

# Lessons learned from community forests in Mexico and Guatemala, to benefit community forest work in West and Central Africa

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## I. Introduction

This paper summarises the lessons learnt from the five months I spent studying community forestry in Mexico and Petén (Guatemala), from March-July 2016, hosted by the Mexican non-governmental organisation [Reforestamos](#). These experiences will inform work to develop community forestry in West and Central African tropical countries (Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Central African Republic, Republic of Congo, and Gabon). This paper looks at:

- Expectations I had about community forests in Mexico and Guatemala
- Findings
- How what I learned compared to my initial expectations
- The audiences that might find this information useful
- What African community forest initiatives could learn

## II. Expectations

One thing I had heard a lot before coming was that community forests in these countries conserve forest better than protected areas. I was sceptical of this, however, especially as I knew that the business model was mainly based on timber extraction. I did not see how it was possible to extract timber and retain a natural forest; I thought the communities' "forests" must actually be something closer to monoculture plantations.

I thought that, where community forests had succeeded, it was where they had strong indigenous histories and forest traditions. I thought that most of their forest management systems must be based on indigenous customs. My image was that Mexican and Guatemalan communities were very well-organised with strong activist traditions.

Another expectation was that the tenure model in Mexico—where communities own forest land—was preferable to the Guatemalan model, where communities have 25-year concessions on government land. I thought that Guatemalan community activists must surely be trying to move toward this point.

I was particularly interested in what makes some communities more organised than others; I thought this was probably the most important factor in predicting whether a community forest would be successful or not, but I was concerned that it was something that is either there in a community, or it isn't—and that there is nothing anybody can do to foster it.

I was interested in the systems communities used to ensure transparency and accountability, and to prevent elite capture. Having worked with platforms of community activists in West Africa, I

predicted that this might be one of the biggest struggles communities faced and that they would need good systems to respond to this.

I had heard a lot about Mexican and Guatemalan communities that had taken on very advanced stages of timber processing—in particular, I had seen impressive photos of community-owned furniture factories—which enable them to build local economies and generate jobs in areas that were otherwise poor. I was particularly interested in the potential community forestry could offer to spark genuine economic development in poor countries. From what I have seen in Africa, many projects that politicians promise will bring “development” to the country—like palm oil plantations, or mining—fail to generate many jobs or long-term benefits for the people living in the local area, and leave the country mainly in the place it started. It seemed that this kind of system, which would build the economy from the bottom up, could offer a better approach.

I thought that Mexico and Guatemala’s success in developing community forests was due to high levels of government commitment and support. My impression was that this support had been very effective, but it was expensive and possibly not replicable in a poorer country.

Before going to Guatemala, I had heard from many people in Mexico that they had done things “better” than in Mexico, for various reasons: that their logging was more sustainable, and that they’d developed more advanced timber processing activities. I imagined that they were producing and processing large amounts of timber, and were acting more as a business than Mexican communities were.

I knew that Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) were part of the Mexican community forestry model, but I was sceptical they could work; I thought they risked replacing intrinsic motivations to protect forests with a transactional view that would end up destroying forests in the long run.

### III. Findings

#### **On land rights:**

- Everyone I spoke to in both Mexico and Guatemala agreed that stability of access to land was a fundamental condition for the success of community forests there. In Mexico, the fact that communities own their land— thanks to the Mexican Revolution 100 years ago—has been vital to communities making the long-term investments necessary to develop successful forest enterprises. In Guatemala, communities do not own their land, but have been given 25-year concessions on government property, conditioned on the maintenance of Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. Twenty-five years is a fairly long period of time, but it does put communities in a vulnerable state. The earliest of the concessions are due to expire in the next eight years, and community activists are already worrying about them not being renewed: there is strong interest in the land from other parties wanting to develop mining, palm oil, cattle farming, or a conservation park. Several community members said this uncertainty reduced their interest in making long-term investments in the concession.
- My original assumption was that, because of their stability, the Mexican tenure arrangement was preferable, and that Guatemalan community activists must surely be trying to move toward a similar ownership model. Interestingly, this was not what I heard from many people I spoke to in Guatemala. Multiple community members and activists I spoke to in Petén said that the conditional concession model was key to the success of community forest management there—and that they were not, even in an ideal world, aiming to gain

ownership rights for communities. Rather, the maintenance of government ownership, and the requirement of FSC compliance, had allowed oversight into communities' land management practices that was both better for forests and for communities' ability to benefit from them. Instead, they were hoping to lengthen the period of the concession to 50 years (or even make it permanent), but to retain the FSC condition and government oversight.

