Addressing Transboundary Timber Trafficking in Ghana: **Update and Outlook**

SUMMARY

Timber trafficking across Ghana and neighboring countries is a significant threat to the forests of West Africa. What is *arguably missing* in the fight against timber trafficking is broader and consistent coordination among law enforcement agencies, as well as sufficient capacity in science-based wood identification methods. As a policy response, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and strategic partners aim to strengthen **capacity and coordination** among nearly 200 law enforcement agents. This will lead to more accurate wood identification, better detection of illegal timber, and improved information exchange. The development of a **mobile wood ID tool** is crucial for accurate and rapid screening by law enforcement agents, eliminating human prejudice in identifying illegal timber. This tool answers the fundamental question in wood identification: "What species is this?" To determine this, as well as the origin of specific timber species, USFS and strategic partners have started a geo-referenced collection of all commercial timber species in Ghana and the West Africa sub-region. This collection will advance science-based wood identification methods, such as DNA and chemical analysis, capable of **identifying timber species and their origins.**

KEY MESSAGES

▷ Timber trafficking across Ghana and neighboring countries is a **significant threat to the region's forests.**

▷ **Misidentification of timber species, transfer pricing, and unsustainable harvesting** of endangered timber species **have increased** in the West Africa sub-region.

▷ **Inadequate capacity** of law enforcement to deal with misidentification and related risks **allows illegal logging and trafficking to thrive.**

▷ Increased **capacity and coordination** among law enforcement agencies and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) to address timber trafficking within and outside of Ghana would allow for a **more robust and systematic response.**

BACKGROUND

Globally, logging practices in some forests are all too often connected with timber trafficking[1] and carried out without regard for national laws and international conventions[2]. While the actual volume of timber trafficked is unknown, illegal logging remains one of the most lucrative ecological crimes on a global scale, accounting for about 15 to 30 percent of the total global timber trade. The economic loss is estimated to be worth between 52 to 157 billion US dollars per year[i], and African countries[3] are estimated to lose $17 billion to illegal logging each year[ii]. Illegal logging also directly contributes to deforestation in tropical forests that harbor about 50 percent of the world's biodiversity[iii]. These activities can also negatively affect the livelihoods of millions of forest fringed communities, reduce government revenue, and harm legitimate timber traders.

This Policy Brief sheds light on the problem of timber trafficking in Ghana and beyond. Subsequently, it describes Ghana's anti-timber trafficking program implementation and highlights key findings. The Policy Brief seeks to increase public awareness of Ghana's anti-timber trafficking program and facilitate collaborative efforts among governments, NGOs, and CSOs involved in combating transboundary timber trafficking. While this Policy Brief primarily provides an update and outlook on Ghana's anti-timber trafficking program, it also offers significant law enforcement insights that may be relevant in other contexts.

Trafficking of timber overland across West African borders is becoming more prevalent, where demand for timber for both domestic consumption and cross-border trade in neighboring countries (e.g. Burkina Faso, Niger, Mali) have considerably increased. While timber trafficking networks operate regionally, law enforcement, policy response, and Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) monitoring tend to operate in a national scope and in a fragmented manner, leading to an uncoordinated approach[4] to law enforcement that is exploited by transnational criminal networks. The West African Rosewood[5] (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*), prized for high-end Asian furniture, is particularly vulnerable to uncontrolled exports[iv] and laundering through porous West Africa borders where traffickers mislabel the timber species to pass it off as legal timber or to mask the value of the timber. In 2021, 62 percent of total Chinese rosewood imports were from West African countries[5].

> *Transboundary timber trafficking in West Africa presents a multifaceted challenge with significant socio-economic and environmental ramifications.*

1 Timber trafficking is defined as "the taking, trading (supplying, selling or trafficking), importing, exporting, processing, possessing, obtaining and consumption of wild fauna and flora, including timber and other forest products, in contravention of national or international law" (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime).

2 Some of the most common forms of illegal acts include but not limited to the following: harvesting without title or timber rights; harvesting outside concession boundaries; harvesting in protected areas; failing to respect management plans setting out the geographic scope and technical approach permitted; re-cutting on a concession site; harvesting more than authorized volumes; harvesting species totally protected by the Convention of International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) or above the authorized annual quotas; harvesting below the allowed minimum exploitable diameter rules; unlawfully transporting wood and other forest products; falsification of documents; smuggling; transfer pricing; tax evasion; corruption; wood laundering, illegal industrial processing; ignoring the terms of social responsibility contracts.

3 It is estimated that between 50% to 90% of Africa's trade in tropical timber and products is illegal. See, African Natural Resources Centre (2021). Illicit trading in Africa's forest products: Focus on timber. African Development Bank. Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire.

4 The root cause of the uncoordinated approach likely stems from fragmented governance structures, overlapping mandates among agencies, and insufficient communication channels and information sharing mechanisms.

5 The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) listed West African rosewood (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*) under Appendix II in 2016, acknowledging that the species of wood could be threatened with extinction if trade were not controlled.

Recognizing this increasing need to address timber trafficking at the sub-regional level, the African Union Strategy on Combating Illegal Exploitation and Illegal Trade in Wild Fauna and Flora in Africa calls for individual countries to develop and implement their national strategies. Furthermore, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Forest Convergence Plan has called on member states to collaborate across borders to protect and manage the region's forests and wildlife.

