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FLEGT: Another ‘forestry fad’?

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ABSTRACT

There has been recent debate around the role of ‘fads’ in global conservation measures, and the lessons they hold for achieving desired conservation and development outcomes. Fads are characterized by initially widespread enthusiasm and major mobilization of resources followed by abandonment in favor of the next fad. Debate centers less on whether such fads exist, but rather on whether they represent opportunities for incremental policy learning, or are symptomatic of the more systemic failure of a market-based conservation agenda and the reinforcement of existing power inequalities. The European Union (EU)’s Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan aims to prevent the trade of illegal timber among the EU and its trading partners especially in the ‘Global South’. Fifteen years since launching the Action Plan, we ask whether the processes and outcomes of FLEGT, and specifically the Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs), resonate with the dynamics observed in other processes dubbed ‘fads’ within conservation and development arenas, and if so, what we can learn from this. Drawing from interviews, grey literature, and scholarship, we examine FLEGT VPAs as following three key stages of a fad: (1) there is initial enthusiasm by a wide range of actors for FLEGT as something ‘new’ or ground-breaking, (2) discrepancies and disagreements emerge about its end goals, i.e. whether its core purpose is to distinguish legal from illegal wood in the EU marketplace, or to achieve deeper governance reforms; while the means for achieving those goals borrow heavily from previous market-based initiatives (3) actors and champions become fatigued, yet at the same time frame elements of their own involvement as a ‘success’. Identifying these fad-like characteristics calls into question the ‘newness’ of FLEGT, by uncovering its many similarities to other market-based measures such as certification that exacerbate inequalities. Hence, branding FLEGT a success without challenging its role in the unequal concentration of power and resources, is likely to further entrench these inequalities in subsequent conservation fads, while a focus on incremental learning misses the larger failures and injustices of market-based approaches and can reinforce their re-emergence.

1. Introduction: FLEGT and fads

The European Union (EU)’s Forest Law Enforcement, Governance, and Trade (FLEGT) Action Plan is a forest conservation and development intervention that has raised great expectations in many countries since its enactment in 2003 (Beeko and Arts, 2010; Owusu, 2009). Coordinated by the European Commission (EC), the FLEGT Action Plan contains measures that are expected to prevent the trade of illegal timber between EU Member States and non-EU timber producers, and to enable legal timber production in the timber producing countries (EC, 2003, 2005). FLEGT symbolizes the EU’s responsibility, as one of the world’s largest consumers of timber products, to tackle illegal logging and trade of illegally harvested timber products.

FLEGT has been lauded as a ‘new’ and ‘innovative’ approach to addressing forest loss that overcomes many of the pitfalls of previous international initiatives, due in particular to its focus on reinforcing, rather than undermining, state power and the rule of law (Cashore and Stone, 2012). Yet, as observed by Redford et al. (2013), this claim of novelty itself conjures a strong sense of ‘dépà vu’. Redford et al. characterize the past several decades of international conservation efforts as a series of ‘fads’, as in “approaches that are embraced enthusiastically” as new and superior to all previous approaches, and then abandoned. They point to a long list of interventions, including Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs), ecotourism, ecocertification, community-based conservation, and payment for ecosystem and

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environmental services (PES)'. They argue that understanding the fadish nature of these international initiatives is important if we are to learn from past experience rather than “accepting whatever fad comes along” (Redford et al., 2013, 438).

As anticipated by Redford et al. (2013), their article on ‘fads’ has stirred considerable debate. In particular, it has sparked a broader discussion over whether international conservation is simply in need of more patience and incremental learning (presumably towards a common goal), or if its faddishness points to systemic failures, highly unequal power distribution, and the need for more fundamental transformations. Fletcher et al. (2016), in their paper on REDD + as a fad, argued that the logic of REDD + built on ‘performance-based’ payments for reducing carbon emissions from forest loss, follows a trend in international conservation of increasingly market-based strategies. This is problematic because market-based policies’ attempt to internalize the social and environmental externalities, fails to acknowledge that such externalities underlie the profit generated and thereby the financing of such market-based approaches. Moreover, the extractive logic and profit motivation of the market created and continues to create the environmental and social inequity dilemmas we confront today, making a reliance on market forces unconvincing as well as dangerous. They argue that the “larger patterns to which particular fads contribute” deserve attention if practitioners truly aim to benefit communities and natural resources (Fletcher et al., 2016, 675). Their paper generated a swift reaction from Angelsen et al. (2017), who questioned whether REDD + was as truly ‘market-based’ as portrayed.

