Net Activism and Forest Governance: A Discursive Analysis of Media Attention on Forest Governance with Relevant Contributions to FLEGT Action Plan and VPA Implementation

THE IVVR INTERREGIONAL FRAMEWORK ON FORESTS[1]

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fidepfoundation@gmail.com

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[1] *Strengthening independent forest monitoring through integrated verification, validation and reporting of FLEGT/VPA processes in West and Central Africa*

PREMIER WORKING PAPER UNDER THE IVVR INTERREGIONAL FRAMEWORK ON FORESTS

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Abstract

The rather passive media attention in forest governance constitutes a significant dent in Ghana's forest policy discourse. In combatting the menace of illegal logging, media's role has been instrumental in promoting transparency as they report on illegal and corrupt practices in the forestry sector. As a result, about 5 people in every 10 have been effectively made aware of forest governance issues through local radio programs. Yet the potential of the media in environmental governance has not been fully explored. In practice however, the media has largely been viewed as a passive tool for disseminating remotely ceiled information rather than an active facilitator of agenda building. This has discouraged a sustained media attraction to forest governance leading to poor public awareness and hindering public participation in key forest sector issues. As access to information by stakeholders improve and awareness deepens, it is expected that their contribution to the implementation of VPA in Ghana will be reinforced and mainstreamed into a more inclusive policy reform process. In this paper, we assess the preconditions for an active inclusion of the Ghanaian media as an incoming stakeholder with significant potential in facilitating policy discourses, informing and communicating forest governance complexities, mobilizing and mainstreaming public sentiment but more importantly, delivering real-time feedback on public reactions to forest policy. We observe and analyze some enabling factors for stimulating net activism as an increasingly ubiquitous means for strengthening governance in the forestry sector of Ghana. We further recognize and recommend the promotion of net activism as an evolving mechanism with huge potentials to transform awareness into commitment and action.

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1.1   Introduction

A major socio-economic and environmental challenge for Ghana is its declining forest resource base. Studies indicate that the forest sector of Ghana has shrunk considerably over the last 15 years as a result of forest resource depletion, and the situation looks set to worsen (Birikorang and Rhein, 2005; Birikorang, 2008; Marfo, 2009). In recent years, illegal logging has been highlighted as the dominant issue relating to sustainable forestry in Ghana. Chainsaw milling for commercial purposes was banned in 1998 (Marfo, 2009 and Hoare (2014). In response to this development challenge, the Ghanaian government has taken a number of important steps to improve forest governance, most significantly, the signing of the Ghana–EU Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) in 2009 (Marfo, 2009; EU FLEGT Facility, 2015). Mass media communication as a tool has been indispensable in each phase in Ghana's VPA process[2]; to raise awareness, facilitate consensus building, meet transparency commitments and raise the profile of the VPA and FLEGT licensed timber (Hoare, 2014; EU FLEGT Facility, 2015).[3] In practice, the media has largely been viewed as a passive tool for disseminating remotely ceiled information rather than an active facilitator of VPA agenda building. This has discouraged a sustained media attraction to forest governance leading to poor public awareness and hindering public participation in key forest sector issues. At the very base of sustainable development is the need for a well-balanced participation and inclusion so that rural populations whose livelihoods depend on forest resources need to have their voices mainstreamed into policy choices that impact on forest resources. However, the general public remains vaguely aware of VPA implications, requirements and developments and stakeholder commitment to action is appearing lethargic.

The functional theory which is sometimes referred to as the functional approach to mass communication theory was propounded initially by Harold Lazwell in 1948 explains that society has varied uses for the media and mass communication. The prediction is that people will use the media for their own specific functions since the audience has a need or needs which the mass media fulfills. According to the functional theory of mass communication, there are five functional approaches the media serves users, namely; Surveillance, correlation, transmission, entertainment, and mobilization. The media

presents information to the audience after they select, interpret, and also criticize it. In combatting the menace of illegal logging, media's role has long been identified as a key actor in promoting transparency and exposing corrupt practices in the forestry sector. In the study on illegal logging and related trade response in Ghana, Allison Hoare (2014), highlighted international and domestic media coverage as an important indicator that provides insight into levels of public awareness of illegal logging and related trade. She highlights that effective media attention will give an indication of the approaches being taken within a country to address illegal forest operations, the policy gaps and tradeoffs. She also highlighted a substantial media attention on forest governance in recent years despite the variations over the years. However, has the full potential of the media been explored in the context of combating illegal logging? What would it take to break the asymmetry between media attention and the socially embedded illegal and corrupt practices in the forestry sector? How can media attention in the forestry sector be sustained and mainstreamed into improved transparency and public participation in forest governance?