In West Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, and Liberia have committed to Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPA) under the European Union Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade (FLEGT) demonstrating the recognition of the challenges posed by illegal logging in the subregion. Notably, Ghana has implemented a Wood Tracking System (GWTS) as part of its Legality Assurance System[6] (GhLAS) to trace timber from the origin to the point of sale or export, which guarantees that only timber harvested legally can be traded. Despite the implementation of the GWTS to reduce the risk of falsification (e.g., mislabeling timber species) and human error associated with paper-based systems among other things, timber trafficking remains a major threat to forests in Ghana and neighboring countries. This remains a threat because of the varied, complex, and highly uncoordinated approach by law enforcement[v], and a lack of science-based methods and tools to aid law enforcement agencies in the identification of timber species in transit. The tool is especially important in addressing intentional mislabeling by traffickers and corrupt practices along supply chains.

METHODOLOGY

For this Policy Brief, we examined the experiences of stakeholders collected during a national stakeholder dialogue on anti-timber trafficking in Ghana, a series of wood ID workshops, and interactions with forestry practitioners and forest-fringed communities during a georeferenced sampling in Ghana. A literature analysis, along with stakeholders' and practitioners' experiences, highlighted important issues in addressing transboundary timber trafficking.

GHANA'S FORESTRY SECTOR

Ghana's forest and wildlife resources have historically played a crucial role in its economic development, providing employment, sustaining livelihoods, and contributing to export earnings. As shown in Fig. 1, the forestry industry in Ghana contributed approximately 1.96 billion Ghanaian cedis (GHS) in 2022, equivalent to about 163.3 million U.S. dollars, to the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP)[vi]. However, the **sector faces challenges such as illegal logging, illegal mining (galamsey), illegal farming, encroachment, and deforestation.** Between 2001 and 2022, Ghana lost 1.53 Mha of tree cover, equivalent to a 22 percent decrease in tree cover since 2000, and 843 Mt of CO_2e emissions[vii].

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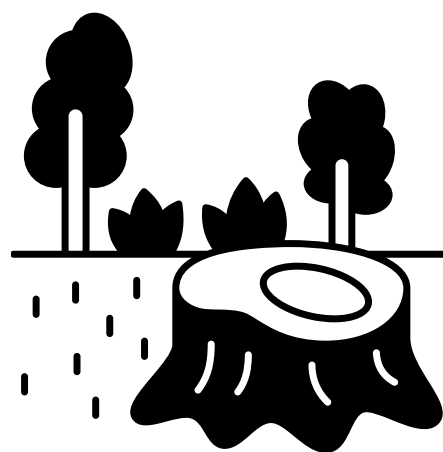
6 GhLAS is a system of legislation and verification processes implemented by the government of Ghana to ensure that all timber and timber products produced and traded in the country are legally sourced. It includes five elements: (1) a legality definition; (2) control of the supply chain using a wood tracking system (GWTS) to monitor the flow of timber and wood products from the forest or point of import to the point of export or sale on the domestic market; (3) verification of the supply chain as set out by the GWTS; (4) the issuance of EU FLEGT licenses; (5) based on a series of independent audits of GhTLAS conducted by third-party verifiers.
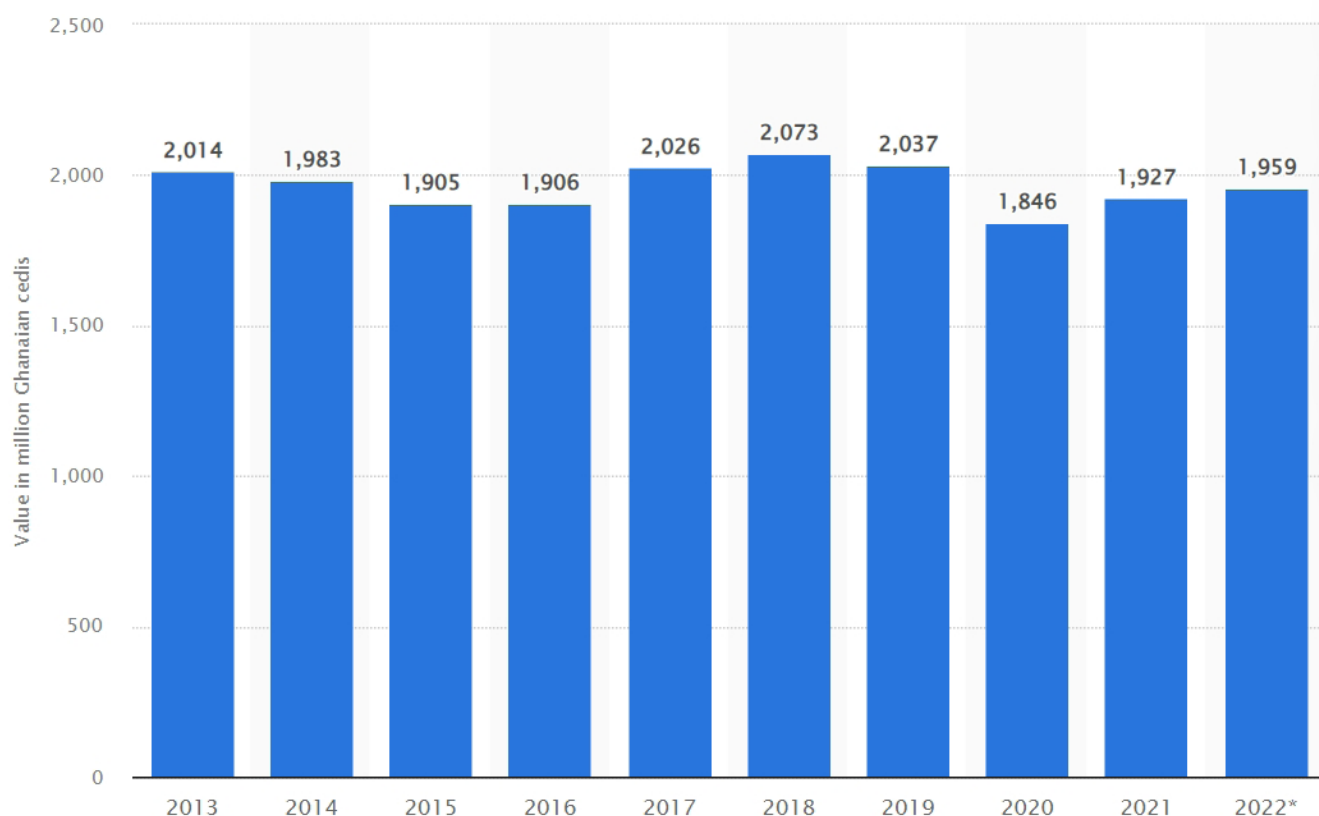
Figure 1: Contribution of Ghana's forestry sector to GDP from 2013 to 2022[7] (Source: Statista, 2024).