Indeed, the diverse stakeholders involved in initiatives like REDD + and FLEGT vary in their levels of support for, and prioritization of, market-based conservation. This leads to greater goal complexity, through the addition, for example, of environmental and social ‘safeguards’, as a means to gain broader stakeholder support (McDermott et al., 2012). This creates differing expectations and priorities, which may frustrate actors who view this expanded mission as obstructing achievement of the initiative’s ‘core’ aim (e.g. Seymour and Busch, 2016). But whatever the priorities of different stakeholders, Lund et al. (2017) suggest that the enthusiasm generated by conservation fads serves strategic purposes; it is oriented toward the activities and policies that tend foremost to favor a professional cadre of donor representatives, practitioners, and policymakers. This implies that policy outcomes may be compromised. Both Fletcher et al. (2017) and Lund et al. (2017) describe the production and stabilization of fads, whereby the narratives of rationale and progress are carefully crafted and managed to achieve aims beyond the ostensible project or program objectives. Hence while conservation fads come and go, they may nevertheless be declared a ‘success’ and recycled in ways that serve the interest of key actors involved.

Fifteen years after its enactment, we examine stakeholder perspectives on FLEGT to assess whether it resembles a fad, and if so what can be learned by viewing it as such. This includes considering whether (1) there is initial enthusiasm by a wide range of actors, due to the perceived ‘newness’ of the initiative coupled with wide ranging expectations as to what FLEGT is meant to achieve, (2) discrepancies emerge between ideals or stated goals and actual implementation, and/or between the ways in which FLEGT actors define success; while the implementation of FLEGT draws heavily on ideas from pre-existing efforts, and (3) actors and champions become fatigued, often marked by frustration that the initiative is not going to plan, but with elements of the initiative still being declared a success. This sets the stage for a major shift in international attention to the next fad, which may involve the abandonment of the previous, but will likely contain elements of former initiatives claimed a ‘success’ by stakeholder proponents. Having discussed these aspects in terms of FLEGT, we then discuss the implications for future development and environmental policy and governance. Taking a constructive critical approach, we aim to provoke thought and discussion, as well as to contribute to the emerging literature on both forest fads and forest legality.

We draw from numerous informal discussions and 33 formal semi-structured interviews with European-based FLEGT actors most active in facilitating VPAs, namely from the EC (n = 5) and FLEGT-affiliated international NGOs (n = 12) and IGOs (n = 16). The formal interviews, conducted throughout 2017, engaged with respondents on a variety of topics including themes of justice and equity, perceptions of and first-hand experiences with design and implementation, and organizational and personal expectations and aspirations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed and the anonymity of respondents was ensured as far as possible to elicit forthcoming responses. The key findings are derived from formal interviews, while informal discussions were used to understand better the general context or specific arguments requiring more context specific information. All quotations are derived from formal interviews. Three of the authors are affiliated with the collaborative research project ProdJus (Supranational Forest Governance in an Era of Globalising Wood Production and Justice Politics) implemented between 2016–2018 by partners in Ghana, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Europe (visit prodjus.eu for more details on project objectives and data collection ethos and instruments). The data used in this article constitutes a subset of the overall project dataset. We also draw from recent scientific research on FLEGT as well as policy documents, reports, and other grey literature. Before launching into our analysis, we provide a brief introduction to one of the core mechanisms of FLEGT, which we utilize for our analysis.

2. FLEGT voluntary partnership agreement (VPAs)

We focus on a component of the FLEGT Action Plan that has received substantial attention: the Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA). VPAs are bilateral trade agreements between the EU and timber-producing countries that establish what ‘legal timber’ entails and how legality will be monitored and verified in the country of export. As such, VPAs intend to facilitate trade of legal timber products to the EU. VPAs are relevant to this inquiry because they are the main mechanism within the FLEGT Action Plan by which EU policy-makers can engage in forest governance in timber supply countries in the ‘Global South’, an issue which the EU itself recognizes is necessary to tackle in order to ensure timber legality (Bollen and Ozinga, 2013; EFI, 2008, 2009; Hopley and Buchi, 2013). FLEGT VPAs focus on timber producing countries with high risk of illegality, which are also countries where state-based systems of forest governance are weak (IUFRO, 2016).

VPAs entail a thorough review of all laws related to forests in the exporting country and the establishment of a timber legality definition. They also include the establishment of a timber legality assurance system (TLAS), which should verify legality throughout the value chain – from tree felling to export of finished products. The TLAS entails supply chain control, verification of compliance, FLEGT licensing, and independent audit (EU, 2007). Once the VPA has been ratified from both sides – the EU and the VPA partner country, the instrument is legally binding for both sides. However, being a bilateral legal agreement and therefore part of soft international law institutional infrastructure, legally both sides have the option to exit the agreement at any stage.

