

# Gabon

## Country Overview

### Politics

Gabon is a presidential republic comprised of an executive branch, a bicameral legislative branch, and a judicial branch made up of four specialized supreme courts. The executive branch and both houses of the legislative branch are currently dominated by the Gabonese Democratic Party (*Parti Démocratique Gabonais*, PDG). The current president, Ali Bongo Ondimba, has been in power since 2009 (succeeding his father's 41-year tenure in the same position)<sup>1</sup> and will not be up for reelection until 2023, after having won a disputed election in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International notes that "power is distributed largely through patronage."<sup>3</sup>

### Economy

The World Bank classifies Gabon as an upper middle income country that has experienced "strong economic growth" over the past decade.<sup>4</sup> This growth has come primarily from the country's oil industry, which is the fifth largest in all of Africa and (on average) accounts for 80 percent of the country's exports, 45 percent of GDP, and 60 percent of budget revenue.<sup>5</sup> In recent years however, oil production has begun to slip, resulting in a 2.7 percent GDP deficit in 2016.<sup>6</sup> Other industries such as manganese production, wood-processing, agribusiness and services are beginning to fill the void being created by the slumping oil industry, but Gabon's poor business climate has impeded these industries' ability to grow.<sup>7</sup>

### Social/Human Development

The United Nations Human Development Programme ranks Gabon as 109<sup>th</sup> in its human development ranking system with a score of 0.697 (0.531 when adjusted for inequality).<sup>8</sup> While the country is relatively wealthy due to its oil economy, poverty remains widespread, and youth unemployment remains high. Oil wealth has also fueled massive urbanization, with 87.2 percent of the total population residing in urban areas as of 2015.<sup>9</sup>

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 913 refugees and 1,986 asylum seekers in the country as of 2016.<sup>10</sup> There are reports that government employees require that refugees pay illegal fees to access services with no repercussions.<sup>11</sup>



## U.S. Department of State TIP Report Summary (2017)

### U.S. Department of State TIP Ranking: Tier 2 Watch List

According to the *Trafficking in Persons Report*, trafficking and trafficking risk was noted in potentially exported supply chains including fishing.

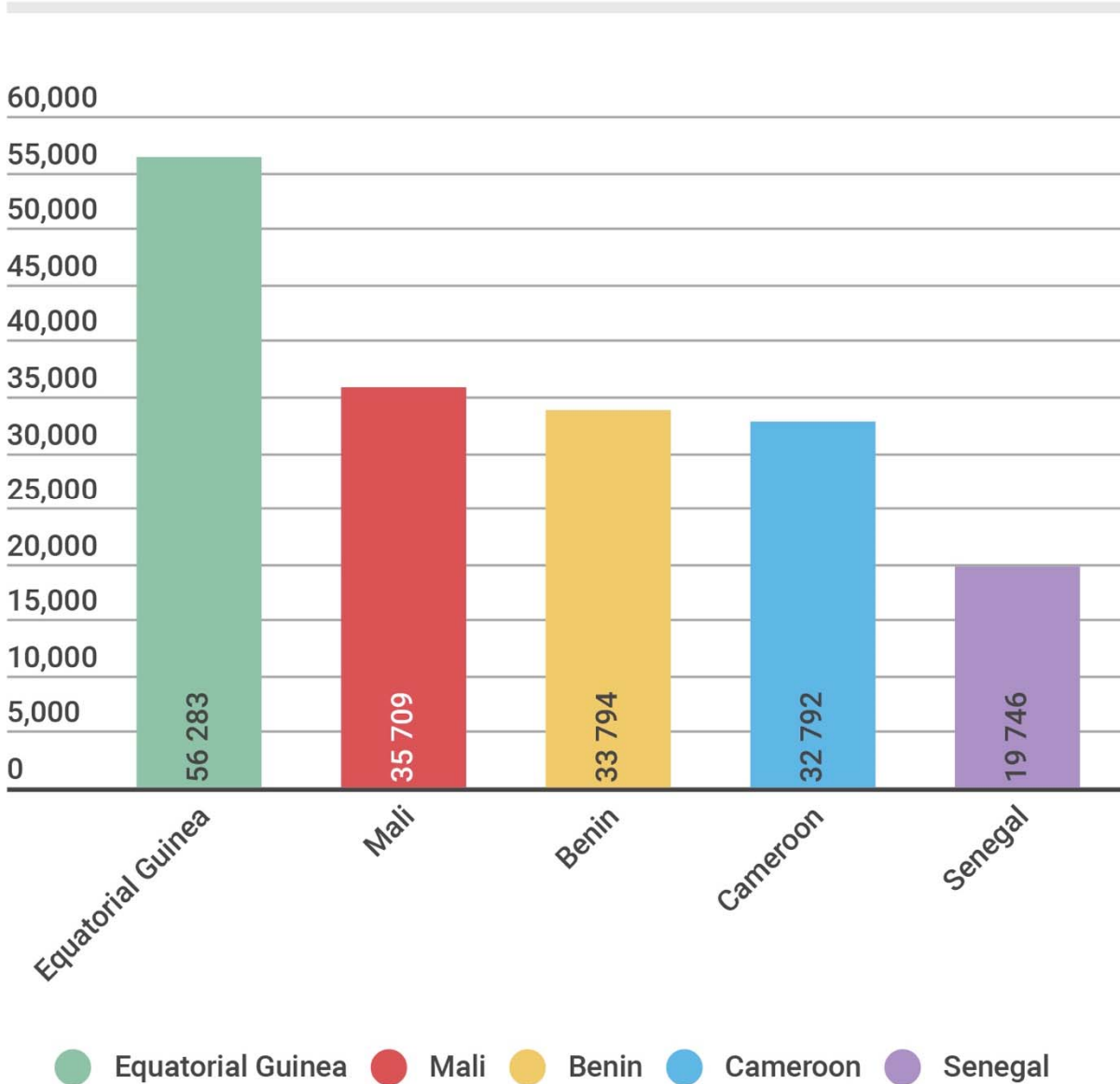
Read the full TIP Report at: <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/countries/2017/271190.htm>

