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

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Introduction

Community forestry (CF) was initiated in the 1970s as a way to empower communities, alleviate poverty and manage forests. Intermediary organisations are considered to have played a critical role in the sustainability and equitability of community forest management. This study analyses a second-tier institution, ACOFOP [*Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén*], founded in the mid-1990s by local people in the Maya Biosphere Reserve [MBR] of Guatemala. ACOFOP has been lauded internationally for its success in supporting communities to achieve both economic and ecological sustainability. However, community forestry in the Petén, ACOFOP and the communities it supports still face multiple threats including challenges from private interests promoting tourism and other mega-projects in the region, and inconsistency in support from successive national governments. As part of an interdisciplinary project on community forestry in Mesoamerica led by Bioversity International, this study draws on participatory action research methods, interviews and literature to identify institutional, social and political factors that have enabled ACOFOP's success, and could be applied to other contexts. The second dimension of this project maps and evaluate the language use by different actors in the MBR, focusing on differences in their perspectives on the meaning of institutional accompaniment.

Context: 1. Forest Tenure

- Approximately one quarter of forests in developing countries are community-owned or managed. Around 60 million highly forest-dependent people, including indigenous populations, live in the forests of Latin America, West Africa and South-east Asia, whilst another 400-500 million people are directly dependent on forest resources for their livelihoods (Cronkleton et al 2008). The importance of forests and forestry to rural livelihoods, especially of the poor, is well recognised and the need to involve forest-dependent rural users in forest-related decision-making and activities is widely accepted.
- In Latin and Central America, communities legitimately manage more than 215 million ha of forest, or 1/3 of total forest cover (Alcorn 2014). Land tenure has remained a contested issue: most countries have implemented some form of land reform in the last 50 years, but forests have often been designated as unowned/state-owned 'wastelands,' with displaced populations encouraged to 'colonise' or clear them for agriculture in exchange for title deeds (Larson et al 2008). CF has thus often emerged as a result of struggles and social movements.
- Whilst actual forms of governance vary, the 'tenure bundle' is the essential legal structure at the heart of CF, including rights to access, control access, and make management decisions. The long-term durability of CF concessions 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 forest management. The work of commons theorist Elinor Ostrom highlights aspects institutional arrangements as key factors, in addition to aspects of the resource and user group, that facilitate or hinder common property resource management.
- A key issue to address through institutional arrangements is the heterogeneity of the user group. There can be considerable difficulty in creating/maintaining a local institution capable of taking responsibilities

in heterogeneous situations, and, even where CF programmes are successful, entrenched forms of social exclusion, especially along the gender axis, can remain unchallenged.

2. The Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR)

- Guatemala has a land surface of 108,889 km^2 with a forest cover of ca. 37%, of which an estimated 2.3 million ha are broadleaved forests (Stoian & Rodas 2006). Ownership rights are divided into Private; National; and Communal/municipal forests, with the latter including over 0.9 million of a total 4.1 million ha of forests.
- The 2.1 million ha of the MBR includes the core zone (national parks and biotopes); the Multiple-Use Zone (MUZ - where the forest concessions are); and a buffer zone. Since the 1990s, more than 0.5 million ha of broadleaved forests have been granted as community concessions in the MUZ. Of 18 units established, 12 are community concessions, 4 are cooperatives or municipal *ejidos,* and 2 are industrial concessions. All were required to obtain forest certification through the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) within 3 years.
- Members undertake a diverse range of activities, including exploitation of high-value timber, secondary timber and non-timber species such as ornamental Chameadorea palms (known as *xate*); chicle gum, allspice (*pimenta*), as well as craft activities and tourism, to obtain benefits including employment and profits shared among community members. Among the 16 Community Forest Enterprises (CFEs), 6 have their own processing facilities for primary wood transformation; others contract milling services. Several species are harvested, including mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), with around 90% destined for the national market for low quality products, including logs. High quality timber is often exported – indeed, Guatemala is the top exporter of mahogany from natural forests in the world
- CONAP (the National Council for Protected Areas) was founded in 1980 to administer Guatemala's protected areas (**see table below)**, while the National Forestry Institute (INAB) administers other forest areas. There is a virtual absence of forest certification outside the MBR. ACOFOP was established in 1995 to promote community livelihoods and economic development through sustainable forest management and represent community interests to CONAP. Members of ACOFOP, alongside other partners, also created the FORESCOM company in 2003 to process and market communities' harvested products.
- The creation of the MBR in 1990 was largely a result of successful lobbying by local grassroots organisations and NGOs, with the support of development projects and donor agencies (especially USAID), in the context of the pursuit of sustainable development in the context of the pre and post-Rio process (Gambetta et al. 2006). During the definition of the MBR, international donor and conservation institutions played a key role in pushing conservation and development dialogue and promoting inclusion of community actors. However, from the beginning investment has been characterised by conflicting interests and governmental priorities.

Methods

This research modelled a participative approach that uses Ostrom's principles for evaluating common property resource (CPR) management as a basis for evaluating and strengthening institutional arrangements. Ostrom's systemic perspective emphasises that effective management of CPRs is possible, but involves the integration of diverse systems within which institutional arrangements interact with aspects of the resource, and of the user group. Participatory action research (PAR) principles have further been employed to enable reflection and observation, from the point of view of various actors, on the institutional arrangements specific to the management of the MBR, to result in the design of action-oriented transformation pathways.

