



Community forests for forest communities: Integrating community-defined goals and practices in the design of forestry initiatives



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ABSTRACT

Community forestry can deliver economic, socio-cultural, and ecological benefits to rural communities, yet criticisms have arisen that community forestry remains dominated by the decision-making of offsite experts and management techniques inappropriate for some communities. We use a case study approach to ascertain the needs, wants, and current realities of selected forest communities in Brazil and Mexico, to inform bottom-up approaches to community interventions. In identifying community-defined goals, we found that other livelihood strategies, particularly agricultural practices, need to be better integrated in the planning of forestry interventions overly focused on timber production. Site-specific intervention models need to take into account the variety of contexts and community interests, rather than replicating models that have been successful in other jurisdictions. A better understanding of local perspectives can aid in the design of community forestry interventions brought by conservation and development agencies, by adding an important and under-studied perspective to the problems that face community forestry.

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Introduction

Community forestry has been promoted globally to enhance the conservation and sustainable use of forests, consolidate rights over traditional lands and resources, and reduce rural poverty (Molnar et al., 2007; Pagdee et al., 2006). Decentralized forest governance has become a major global trend in the past three decades (Agrawal et al., 2008), with 22% of forests in tropical countries being community-owned or managed (RRI and ITTO, 2009). Some of the central tenets of community forestry and related small-scale enterprises include enhancing social justice, political empowerment, and participation of forest-dependent people (Larson and Soto, 2008; Ribot, 2004). Yet, despite the prevalent rhetoric of community empowerment and participation, community forestry is often promoted in a top-down manner. This occurs either by promoting industrial-scale forestry practices at the community level, or by putting forward the interests of agents outside the community.

Traditionally, government-sponsored forest sector development has favored large-scale industrial production and overlooked the development of small-scale commercial forestry (Donovan

et al., 2006). In many situations, industrial-scale logging practices have been used as the model on which community forestry is based (Amaral and Amaral Neto, 2005; McCarthy, 2006; Oyono, 2005). Requirements for legally-authorized commercialization of timber in Latin America oftentimes include complete tree inventories and management and annual operation plans elaborated by forest technicians. This often requires sophisticated technologies and practices that are out of the reach of most communities without significant external support (Benatti et al., 2003; Sabogal et al., 2008). On community-based natural resource management, Blaikie (2006) notes that communities are expected to deliver on scientific principles that are rarely community-constructed or locally-derived. Pokorny and Johnson (2008) state that existing support strategies for community forestry in the Amazon are based on the top-down transfer of knowledge generated by offsite experts. On the other hand, in Mexico, industrial processes that were thought to be out of reach of communities were adopted successfully when communities were provided with the appropriate support (Bray, 2004).

The support required by communities to fulfill the expectations of practicing forestry modeled on industrial-scale practices has, however, resulted in communities becoming reliant on external agents to develop forestry initiatives. In this way, yet another top-down approach is introduced into community forestry promotion; one where the agenda of the intervening (and often funding) agency is imposed on the local population. Cooke and Kothari (2001),

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Pulhin (1996), and Edmunds and Wollenberg (2003) present examples of participatory approaches to rural development that ended with manipulation of local populations and imposition of outside agendas rather than local empowerment. Medina et al. (2008, 2009) show how community forestry in the Amazon has been dominated by the interests of powers outside of the communities, namely, development and/or conservation agencies and industrial logging companies that form partnerships with communities. Even when agencies pursue participatory methods in community development projects, this often results in token measures with the appearance of community participation, while planning continues from the top-down (Evans et al., 2010 and citations within). Development projects often disregard local realities (Hoch et al., 2009), demanding from communities new technical, organizational, and managerial capacities to deal with markets and technologies suggested by the external agent (Pokorny and Johnson, 2008). In many of these cases, communities have become overly-reliant on external agents for financial and technical support, and initiatives risk failure when such subsidization ends (Medina and Pokorny, 2008).

The prevailing top-down nature of community forestry cannot be blamed for all problems facing community forests globally, and several authors have posited various explanations for ineffective enterprises and strategies for improving their chances of success, from enhancing market access to improving policy environments and technical capacities (reviewed in Molnar et al., 2007). This paper adds to these strategies by arguing for bottom-up approaches to designing community forestry initiatives as a way of promoting local empowerment and avoiding many of the problems associated with top-down approaches. It does not suggest that there are no roles for external agents to play; rather, a bottom-up approach that takes into account the needs, wants, and current realities of communities managing their forests can lead to better designed support systems brought from the outside.

