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“Solidarity in a competing world —
fair use of resources”

Second-Tier Community Forestry Organisations and Equitable Resource Management in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala

NAOMI MILLNER¹, IRUNE PEÑAGARICANO², MARIA FERNANDEZ³, LAURA SNOOK³

¹*University of Bristol, Geographical Sciences, United Kingdom*

²*University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU), Division of Organic Farming, Austria*

³*Biodiversity International, Forest Genetic Resources Programme, Italy*

Abstract

Whilst community forestry programmes have combined sustainable forestry with community empowerment and poverty alleviation since the late 1970s, the role of intermediary organisations in shaping the technical and political capacities of forest user groups has rarely been systematically studied. The long-term durability of community forestry groups has been linked with the congruence between local and national determinations of tenure rights, and the involvement of local communities in determining the ‘rules’ that govern the management of the forests. However, the role of intermediary organisations in negotiating such rights and rules is of central analytical importance - especially in contexts where pre-existing power and gender relationships influence who makes which decisions and how, and where long-standing conflicts over access to land constantly over-determine the possibilities for upscaling successful projects. As part of an interdisciplinary project on community forestry in Mesoamerica led by Biodiversity International, this paper focuses on the case of the Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén [ACOFOP], a second-tier community organisation founded in the mid-1990s to coordinate and represent first-tier organisations that were granted community concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in the Petén region of Guatemala. Drawing on interviews, the outcomes of participative workshops, and a review of key literature, we trace ACOFOP’s emergence as a forestry organisation from existing agricultural and non-timber product cooperatives, and its subsequent consolidation as a platform for regional coordination and advocacy. Using a ‘Sociology of Knowledge’ approach to discourse analysis (SKAD), we highlight three important dimensions of ACOFOP’s evolving strategy that facilitate the development of both local autonomies and collective coherence: the mobilisation of concepts of ‘environmental justice’ and associated international rights frameworks to link local concerns with national governance issues; the elaboration of legal knowledges and mechanisms in these terms to negotiate improved tenure relationships; and a concentration of resources in the development of local leadership with an emphasis on elaborating the fixed ‘rules’ of forestry management in a manner that is appropriate to each community’s individual characteristics. We conclude by highlighting key strategies that may be applied to strengthen community forestry in other regional settings.

Keywords: Community forestry, conservation, forest genetic resources, Guatemala, migration, non-governmental organisations