## Migrant and Other Vulnerable Populations

Gabon receives a modest number of annual migrants (5,000 in 2012), and as of 2015 there were 268,384 total migrants in the country accounting for 15.6 percent of the population.<sup>12</sup> The main source countries for migrants living in Gabon are Equatorial Guinea, Mali, Benin, and Cameroon with 56,283; 35,709; 33,794; and 32,794 total migrants residing in Gabon from each country respectively.<sup>13</sup>



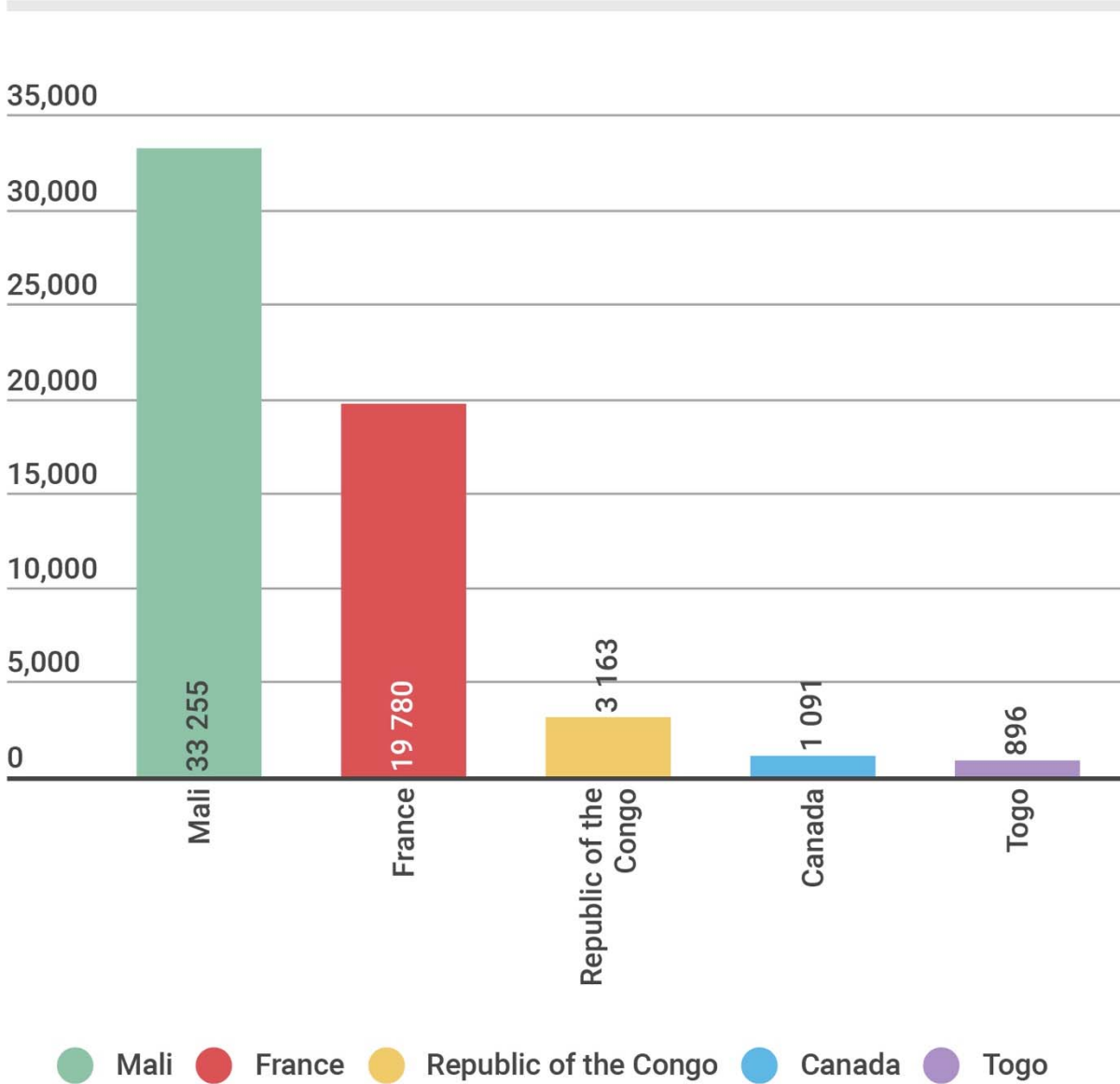
## Migrants to Gabon



There were an estimated 2,884 persons of concern in Gabon at the end of 2015, with asylum seekers making up 67.3 percent of the persons of concern and refugees making up the balance.<sup>14</sup>