The forests of Ghana are diverse and ecologically significant. They are comprised of natural and planted forests, spanning approximately 1.6 million hectares, which accounts for about 21 percent of the country's land area. There are two primary ecological zones: the high forest zone[viii], comprising about one-third of the country's land area (approximately 34 percent), and the savannah zone[viii]. These forests are classified as on-reserve and off-reserve, with Protected Areas totaling 22,754 km², including 216 located within the high forest zone. About 80 percent of Ghana's forests are designated for timber production, and the other 20 percent have been zoned for conservation[viii]. The high forest zone harbors significant biological diversity, representing a substantial portion of the country's flora and fauna species. Out of 3,725 higher flora species known to be in Ghana, approximately 2,300 are found in the high forest zone, including 730 tree species[viii].

The government of Ghana, through the Forestry Commission, oversees forest management and conservation activities. Management practices in Ghana involve a combination of conservation efforts, sustainable forestry practices, and community involvement. To give legal backing to the involvement of local communities in wildlife management, especially Community Resources Management Areas (CREMAs), Ghana passed the Wildlife Resources Management Act, 2023 (ACT1115). This collaborative approach to forest management aims to empower communities to sustainably manage forest resources while promoting livelihoods and biodiversity conservation.

The Forestry Commission of Ghana regulates the processing of all applications for salvage permits, Timber Utilization Contracts (TUCs) and plantation permits in accordance with the laws and processes. Ghana's Annual Allowable Cut (AAC) for natural forests is set at 1,000,000 m³ to ensure sustainability[ix]. The total volume of timber and wood products exported decreased from 303,190 m³ in 2019 to 226,158 m³ in 2020[ix]. Correspondingly, the total value of wood products exported in 2020 amounted to €116 million ($138 million), down from €151 million ($179 million) in 2019, representing a 23 percent decline[ix]. These exports were directed to various destinations in Africa, Asia, the United States of America, and Europe.

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7 Ghana's forestry sector has seen remarkable stability and potential growth since 2022. This growth is driven by improved governance and rising global demand for wood products. According to ITTO, the recovery seen in the first 10 months of 2021 can be attributed to the pre-Christmas and New Year holiday stock build-up by international buyers. See ITTO (2022). Tropical Timber Market Report. ITTO TTM Report: 26:1 1- 15 Jan 2022

CONTEXT AND SCOPE: GHANA'S ANTI-TIMBER TRAFFICKING PROGRAM

From 2018-2021, USFS partnered with the Timber Industry Development Division (TIDD) of the Ghanaian Forestry Commission (FC) and the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research - Forestry Research Institute of Ghana (CSIR – FORIG) to build capacity in timber identification, funded largely by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization's (UNIDO)[1]. The successful implementation of this project achieved the following: 1) the anatomy laboratory of CSIR – FORIG was equipped with modern microscopes and portable sander; 2) wood anatomy laboratory was established at the Timber Grading and Inspection Department of FC-TIDD; 3) four personnel from the Ghanaian Institutions were sent as attachés to USFS Center for Wood Anatomy Research (CWAR, Madison, Wisconsin, USA) to build their capacity in advanced wood anatomical and XyloTron wood identification methods: 4) a field manual for the identification of 102 Ghanaian timbers was developed and published[2]; 5) a science-based wood identification workflow was established in Ghana; 6) a semi-automated field identification mobile App (Xylorix Pocketwood) was developed with AGRITIX[3] and 7) over 120

personnel of the timber law enforcing agency (FC-TIDD) were trained in science-based timber identification methods. Feedback from the training revealed that personnel of FC-TIDD preferred a fully automated wood Identification Mobile Phone Application (e.g. Xylorix) to aid real time identification of timber species along the supply chain in Ghana.

