance and support was required by EU operator companies. “In particular they need the EU itself to provide information on relevant producer country forestry legislation.”

### **New approaches based on new technologies**

Other presentations focused on new tools and technologies that could ultimately assist implementation of FLEGT VPAs, the EUTR and other market legality requirements, and also aid compliance.

Robbie Weich of Tradelink explained Sisflora2, the new tracking system developed by Brazil’s environment agency IBAMA with Pará environment secretariat SEMA. Set for launch next year, this involves embedding radio frequency ID chips in the tree so logs can be tracked to the sawmill. “This will combat the practice of loggers reusing documents issued against previous timber consignments,” he said. “And the technology could be readily used in other regions.”

The World Resources Institute (WRI) gave latest news on its two new online systems for combating deforestation and aiding timber legality and sustainability verification; Global Forest Watch (GFW) and the Forest Transparency Initiative (FTI).

Launched in February, GFW ([www.globalforestwatch.org](http://www.globalforestwatch.org)) is being developed in association with Google, with UN and US, UK and Norwegian national government backing. Using satellite imaging, it maps and monitors forest area worldwide, identifying impacts of timber concessions, fires and land conversion. Monthly global forest coverage reports go down to a resolution of 500m (soon to be 250m) and annual reports to 30m.

“This data can be invaluable in combating illegal logging, but also supporting buyers’ due diligence illegality risk assessment,” said WRI Africa senior manager Matthew Steil, “The aim is to survey at ever lower resolutions more frequently for even more precise real time monitoring.”

Currently a pilot project focused on the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville), the FTI pools data from national timber sector legislation, to forestry and timber company legality and sustainability verification, and even tax records. This is cross referenced with relevant information from other sources worldwide, including NGOs, GFW, and market legality requirement administrators and enforcement agencies, such as EUTR Competent Authorities, creating a “powerful tool for supporting legality assurance systems”.

“It will identify companies operating legally and according to recognized social and environmental norms and those that aren’t,” said Mr Steil. The aim, he added, is for FTI to extend to the DRC in the next nine months, then further afield, dependent on funding.

#### **Timber DNA database**

The ATIBT also announced its project to create a timber DNA database for central African producer members. The concept is being developed in association with DNA-tracking specialists Double Helix, and Germany’s Thünen Institute. The goal is to provide incontrovertible evidence that timber originates from a specific source, with the database logging genetic reference information on principal commercially traded species from ATIBT members’ certified concessions.

“Utilising cutting edge genetics to determine legality will support members’ long-term access to markets with increasingly strict legality and other procurement requirements, like the US and Europe,” said Mr Ridder. “It could also potentially secure a price premium for their timber.”

Double Helix estimates the cost of building DNA reference data for 10 species across 10 300,000ha concessions at US\$3 million. “The project is at an early stage, but we’re now actively seeking donors,” said Mr Ridder.

On ATIBT’s wider mission to strengthen trust in tropical timber, Mr Ridder and his team said goals included expanding membership, possibly establishing offices in Africa, and increasing collaboration with other bodies in the sector worldwide. Having recruited public relations expert Tullia Baldassarri last year, and relaunched its website and newsletter, it also plans to step up communications. As a basis for this it is now undertaking a survey of consumer perceptions of tropical timber, starting in France, with the aim of rolling it out to other countries.