## Migrants from Gabon



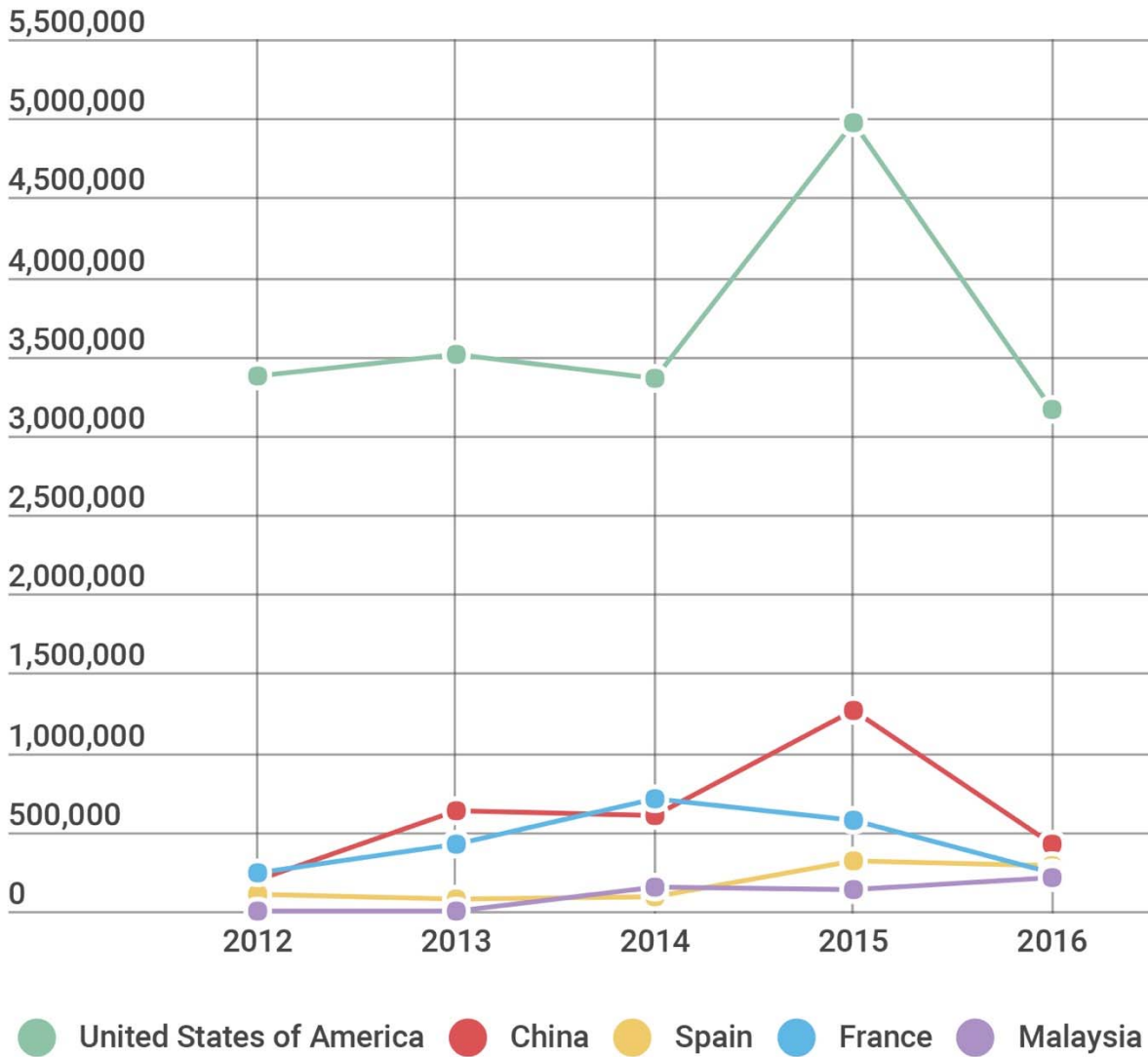
## Exports and Trade

Gabon's top exports in 2016 were mineral fuels, manganese, wood, gold, and rubber.<sup>15</sup>

### Top Commodity Exports (USD/Thousands)



## Gabon Export Partners (USD/Thousands)



The top importers of goods from Gabon in 2016 were China, Australia, Italy, Korea, France, the Netherlands, Spain, the United States, and the United Kingdom.<sup>16</sup>



## Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors Analysis

### Legal/Policy Risk Factors

#### Level of Legal Protection for Civil Liberties and Workers' Rights

##### Freedom of Association

Workers in Gabon have the right to join unions and collectively bargain with their employers. Unions must be registered with the government, and registration is usually granted to those who request it. There are protections for workers who have been dismissed for union activities, and strikes are permitted with eight days' notice only after arbitration with the employer has failed. Public sector employees are permitted to unionize but are not allowed to strike, as the government claims that this right could impinge upon public safety and security.<sup>17</sup> These protections do not extend to the informal sector or to industries in which the majority of the workforce is comprised of migrants, notably, the mining and forestry industries.<sup>18</sup> There are reports that some union-affiliated individuals have faced termination and industry blacklisting due to their organizing activities.<sup>19</sup>