In this study, we sought to address these questions by observing and analyzing some preexisting conditions and/or enabling factors for promoting net activism. Net activism, also known as digital campaigning, has been described as the use of electronic communication technologies such as social media, emails and podcasts, for various forms of activism. Net activism enables faster and more effective communication by citizen movements. It also enables effective delivery of particular information to large and specific audiences and has recently emerged as an increasingly ubiquitous means for strengthening governance in the forestry sector. Generally, there is no consensus about what constitutes "net activism"[4]. However, it is quite plausible for net activism to provide the needed media support to advance public participation in VPA implementation. Thus, this study provides a context for such recommendation based on systematic discursive analysis of media engagement on forest governance and VPA implementation in Ghana. This paper assesses the active inclusion of the Ghanaian media as a newcomer with significant potential to strengthen inclusion in forest policy discourses. It further draws attention to the emerging capacity and capability of net

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[4] See European cetacean bycatch campaign "Man is but a strand in the complex web of life", Net activism has the power to change the world: http://www.eurocbc.org/page987.html

activism and proposes a range of policy responses to ensure transparency in Ghana's forest governance and in the VPA implementation process.

3. Methods

The research methodology consists of purposive outcome analysis of local level media programs and unstructured field interviews with external VPA boundary partners including media representatives and CSOs/CBOs. It draws on evaluation of the work carried out across 6 regions in Ghana by Friends of the Earth-Ghana in informing and communicating forest governance complexities, creating awareness and mobilizing and mainstreaming public reactions to forest policy in the context of FLEGT/VPA implementation in Ghana. It reviews the outcomes from the cume (unduplicated audience) from 10 purposively selected radio programs in the High Forest Zone (HFZ) within a period of 12 months (June 2016 to May 2017) on forest governance to estimate the unduplicated audience or the value per discussion (VPD) of each radio program. Using this estimation, a person must have qualified for at least one quarter-hour of credit in order to be included in a Cume calculation[5] (equation one).

$$\frac{AQH\ Persons}{Population} \times 100 \ = AQH\ Rarting\ (\%) --- Equation\ one$$

4. Presentation and Analysis of Results

Observations indicate that 35 radio discussions had taken place within the HFZ involving 16 media houses. Some of these composed of one-off discussions, serial weekly talkshows and news interviews. Table 1.1 provides a breakdown of the distribution of radio programs by region. These radio programs targeted communities, timber companies, traders and domestic timber producers and several other intermediaries with useful information with respect to the implication of VPA implementation, the institutional framework and the respective roles of each stakeholder.

[5] See Arbitron (2010). A Guide to Understanding and Using PPM Data for PPM Radio Ratings Customers. Arbitron Inc. iBiquity Digital Corporation. USA.

