



Is Amazon nut certification a solution for increased smallholder empowerment in Peruvian Amazonia?



Julia Quaedvlieg^a, Ing. Mishari García Roca^b, Mirjam A.F. Ros-Tonen^{c,*}

^aAsociación Huarayo/Consortium Madre de Dios, Av. 26 de Diciembre 247, Puerto Maldonado, Madre de Dios, Peru

^bNational Amazonian University of Madre de Dios (UNAMAD), Ciudad Universitaria, Av. Jorge Chavez s/n, Puerto Maldonado, Madre de Dios, Peru

^cDepartment of Human Geography, Planning and International Development, University of Amsterdam, Plantage Muidergracht 14, 1018 TV Amsterdam, The Netherlands

A B S T R A C T

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The certification of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) was introduced in the early 2000s as a means of promoting sustainable community forestry and smallholders' access to profitable niche markets. Several studies have been carried out to analyze the success of smallholder certification, with a focus on its feasibility, compliance with sustainability standards and livelihoods effects. Much less attention has been given to certification as a process that promotes the empowerment and inclusion of small producers in natural resource management. Based on a study of three Amazon nut (*Bertholletia excelsa*) certifications (Forest Stewardship Council, organic and Fairtrade) carried out in Madre de Dios, Peru, in 2008 and 2010 this paper aims to fill part of the gap by assessing five empowerment outcomes of Amazon nut certification schemes nearly a decade after their introduction. The findings show that certification enhances producers' political empowerment (having a voice based on representation and social organization and increased self-confidence in one's ability to effect change) by increasing their organizational capacity and managerial know-how. However, limited demand, monetary benefits and economic viability are major constraints on their economic empowerment (increased assets and capabilities that enable them to benefit from new opportunities and freedom to make economic decisions). The authors argue that only stronger social organization will enable certification to break the hierarchical economic structures that disadvantage producers and prevent their replacement with new dependencies on donor and NGO support.

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1. Introduction

Forest certification was introduced in the 1990s as a strategy to promote sustainable forest management (Meidinger et al., 2003; Rametsteiner and Simula, 2003). Although it was initially applied almost exclusively to timber operations, it was extended to non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in the early 2000s as a means of promoting sustainable community forestry and – together with product certification under Fairtrade and organic umbrellas – improving smallholders' incomes through access to profitable niche markets (Shanley et al., 2002, 2008; Taylor, 2005a). Several studies have been carried out to analyze the success of smallholder certification, with a focus on the adoption of, and compliance with, sustainability standards, the feasibility of smallholder certification,

the distribution of benefits, and the livelihoods effects (e.g. Molnar, 2003; Taylor, 2005a,b; Bacon, 2005, 2010). Governance aspects of certification have also been amply addressed in literature, either in terms of global environmental governance (e.g. Visseren-Hamakers and Glasbergen, 2007), 'governance through integration' (with national legislation) (Pattberg, 2006), institutional governance of certification processes (e.g. Auld et al., 2008; Mutersbaugh, 2002), or commodity or value chain governance (Klooster, 2005; Taylor, 2005a,b). In contrast with literature on coffee certification in Mexico (Bray et al., 2002; Mutersbaugh, 2002) and Nicaragua (Bacon, 2005, 2010), forestry literature has hardly paid any attention to forest and forest product certification as processes that promote the inclusion and empowerment of small producers in natural resource management. Based on a study of *castaña* or Amazon nut¹ (*Bertholletia excelsa*) certification carried out in Madre

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +31 (0)20 525 4179; fax: +31 (0)20 525 4051.

E-mail addresses: juliaquaedvlieg@gmail.com (J. Quaedvlieg), madreselva.consultores@gmail.com (Ing. M. García Roca), m.a.f.ros-tonen@uva.nl (M.A.F. Ros-Tonen).

¹ Following Assies (1997) we prefer the term Amazon nut for *Bertholletia excelsa* to its more commonly used name 'Brazil nut' to acknowledge that these nuts also grow in other Amazonian countries, notably Bolivia and Peru.

de Dios, Peru, in 2008 and 2010, this paper aims to fill part of the gap. It addresses the question of how forest and Amazon nut product certification under Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Fairtrade and organic schemes impact on extractors' empowerment nearly a decade after their introduction in the Peruvian Amazon.

After clarifying the methodology used in this study, we outline the theoretical strands underlying the analysis. In doing so, we first review the NTFP certification debate and then zoom in on empowerment and social and political capital. In the results section we first provide background information on the Peruvian Amazon nut sector and the extractors involved. Next we review Amazon nut certification schemes and processes in Peru. We then analyze the effects of Amazon nut certification in Madre de Dios in terms of the material benefits of certification and the dependencies related to them. Finally, we look at how social and political capital, or the lack of it, influences producers' empowerment. In the discussion we relate the findings to the empowerment framework and broader literature. We argue that only stronger social organization will enable certification to break the hierarchical economic structures that disadvantage producers and prevent their replacement with new dependencies on donor and NGO support.