- It is also important to note a peculiarity of the Mexican tenure model for ejidos (one of the two types of community forest in Mexico – the other is simply called a “community”), which has undermined them to such an extent that several people I spoke to feared the whole model would collapse. In most ejidos and communities in Mexico and Petén, community land is divided into several different areas: communal areas (usually forest land), and individual or family plots (usually for agriculture). Unlike communities in Mexico and Guatemala, ejidos are allowed to sell their individual plots. This has become quite common in some ejidos, and is causing serious problems. Individualisation and sale of land can severely weaken collective decision-making institutions—which are vital to the model's ability to protect forests. Some of the people buying ejido lands or rights do not live in the ejido, and do not participate in assemblies. They are also more likely to be interested in using the land for agriculture or cattle farming—the most serious risk factors for forests in the region. In contrast to ejidos, Mexico's communities do not allow land to be sold in this way; people in Oaxaca thought that the prevalence of communities (rather than ejidos) in the state was an important reason for the relative success of community forestry there.

#### **Livelihood activities:**

- The most universally-shared opinion I heard was that, to keep forests standing, local communities need to see an economic benefit. A successful community forest policy must prioritise time and resources towards helping communities to develop forest-dependent economies.
- In nearly all of the communities I visited—with the exception of two in Petén-- timber extraction provided the vast bulk of the forest economy. Timber is, in most cases, the highest-value use of the land by quite a long way, and may be the only land use that brings enough revenue to discourage clearance for agriculture. In Noh Bec—the most successful tropical community forest in Mexico - community revenue from timber extraction brings in about 30 per cent of community members' annual income. On top of this, timber extraction and processing activities also employ about half of the adult men in the community.
- I was also convinced, despite my doubts, that it is perfectly possible for communities to log natural forests sustainably. The forest areas I visited were clearly natural, biodiverse forests. It is true that, because of logging, the trees tend to be younger than an “old growth” forest, but community members working in the forests said this cycling of trees kept the forest healthy, reduced tree diseases, and opened up space for new trees to grow. Evidence shows that plant and animal diversity in the forests has been maintained, and in some cases even increased because of the space caused by selective logging. In Guatemala extraction levels are extremely low—at around one tree per hectare in every cutting cycle. In both countries, communities carry out replanting of the most heavily extracted commercial species, in order to allow harvesting in the future; many have nurseries, staffed by community members, which allow them to do this.

- Although it is technically possible for communities to log forests sustainably, they have not always done so in practice. In Quintana Roo, there are problems with over-exploitation of the two most commercially valuable species, mahogany and cedar (though this likely began with the logging companies who were there before the communities, and tree stocks were also severely affected by Hurricane Dean in 2007). More organised communities like Noh Bec are now combating this by reforesting those species, and focusing on extracting other species instead—showing that an effective community institution can respond to these issues, and (as one person said) “the forest will survive”. In Guatemala, extraction rates (mandated by the government) have been so low that there is no risk of over-exploitation—but communities there have also not made as much money out of forest extraction as the Quintana Roo communities have, and one person worried this would eventually cause the model to collapse as communities lose interest. This will obviously always be a balance between environmental and economic sustainability, which is difficult, but crucial, to get right.
- An important consideration is whether there is enough commercially valuable timber in the area, and whether the area is big enough to rotate cutting cycles. If not, it will not be sufficiently profitable to conduct forest management there, and the community may well decide it is better to clear the land for other uses—unless other forest activities are strong. One of the Petén concessions has failed for this reason.
- Communities need support in learning how to run logging operations. Exchanges with other communities can be helpful (see below, Section VI). Communities can also learn from industrial loggers: in Mexico, the most successful community logging operations have mostly been in areas where there were previously industrial concessions. Community members had already gained experience working as employees of logging companies, and thus were quickly able to transfer these skills into running the concessions themselves.
- Another partner helping communities learn to manage logging operations is, in Mexico, the “forest technician” that all communities are legally required to work with. In the best cases, where the forest technician is committed and involved, this person will not only help the communities with the technical part of managing the concession (developing management plans and environmental impact studies, or conducting tree inventories), but will also help with things like developing a business vision, diversifying economic activities, or finding new markets. In less-successful cases, the forest technician will add very little to the community apart from paperwork—often “copy & pasting” forest management plans they have developed for other communities they work with. At worst, they may be involved in depriving communities of the money coming from their concession—especially in cases where communities has contracted a timber company to manage their forest, and the forest technician is the intermediary between the community and the timber company. Forest technicians have worked best when they actually come from the community, and the most successful communities have invested money in educating their own children to become forest technicians. Reforestamos Mexico also has an interesting “Young Forest Entrepreneurs” competition that is trying to encourage a more entrepreneurial approach in the next generation of forest technicians.
- It is also important for communities to be able to add value to their wood: this brings in more profits for the community, as well as creating jobs for community members. Communities in Mexico and Guatemala have taken on various stages of processing wood. Many have sawmills to turn logs into wood boards, some also have drying machines, some others make furniture or floor boards, and a few (such as TIP Muebles in Oaxaca or Arbol Verde in Guatemala) even run shops to sell their furniture. In Mexico, communities that take on later-stage processing activities

are in a minority; Guatemala has done better at this, with the association FORESCOM assisting communities to add value to wood, and several of the 11 concessions having furniture production operations.