VPAs require the establishment of mandatory implementation bodies to carry out tasks such as verification of compliance and independent monitoring and auditing (EU, 2007). When and if such a system fully comes into place, compliant exporters can qualify for a ‘FLEGT license’ for their timber and wood product exports, which is granted through a domestic licensing authority. FLEGT-licensed timber and wood products freely enters EU markets (a so-called ‘green lane’), as it automatically meets the requirements of the European Union Timber Regulations (EUTR) without the need for further due diligence. Traders in countries without FLEGT licenses are still free to trade with the EU, but are responsible to carry out due diligence. Together, the measures are hoped to prevent the importation of illegal timber into the EU and improve the supply of legal timber. The FLEGT Action Plan was

enacted in 2003 and the EU issued a VPA Policy in 2007- the same year VPA negotiations began in several countries. Progress can be understood in terms of four major milestones: negotiation, signing by the EU and partner country, entering into force, and issuing of FLEGT licensing. Table 1 below presents the progress of VPA countries according to these milestones.

3. Initial enthusiasm and great expectations

The FLEGT Action Plan and its VPAs were described as novel due primarily to their focus on laws and legality rather than what has become the contested concept of sustainability (EU, 2004; McDermott, 2014). FLEGT VPA's consideration of country sovereignty also resonated well with the interests of governments (as well as some civil society actors and scholars), as timber legality builds on domestic regulatory framework rather than on external or foreign set of rules, as in the case of non-state market forest certification schemes. This suggested a shift back to state power that “re-embrace[d] the role of governments”, thereby promoting state authority and legitimacy (McDermott, 2014, 15). Some scholars also described the remarkable ‘coalitions’ that emerged among traditionally opposing groups – including politicians, environmentalists, and industry – in support of FLEGT and its associated measures (Cashore and Stone, 2012; Sotirov et al., 2017). FLEGT seemed to promise something for everyone.

The Action Plan and VPAs were also presented as novel and innovative by EC representatives and EU Member State high-level officials, due to their linking of “good governance reform in producing countries to the leverage provided by the EU's own influential markets” (Brown et al., 2008, 8). For example, the Finnish Minister for Foreign Trade and Development stated in 2009 that VPAs “provide a novel and innovative mechanisms for supporting countries that wish to manage their forests better, improve peoples’ livelihoods, and protect natural resources” (EFI, 2009). Trade, in combination with a good governance focus including the requirement of a multi-stakeholder process with participation of different sectors and civil society actors, was also seen to make VPAs “special and different from a typical bilateral trade agreement” (EFI, 2015; EC, 2007; Owusu, 2009).

The FLEGT Action Plan (2003) and the EU VPA Policy (2007) also go beyond the focus on legality to refer to loftier ambitions of good governance, sustainable development, and ethical forestry. The Action Plan states, “...the EU's wider objective is to encourage sustainable forest management. Since in many countries forest legislation is based on the premise of sustainable forest management, better law enforcement will in general lead to more sustainable forest management. Where this is not the case the EU should encourage a review of the legal framework. Better forest governance is therefore an important step on the path to sustainable development” (EC, 2003, 5). The Plan also refers to land tenure and access rights for marginalized rural communities and indigenous peoples, stating, “Efforts will be focused on promoting equitable and just solutions to the illegal logging problem which do not have an adverse impact on poor people” (EC, 2003, 3). The FLEGT VPA policy references internationally recognized principles of sustainability, including participatory processes and the safeguarding of environmental and social welfare through benefit sharing (EC, 2007).

The great expectations have been followed by substantial resources. The total investment in the FLEGT Action Plan was an estimated €936 million for the period of 2003–2014 (TEREA/S-FOR-S/TOPPERSPECTIVE, 2016, 127). FLEGT management and implementation also stimulated the development of new institutions and instruments, through which numerous professionals assembled under the banner of FLEGT. The European Forest Institute's (EFI) FLEGT Facility and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN's (FAO) FLEGT program are most notable¹. In addition, numerous European environmental

Table 1

VPA country progress since 2007.

Source: EFI, 2018.

