



## Research Brief

# Putting an End to Liberia's Blood Timber

**Elissa Parker**  
*Vice President*  
*Research and Policy Studies*

The small West African nation of Liberia is home to one of the continent's great natural treasures, the Upper Guinean Forest Ecosystem. The region is a biodiversity hotspot, boasting a wealth of animal and plant species and high levels of endemism. Liberia's rainforests, for example, are famed for the rare Pygmy Hippopotamus. And the forests are not only a source of subsistence for countless local Liberian communities; they are also a base of economic activity and cultural identity for the entire republic. Unfortunately, in Liberia's recent, troubled past, its forests have yielded another, undesirable harvest: so-called blood timber.

Under the regime of Charles Taylor, the forests were a lawless place, lying beyond the reach of any legitimate government and serving as an economic engine for conflict. Many timber companies worked hand in hand with the Taylor regime, plundering forests and appropriating one of the country's most important revenue streams. The forests fed the civil conflict and helped sustain the warlord economy of the region, fueling arms trafficking

and cross-border conflict throughout volatile West Africa. Local communities lived in fear, exhausted from more than a decade of killing, war, and displacement.

Today, following 15 years of civil war and the lifting of U.N. Security Council sanctions on Liberian timber exports, the country is in the midst of a stunning turnaround — and ELI has played a central role in that transformation.

Since 2004, led by ELI Senior Attorney Bruce Myers, ELI staff have created — virtually from scratch — a new legal framework in Liberia's battered forest sector. The country's National Forestry Reform Law of 2006 has become a model for natural resources management in Africa — requiring transparency and accountability, empowering traditional communities, and safeguarding the biodiversity of the country.

The current rainy season in Liberia has just ended, and commercial logging will soon resume for the first time in the post-Taylor era. And now — also for the first time — communities will be affirmatively involved in the government's decision to put an area up for bid for commercial

logging. For the first time, the winning bidder of a commercial concession will have to negotiate a "social benefit agreement" with the communities affected by the logging, ensuring that financial and other benefits flow directly to affected communities. For the first time, logging companies will be required to manage the forest sustainably, confining their annual yield and cutting even within the boundaries of a concession to specific areas and quantities of trees. And — for the first time — every log will be tracked from stump to mill to truck to dock, to ensure that it is of legal origin and maintain the integrity of the entire process.

All of this is part of a new, democratic, open approach to forest management — and even to government.

Bruce explains: "Every aspect of Liberia's forest sector, from planning to awarding concessions to concession management to fee collection and community benefit-sharing to contract administration and law enforcement, will be subject to public oversight and scrutiny. Under the new law, every document that relates in any way to

the forest sector must be made easily accessible to any Liberian interested in reviewing it."

The ELI team has been the key driver in the legal reform of the forest sector. After the UN Security Council lifted sanctions on Liberian timber exports, the ELI team went on to assist the forestry agency in establishing 10 core implementing regulations, a process that featured the first-ever notice-and-comment rule-making process in Liberia.

With the help of our local Liberian partners, Bruce designed a public comment plan that led to community meetings and hearings in 11 of Liberia's 15 counties.

"The critical long-term goal," according to Bruce, "is to ensure both that Liberia's communities have a voice in — and benefit from — the sustainable management of the republic's forests, as well as that conservation remains a top priority in the forest sector."

Bruce and ELI Staff Attorney Lisa Goldman initiated an unprecedented effort to institutionalize legal training within Liberia's forestry agency. The intensive, interactive workshop they ran in July in Monrovia explored with staff from the agency's headquarters office a wide ranging agenda.

ELI's rewarding efforts in Liberia are one part of the Institute's longstanding focus on Africa as a place of rich natural resources and emerging post-conflict governance structures with the potential to enhance the lives and livelihoods of its people.