- Non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are also a key part of a community forest economy, because they further diversify the local economy, and because they tend to create more jobs than logging—particularly for women. The jobs and income from NTFPs also often have the advantage of being year-round, which—in most communities—logging is not. However, everyone agreed NTFPs would never be enough to propel a community forest on their own, and that timber would usually bring the bulk of forest-based profits. NTFP were the dominant base of economic production in only two communities I visited: Uaxactun and Carmelita in Petén. These two have large businesses harvesting and exporting xate, a small palm plant whose fronds are popular in floristry, which employ around half of the community full-time. In most community forests in Mexico and Guatemala, NTFPs have still not been developed enough yet, and require further help in reaching markets.
- On the whole, agriculture and cattle farming have been threats to community forests—but it is possible for them to have a place in sustainable forest economies. Some organisations, like Reforestamos, are working with communities to develop agroforestry or silvopastoralist approaches that allow them to continue these activities in the forest. Other organisations work with farmers to raise awareness of the role local forests have in protecting their crops. Ultimately, though, it may be important to limit or control agriculture in certain ways to prevent it from taking over forest land. Some communities in Guatemala restrict their members from doing any commercial agriculture. Another community in Guatemala has worked with the government to relocate community members' agricultural plots so that they are all in one place (rather than scattered throughout the concession), which will make it easier to control fires. Finally, many communities in Guatemala and Mexico have requirements that community members must apply for permission from the community leaders to clear land, and/or be supervised when they do so.

### **Payment for Ecosystem Services**

- Most people I spoke to were very critical of the way PES are currently administered in Mexico (they do not exist in Guatemala). People thought it was good for the government to recognise and compensate the services communities provide in protecting forests, particularly in ensuring things like water quality. However, they strongly opposed the fact that PES are still largely distributed in exchange for doing nothing—i.e. not touching the forest. This, along with the subsidies that state governments distribute to communities—often to win their votes in elections—creates a mode of dependency and inaction which makes it hard to develop rural economies. People thought PES should be maintained, but there should be a requirement that they are invested into developing forest enterprises, or to employ community members to carry out active conservation tasks (such as clearing underbrush, watching for forest fires, etc.) NGOs can play a facilitative role here, helping communities decide how they want to invest their PES.
- PES can also be dangerous if they are relied upon as the sole incentive for conserving forests. Because the money to pay PES is usually limited in some way (in Mexico communities can only receive PES for five years), there is a danger that—if PES are the only reason communities are conserving forests—when the money runs out, communities will decide to clear the land for other purposes. There have been interesting proposals developed in Mexico to create a permanent flow of PES for forest communities from local

tax revenues, in exchange for the services they provide to downstream water users in e.g. Cancun. None of these proposals have yet become a reality, however, as they can be politically difficult to pass. On the whole, PES seem to work best when they are paid to communities as an added bonus for an area that they have, for other reasons (such as protecting local water sources from erosion, or for hunting, or because the land is otherwise unusable) decided to conserve. In these cases, it becomes a much-appreciated additional source of revenue for the community, but the forest protection does not hinge on it being paid.

### **How communities protect forests**

- One thing that was particularly impressive to witness was how communities organise themselves to protect forests. These kinds of defence systems present clear advantages in contexts where the government does not have the capacity to monitor remote forest areas (as is the case in all of our partner countries in Africa). These systems are likely to become even more important as climate change puts forests under increased threat from fires and disease. In both Mexico and Guatemala, communities operate vigilance committees that regularly patrol their forest area to watch out for illegal forest clearance, tree diseases, and forest fires. Controlling for illegal logging is particularly straightforward for communities to do, as they have watch-houses and barriers at the entrance of the roads leading into the forest and thus are aware of every log leaving the forest. In instances of forest fire, several communities I visited in Mexico described recent experiences of ringing the local church bell and getting the whole community up in the middle of the night to combat the fire. Where there have been issues with illegal forest clearance, some communities have organised groups to arm themselves and patrol the forest, and have managed to chase the offenders out this way. But this can be a very risky business, because of the links between illegal forest clearance and organised crime, especially drug trafficking. In some areas of Petén, communities were not able to keep clearing for cattle farming at bay because it was too dangerous. The government has now stepped in to help the communities protect the forest, but many of these areas have now been lost.
- Another important component for protecting forests is the internal rules that communities devise to govern which parts of their land can be used for which purposes. In most communities in Mexico and Petén, communities maintain a communally-managed forest area, as well as individual/family plots for agriculture or animal-raising. It is important to draw up such land use plans first, so that it is very clear which areas are to remain forests and which areas can be used for agriculture. Communities in Petén learned this the hard way: three of the community concessions were severely affected by forest clearing for cattle ranching. Only one has managed to retain its FSC certification, and the first thing NGOs working with them did was to draw up a land use plan stating very clearly the boundaries of the forest area. Successful community forests in both countries also have clear rules stating how community members can use the forest—how much timber they are allowed to extract for personal use, for example, or a requirement to get permission from the community commissioner before constructing a house—as well as sanctions if these rules are not followed.