##### Working Conditions

The national monthly minimum wage in Gabon is CFA 150,000 (257 USD), and the government defines the poverty income level as CFA 80,000 (137 USD) per month per family. Labor laws stipulate a 40-hour workweek with at least 48 hours of consecutive rest. Compensation for overtime work is determined by collective bargaining or government regulation. The law also provides for basic safety and health standards within the formal sector of the economy, which are generally adhered to and/or enforced by the Ministry of Health.<sup>20</sup>

##### Discrimination

Gabonese labor laws prohibit discrimination regarding employment and work conditions based on race, color, sex, religion, political opinion, disability, national origin or citizenship, or social background. The law does not address discrimination against individuals based on gender identity, sexual orientation, language or age, and no law addresses an individual's right to equal pay for equal work. Individuals who identify as LGBTQ, are HIV/AIDS positive, belong to an indigenous group, or migrated to Gabon in search of work are routinely subjected to workplace discrimination.<sup>21</sup>



## Forced Labor

Gabonese law prohibits forced or compulsory labor, but bonded labor remains legal. Enforcement of the prohibitions on forced and compulsory labor is reportedly not adequate, particularly for adult victims.<sup>22</sup>

## Child Labor

The legal minimum age for work in Gabon is 16 and this law is sufficiently enforced within the formal sector. However, in the informal sector child labor is much more prevalent, and the Gabonese government reportedly rarely enforces applicable child labor laws. Non-citizen children are especially vulnerable, and many work in markets or as domestic servants to wealthier citizen families.<sup>23</sup>