Table 1.1 Summary Radio Programs Cume Persons by Region

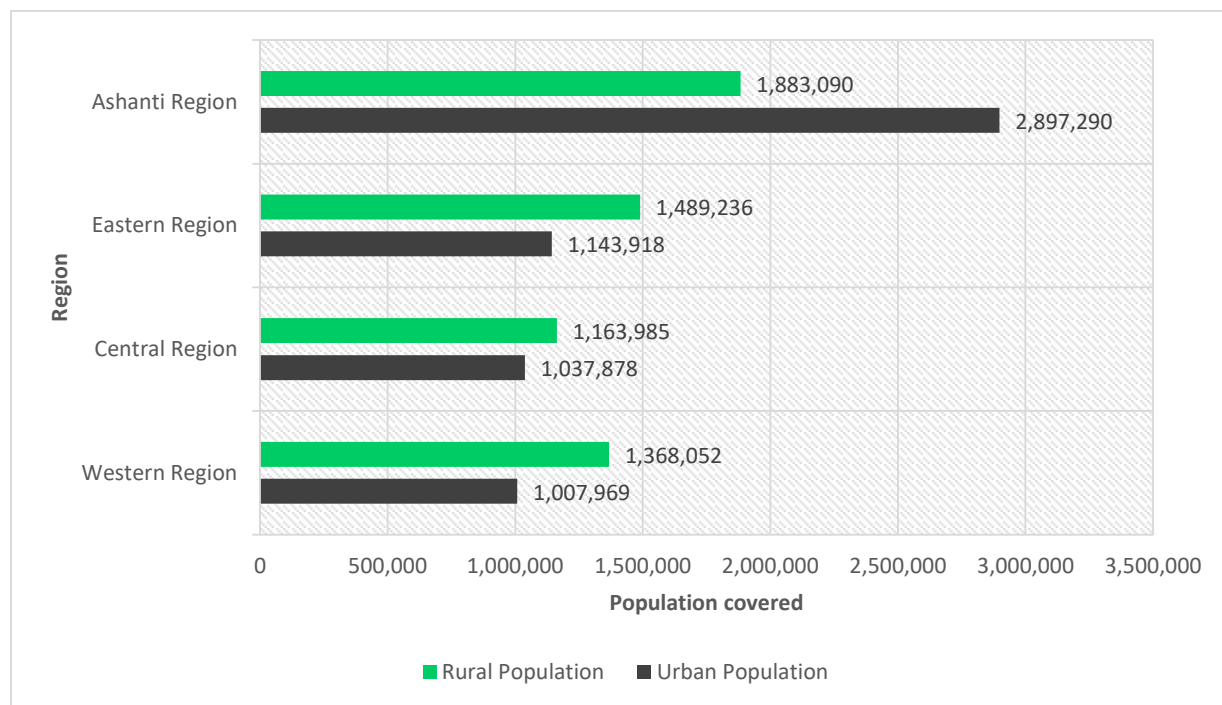| **Regions**	*Total Population*	*Urban Population*	*Rural Population*	*Number of Discussions*
Western Region	2,376,021	1,007,969	1,368,052	4
Central Region	2,201,863	1,037,878	1,163,985	2
Eastern Region	2,633,154	1,143,918	1,489,236	2
Ashanti Region	4,780,380	2,897,290	1,883,090	2
Total	**11, 991,418**	**6,087,055**	**5,904,363**	10

Source: Authors, (2018).

Figure 1: The distribution of unduplicated audience reached through these 10 programs.
Source: Authors, (2018).