### **Forest Stewardship Council**

- FSC certification has played a very useful role in community forests in both countries. In Petén, FSC certification is a condition for communities retaining the concession. Community

members and supporters reported that this had been vital in motivating and supporting them to develop sustainable timber extraction methods. Because certification was the condition for continuing the concession, it was particularly helpful to have an independent body certifying they were doing things right, as it protected them from arbitrary cancellation by the government. In Mexico, I witnessed many NGOs using FSC requirements around transparency, internal organisation, employee safety, and sustainable harvesting to encourage communities to develop good forest management and business practices. It is important that governments and/or NGOs support communities to attain FSC certification, however, as the requirements can be difficult and expensive to follow.

## Organisation

- Strong internal organisation seemed to be the biggest difference between communities that succeed and those that fail. Internal organisation is what allows communities to have a long-term vision for their forest that overrides short-termist or individualist actions. It is also what enables them to make rules about forest management and ensure they are followed; to conduct surveillance of the forest; to pursue economic activities requiring a high level of coordination (such as processing timber, or operating an tree inventory and chain of custody); and to ensure the communities' money is used for collectively-agreed purposes rather than being misappropriated by individual community members.
- Organisation is not just important within communities; it is also important for communities to organise between themselves as well. Community networks—like ACOFOP in Guatemala or Red MOCAF in Mexico - have been vital in helping communities influence policy in their favour. Inter-community associations like FORESCOM in Guatemala, or TIP Muebles, Ecoforce and the Alianza Selva Maya in Mexico, have also allowed communities to group their products together to be able to sell in larger quantities, share and set collective prices, find new buyers, and take on later-stage processing activities. It is often more efficient for communities to group together to buy expensive equipment like a sawmill or a wood dryer, rather than each owning one themselves. Some inter-community organisations have been able to administer FSC certification themselves (e.g. FORESCOM, Ecoforce, and Alianza Selva Maya), or even offer credit to members (e.g. FORESCOM, and the Asociacion Mexicana de Uniones de Credito del Sector Social in Oaxaca).
- Mexico and Guatemala both present numerous cautionary examples of what happens when collective trust breaks down—either at the community level, or between communities. At the community level, low levels of trust mean community members will be reluctant to invest community profits into future business development or communal projects, preferring instead to divide any profits between them—as they do not trust that communal money will be administered responsibly. This has clear negative impacts for the development of the forest enterprise. In more extreme cases, trust may break down so much that communities will stop administering land collectively at all. In Quintana Roo, the majority of ejidos have now divided logging rights amongst individual ejidatarios—that is, each ejidatario has a certain quota of wood he can extract—rather than organising it as a collective activity. This has led to unsustainable logging and land clearance, the loss of FSC certification, and regressing back to selling unprocessed logs rather than adding value to timber. Noh Bec is the only ejido in Quintana Roo to continue managing its timber extraction collectively—and is far and away the most successful both in business and environmental terms.