VPA Country	Negotiations started	VPA signed	VPA enters into force	FLEGT licensing started
Indonesia	2007	2013	2014	2016
Cameroon	2007	2010	2011	
Ghana	2007	2009	2009	
Malaysia	2007			
Republic of the Congo	2008	2010	2013	
Central African Republic	2009	2011	2012	
Liberia	2009	2011	2013	
Democratic Republic of the Congo	2010			
Gabon	2010			
Vietnam	2010			
Guyana	2012			
Côte d'Ivoire	2013			
Honduras	2013			
Laos	2017			
Thailand	2017			

organizations, consultancy companies, and similar institutions have received FLEGT-related resources from the EC, Member States, and/or EU timber associations/firms, all to make FLEGT VPAs work along the way. Tasks range from improving participation and capacity of local civil society to establishing technical systems.

4. Discrepancies: promises challenged by implementation, conflicting stakeholder priorities, and the integration of ‘old’ ideas with the ‘new’

As described above, the core mechanism for implementing the FLEGT VPAs is the generation of a FLEGT ‘legality licensing system’ to verify the legality of wood entering the EU. Cashore and Stone (2012) and Setyowati and McDermott (2017) have noted how this dimension of FLEGT bears strong resemblance to the pre-existing mechanism of non-state, market-based forest certification, only with a focus on legality and state involvement. Stakeholder perspectives vary greatly, however, as to the relative importance of FLEGT as a market-based mechanism for generating licenses versus its role in achieving other governance reforms.

Emphasizing broader reforms, a recent independent evaluation described that, while variable among countries, VPAs generally have “effectively contributed” to improved governance, transparency, and equitable solutions “particularly in the engagement of diverse national stakeholders in VPA processes”, and capacity building of civil society and government (TEREA/S-FOR-S/TOPPERSPECTIVE, 2016, 15). VPAs’ contribution to strengthening forest governance in timber supply countries has received particular praise. Referring to the “unprecedented multi-stakeholder nature” of the VPA negotiation process, Bollen and Ozinga (2013, 15) described how VPAs “have radically altered the negotiating and policy-making landscape” in six VPA countries. Our respondents praised the improved participation and ‘deliberative democracy’ achieved through VPA negotiations, and their contributions toward clarification in timber law. These were considered evidence of success, and indeed justification, of VPA interventions. An NGO respondent explained, “For us, if [FLEGT VPA] acts as a vehicle to

(footnote continued)

fund, is the most prominent organization advancing the FLEGT Action Plan. The FAO FLEGT program supports smaller projects that contribute to overall FLEGT objectives in VPA and non-VPA countries.

¹ The EFI FLEGT facility, funded by the EU Member states multi-donor trust

improve the rule of law, the checks and balances, the seat at the table in this deliberative space concept, in a country, then it is succeeding, in my mind.”

While respondents praised VPA participatory achievements, FLEGT is also subject to judgment by Member States and the European Parliament. This judgment largely determines the flow of EU and Member State financial resources to FLEGT. For these actors, the implementation of trade-based measures in the form of a TLAS and FLEGT license system are considered as the crown jewels of the VPA. It has been a disappointment for many involved that since FLEGT was enacted, only one license system has been achieved in a VPA country so far (in Indonesia in late 2016; see Table 1), after a decade of negotiation and implementation efforts. An EC respondent explained that European politicians generally “want simple messages (...) they just need these headline figures. So if we are able to say, ‘we have X percentage of tropical timber trade covered by FLEGT’, that’s the sort of simple message they want.” Another EC respondent reflected: “For a lot of technocrats, success is timber with a license, on the European market. (...) For the commission, a certain volume of timber with a license was the notion of success. And for the Member States. (...) I guess they wanted VPA working with 3 countries in 5 years’ time. A purely quantitative tick the box type of approach. That doesn’t come about. We are now 14 years down the line and we have one with Indonesia, and maybe Ghana next year, I don’t know. And that was partially because this debate opened up completely, and I guess, the realization that the debate had to open up. (...) Well, we can do it without that – we can just ignore indigenous people, we can just chop timber and put a sticker on it. I guess nobody wants to go there once they realize what it took. Although the commission of course is still desperately looking for VPAs that work.” Such statements reveal cracks and discrepancies between the conceptualization, and actual implementation, of FLEGT. They make plain the persistent tendency of development interventions, and the messiness of reality on the ground, to be subjected to technical and reductionist frames (Li, 2007; Myers et al., 2018a, 2018b). They also suggest the importance of the trade-based logic of FLEGT, which in many ways mirrors the logic of pre-existing initiatives such as forest certification.