Within this framework two sets of participative workshops were undertaken in two communities between January 2015 and June 2016. A first round provided a forum for jointly defining how the forest is governed; who can participate; and what are regarded as obstacles. A second round involved the co-creation of transformation pathways to frame learning in the context of valued outcomes/benefits and research impacts. Alongside these workshops we conducted 44 informal interviews with members of the two communities, as well as 27 formal interviews with members of ACOFOP and other local, regional and national institutions. Resulting data, in the form of interview transcripts, workshop notes, diagrams, literature reviews and short films, was triangulated with policy and academic literature, and was analysed using a 'Sociology of Knowledge' approach to discourse analysis (SKAD).

Results and Discussion

Our analyses confirmed that ACOFOP behaves according to the **Accompaniment Model,** positioned alongside and within communities, not outside them. Solutions and increased technical capacities are 'scaffolded' rather than imposed, by involving communities in decision-making, and where possible, ensuring their oversight in the design of programmes and enterprises. ACOFOP does this by a) promoting direct funding to community institutions; b) focusing on helping improve the abilities of community organisations themselves (rather than the central organisation) in information gathering and self-diagnosis; c) actively supporting the participation of women in leadership and decision-making; d) training community organisations to run their own training schemes e) developing *horizontal* social networks extending to national and international levels.

Dialogue between institutions; **political advocacy/impact** at multiple scales and time horizons; and **awareness raising** alongside **alliance-building** ensure that ACOFOP resists promoting a particular constituency or agenda. These institutional arrangements are united through two key working principles:

1. **(Forest) communities already have capacities to govern themselves and the expertise or the capacities to learn to manage the forest.** Institutional support works best when it sites learning in the communities *as well as in* key institutions that systematically collect and disseminate such expertise, such as universities and training organisations. Moreover, future collective learning needs to focus on connecting diverse forms of expertise rather than reifying one form over all others.
2. **Equitable and sustainable forest management needs to address the politics of land tenure as well as principles for effective management.** It is critical to document and communicate the effectiveness of existing management practices as well as to improve understanding of the ecology of forests.

Table 1, below, identifies four key problem areas for community forestry (CF), identified in the literature, together with a schematic representation of ACOFOP's clarification of, and response to, these issues. The fourth column draws on insights synthesised from the wider literature (see Appendix 1) to recommend further opportunities for strengthening institutional arrangements and reducing conflict in the MBR:

ACOFOP's response to CF problems	ACOFOP model	Risk identified	Recommendations, based on wider literature
1. **Participation (who will take part?)** *Acompañamiento* [accompaniment]	Participation centres on the concept of 'accompaniment', whereby ACOFOP and other institutions provide a framework and build coherence around self-sustaining and self-governing communities, with women and young people supported to play a leading role.	Decisions may be made by accompanying institutions, not by the communities. A lack of space for disagreement or co-production.	• Elaborate principles for how multiple actors can co-create plans together. • Differentiate 'rules' that cannot be altered from those that can, taking care that the difference is understood. • Elaborate on 'women's participation' beyond attendance, to address which roles can/cannot be played, and the capacity of women and other minorities to develop their own narratives.
2. Expertise (who holds it?) *Diálogo* [dialogue]	Communities **have expertise relevant to forest management**. Supporting & regulatory organisations need to understand it before proposing interventions. Forums are needed to integrate diverse kinds of expertise.	Decision-making takes place far from CF practices. Different types and sources of expertise yield different 'solutions', which may be in opposition	• Learn from other peer-to-peer programmes in the region in other domains, eg. *campesino-a-campesino* approaches • Create learning forums focused on specific objectives, eg. certification.

3. Environmental justice (how do we address the politics of tenure?) *Incidencia política* [political advocacy]	Collective politics needs to be premised on demonstrating that **the MBR is not an empty space**. It is made up of species, management practices and cultural history.	Governmental instability/flux & private interests (eg. via investments in tourism) threaten the future of the concessions, whose 25 year lease is shortly up for renewal.	• Address the variability in interpretations of both 'justice' and 'environmental justice' in the context and develop a clear sense of how legal capacities can be reinforced to address structural inequalities as well as environmental infractions. • Increase research and communications capacities to be able to contest implications that the MBR is not being managed effectively.
4. Political will (how do we ensure long-term viability?) *Sensibilizar* [raise awareness] and build alliances.	To ensure the sustainability of community forestry, long-term and collaborative strategies are needed, rather than projects operating in isolation.	A history of NGOs working to their own aims has left a short-termist, project-oriented legacy and a 'dependency culture.'	• Widen national and international networks to contest private interests and build support • Deepen the use of rights-based approaches to make clear when government-supported proposals are not legitimate in these terms • Develop further the capacity of young people as leaders and communicators of community interests at multiple scales.

Whilst specific to the MBR's social context, the key strategies summarised also provide important systemic devices that can be used to strengthen institutions in other contexts. To guide the application of ACOFOP's model to other contexts, we recommend the following eight principles for institutional accompaniment:

1. Use rights-based approaches
2. Create learning communities
3. Devise participative processes that nurture existing and emergent organisations
4. Support inter-organisational cooperation
5. Mobilise long-term perspectives and long-term horizons
6. Empower communities to apply and engage with regulations and rules
7. Address cultural and institutional forms of racism
8. Build on and expand ecological approaches.

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