- Lack of trust can also break apart unions between communities, depriving them of the advantages of working together. In both Guatemala and Mexico, I witnessed cases where communities were buying individual sawmills (in one community in Guatemala, they had bought four just for one concession), despite the fact that there was a sawmill available at the union they were part of, because they did not trust the union to give them a fair price for their wood. Inter-community organisations have responded to this in creative ways. In Petén, the community association FORESCOM abandoned its initial plan to buy all the wood from its members' concessions and sell it collectively. Now, it simply helps communities negotiate with buyers, and allows them to use its drying machines—but this is just a service communities pay FORESCOM for; the communities continue to contract directly with buyers themselves. In Mexico, the Alianza Selva Maya was formed in part to allow its members to generate enough timber volume to meet buyers' demands, but it also does not sell timber conjointly; rather, if a buyer wants more than a seller can provide, the seller can contact other ejidos in the Alianza to see if they can make up the shortfall.
- Internal organisation does not just happen; it must be built, and constantly nurtured. This may sound disheartening, but it also means that there is no reason why any group of people may not become sufficiently organised to manage a forest area effectively. I had thought that the most successful community forests would be those that had long indigenous histories, but this was not the case: though this certainly helped (and was particularly visible in Oaxaca), some community groups in Petén have managed forests extremely well despite only coming together in the past few decades. But this level of organisation can deteriorate at any time, and even the most successful community forests I visited reported periods when things were not going so well, especially regarding money being mismanaged. It is vital that external facilitation be easily available, and that the situation continue to be monitored, so that problems can be addressed before they spiral out of control.
- One of the biggest things communities have struggled with is developing good business administration skills, particularly around the management of money. People working in both Mexico and Petén thought that not enough attention had been paid to this from the beginning, and many communities have had serious problems with this. Financial and administrative capacity-building needs to be placed at the heart of support programmes to community forests. In Petén, following serious debt problems in some communities, the government has sent full-time accountants to live with them to help them develop good financial administration.
- One particularly important aspect of financial administration for communities is developing good transparency and accountability practices. There is inevitably some delegation of decision-making around communal funds to smaller groups doing the daily business of managing the forest resources—whether it is the elected community authorities, or smaller committees or enterprises that have been created to manage various forest resources. There is an ever-present risk that these delegates will make decisions outside of what has been decided by the community, pocket communal funds, or enter into bad deals with external operators. Communities need to develop systems to avoid this. Regular presenting of accounts and activity reports to the community assembly seems to work well, as does posting such information in the community hall. This seems to work best if communities develop such systems themselves, via trial and error, rather than having particular frameworks imposed. Outsiders can help by monitoring the situation and stepping in to help communities develop new transparency systems when the need arises.
- Another key issue for internal governance is how to decide who is actually in the community. It is vital that the community group—that is, the people officially entitled to participate in

community decision-making and share in profits—include as many of the people actually residing in the local area as possible. This is what the model is premised on—that forests are protected better when local residents are responsible for and benefit from managing them. Mexico’s ejidos have had a very hard time with this. Unlike communities in both Mexico and Guatemala, where all adult residents of the community are automatically eligible to be “*comuneros*” (members of the community—though they do not have to take this up if they do not choose), ejidos have a fixed number of “*ejidatario*” rights that generally belong to the male head of the household. This right is only passed on when he dies, or decides to sell the right—and even in that case, it will only be passed on to one person. This means that there is an increasing number of “young” (and this includes people well into their forties) men who live in the ejido, but cannot participate in assemblies and do not receive income from the community forest. Women are generally excluded entirely. In many ejidos, this may mean the majority of the population is not actually involved in managing the forest. This has fed illegal forest use in many cases, as well as increasing outward migration of younger generations from the ejidos. It has also deprived ejidos of the skills, education and new ideas of the next generation. This problem will only get worse as time goes on—many people thought it posed a potentially fatal risk to Mexican community forestry - and would likely only be fixed by a legal change to the ejido form.

### **Running a business**

It can be difficult for communities to adapt to running a business. Unlike a normal business, a community does not have purely economic aims, and it will base decisions on a number of social or personal considerations that a company does not have to take into account. This is not a bad thing, but it does mean communities can have a difficult time integrating into markets that expect them to behave like companies. A particularly common struggle in both countries has been fulfilling contracts with timber buyers—there were frequent experiences of not producing enough timber, or producing it late. Communities may also do things like employing more people than they need for a productive activity, which is good for creating jobs, but reduces profits that could be invested in further development of the enterprise. They may select people to run parts of the business based on personal relationships, rather than going through a hiring process to select the best person for the job. Important business decisions must be made by the whole assembly—which may include hundreds of members. This makes it much harder to come to agreement over strategy than a normal business. Communities also find it very difficult to access credit, though a few have formed associations that give out credit to members (see above). Finally, both countries have struggled from the fact that they replace their community leaders every few years (in Mexico every three years; in Petén every two). This rotation of leaders was seen as important in terms of avoiding corruption, but it has serious disadvantages in terms of allowing the development of individual entrepreneurial skills or a coherent long-term business vision. One way a community could avoid this is to have very clear written processes and plans in place, that carry over from leader to leader, so that not too much is lost when the post is changed.

One solution to these issues, which several of the more advanced communities I visited have done, is to create a separate business entity to run the community enterprise. This presents regular accounts to the community assembly, and distributes profits to them, but it makes business decisions independently, and hires permanent staff rather than being run by elected community officials. This has been done fairly effectively in several cases, for example the communities of TIP in Oaxaca (Santiago Textitlan, Ixtlan de Juarez and Pueblos Mancomunados). In other cases, such as in

Noh Bec, controversies around mismanagement of money have caused the company to be disbanded.

