Governance challenges of community forestry in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala and in the indigenous Miskito territory, Nicaragua

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Objective

This study analyzed the perspectives of local actors to determine enabling conditions that allow governmental entities to renovate and strengthen community forestry in four cases: two community forestry concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR), Guatemala and two Forest Management Units in the indigenous Miskito territory, Nicaragua.
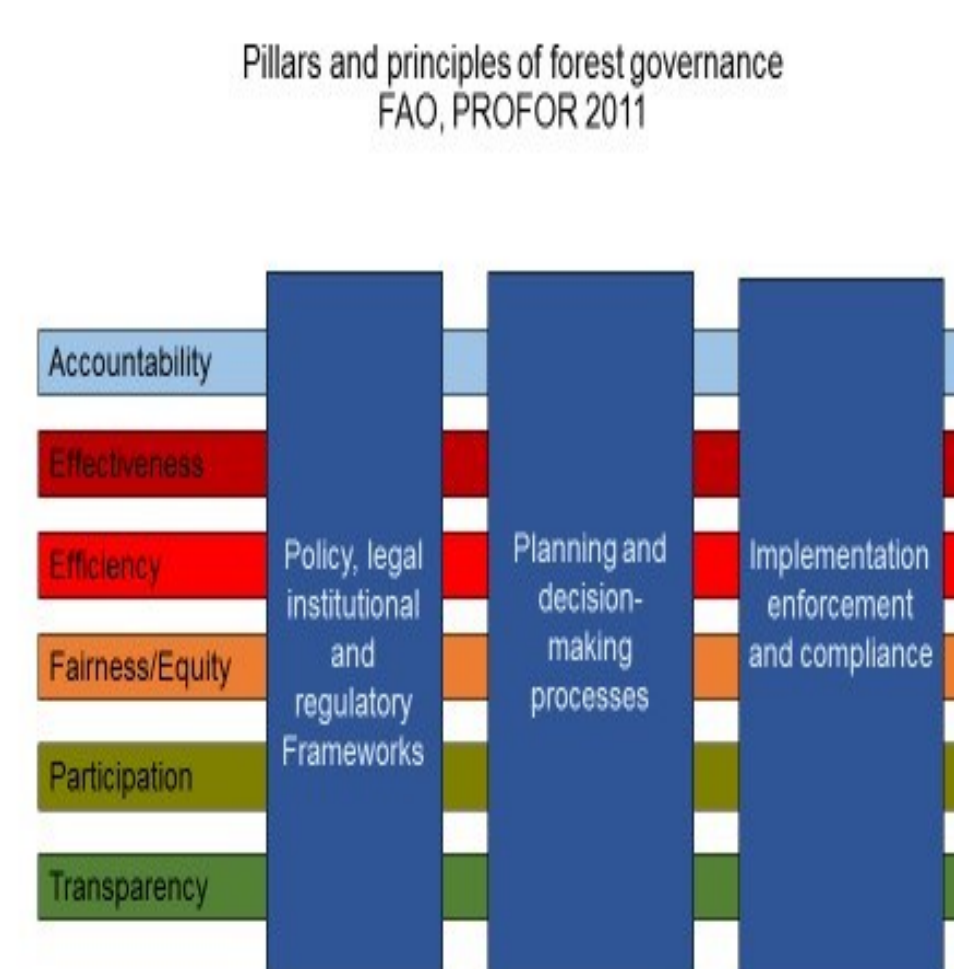
Location of case study areas

What makes for good forest governance?

- Stakeholder participation
- Transparency of decision-making
- Accountability of actors and decision-makers
- Rule of law and predictability
- Efficient and effective management of natural, human and financial resources
- Fair and equitable allocation of resources and benefits.

FAO, PROFOR 2011

Pillars and principles of forest governance
FAO, PROFOR 2011

Methods

1. Theoretical framework

Empowered Participatory Governance (EPG), Fung and Wright, 2003

- The way people participate in and influence polices (plans and actions)
- Who makes the decisions, how and for what?