The fundamental paradox common to forestry fads described by Lund et al. (2017), whereby external yet fundamental drivers of deforestation and forest degradation are largely ignored because they make interventions messier and more political (see also Myers et al., 2018a, 2018b), has become evident for some in the context of FLEGT VPAs. One NGO respondent described, “I also sat in negotiations of VPAs that to me, it was obvious they were bullshit from the start. (...) Look at the list, look at the ones that initiated a really long time ago and very little has happened. And where you had a lot of chat from ministers, you had ticked off, you know, ‘Ooh, we had a stakeholder workshop!’, but there wasn’t the kind of, ‘Right, let’s really dig deep and think about how the forest sector is going to have to change’. And deal with the institutional actors who are going to lose out in that change.” This is just one example of the ways in which the objectives of FLEGT VPAs were highly ambitious, and arguably contradictory in their trade versus development focus, and how this became increasingly apparent in implementation. The process of implementation makes evident the very ‘old’ and well-known challenges of political complexity and the great difficulty of implementing forest governance change (see also Lesniewska and McDermott, 2014; Myers et al., 2018a, 2018b). One FLEGT practitioner also explained how gaps have emerged between expectation and reality: “This idea of when we sign the VPA in Cameroon, and we said in three years we will have FLEGT license and all the timber in circulation on the territory will be legally verified, that’s completely... It’s impossible!” The gap between the stated intentions of FLEGT and actual implantation and achievements to date ring familiar with many other policy efforts to address global problems (Mosse, 2004).

Recent studies are also revealing discrepancies between FLEGT VPAs intentions and outcomes. While some scholars suggest that VPAs have improved multi-stakeholder processes and transparency, for instance in Ghana and Indonesia (Beeko and Arts, 2010; Overdevest and Zeitlin, 2018; Owusu, 2009), less progress is observed in terms of

advancing and/or protecting forest communities’ rights (Lesniewska and McDermott, 2014; Obidzinski et al., 2012). Despite ambitions for sustainable, ethical, and participatory forest governance, some scholars argue that the VPA at best promotes a reductionist model of participation aimed at “technical solutions with little consideration for the socio-economic and political context” (Wodschow et al., 2016, 3). Lesniewska and McDermott (2014) found that the VPAs in Ghana and Indonesia are adopting an approach driven by technical verification requirements which create new market barriers for small scale producers. In Indonesia these involve the use of private certification, an approach that is most directly ‘recycled’ or borrowed from forest certification, to verify legality in a way that is prohibitively expensive for small-scale operators (Setyowati and McDermott, 2017); while in Ghana a state-run verification system has been designed to serve export markets and will presumably be expanded to eliminate the majority of domestic and local production, as this production is deemed illegal (Hirons et al., 2018). Also in Indonesia, Maryudi and Myers (2018) suggest that as a result of the new FLEGT licensing system, more vulnerable timber operators now face worsened mechanisms of exclusion. Specifically, they shed light on the emergence of FLEGT license renting which represents a new mode of elite resource capture and the production of new vulnerabilities. Similarly, various market related barriers for small-scale forest businesses were identified in the VPA in Cameroon (Carodenuto and Ramcilovic-Suominen, 2014). Hansen et al. (2018) also challenge recent positive depictions of governance and technical achievements in Ghana, by demonstrating that the most fundamental inequities and drivers of deforestation remain unaddressed in VPA processes. Myers et al. (2018a, 2018b) argue that FLEGT intensifies post-colonial and neoliberal impositions of notions of legality on actors, with especially detrimental impacts on those at lower levels of the global production network.

5. Fatigue, abandonment, and rebirth?

Fads by definition come to an end; they are replaced with the next ‘latest and greatest’. But do we see evidence that people are moving on from FLEGT? On one hand, most FLEGT practitioners we spoke with in 2017 still described VPAs in a positive light, calling them “special”, “different”, and “unique”. This positive messaging and depictions of success generally downplay the trade-based nature of FLEGT, centering instead on how VPAs have enabled NGOs to engage in dialogue with state governments. This messaging is echoed in the media centers of engaged institutions including NGOs (e.g. FERN, see Olden, 2018), intergovernmental institutions, and the EC (see EFI, 2017; FAO, 2017). Further, Laos and Thailand recently initiated formal negotiations (2017), and Vietnam is seen as progressing rapidly toward VPA signing. This suggests that FLEGT VPAs remain an attractive mechanism and intervention to timber exporting countries.

On the other hand, many of our respondents also described a cyclical, yet worsening, ‘FLEGT fatigue’ due to slow progress on its trade-based mission. Many question whether most of the 15 VPA countries will achieve FLEGT licensing systems. One European consultant respondent described: “What I hear more and more, they [the EU] recognize that it’s not really working. And they will lose their countries’ interest, if they don’t do something. They cannot go on and go in circles forever. (...) Many of the African countries have kind of stalled in process. Ghana is a horror example of start and fail, start and fail. Investments in shitty monitoring and shitty tracking systems, millions of dollars has gone into that. (...) It’s the same with Malaysia. Sarawak is not willing or able to participate, then Sabah and peninsula are penalized. It’s a big ship to turn around suddenly.”