Some NGOs, like Reforestamos, have chosen to respond to the difficulty of developing a business with an entire community by working with individuals or smaller groups within the community to develop their own forest enterprises. This works particularly well with NTFPs like ramon (a nut used to make flour and tea substitutes) or honey, because they do not need large groups of people to operate. Working with smaller groups makes it a lot easier to develop a coherent business vision, avoid mismanagement of funds, and ensure only the most motivated people are involved in the business. It is important to proceed carefully with this approach, as some people thought it could fragment community unity (which, as discussed above, is vital for success). Others maintained, however, that many of these communities were already too fragmented to be able to carry out activities together, and that it was better to start out small, with the vision of eventually translating it to the community level once it had got off the ground. In any case, it is clear that these questions around how much to create separate business entities to administer community resources vary widely from community to community, and will fluctuate within a community depending on the circumstances—and that this is a good thing. In Noh Bec, for example, the ejido could not afford to replace their carpentry equipment when it was destroyed by Hurricane Dean in 2007. As a result, several smaller carpentry shops have sprung up, owned by individual ejidatarios, that buy and work the timber from the ejido's sawmill. This has been a flexible response to an unforeseen disaster that has enabled money to stay in the ejido, even if it is not being made directly by the ejido itself.

### **Role of outside support**

All of the above challenges mean that outside support is vital for community forests to function, particularly in the beginning years. Both Mexico and Guatemala benefited hugely from the support of government and NGOs. Support included facilitating land use planning and drafting of community rules; technical and administrative capacity-building; helping communities connect with buyers; facilitating annual investment planning; lending or granting money to buy equipment; guiding communities through the process of gaining FSC certification; fostering networks between communities; and conducting political lobbying at the national level.

This support appears to have been most useful when it has been long-term, and located in or near the community. This enables communities to work frequently with the same person or organisation over an extended period of time, ensuring that this relationship is facilitative and responds to the needs and goals of the community as they evolve. Under the Mexican government's PROCYMAF programme, which was run as a government pilot in Oaxaca from 1997-2003, independent advisors were sent out to live in communities full-time to help organise communities. Government agents would also go around and visit the communities, rather than requiring them to come to a central government office to access support. PROCYMAF has been widely-admired for its success in helping produce Mexico's most-developed community forest enterprises.

Another key to PROCYMAF's success was that the support it provided was diversified: it categorised communities from I to IV according to what level of control they had over the timber production process, and tailored support accordingly. PROCYMAF also allowed communities to choose what kind of technical support they wanted, rather than imposing it on them: it established a database of technical advisors and allowed communities to choose who they wanted depending on what their needs were.

It is helpful if support programmes have a regional scope, as this allows organisation to be fostered between communities, and regional economies to be built that can absorb and/or add value to communities' forest products. PROCYMAF's initial stage in Oaxaca had the advantage of being focused on the whole state; the Mexican government's Plan Piloto Forestal in the 1980s was similarly focused on the state of Quintana Roo. Petén's community concessions have clearly benefited from the fact that they are administered as part of a unit, the Mayan Biosphere Reserve.

### **Issues with government role in Mexico?**

Despite some historically very successful programmes, Mexico has now fallen quite far downhill in terms of government support to community forests.

In 2010, PROCYMAF was relaunched and extended to all Mexican states, but gutted of funding and staff, such that it effectively is no longer operational. Nothing has really arisen to replace it: the government budget as a whole has shrunk due to decreased oil revenues, and the government seems to have lost interest in community forests both as a means for producing timber, and conserving forests. The Mexican government has set a 17 per cent target of forests under protected area management by 2020, but has not included communities within this. Mexico also now imports a large quantity of its timber, despite the fact that it has ample forest resources.

Rather than trying to expand timber production in Mexican community forests, many of the people interviewed felt the government was "picking winners" and focusing on intensifying production within areas that are already functional, rather than trying to build up communities that need more help. Rather than putting in place long-term support programmes, the government has replaced these with year-long projects that beneficiaries have complained are too rigid and prescriptive to really facilitate communities to develop. As a result of this collapse in support, many communities are actually regressing, giving up FSC certification or later-stage processing activities. Some interviewees were worried this was sending Mexican community forestry into terminal decline; others saw this a normal cycle of fluctuation in government support, which would hopefully be rectified with the next national election.