Building on the successes of this Wood Forensic Project in Ghana, USFS continued its partnership with FC-TIDD and CSIR-FORIG to implement a 2-year program dubbed "Addressing Transboundary Timber Trafficking in Ghana" (see Box 1).
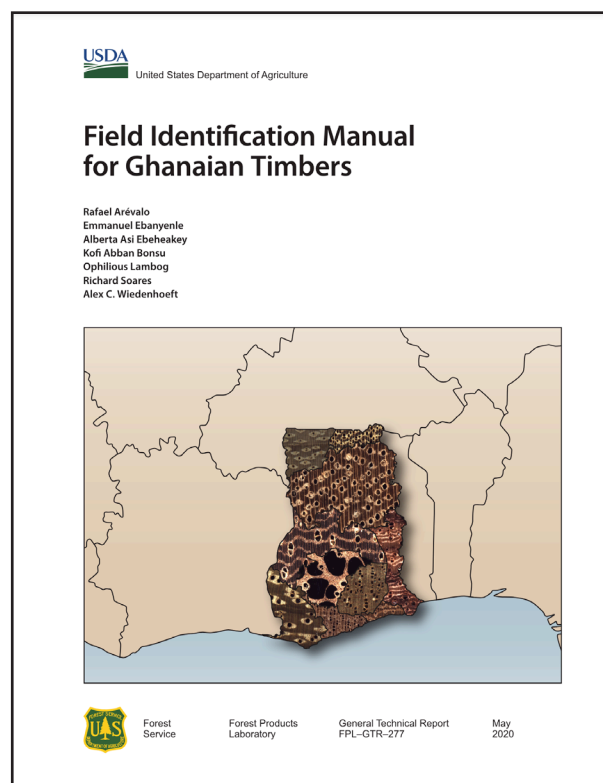
Box 1: Ghana's anti-timber trafficking program's response

> **The strategy to combat timber trafficking in Ghana focuses on three main objectives and enforcement mechanisms:**
>
> **(1) develop a field-deployable technology (using taxonomically robust geo-referenced samples) that allows timely and accurate identification of timber species targeted for trafficking as well as a reference guide for applicable national laws and international conventions on timber trade – including a decision tree on how to process illegal timber, once seized.**
>
> **(2) Strengthen capacity and coordination among customs and other law enforcement agencies in Ghana, through a series of wood ID training programs, in addition to in situ support to apply increased knowledge and capacity on timber identification and processing at key border and transportation checkpoints.**
>
> **(3) Bolster the effectiveness of Civil Society Organocations (CSOs) in deterring timber trafficking, through capacity building in wood ID and post-identification processing; robust 3rd party monitoring mechanisms at strategic timber trade check points and border crossings; and support communication and outreach strategy, with the objective of increasing public awareness and accountability around timber trafficking in Ghana and collaborate with forest communities to monitor and promptly report all timber illegalities in their landscape. The potential impacts of this program hinge on translating the operational program by the Forestry Commission to enhance broader forest law enforcement and governance aspects such as stakeholder participation, legislative and institutional clarity, accountability and oversight, transparency, and compliance promotion and enforcement.**

8   https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GOVPUB-A13-PURL-gpo143188/pdf/GOVPUB-A13-PURL-gpo143188.pdf

9   https://www.fs.usda.gov/treesearch/pubs/60264

10 https://www.xylorix.com/products/apps/pocketwood

ANTI-TIMBER TRAFFICKING PROGRAM: UPDATE IN GHANA

The role of multi-stakeholder national dialogue in addressing transboundary timber trafficking

To support the implementation of the anti-timber trafficking program, stakeholder consultations were conducted in early 2023, engaging law enforcement agencies, forest-related institutions, and CSOs. These consultations informed the organization of a one-day National Stakeholder Dialogue held on February 28, 2023. The multi-stakeholder dialogue underpins the process of sharing Ghana's anti-timber trafficking program's response with stakeholders directly and indirectly impacted as this sharpens the effectiveness of the program implementation. First, the dialogue revealed the following issues to be hampering efforts to combatting timber trafficking in Ghana: inadequate law enforcement personnel, lack of capacity in science-based wood identification methods, weak coordination among law enforcement agencies, CSOs and communities, porous borders, political interference, and lack of clear guidelines to process trafficked timber. Poverty and livelihood issues appear to be critical drivers of illegal timber activities in Ghana and demand for cheap timber and conversion of forest lands for other land uses also promote illegal timber logging. Variations in the definition of legal timber and disparities in timber trade tariffs among the West African countries are being exploited by timber traffickers. Furthermore, data on illegal timber trade or crimes, timber species, and a number of successful prosecutions are not readily accessible, even if available.

Figure 2: Participants of the National Stakeholder Dialogue, held on 28th February 2023. (Photo credit: USFS and FC-TIDD).