Despite the recent action on or toward VPAs in several countries, we have some doubts about the likely achievement of fundamental change, and even implementation. In Laos for example, the government appears eager to have another international agreement signed as this is believed to make it a more competitive partner for e.g. international donor agencies (Mustalahti et al., 2017). That Laos exports primarily to

Vietnam and other Asian markets rather than EU markets also raises doubts as to whether the VPA will amount to much. Considering that FLEGT donors and practitioners are also getting “fatigued”, they too may emphasize speed over transformative change. Some preparatory activities (e.g. FLEGT piloting) have taken place, but the legality verification system is far from operational. Meanwhile in Vietnam, a FLEGT implementing institution respondent explained that while “more technical people” in the forest sector expressed, “this is too difficult, we are not ready for all these questions”, the Prime Minister “stepped in and said, ‘No, this is national pride, this is reputational issue, I want to conclude. You do what is necessary to conclude the negotiations.’” This suggests that at least some VPAs rest on unstable foundations.

Threats to FLEGT’s legitimacy and funding appear to be mounting, in what some respondents referred to as ‘FLEGT fatigue’ stemming from a combination of slower than expected progress as well as shifting European priorities toward European security and immigration (not to mention ‘Brexit’ and the implications of the withdraw of the U.K., a longtime international forestry and development proponent, from the EU). Multiple FLEGT practitioners described increasing anxiety at the EC in relation to maintaining Member State support for FLEGT. One recounted, “*Someone in the FLEGT conference the other day raised the question... the Commission said, ‘you all need to be aware that we are in the moment of crisis and we have no resources’, and somebody said, ‘well I thought that money followed political priorities, and not the other way around... You’re now saying this is a political priority for your bosses but we don’t have funding to pay.’* Other respondents described the increasing scrutiny of donors on FLEGT facilitating organizations, expressing donors’ growing uncertainties with the process and an increasingly urgent need to be able to ‘prove’ whatever successes have been achieved.

As shown in the EU evaluation report (TEREA/S-FOR-S/TOPPERS-PECTIVE, 2016) and as described in interviews, the search for FLEGT success stories has led to discussion of cutting funds to new VPA countries and disproportionate spending on front-running countries like Ghana and Cameroon, in order to concentrate resources toward those countries most likely to attain the FLEGT licensing systems prioritized by higher-level European politicians. This may signal ‘learning’ on the part of practitioners, but we believe that it also signals an emerging desperation. Despite the emphasis of many FLEGT stakeholders on the success of VPAs as a tool for governance reform, the trade-based ‘success story’ of Indonesia as the first to achieve FLEGT licensing in late 2016, was critical to communicate success to a broader audience. An EC respondent explained its significance: “*Oh my god. That was a very, very good moment, because we had a very critical evaluation, which concluded that, ‘all well, but too much money spent and so far we don’t have the licenses and the EUTR isn’t exactly working, so what have you been doing with taxpayers money?’ (...)* So that the first FLEGT license came was a huge relief for us. You could see the result of a lot of work, a lot of patience, resources, ambition. And a lot of personal credibility, of a few people that invested, I mean, their lives, into this VPA.” Optimistic representations of interventions are “no coincidence”; rather, they follow “the logic of the development and conservation industry more generally”, which requires depictions and the circulation of interventions as success and, in the case of some FLEGT actors, of success as a trade-based mechanism, to maintain a coalition of proponents and the continued flow of financial resources (Lund et al., 2017, 9; also see Büscher, 2014; Mosse, 2004).

On the other hand, some FLEGT practitioners argued that FLEGT’s success really did not depend on generating trade license at all: “*What’s interesting about FLEGT and why I like it is, if you’re putting so much emphasis on the process, and not the actual result [i.e. the FLEGT license], then you’re equipping countries to set up mechanisms to take on whatever new trends comes. And nobody [at the EU level] really talks about that, everybody’s still focused on the illegal logging and ‘did we get our results that we needed by the end of this year?’ (...)* So I don’t see it as a problem and a reason to move to the next trend, I see it as, you’re putting in the fundamentals for a country to be stronger and to have better oversight and

management of their forests.” Yet as Lund et al. (2017) argued in relation to their examination of REDD+, by “recognizing certain shortcomings of the mechanism yet never questioning outright its legitimacy”, FLEGT proponents are not only legitimizing their work, “but also the value of new avenues for policy development and interventions”. Such discursive outcomes are central to the logic of the development and conservation industry generally, which produces and feeds off the development and testing of new policy models, or fads (Lund et al., 2017, 9; Redford et al., 2013).