Another very common complaint with the Mexican government's role was its tendency to over-regulate. It is important the government retains an oversight role to ensure forests are being used sustainably; in both Mexico and Guatemala, communities are required to submit longer-term forest management plans, as well as annual permits. People in both countries thought this was a good system and did not object to the government requiring these documents. In Mexico, however, there were many complaints about the delays and difficulties involved in granting the annual logging permits. Some people reported delays of up to three years, and many rejections without justification. This meant communities had to either carry on in the meantime, operating illegally, or stop operations- leaving them unable to fulfil buyer contracts or keep paying employees. Another complaint was that the government had a tendency to impose excessive and unnecessary conservation requirements: overzealous reforestation requirements that made the forest too thick and slowed trees from growing, or bans on cutting paths in the forest despite the fact that this entails very little destruction. People did not even feel the government had the capacity to monitor its own laws were being kept. It would be better for the government to simplify the legal framework to a level that it can actually enforce.

### **Why do some communities succeed where others fail?**

One question I was especially interested in was what makes some communities succeed where others fail. All of the aspects discussed above are important parts of this. However, there were also a few basic conditions that I observed throughout my study whose presence was virtually determinative—in other words, even if all the aspects discussed above were got “right”, the community forest was highly likely to fail. These conditions must be considered by people working in other countries, as I think it would be difficult if not impossible to develop community forests in these conditions (though it also appears nothing else would work either).

1. **Proximity of the community forest to the forest frontier**—namely, the boundary where the forest meets land already cleared for agriculture. In Petén, the difference in forest cover between the community forest concessions and the nearby protected area (which has suffered severe degradation) is certainly impressive, but several of the community concessions bordering the protected area have suffered a lot of forest degradation as well. It is clearly not a coincidence that all of these areas were closest to the area already being rapidly cleared for agriculture. A 2008 study of Mexican and Guatemala showed that neither protected areas nor community forests perform well in active colonization fronts.<sup>1</sup> This is not an argument against community forestry, but rather a caution that it cannot be relied upon as a panacea in contexts where forest clearance and conflict is already high (such as possibly Ivory Coast).
2. **The pre-existing livelihoods of the community.** The most successful tropical community forests in both Mexico and Petén (Uaxactun, Carmelita and Noh Bec) were founded by communities of chicleiros (harvesters of chicle, a natural gum). Chicle extraction depends on the maintenance of natural forest cover, as the trees grow wild in the forest and require the shade of other trees to extract the chicle. This meant that, before the community forests were created, the communities already placed a very high value on keeping the forest standing. As the international market for chicle has declined, it has been a relatively easy transition for these communities to take on sustainable logging. By contrast, neighbouring communities in both Petén and Quintana Roo which had strong pre-existing cattle-raising or agricultural traditions have experienced high rates of forest clearance.

## IV. Conclusions

I had heard before coming that communities can conserve forests better than protected areas, and in both countries there were many cases where this was true. A glance at the map of Petén clearly shows that community concessions have conserved forest cover much better than the protected area nearby—to the extent that conservation NGOs working in the region are now trying to convert protected areas to community management. Many communities in both countries have sophisticated systems to catch and deal with illegal logging, and to control forest fires and forest disease. However, community forests in both countries struggled to prevent deforestation in situations of active colonization.

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<sup>1</sup> Bray et al. (2008), “Tropical Deforestation, Community Forests, and Protected Areas in the Maya Forest”, 13(2) *Ecology and Society* 56.

Contrary to my expectations, it is perfectly possible for communities to log sustainably— the forests I visited were clearly natural forests, and the community concessions in Petén especially seemed to have developed fully sustainable extraction rates. However, this does not mean they always do. Many ejidos in Quintana Roo have struggled with overexploitation of commercially valuable species, though it does not appear this damage is irreparable and some are now carrying out reforestation of these species.

It was not as important as I thought that the communities have long indigenous histories in the forest. Some communities in Petén manage their forests very effectively despite only coming together in the past few decades. What is important, however, is some pre-existing practice of seeing the forest as economically valuable—whether for logging or for chicle.

I was also challenged in my assumption that Mexico's tenure model was superior to Guatemala's. Ownership rights have clearly been vital to the success of Mexican community forests. However, Guatemalan community forests had also done well despite only having 25-year concessions, though people will have to fight to make sure these are renewed and/or lengthened. In Mexico, the advantages of land ownership were undermined by the individualisation of collective land tenure in ejidos, as well as by the exclusion of younger generations from decision-making.

Communities' level of organisation proved to be one of the most important factors for their success. However this wasn't something communities either naturally had or didn't—it was a constant struggle for all communities, and it was vital they develop good decision-making, transparency and accountability systems to respond to this.