## Civil Society Organizations

There are several non-governmental organizations in Gabon that monitor human rights without substantial interference from the government. However, during the lead-up to the 2016 presidential elections, some groups reported heightened governmental interference in their work.<sup>24</sup>

## Political Risk Factors

### Political Instability or Conflict

Gabon scored a 73.8 in the Fragile States Index, placing it in the “warning” category.<sup>25</sup>

The main source of tension in the country continues to be the violent targeting of opposition political parties and street protests.<sup>26</sup>

### Level of Corruption

The Transparency International Corruption Perception Index scores Gabon as a 35 out of 100, where a 0 signals “Highly Corrupt” and 100 signals “Very Clean”. Gabon ranked 101 out of 176 on that index.<sup>27</sup> The U.S. Department of State has said that government officials “often engaged in corrupt practices with impunity,” and corruption is also endemic within the police force and the state security apparatus, as officers of the law supplement their income by demanding bribes at illegal vehicle checkpoints.<sup>28</sup> The extractives industry has also been a major source of corruption, particularly within the ruling family, as oil revenue has been diverted into the private accounts of connected elites.<sup>29</sup> The World Economic Forum also lists government corruption as the largest obstacle to doing business in the country.<sup>30</sup>





## State Persecution

Violence and arbitrary detentions targeting citizens and political rivals of the ruling Gabonese Democratic Party (PDG) were commonplace during the disputed presidential elections of 2016. There are reports that government forces committed unlawful killings in the weeks following the elections and also killed between 20-50 demonstrators while dispersing protests around this time. Detained protesters were also reported to have suffered abuses while in the custody of state security forces. State security forces also raided the headquarters of opposition candidate Jean Ping in the aftermath of the election, killing two and disappearing many others.<sup>31</sup>

Refugees and immigrants have been subjected to abuses at the hands of state security forces, including harassment, extortion, beatings, and detention.<sup>32</sup> Amnesty International notes that refugees are “discriminated against socially, economically and politically.”<sup>33</sup>

## Socio-Economic Risk Factors

### Level of National Economic Development

The United Nations Human Development Programme ranks Gabon as 109<sup>th</sup> in its human development ranking system with a score of 0.697 (0.531 when adjusted for inequality).<sup>34</sup> In comparison, neighboring Republic of Congo, Cameroon, and Equatorial Guinea rank 135<sup>th</sup>, 153<sup>rd</sup>, and 135<sup>th</sup> respectively (Congo and Equatorial Guinea are tied).<sup>35</sup>

### Level and Extent of Poverty

According to the United Nations, Gabon’s Human Development Index score drops from 0.697 to 0.531 when adjusted for inequality, signaling the prevalence of poverty in the West African nation. While Gabon does not have a Multidimensional Poverty Index score, 20.4 percent of those living in Gabon are considered to be “working poor” living on less than 3.10 PPP a day.<sup>36</sup>

### Degree of Gender Inequality

Gender inequality in Gabon is prevalent, and although the country does not have a Gender Development Index Score, there are a variety of other statistics that we can use to extrapolate the levels of inequality which Gabonese women face. Women make (on average) 7,913 PPP less than their male counterparts annually,<sup>37</sup> and there is no law which requires equal pay for equal work.<sup>38</sup> Gabonese law, however, does require for a married woman to acquire permission from her spouse to apply for a passport and travel abroad.<sup>39</sup> Rape cases are seldom pursued by authorities, and spousal rape is not



addressed in Gabonese law. There is also no law which prohibits sexual harassment, and it is reportedly a widespread problem. Women also face substantial societal discrimination, especially in financial dealings, and married women find it hard to open bank accounts or own assets without their husband's permission (especially in rural areas).<sup>40</sup> Despite the state-sanctioned misogyny and rampant gender-based inequality which exists in Gabon, women do own property, own businesses, and participate in politics, albeit at a far lower rate than their male counterparts.<sup>41</sup>

## Immigration Policies Limiting the Employment Options or Movements of Migrants

Gabonese law requires that a company operating within the country only employ a migrant workforce which accounts for 10 percent or less of the company's workers. This law has been increasingly enforced in recent years. Gabonese law also requires that foreign workers acquire a work permit from the Ministry of Labor, and non-Gabonese African workers have a harder time landing these work permits than expat workers of other nationalities.<sup>42</sup>

