



Research frontiers in community forest management

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Community forest management (CFM) has been promoted worldwide as a means to conserve forests, recognize community rights, and improve local livelihoods. Here, we synthesize findings across recent CFM studies and identify two thematic and one methodological trend at the forefront of CFM scholarship. The first thematic trend is an examination of community forest enterprises as hybrid business models. The second is the increase of studies examining how REDD+ can contribute to the goals of CFM, and vice versa. The key methodological trend is the use of secondary data sets to determine outcomes of CFM policies at regional and national scales. These three trends add new perspectives to the debate on the effectiveness of CFM as a forest policy and institutional intervention.

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Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability 2018, **32**:119–125

This review comes from a themed issue on **Environmental change issues**

Edited by **Arun Agrawal, Chuan Liao, Cristy Watkins, Laura Vang Rasmussen, and Reem Hajjar**

Received: 29 November 2017; Accepted: 08 June 2018

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2018.06.003>

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Introduction

Forests provide essential environmental services and contribute directly to the livelihoods of more than one billion people living in or close to forests [1]. Since the mid-1980s, numerous governments and international organizations have promoted community forest management (CFM) as a way to consolidate and streamline various conservation, natural resource management rights, and rural development agendas [2]. Although most forests are still under government ownership and control, local communities now manage approximately 13% of forests globally. The proportion increases to 30% in low

and middle income countries,⁴ and international sustainability agendas have re-emphasized the importance of rights-based approaches to sustainable development⁵ [3].

The growth and expansion of community forest management globally has been accompanied by a comprehensive body of literature focused on the conditions that promote and facilitate equitable community forest management, and positive forest and livelihood outcomes. Much of this literature has focused on case study analyses to develop theoretical arguments and gather empirical evidence about how local institutional conditions and different governance arrangements influence community forest outcomes. These studies provide a complex picture of what drives social and environmental outcomes of CFM, with clear examples of successes and failures. Several syntheses and meta-analyses have sought to bring together lessons learned from case studies around the world in an attempt to produce more generalizable findings about what conditions lead to favorable, or unfavorable, CFM outcomes [4–14]. Several of these studies point to the importance of tenure security, government support for CFM, and effective and appropriate regulatory frameworks [4,7,10,11] as exogenous factors that aid in CFM success. These add to the governance and institutional factors within communities that shape successful common-pool resource management, such as local rule-making autonomy [15], monitoring and sanctioning [16], local organization, social capital, and leadership [4,6,17,18].

This rich and growing literature on CFM continues to shed additional light on processes and outcomes, with scholars looking to answer the questions, what works where, and why? Here, we take stock of the CFM literature since 2014,⁶ the year that data were collected

⁴ RRI Tenure Data and Tools; URL: <http://rightsandresources.org/en/work-impact/tenure-data-tool/>.

⁵ For example, see activities of the newly established International Land and Forest Tenure Facility <http://thetenurefacility.org/>.

⁶ From an initial pool of 749 articles obtained using search criteria related to CFM, we narrowed down our review to 82 articles by screening paper titles and abstracts for relevancy to CFM. We defined CFM as a forest being collectively managed by at least three households, and focus on natural forest management and reforestation projects in less industrialized nations in Latin American, African, and Asia-Pacific regions (where most community forests are located). We excluded cases of afforestation or exotic species plantations [12]. 40 of the 82 articles were categorized as addressing one of the three trends described here. In addition to the papers reviewed since 2014, we occasionally refer to key papers published before 2014 for comparisons with the most recent literature.

for the latest systematic review [12]. We find that much of the literature continues to focus on case studies addressing themes that have dominated the literature since the 1990s, including (i) outcomes of CFM interventions, including whether CFM has increased local incomes, access to forest products, and forest cover — with mixed results; and (ii) power relations and institutional arrangements when CFM processes have resulted in limited devolution of power and/or benefits. However, we also find three prominent trends, which we suggest are at the frontier of CFM scholarship. Two of these trends are thematic, and one is methodological. The first thematic trend examines the mechanics of community forest enterprises as hybrid business models that can drive local prosperity. The second trend focuses on how Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) mechanisms are superimposed on, and overlap with, existing decentralized institutional arrangements, and how they contribute to or impede community forest management goals. The methodological trend focuses on the use of secondary socio-economic and environmental datasets to determine outcomes of CFM policies at regional and national scales, shifting scholarship away from local case studies. These research frontiers provide new perspectives and methods with which to understand social and environmental synergies and tradeoffs of CFM.

The mechanics of community forest enterprises

The contributions of community forestry to local livelihoods has been a common theme in much of the CFM literature to date, extensively describing CFM contributions to both subsistence and commercial livelihoods. However, less common are analyses of community forest enterprises (CFEs) as business models—social or hybrid enterprises aiming to balance community development and ecological sustainability, while remaining financially viable [19]. A series of recent papers have focused on community forest enterprises as businesses, primarily addressing two topic areas: cost–benefit analyses that examine the financial efficiency and viability of CFEs; and exploring CFE’s organizational behavior, from a business management perspective.

Past studies have noted the difficulties CFEs have in remaining financially viable without external support and funding, usually in the form of limited-term NGO or governmental aid [17,20,21]. More recent studies have demonstrated that financial viability of CFEs is possible, but that it is dependent on key enabling conditions. In a sample of 30 CFEs in Mexico, all but one CFE showed profits in forest and timber management, and communities with lumber processing infrastructure saw the greatest returns despite high production costs relative to other countries [22]. Another study in Mexico examined the cost-effectiveness of various logging mechanisms and technologies, commenting on the need to balance

efficiency and desired co-benefits such as employment [23], reflecting the multiple goals of these hybrid businesses. In the Brazilian Amazon, community timber production cooperatives were found to be financially viable in one region [24, Humphries *et al.*, accepted by World Development], but other community timber businesses in a similar region were less viable [25], with poor market access making it difficult to overcome the costs associated with managing a forest legally.

Recent works on CFEs have also focused on the internal workings of these hybrid business models, and how they interact with external contextual factors. In looking at CFEs as business entities, these works have borrowed theoretical frameworks from the business management literature on organizational behavior. Studies of managerial behavior in CFEs in Guatemala and Mexico found that different organizational forms play a role in reducing transaction costs in market exchanges; the authors call for enabling environments that reduce information asymmetries in relations between CFEs and their exchange partners, through better commercial relationships, social innovation, and entrepreneurship [26,27]. Elsewhere, authors have documented how communities have evolved innovative internal governance institutions to reconcile differences and disagreements among community members, while also navigating market turbulence [28]. Another study explored decision-making processes in vertically-integrated CFEs, highlighting how different governance arrangements are used to manage trade-offs between effectiveness and efficiency [29]. One study described different business models used by CFEs, with the authors stating that current typologies that characterize CFEs solely as social enterprises seem to be inadequate in capturing the variability in types of woodland enterprises [30]. Adding to the wide scholarship examining enabling environments conducive to fostering CFEs and other small-scale forest enterprises [31,32], recent work has also focused on internal CFE capacities, especially the need for competitive business and marketing skills, that are crucial for business success [33–35].

The above studies help to integrate perspectives of business management scholarship into what has previously been dominated by development discourse and common-pool resources theory, and can help practitioners to think through CFM challenges in ways that can foster these unique business models.

REDD+ and CFM

Although REDD+ is not a new topic, we find the focus on the links between CFM and REDD+ to be the most prominent trend in recent CFM literature, in terms of the number of articles addressing this topic. Although the primary objective of REDD+ is climate change mitigation, it has also received considerable attention for its

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