While some actors may argue that ‘fundamentals’ of good governance are being established, there is growing evidence of regressive outcomes. The reinforcement of state laws which originated from colonial policies, and which capture recourse benefits for the state and other elite actors, discriminate against more vulnerable populations. This is clear, for example, in Ghana where private tree tenure remains unaddressed (Hirons et al., 2018; Hansen et al., 2018). In Indonesia, most domestic producers are small-scale operators who cannot afford to get certified (Maryudi and Myers, 2018). So assumptions that it will take a long time but eventually do good, are hard to accept based on the current evidence.

Meanwhile, the faddish nature of FLEGT and other international initiatives, with their concern for ‘newness’, creates barriers to long-term investment in any one approach. For example, two FLEGT practitioners noted: “*In development cooperation, unfortunately, it tends to be every ten years, they have to invent a new thing, like overall. (...) When we are talking about FLEGT, it’s like, ‘Hey! We are just sort of, starting to see results’, and then people just want to invent something else.*” And, “*The reality is the horrendous landscape of shifting priorities that we’re constantly living with. ...It’s basically our idea to sift through the nuanced language differences and say, ok if we are still working toward forest governance and SFM, how do we package this and continue to deliver something that’s consistence with overall objectives? (...) There’s a constantly evolving field of politics. That’s why we flirt between these.*” An EC respondent also described how shifts in European political priorities force their work to be perpetually recast, noting: “*Now the EU being a different place and having very short term objectives, and ‘how is FLEGT speaking to jobs, to security?’ Right. We need to repackage everything to fit the new agenda.*”

While neither our respondents nor we have a crystal ball, the scholarship and practice suggest that if FLEGT is a fad, it will fade away and something else will arise. Several respondents predicted that zero deforestation and a broadening of FLEGT to other (non-forest) commodities will overtake FLEGT as the ‘next big thing’. As one NGO respondent put it, “*[zero] deforestation is much bigger than the timber trade. ... So that is the next big wave. And one thing you hear is to what extent can we utilize the FLEGT approach for other commodities.*” This shows how, as the conservation and development community moves on to the next fad, they intend to take the ‘success’ of FLEGT and ‘recycle’ its focus on legality by applying it wholesale to the much ‘bigger’ arena of food production. Alarming absent from mention, is the even farther reaching negative impacts this may have on the local communities and small-scale actors who are at threat of criminalization under the FLEGT VPA system.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The aim of this paper was to evaluate FLEGT VPAs in relation to the growing debate around fads within the development-conservation nexus. We found that FLEGT follows the pattern of what is considered a fad: high initial enthusiasm, discrepancies between plans and realities, and waning interest. Specifically, we have shown how EU FLEGT stakeholders demonstrated initial enthusiasm and devoted significant energy and resources into developing a central mechanism to reduce illegal timber trade: the VPAs. Many of these stakeholders, in turn, have declared FLEGT a success in terms of its broader stated goals of governance reform, as witnessed by the level of stakeholder involvement in FLEGT countries in establishing legality verification systems. However

the process of developing these trade-based legality verification systems has also been much more challenging than anticipated, with only one FLEGT licensing system established after 15 years and around a billion Euro of investment. This has been discouraging for FLEGT proponents, who were bolstered by the Indonesian VPA and licensing system in 2016, but who must now wonder whether another is imminent or even likely, and who increasingly face the threat of disengagement including financial cutback from the EU. As a result of these discrepancies between FLEGT plans and on-the-ground realities, support for FLEGT is starting to wane, signaled by respondents' expressions and descriptions of fatigue.

We also argue that debates over the priorities and successes of FLEGT can be understood as evocative of parallel debates over (a) the degree to which FLEGT should function simply as a market-based mechanism to address forest problems, whereby the dearth of FLEGT licenses signals a failure either in its design or implementation, or (b) its inefficient attention to larger issues of governance and local wellbeing. These debates are far from new. They echo debates, for example, over REDD+, which seems stuck in the preparatory ('readiness') phase and has yet to achieve its stated goal of results-based payments for reduced forest emissions (see Fletcher et al., 2016, Angelsen et al., 2017; Lund et al., 2017). If the fad debate holds true, we would expect to see abandonment within the next decade and a cross-over to the 'next big thing', signaling a re-birth of a new market-based approach to address forest governance, as Fletcher et al. (2016) suggest. If our analysis is correct, the substantive outcomes of VPAs will be marginal. However, and as witnessed by the various arguments of what makes FLEGT a 'success', its focus on legality and reinforcement of state power and the 'rule of law', and its focus on international trade, along with its involvement of a select group of civil society organizations in multi-stakeholder processes, may well live on and re-emerge in the 'next big thing' in international conservation.