Enabling Conditions for EPG

- Balance of power amongst the parties
- Social responsibility of public and private stakeholders and NGOs, improving social capital
- Local leadership of teams or groups

Question:
Are the decisions participatory, equitable, well-founded and do they lead to concrete actions to enhance livelihoods and sustain forests?
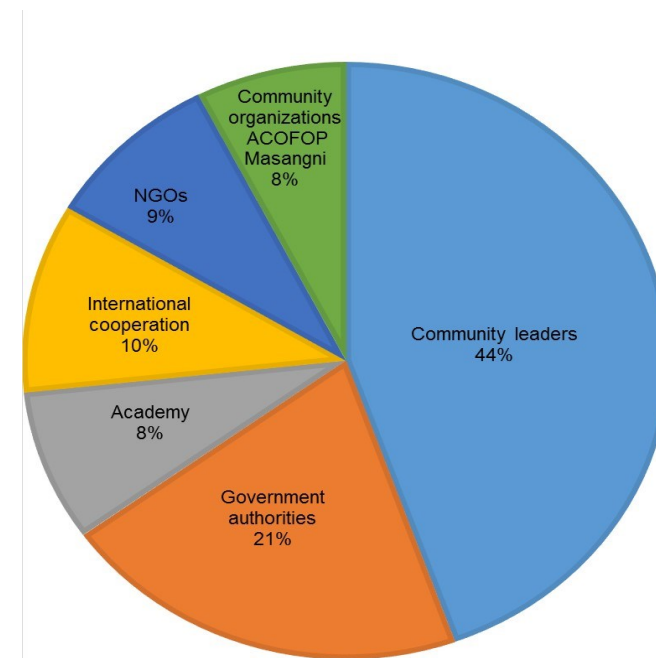
2. Review of secondary sources

Reports from national agencies and NGOs 2000-2015
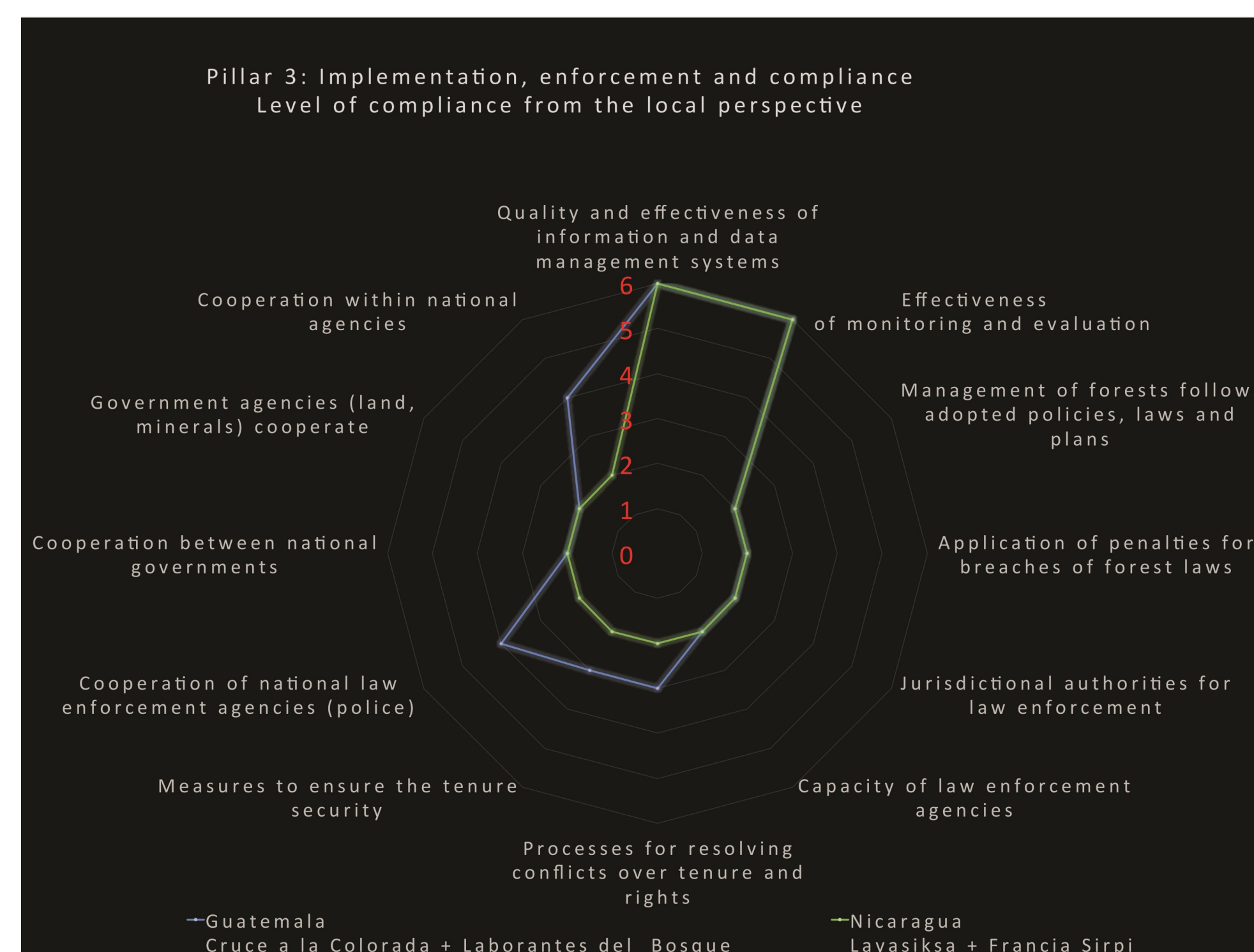
3. Data from primary sources