2. Methodology

2.1. Study area

Data for this paper was collected during fieldwork carried out in 2008 and 2010 in the Peruvian region of Madre de Dios, located in southeast Peruvian Amazonia (Fig. 1). Madre de Dios covers 8.5 million ha of humid tropical forest (INEI, 2007; Holdridge, 1967). The principal economic activities in the region include mining, forestry, agriculture, tourism, ranching and hydrocarbon prospecting (ProInversion, 2008). The population was 109,600 in 2007 (INEI, 2007) and is growing rapidly. The majority of Madre de Dios residents migrated from the Andean highlands.

Most Amazon nut concessions in Madre de Dios are located in the southeastern portion of the region. They are inhabited during the harvest in the rainy season (December–March), when these areas are difficult to access. During the rest of the year *castañeros* generally live in settlements nearby, or in, the regional capital of Puerto Maldonado. For this reason we sought interviewees in Puerto Maldonado and various smaller towns including Alerta, Mavila, Alegria, Planchón and Triunfo, all of which are located along the Inter-Oceanic Highway in the zone with Amazon nut

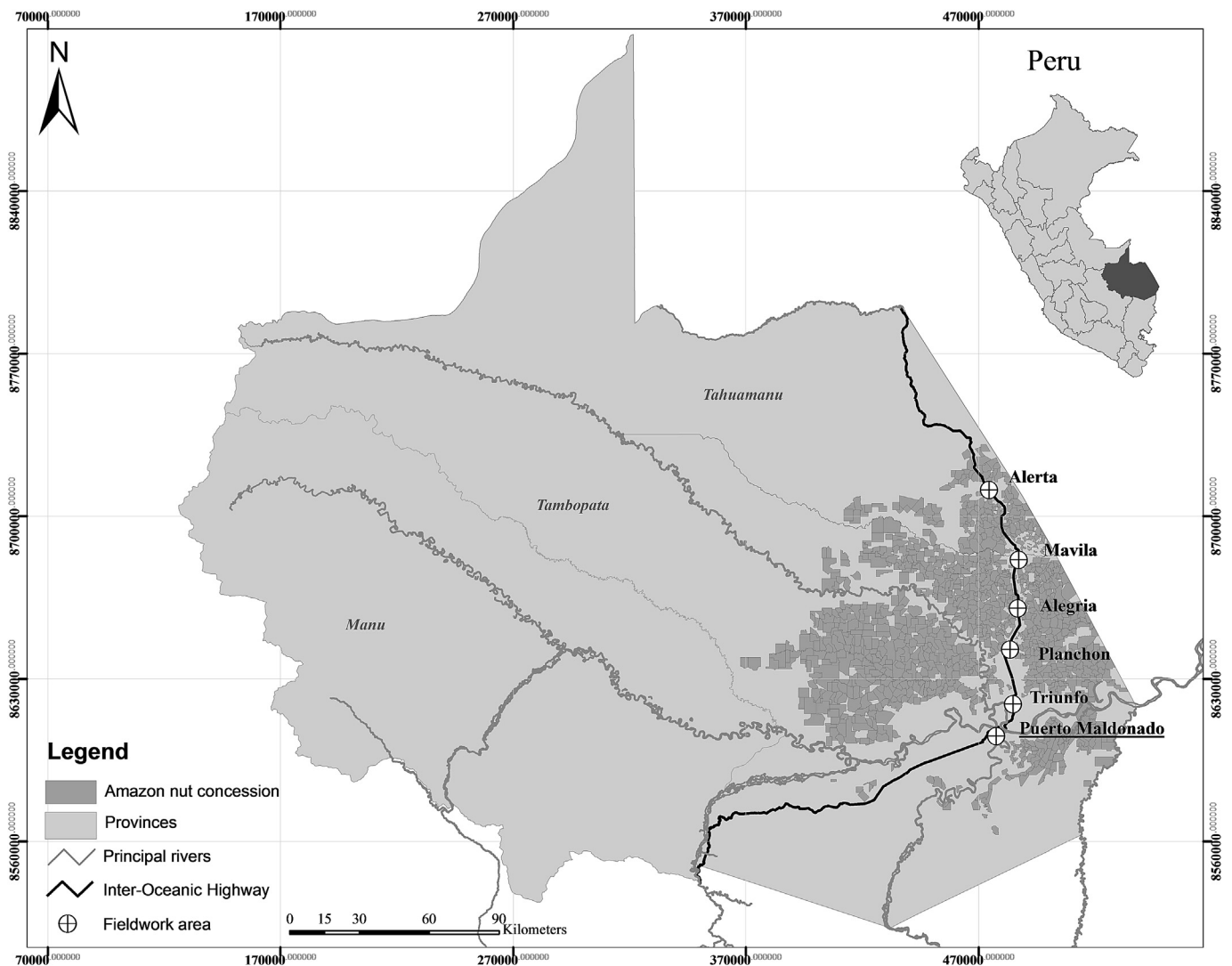


Fig. 1. The study area.

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