In Figure 1, the study shows that the greater percentage (40%) of population covered by media is in Ashanti region, followed by Eastern region (22%), Western region (20%) and lastly Central region. Figure 2 presents the rural urban distribution of media coverage.[6] It indicates that in terms of percentage distribution, Western region has the highest rural coverage (58), followed by Eastern region (57%), Central (53%) and Ashanti (39%) respectively. Figure 4 below seeks to illustrate the relationship between the total population covered and number of discussions by region, i.e. the value per discussion (VPD) using trend forecast. It indicates that the value generated in western region falls above the forecasted values. In central and eastern region, the value created falls below expected but in Ashanti, the value created again rises far above the anticipated VPD. This variations in VPD is influenced not only by one factor but a combination of factors. The study noted that the total population covered is not necessarily dependent on the population size of the region but also the population density.
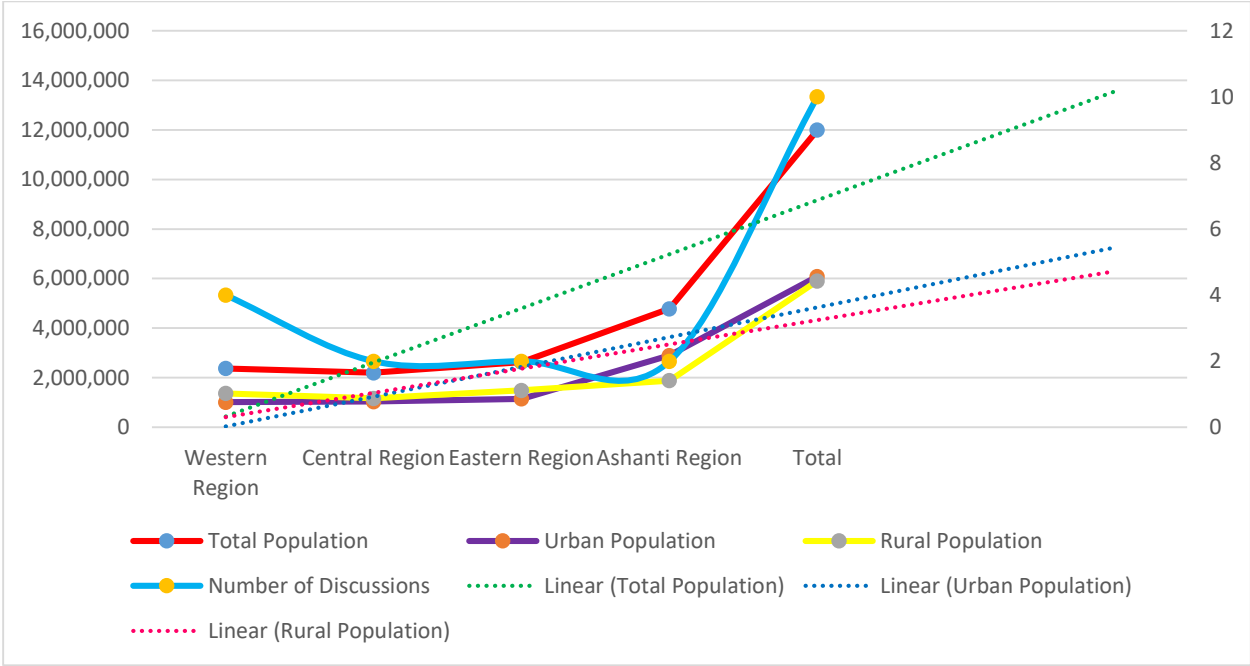

Figure 2: The value curve generated by media programs

Source: Authors, (2018).

It was noted that the VPD in Western Region falls above the forecasted values for both rural and urban populations. In Central and Eastern Region, the actual value created falls below expected levels for both rural and urban populations. Again, in Ashanti region, it was noted that the actual VPD rises far above the anticipated values for urban populations but only marginally for rural populations. This assessment of VPD assist in defining the points of inflection in the awareness creation process. The point of inflection refers to the point at which the forecasted curve (expected VPD) intersects with the observed values (actual VPD). For a total population of 11, 991,418, the point of inflection falls at 2000,000 people. In urban populations, the point of inflection is observed to be at 1,500,000 people which corresponds to about 1.3 radio discussions. In rural populations, the point of inflection is observed to be about 1,550,000 people which corresponds to about 1.5 radio discussions (see Figure 2).

5. How Can Media Attention In The Forestry Sector Be Sustained?

This study observed that adapting mass communication media to the rather technical issues in forest governance requires a full-bodied appreciation of tools and techniques that would encourage maximum interaction and sustain interest in the selected themes. This implies there is the need to frame the media activities in such a manner that ensures a wider coverage but also deconstructing the discussions down to the regional, district and community level. A far-sighted approach to improving this situation in Ghana would require cultivating a high VPD or gross impression. In this study, the value per discussion as observed in the radio discussions indicates that the radio alone, if well organized could build massive gross impression across the country which could eventually translate into improvements in public participation, transparency, accountability and other forest legality compliance support factors. In this study, it is observed that an increase in public awareness on forest governance could also mean an increase in media attention or media engagement but not essentially an increase in media interest. It is therefore not extreme to assert that media attention does not necessarily imply media interest in forest governance. Also, increased media attention could easily interpreted as increased public awareness in forest governance the FLEGT-

VPA implementation. However, without a sustained media interest in forest governance the FLEGT-VPA implementation, public awareness alone may not translate into improvements in public participation, transparency or accountability. Similarly, in Alison Hoar's study[7], it was noted that the number of articles in international media that referred to illegal logging in Ghana grew markedly over the period 2001–07. But Hoar's study also noted substantial fluctuations in media attention over the years. This is certainly the best time to en route a sustainable partnership with media in focusing attention on forest policy.