## Ratification of ILO Conventions Related to Human Trafficking or Rights of Workers and Migrants

Conventions	Status
ILO 29 Forced Labor	In force
ILO 87 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize	In force
ILO 98 Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining	In force
ILO 100 Equal Remuneration	In force
ILO 105 Abolition of Forced Labor	In force
ILO 111 Discrimination	In force
ILO 138 Minimum Age	In force
ILO 181 Private Employment Agencies	In force
ILO 182 Worst Forms of Child Labor	In force
ILO 97 Migration for Employment	In force



## Use of Export Processing Zones (EPZs)

Gabon has two Export Processing Zones (EPZs), but there are no special exemptions from labor laws provided to companies which operate within them.<sup>43</sup>

## Landlessness and Dispossession

According to the UNHCR, there are currently no internally displaced or stateless individuals residing in Gabon.<sup>44</sup>

Refugees and asylum seekers are sometimes subjected to harassment, detention and/or forced deportation<sup>45</sup> at the hands of security forces.<sup>46</sup>

Indigenous peoples have historically faced forced relocation out of their traditional lands towards urban centers, but the majority of this dispossession happened in the late colonial and early independence years.<sup>47</sup>

## Environmental Factors

The main environmental concern in Gabon is deforestation linked to the logging and palm oil industries. One report by the U.S.-based non-profit Mighty shows that palm oil plantations owned by the Singaporean company Olam have cleared 20,000 hectares (ha) of forest to make way for palm oil plantations, a number that is double the Forest Stewardship Council's (FSC) 10,000 ha threshold for 'unacceptable' forest conversion.<sup>48</sup>

## Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Key Commodity Supply Chains

### Oil

#### Oil Overview

Between 2012 and 2017, the oil sector represented more than two thirds of export earnings on average, leaving sharp revenue reductions after the global drop in oil prices in 2014.<sup>49</sup> Outputs have been dropping since 1997.<sup>50</sup> In response to drops in revenue, the government was reportedly planning steep budget cuts, particularly in the health and infrastructure sectors.<sup>51</sup>

#### Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Oil Production

No trafficking has been documented directly in the oil and gas extractive sectors, but Gabon's oil wealth draws a relatively large number of migrants from neighboring countries. Due in part to corruption and mismanagement in the sector, there are few available jobs, creating vulnerable populations with few



viable income opportunities and creating tension between native Gabonese people and migrant populations.<sup>52</sup>

## Forestry/Wood

### Forestry/Wood Overview

All of Gabon's forests are owned by the government.<sup>53</sup> Almost half of Gabon's forested hectares are allocated as concessions for commercial production.<sup>54</sup> Forestry and wood products are still central to the Gabonese economy, although they've been displaced in terms of value by oil production. It is the top employer with nearly 30 percent of the workforce. There are roughly 30,000 workers in the sector.<sup>55</sup> The Okoume species, which is used for plywood, dominates exports. The government banned export of unprocessed wood in 2010 to support the local wood processing industry.<sup>56</sup> China is the biggest buyer of wood products followed by Europe. 90 percent of logs produced are for export.<sup>57</sup>

### Documented Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors in Forestry/Wood Production

In spite of attempts at government regulation, illegal logging is reportedly growing.<sup>58</sup> An estimated 30 percent of logging activities are illegal.<sup>59</sup> Within illegal activity is the practice of *fermage* in which "the permit owner, unable or unwilling to engage in logging activities, rents the logging rights for a concession to a third party in exchange for a fee."<sup>60</sup> This practice depresses government tax revenues and disincentivizes long-term responsible management of concessions.<sup>61</sup> In 2015, 30 people, including government employees, were reportedly arrested for an illegal logging ring.<sup>62</sup>

Where companies are operating to log legally, local livelihoods are still at risk. A relatively weak legal framework for land rights allows forestry companies operating in Gabon to avoid compensation to former land tenants.<sup>63</sup>

As the government promotes logging and forestry, some media reports have noted that attracting adequate labor will be a challenge.<sup>64</sup>

Logging activity opens access to forest previously inaccessible to any outside populations, and the logging sector in Gabon has reportedly increased the bushmeat trade in Gabon. Logging employees reportedly supplement their income with bushmeat trade.<sup>65</sup> This increase in hunting in previously inaccessible areas may decrease biodiversity and contribute further to environmental degradation and loss of traditional livelihoods.





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## Endnotes

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