Stakeholders suggested that enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies by developing and deploying science-based **wood and charcoal identification methods** in Ghana could contribute to combatting illegal logging in the West Africa, particularly African Rosewood (*Pterocarpus erinaceus*). Despite the ban on harvesting African Rosewood in Ghana, it continues to be converted into charcoal and trafficked, particularly in forest fringe areas. The lack of effective charcoal identification tools exacerbates the threat to African Rosewood due to overexploitation in West Africa. Empowering forest fringe communities and CSOs and promoting livelihood programs could help reduce illegal logging. Additionally, engaging Ghana's neighboring countries by organizing a subregional dialogue is crucial for agreeing on common principles to combat transboundary timber and charcoal trafficking. Stakeholder engagement and dialogue are essential for emphasizing the program's relevance in the sub-region and securing stakeholder support to drive the implementation process.

Figure 3: A photo of Traditional Ruler of Ghana contributing to the discussion on timber trafficking in Ghana

A 'fit for purpose' field-deployable wood identification app

Science-based wood identification presents a formidable challenge due to the vast global diversity of tree species, which exceeds 73,000, among which 9,200 tree species are yet to be discovered[xi]. Of these, over 1,500 are classified as commercial timber, adding complexity to accurate identification processes. Thus, the need for precise timber identification is paramount for stakeholders such as customs officials, industry professionals, and academic institutions. Achieving this accuracy requires the advancement of science-based wood identification methodologies to ensure precise classification and effective utilization. However, major impediments to the advancement of wood ID technologies include the lack of taxonomically robust geo-referenced materials, the creation of a freely accessible global database, and the priority inclusion of CITES-listed species[xii].

As a valuable response to these policy needs to invest in Timber ID, a significant stride has been taken through the implementation of non-destructive, geo-referenced field-based sampling of commercial timber species specific to Ghana and West African countries[8]. Following World Forest ID[9] and FlorestaDB[10] standardized protocols, this involves the sampling of wood, sawdust, and leaflets from Ghanaian commercial timber trees. To capture inter- and intra-anatomical variability, the geo-referenced field-based sampling is currently being expanded from Savannah woodlands to all ecological zones in Ghana. The process ensures that all wood samples would be reliably identified and be accessible to support any present or future wood ID technology, thereby, contributing to the world's largest geo-referenced, open-source database for anatomical, chemical, and genetic analysis (e.g., stable isotopes, DNA, mass-spectrometry).

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8 The USFS is implementing anti-timber trafficking programs in Ghana, Liberia, Senegal, and Gambia and seeks to strengthen coordination among these target countries and their neighbors in West Africa.

9 World Forest ID is a global initiative using advanced scientific methods to verify the species and origin of forest products. By creating a vast library of geo-referenced plant samples, it helps identify and prevent illegal logging, ensuring transparency and accountability in supply chains.

10 FlorestaDB is an app that helps track and combat illegal logging by collecting detailed data about forests globally. It provides valuable information for law enforcement and scientists to analyze tree characteristics and ensure sustainable forest management.

Figure 4: Photos of different stakeholders contributing to the discussion on timber trafficking in Ghana

For significant law enforcement issues like misidentification, a field-deployable wood ID app appears to be the most important and impactful for law enforcement agents in Ghana.

Utilizing a cutting-edge Xylorix wood identification platform that combines a suite of apps, tools, and services, 3 West African and CITES-listed species[11] targeted for timber trafficking have been prioritized, sampled, and integrated sampled, into a field-deployable mobile application wood ID tool. This rapid and user-friendly tool is enabled by Xylorix Inspector or Xylorix Enforcer, a specialized wood ID tool that uses macroscopic features for automated identification. The tool provides access to trained AI models for automatic identification or verification of the timber species. The app's functionality includes a Xylorix WIDK-24Ñ-01 illuminated macro lens attached to the mobile phone camera for correct performance. Both tools have an offline operation for use in remote areas with no internet access, and support multiple languages.

11 *Afzelia africana* (Papao), *Khaya senegalensis* (Africa Mohagany) and *Pterocarpus erinaceus* (West African Rosewood).
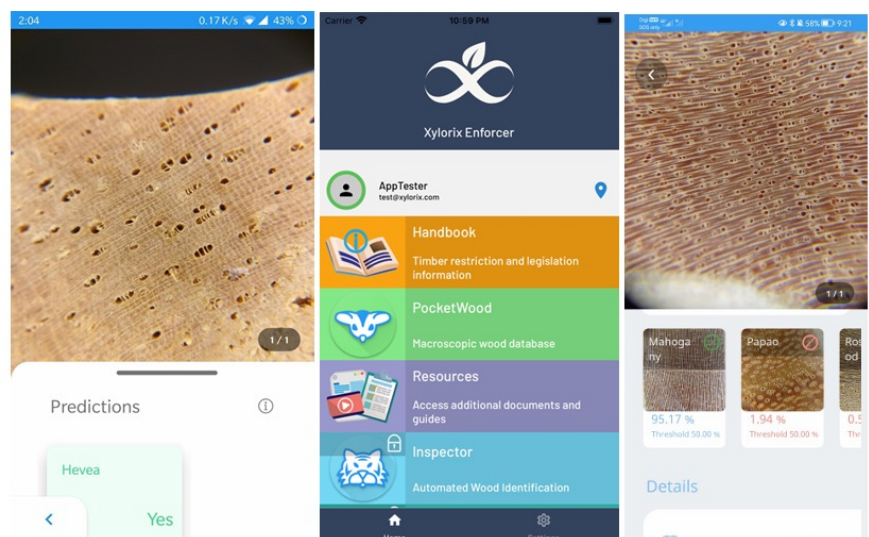