The study noted that to support of VPA implementation in Ghana, civil society has initiated wide and multi-pronged capacity development actions aimed at shifting the bias of the media from politics, sports and social issues for equal attention on the current forest governance paradigm. Making reference to Alison Hoar's observation in 2014, local media attention in forest governance had centered on illegalities. However, this study noted that media attention is now beginning to percolate to the community level issues. Also, most of the coverage was done by the *Ghana News Agency (GNA)*. However, there are indications that the media attention scope in forest governance is widening as other media house such as *Today Newspaper (*with a circulation of over 5000 readers)*, Ghanaian Times* (with a current circulation of over 80,000 copies) and *Peace FMonline* (*with an international reach)* are beginning to take interest in reporting forest related issues[8].

However, there is a significant concern which threatens to cut off any long term gains made in this effort. Media attention is known to have a significant impact only at the time they were published. We can expect the mass media to play a role in raising public awareness of forest governance only in a temporal sense. If no other environment-related news breaks, then other political or social issues take over. Downs (1972 and Sampei and Aoyagi-Usui, 2009) made a similar observation that environmental issues attract widespread attention in mass media and then decline from public view, though the issues remain largely unresolved. Studies indicate that high levels of media coverage

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[7] See A. Hoare, (2014). Illegal logging and related trade, the response in Ghana, energy, environment and resources Chatham House Assessment.
[8] See http://m.peacefmonline.com/pages/news/social/201503/236565.php and

http://m.peacefmonline.com/pages/news/social/201406/202444.php. Date accessed: 18/08/2016.

does not last for a long time (Sampei and Aoyagi-Usui, 2009). Research shows that environmental news is still far down the news scale, with local and domestic political news dominating (Lister, 2002; Lester, and Hutchins, 2009). Therefore civil society's efforts may have resulted in training a significant number of media practitioners on a broad range of topics in forest governance but mostly on logging related issues, the VPA as a conduit to the FLEGT Action Plan and role of the media. However, the net effect of this public awareness could easily be eroded when media attention recedes. This is where net activism becomes essential; ensuring constant media attention on forest governance issues.

With almost 60% of rural households having access to mobile phone or the internet, it is time for the potential of net activism to be unlocked. Though still untested, net activism has the potential initially to canvas the support of the media to place premium on current forest policy bottlenecks in order to advance the required reforms for effective VPA implementation. With a penetration rate of 59.78%, mobile data figures in Ghana recorded an increase from 15,804,608 subscribers as at 2015 to 16,106,218 as at 2016. This increase in mobile data usage clearly lends support to net activism. Linked to the recent upsurge in media attention on forest governance, the results can only be consolidative. On that basis, this study recognizes and recommends the establishment of a regional or sub-regional media network on forest governance as a mechanism for consolidating media capacity in VPA countries in Africa.

6. Conclusion

Ghana is not the only VPA country facing with VPA implementation challenges. Most other VPA countries are troubled with issues of poor policy responsiveness, legal pluralism, inadequate participation, cultural and social sophistries that makes legality compliance very indeterminate outcome. Net activism would canvas the support of the media to place premium on current forest policy bottlenecks in order to advance the required reforms for effective VPA implementation. This could be a potential for testing community level journalism as a complementary tool to forest monitoring operations. Testing community level journalism brings on board a mechanism that will enable

community members to instantly report illegal forest operations via a media network. In other words, community members become forest journalist. Given the right capacity, to both identify and report on illegal forest operations with the assurance that they will get a media response without being victimized, community will become a reliable means of monitoring local illegal forest operations.

Net activism could also be used to leverage media capacity in support of civil society and local community interactions on forest policy and with the VPA implementation process. As an evolving mechanism with huge potentials to transform awareness into commitment and action, net activism could end up giving communities the capacity to gather evidence, provide media capacity to report the evidence and give civil society the capability to influence policy with that evidence. Thus, although we cannot approximate that net activism will change the course of forest governance, we can measure up the budding potential of net activism in forest governance as fluid channel to advancing sustainable forest management.

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