We find the concept of conservation fads, as proposed by Redford et al. (2013), useful for understanding FLEGT's evolution thus far, and for predicting its future trajectory. However, like Fletcher et al. (2017) and Lund et al. (2017), we argue that the lessons learned are about more than the need for incremental adjustments in future approaches to address deforestation and forest degradation. Rather, the narratives of rationale and progress for FLEGT have been crafted and managed with care, both to save the initiative (e.g. pushing resources into countries where success is most imminent), and to depict the work of practitioners in a positive light. Surely learning takes place (see Overdevest and Zeitlin (2018) for a description of incremental ('recursive') learning for some through VPAs), and we are careful not to suggest that fads are followed by complete rebirth of the next initiative. Remnants of FLEGT are likely to be durable regardless of what comes next. For example, EU Member States that have already set up monitoring systems to comply with the EUTR continue to implement these systems even after FLEGT. The focus on legality and possibly the proliferation of legality certification and licensing may also persist. But as support for FLEGT wanes, we suggest that rather than pursuing VPAs in producing countries or implementing robust monitoring systems in EU states, actors will be more interested in the emerging new mechanism that develops - denoting a rather narrow 'learning' oriented toward self-preservation. Such learning suggests the further stabilization of status quo approaches to respond to deeply political natural resource and social conundrums, and to the perpetuation of the phenomena of fads in future development and environmental policy and governance.

In light of this, we reiterate calls by for instance Fletcher et al. (2017, 723) to also - and particularly- acknowledge the overarching political economy of development and environmental funding and implementation, and to acknowledge that the future of conservation and development "in general lies not in finding 'new' tools for expanding markets but in better sharing the wealth we already have". In the early nineties, Ferguson and Lohmann (1994) struggled with the question of, 'What should we do?' We know that it is surely not enough to recognize

fads and acknowledge that approaches are not as new as we may think they are. As Ferguson and Lohmann (1994, 181) and later scholars point out, "There is a ready ear for critique of 'bad development projects', only so long as these are followed up with calls for 'good development projects'". Things seem to have changed little since then. In response to the question of what should we do - and in ready acknowledgement that 'nothing' is not an option - they provocatively suggest that 'we' (the global concerned elite, particularly those in the 'West') engage first and foremost in the politics of our own societies. It is here that the unsustainable and unethical global systems both were birthed and are perpetuated today. It is here that the 'need' for development intervention originates and is maintained.

Returning to the analysis of FLEGT VPAs as a fad, the question is begged: is there a way for forest governance change without a chain of fads to propel the interests of policy-makers? By definition, fads start with a wave of enthusiasm. This enthusiasm attracts funding that can be useful in addressing complex forest governance issues. Each successive fad is characterized by the hopes of policy-makers that this time, the scheme will work, and even possibly that there has been learning from the struggles for success in past attempts. 'Failures' framed as 'lessons learned' give cause to try again, but the repeated attempts come from the same logic we see in FLEGT, in which realities on the ground that created discrepancies are not addressed sufficiently to meaningfully resolve local and political dilemmas. While 'innovative' solutions such as FLEGT propel global efforts to address deforestation, their central logic of market-based mechanisms (i.e. trade) attempts to redress a market-based problem (markets for timber that encourage illegal deforestation). This in-the-box thinking has so far proven ineffective in resolving the root problems of unsustainable and unethical natural resource management. An alternative approach, which would be a point of departure from successive market-based and neo-liberal approaches, would look quite different. It might, for example, be rooted in robust land tenure security, traditional knowledge, local initiative and ownership of that initiative, and based on notions of local control over natural resources. An approach that takes these dilemmas into account would be therefore a truly novel approach has yet to be tested widely. Our central argument is that in order for substantive governance change to take place, truly new approaches to forest problems must break free of the persistent logic that trade will correct the problems that trade and consumption create.

Declaration of interest statement

Sabaheta Ramcilovik-Suominen was employed by the European Forest Institute (EFI) in the period of 2007–2012, where she used to work on FLEGT related issues. Under the auspices of the European Commission, EFI acts as the FLEGT facilitating body. There are no current relevant personal or professional relationships to acknowledge to this effect.

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