Figure 5: Xylorix wood ID

> *Early successes include the development a fully automated field-deployable wood ID app that allows high-confidence identification of 3 timber species targeted for trafficking, serving as a model for West African countries.*
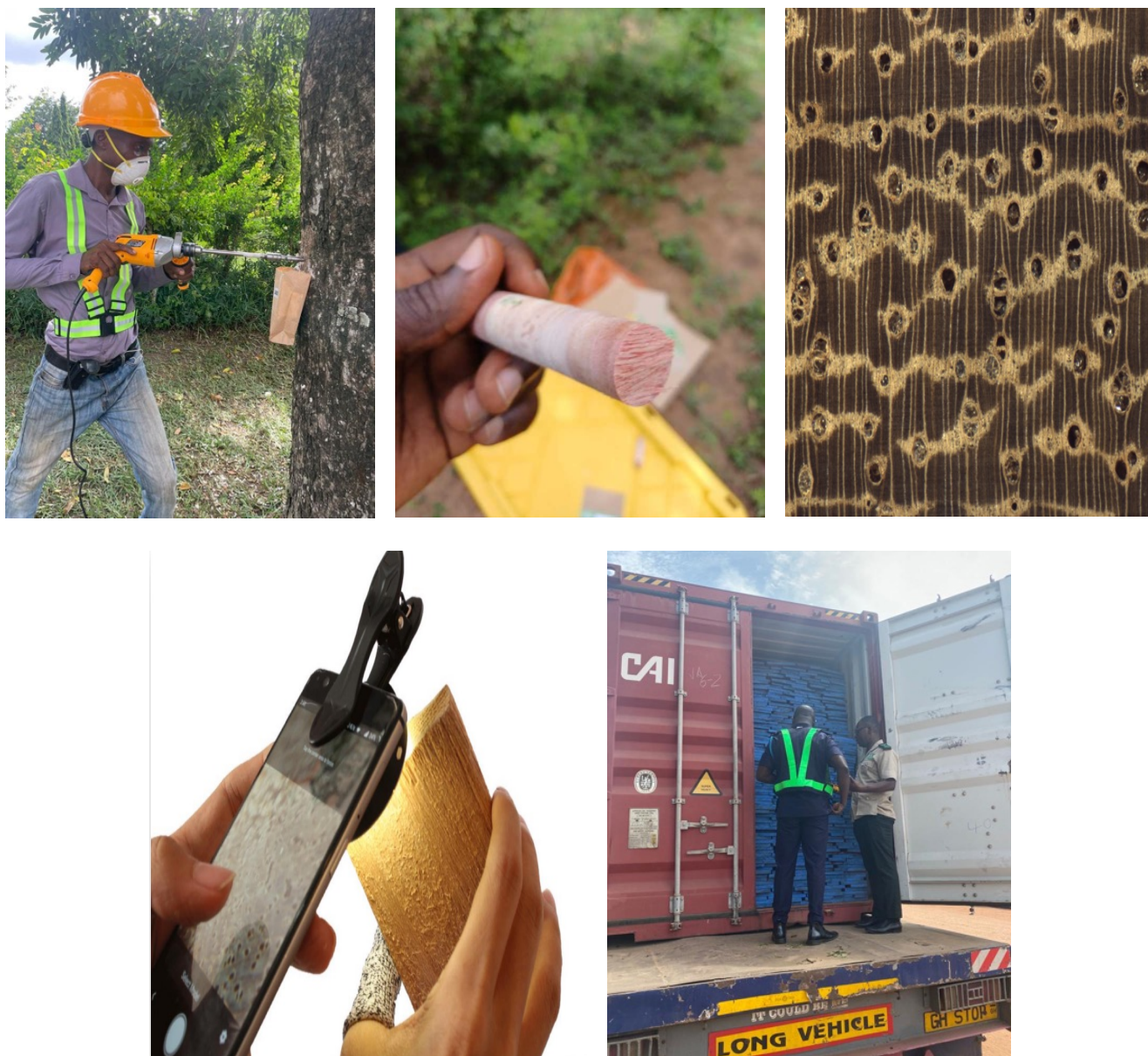

Figure 6: From left to right: Taking wood samples and using technology to view the anatomical "fingerprint" of a wood sample. Last photo: cargo inspection.

In parallel to advancing wood ID technology is the development of a reference guide (decision tree[12]) to orient law enforcement on how to process identified timber at checkpoints and border crossings. Once a potential non-compliance is identified, law enforcement must decide whether to carry out examination and how to proceed. With resources like a decision tree guide, law enforcement agents such as Customs can easily handle illegal timber through simple steps or by simply notifying forestry officials or law enforcement agents in neighboring countries of the non-compliance. Through ongoing efforts with USFS and its strategic partners, the aim is to ensure that the guide is relevant, robust, and tailored to the specific needs of the Ghanaian context but adaptable for broader application in different regions.