146 interviews (2015)
75 Guatemala, 71 Nicaragua

4. Mapping insights against pillars and principles of good forest governance and enabling conditions for Empowered Participatory Governance (EPG)

Results

Pillar 3: Implementation, enforcement and compliance
Level of compliance from the local perspective

— Guatemala: Cruce a la Colorada + Laborantes del Bosque
— Nicaragua: Layasiksa + Francia Sirpi

Good Forest Governance?

Pillar 1: Policy framework

- There is a critical lack of consistency and coordination of policies, laws and regulations between forestry and sectors including mining, agriculture, transport, tourist and energy
- Land use plans are not consistent with forest policy goals and priorities.

Pillar 2: Decision-making

- Community forestry groups have a decisive role in the sustainable use of the forests of the MBR and the generation of social benefits for members of concession associations
- In all cases, channels for reporting corruption and whistleblower protection are inefficient or nonexistent.

Pillar 3: Implementation

- Community forestry is threatened by the lack of political will to deal with the dynamics of the agricultural frontier
- The resulting advance of the agricultural frontier through actions of diverse stakeholders, from marginalized, often landless people to powerful interest groups involved in both licit and illicit activities, leaves the communities with limited options to resolve conflicts over land and forest use rights.

Empowered Participatory Governance?

- Community forestry is threatened by the lack of political will to deal with the dynamics of the agricultural frontier
- The forest communities' struggle revolves around the recognition of their rights as forest users
- Community forest governance is determined primarily by the leadership of community groups involved in the management and utilization of forest resources
- Civil society organizations supporting communities, in partnership with NGOs, academia and international aid workers, have promoted the claims of community groups for territorial rights
- The organizational weaknesses of community groups make community forestry vulnerable
- Increasing the financial benefits to communities from forestry is necessary to improve production and social capital in the territories.

Conclusions

- Community forestry groups have played a key role in the sustainable use of the forests
- The same kinds of strengths and weaknesses in governance of community forest management were found in both countries, but in Nicaragua weaknesses are more critical and in Guatemala strengths are more established
- In Guatemala, politicians and other decision-makers should promote the transfer of forest lands to community management and support consolidation of the processes
- Community groups in Guatemala are making progress in social responsibility and creating deliberative solutions from the bottom up, on specific issues
- In Nicaragua, the basic conditions needed for community forestry are lacking due to de facto insecurity of land tenure and indigenous rights to use forest resources in the Miskito territory
- In both countries, the principal impediment to community forestry is the limited capacity or will of national governments to effectively control the illegal usurpation of land earmarked for, or with high potential to initiate, community forestry.

Recommendations

- An integrated management approach at landscape level could be implemented with more effective governance strategies for sustainable community forestry
- In Guatemala, it is necessary to build a state policy that guarantees the continuity of community forestry in the MBR independent of political contingencies
- In the Miskito territory, an inclusive process of territorial planning appears a viable solution to resolve conflicts over natural resource governance and could be implemented with high degrees of social legitimacy
- To develop state policy in Guatemala and an inclusive process in the Miskito territory, the principles, design elements and enabling conditions of Empowered Participatory Governance should be taken into account
- Develop policies which promote consistency and coordination of sectoral (mining, agriculture, transport, energy) and land use plans with community forestry goals and priorities
- Include legal frameworks to support transparency of revenue collection, budgeting, expenditures and accounting
- Develop policies to improve social agreements around equity in the distribution of access to forest resources to improve social capital.

Layasiksa Bosque, Nicaragua, April 2015.
Photo by Mónica Orjuela