In this vein, this study sought to ascertain aspects of forest management that are important to communities by asking local families how they benefit from their forests, how they manage their forests, and what they want from forestry initiatives. What emerged was a list of aspects related to forest management (stated desires and preferred practices) that were important to the studied communities. In enumerating these results, we also analyze local forest users' opinions across case studies by pointing out unique contexts that may have brought about such opinions. We then highlight where local opinions and desires contrast with introduced models of community forestry in the discussion. We conclude by arguing that these local opinions can and should be used to help design and inform community forestry interventions that would be more acceptable to the local users who are meant to benefit from them.

Methods

The purpose of this paper was to ascertain and analyze the needs, wants, and current realities of selected forest communities, and to point to contradictions between local users' desires and introduced community forestry models, where they exist. A case study approach was used to study community forestry initiatives in the Mexican Yucatán Peninsula and the Brazilian Amazon. These two regions provide interesting contextual differences for the case studies, with several historical and political contrasts in terms of community forestry development. Mexico is seen as having the most advanced community forestry sector in Latin America, with several examples of advanced enterprises (Charnley and Poe, 2007; Molnar et al., 2007), and has been promoted as a global model for sustainable landscapes (Bray et al., 2003; Klooster, 2003). Meanwhile, community forestry in Brazil, which came about from an exogenous push mostly from NGOs trying to promote more

sustainable forest practices in the Amazon (Amaral and Amaral Neto, 2005), has a comparatively short history, with mixed results to date (Pokorny et al., 2010). While this is not a comparative study, the contrasting experiences among the diverse community forestry models studied in these two regions provide insights into how community goals contrast between established models of community forestry (the Mexican cases) and less established models (the Brazilian cases).

Six cases were chosen for this study. Sampling of the case study communities was non-random and purposive (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) to have a variety of community forestry models represented. The case studies were selected with the help of local collaborators in both countries based on pre-existing research-based and professional relationships with the communities. The case communities were chosen to provide for meaningful comparisons of different, yet prevalent, contexts in each of the respective regions.¹ The case studies are varied across several characteristics: communal versus smallholder land ownership; date of introduction of the models; long-established communities versus recent colonists in government-sponsored rural settlements; and introduced community forestry models versus traditional/local management practices. The inclusion of sites without external intervention (one in each country) provided an important contrast of traditional practices with those being undertaken in introduced models.

In Mexico, the cases were: Caobas and Naranjal Poniente (Quintana Roo), both of which were part of a pilot programme of community forestry in the 1980s; and traditional forest management in Yaxcabá (Yucatán). In the 1980s, a Forestry Pilot Plan in several ejidos (communally-owned territories) in Quintana Roo established permanent forest areas, where agriculture was prohibited and for which community timber management plans were developed (Vester and Navarro-Martinez 2005). Communities were provided with training and infrastructure for forestry. This model of forestry continues in Caobas and Naranjal Poniente to this day, although annual cuts and acceptable tree diameters have been reviewed in light of more recent research and, in some cases, adapted to local conditions. No such programme was developed in Yaxcabá, and government attempts at introducing forest plantations in some ejidos were rejected by community members. Informal and formal non-timber forest enterprises exist in these ejidos, as well as informal mask carving enterprises using wood from community forests.

In Brazil, the cases were: Oficinas Caboclas de Tapajós, a small-scale furniture-making cooperative in three communities (Nova Vista, Nuquini and Surucuá) in the Tapajós-Arapiuns Extractive Reserve (Pará); colonist partnerships with the logging company, MAFLOPS (Forest Management and Lender of Services), in government sponsored settlements (Santo Antonio and Igarapé da Anta, also in Pará); and traditional smallholder forest management in seasonally-flooded forests (várzea) in Foz de Mazagão (Amapá). Oficinas Caboclas was developed as a collaborative initiative between several communities on the Tapajós River, IPAM-Amazon Institute of Environmental Research (Brazil), and the Woods Hole Research Center (USA). Community members were trained to produce simple, hand-made furniture using wood from community forest reserves that they were also trained to manage sustainably. In the second case, colonists in Santo Antonio and Igarapé da Anta formed community associations that, encouraged by the government land settlement agency (INCRA), signed a contract with MAFLOPS to manage their forested land and harvest and sell their timber. No forestry intervention had taken place in Mazagão at the

¹ We, however, acknowledge that the cases do not represent all models of community forestry in the two countries.

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