12 This is still under development by USFS, TaylorCrabbe Innitiative and FC-TIDD. Drawing on iterative discussions among relevant law enforcement agencies, the related decision nodes were carefully delineated to ensure compliance with the definition of "Legal Timber." The next step involves a stakeholder validation workshop to present the revised decision tree to the Forestry Commission of Ghana and, subsequently, all relevant stakeholders for input and finalization. Gathered consultation feedback will inform the decision tree's final version preparation.
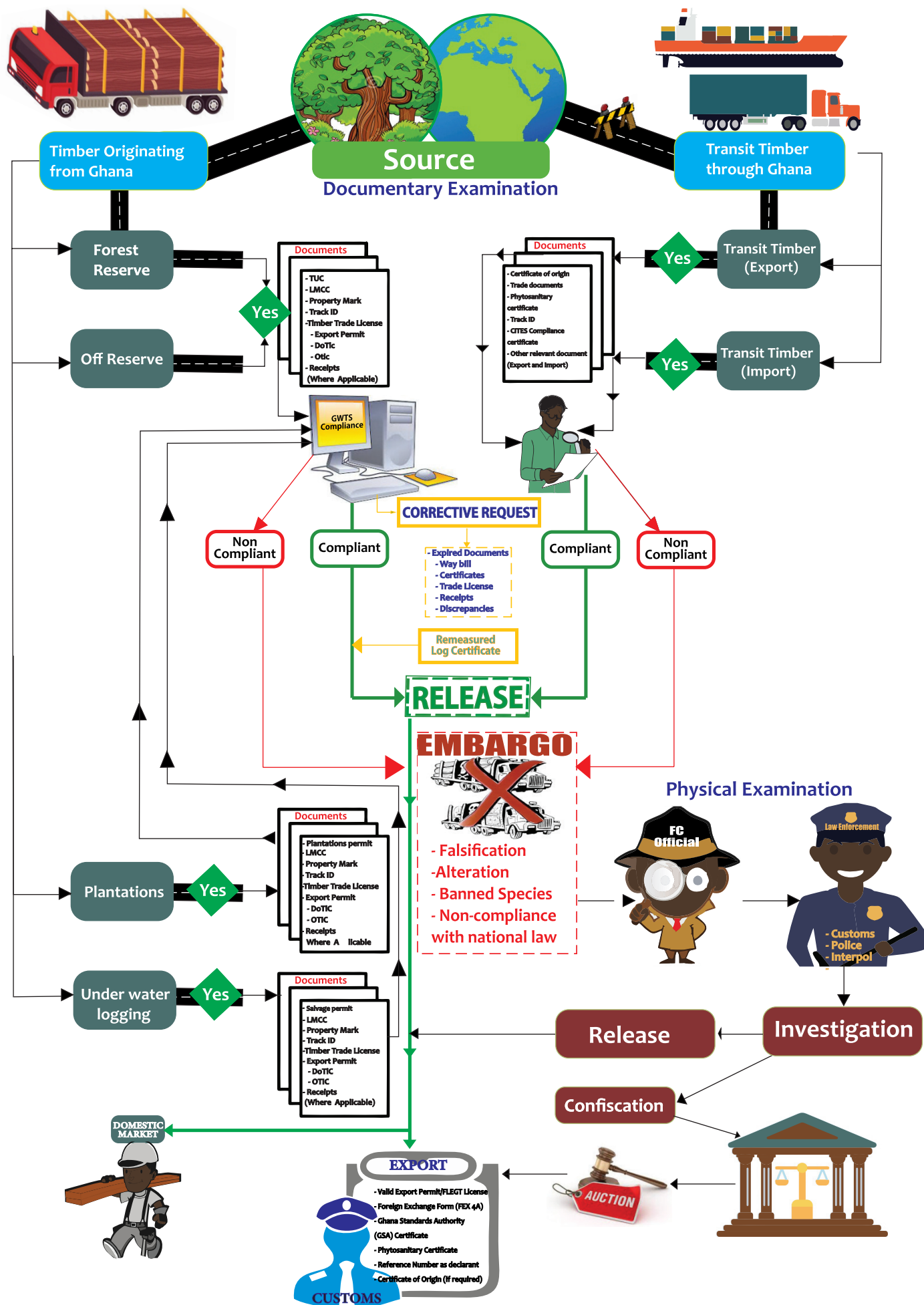
Figure 7: Decision tree reference guide for handling timber (Source: USFS, TaylorCrabbe Innitiative and FC-TIDD)

Strengthening capacity and coordination among law enforcement agencies

Strengthening the capacity and coordination of law enforcement agencies would lead to more accurate wood identification, heightened detection of illegal timber, improved prosecution, and better exchange of information and knowledge among relevant entities and authorities[xiii]. However, Ghanaian law enforcement agents do not have adequate capacity and tools to accurately identify and verify timber species. More importantly, there is a significant shortage of skilled wood anatomists and taxonomists, which is exacerbated by retirements and limited job prospects in the country. Traditional wood identification methods based on experiential knowledge and non-anatomical descriptions (such as visual observation, smell, color, and taste) are often relied upon to distinguish and identify commercial timber species along the supply value chain. Due to inadequate training in science-based wood identification, high-value timber species are still at risk of being trafficked. This includes species such as *Pterocarpus erinaceus* (African Rosewood), *Pericopsis elata* (Afrormosia), *Afzelia africana* (Papao), *Tieghemella heckelii* (Makore), *Milicia spp* (Iroko), *Etandrophragma spp* (Sapele) and *Triplochiton scleroxylon* (Wawa). Recent high-profile cases highlight these issues, including a notable incident where Ghanaian authorities seized[13] containers full of rosewood from Nigeria[xiv].

To strengthen capacity and coordination among law enforcement agencies in Ghana, around 200 personnel of the Forestry Commission - TIDD timber inspectors, Ghana Revenue Authority-Customs, CSOs, and students have been trained in science-based wood identification methods, empowering them to verify and identify timber accurately. These law enforcement personnel have gained access to vital tools, including macro-lenses, the Ghanaian wood identification manual, the Xylorix Pocketwood mobile app, and the Xylorix Enforcer. The operationalization of these tools into the workflows of law enforcement is a significant step forward in addressing timber trafficking. A notable outcome is the heightened awareness of the concerns about **"open and close"** inspection techniques due to a lack of knowledge to identify wood correctly and the creation of an enabling platform via wood ID trainings for networking and coordination among various law enforcement agencies. This not only strengthens law enforcement's collective efforts but also fosters a sense of community and cooperation in the fight against timber trafficking.

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13   These seizures of contraband timber likely represent only the tip of the iceberg of what is flowing out of, and through, Ghana.

Figure 8: Wood ID Training Workshop at Assin Fosu Zone. (Photo credit: USFS and FC-TIDD).

OUTLOOK AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In West Africa, timber trafficking is exacerbated by the uncoordinated approach to law enforcement, lack of capacity in science-based wood identification methods, and inadequate independent third-party monitoring.

At a country level, the successful implementation of the Ghanaian Timber Legality Assurance System (GhLAS) to verify the legality of timber supply chains in Ghana is dependent upon the accurate identification of species and the geographical origin of timber. One promising policy response is Ghana's initiative to combat timber trafficking by enhancing wood identification capabilities, strengthening law enforcement coordination, and empowering civil society actors to serve as an effective third-party accountability mechanism to government.

Ghana's anti-timber trafficking program has achieved early successes, including the development of a fully automated, field-deployable, wood ID app that allows high-confidence identification of 3 CITES-listed species targeted for trafficking, serving as a model for West African timbers. Such a tool empowers law enforcement agents to conduct accurate and rapid screenings without bias as well as help to prevent under-declared timber exports and the illegal export of protected timber species. While this intervention is unlikely to end timber trafficking, prosecution and enforcement of non-compliance detected by wood ID tools and other systems, as well as alternative livelihoods, will reduce the incentives for timber trafficking in Ghana.

Given the transboundary nature of timber trafficking, regional dialogue and cooperation among West African member states, consistent coordinated approach by governments, NGOs, and CSOs to law enforcement, and more investments in science-based wood identification and trainings for law enforcement frontiers are crucial to improving the capacity of member states to prevent and establish a more robust and systematic response to timber trafficking within and beyond Ghana.

Key actions toward this goal should consider the following policy recommendations:

Regional dialogue and cooperation

West African member states must initiate and sustain a regional dialogue platform focused on combating timber trafficking. This dialogue should facilitate communication and information sharing, coordination of efforts to ensure the appropriate identification, investigation, and prosecution of non-compliances, as well as the development of joint strategies among participating countries.

Consistent and coordinated approach

Governments, NGOs, and CSOs must adopt a consistent and coordinated approach to law enforcement efforts. This action entails harmonizing wildlife policies in Ghana and other West African countries to include flora, enhancing information-sharing mechanisms and collaboration among agencies, and aligning resources to more effectively tackle timber trafficking across borders. Additionally, implementing inter-agency collaboration agreements and establishing a centralized coordinating task force with clear authority and accountability to oversee all aspects of wildlife issues is crucial.
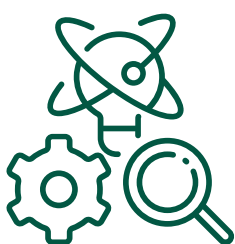
Investments in capacity building and research development

There is a need for increased investments in science-based wood identification methods and training programs for law enforcement personnel. This includes providing access to cutting-edge technology, such as DNA barcoding and spectrometry, and delivering specialized training to enhance the capacity of the judiciary and frontline officers in identifying illegal timber and prosecuting offenders. Research initiatives should also be implemented to support the development of science-based wood identification locally and jointly between tropical forest countries.

Strengthened legal frameworks

Member states should strengthen their legal frameworks related to timber trafficking, including enacting and enforcing robust legislation and common principles to impose stringent penalties on offenders, and enhancing cross-border cooperation mechanisms to facilitate extradition and prosecution of traffickers.

Engagement of stakeholders

Governments, NGOs, CSOs, and local communities must actively engage in awareness-raising campaigns, advocacy efforts, and community empowerment initiatives to mobilize support, build resilience, and foster a culture of zero tolerance towards timber trafficking.

By implementing these policy recommendations collectively and effectively, West African member states can significantly improve their capacity to prevent and respond to timber trafficking, thereby safeguarding their forests and promoting sustainable forest management in the region.

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