Timber provided the bulk of the forest-based economy in nearly all communities I visited. NTFPs were generally not very developed, apart from two exceptions in Guatemala with large xate operations. In terms of later stage processing of timber, this was generally better developed in Petén. In Mexico these communities were highly advanced but in a tiny minority; most communities have stagnated or even regressed backwards along the timber production chain.

Community forestry was clearly able to be a motor for economic development in some cases; this was particularly evident in the most successful communities of Mexico, where large portions of community members were employed by the community and younger generations had benefited visibly from improved education. In both Mexico and Guatemala, these more successful communities pay their employees above the national median wage. In Guatemala, the "successful" communities were visibly poorer than the successful Mexican communities. Perhaps this was because their timber extraction levels are more limited than in Mexico; it could also be because Guatemala is a poorer country than Mexico.

PES can be helpful, but they should be invested into active conservation or productive activities, rather than being given as a flat payment.

The role of outsiders is vital in helping communities to conduct land use planning, make and improve forest management rules, develop business skills, conduct political lobbying and more. Communities need to have access to sustained, long-term support, especially in the beginning years.

Government support programmes have been vital in both Mexico and Guatemala. In Mexico, however, these have declined significantly in recent years, with visible effects on community forests. Instead, it has replaced its facilitative role with a more restrictive one, placing excessive conservation requirements that make it difficult for community forests to operate.

# V. What Mexico and Guatemala can share

## 1. For communities:

Exchanges between communities have been at the heart of community forestry's success in Latin America. The communities in Petén, for example, learned how to do forest management by making regular visits to the ejidos in Quintana Roo, just across the border. Exchange visits give community members the opportunity to ask questions directly of people in similar positions in other communities. This is often far more instructive than having an external person come to their community and give a presentation.

Things it might be particularly interesting for African communities to see in other communities:

- **Timber extraction:** It is unlikely they would be able to actually learn how to conduct it, as Guatemalan communities did by coming to Mexico, as the forest is different, the language barrier would be too difficult and they are too far away to make frequent visits. However, it would be inspiring just to visit and see that other communities are doing it, and that they have sawmills and in some cases are producing furniture.
- **Production of NTFPs:** The potential NTFPs in the region are likely to be very different (with the exception of honey), so again, a visit would be useful simply to spark new ideas as to what is possible. It would be particularly inspiring to visit the xate production activities in Uaxactun (Guatemala), as these are very well-developed and show it is possible to have a local economy based on commercial export of NTFPs.
- **Coffee:** For people working in Ghana and Ivory Coast, where smallholder-produced coffee and cacao are big industries, it might be useful to visit the SENOC cooperative of coffee producers in Oaxaca. These people have organised themselves to a point that they are packaging and selling coffee to international markets themselves.
- **Business organisation:** It would be useful to see the ways communities have organised themselves to produce different goods—what kinds of teams they have created, how they have delegated authority, what business entities they have created, etc. There have been a wide diversity of responses to these questions in Mexico and Guatemala, and visits could be arranged according to what kinds of models people think they might be interested in.
- **Internal governance:** It would be helpful to see how other communities' internal governance systems work, including their constitution, land use plan, accountability systems, and how issues are resolved at community assemblies. Somebody from the host community could present their internal governance systems and give people the chance to ask questions. It may be particularly beneficial to see the community assembly hall, and the place where minutes and accounts are posted on the wall—this gives a clear sense of what systems are in place. It would be really good if visitors could attend a community assembly, but this would probably not be possible because of the language barrier.
- **Forest protection:** This would include how communities run vigilance patrols and what kinds of things they look out for, how they respond to fires or illegal logging, what rules they have about using the forest (and sanctions when these are broken), and how they monitor forest cover. Guatemala also has some impressive experience of community-led satellite monitoring.
- **Preventing corruption:** One concern expressed by people in Africa was how to prevent collusion between logging companies and local elites, where they take advantage of the

community forest to conduct logging without the knowledge or benefit of the rest of the community. When I asked people in Mexico about this, they said the solution was strong community governance, in particular an active assembly. I did not get a chance to do this, but it may be interesting for people to talk to Mexican communities that are not actually extracting timber themselves—the majority in fact contract logging to an external company—to see how they have dealt with this risk.

- Finally, it is useful for community members to visit other community forests just to see what is possible. People would be inspired by seeing what kinds of benefits other communities have bought using the profits of their forest management—such as running water, schools, or even Wi-Fi. It is important, however, to make sure communities also visit some less-developed community forests, as the more-successful ones may be so far away from their own reality that it may be hard to see the connection.

## **2. For NGOs & government:**

One thing I felt strongly before I came is that it will not work to transpose specific aspects of community forestry from one place to another, as the conditions in terms of community organisation and potential economic activities vary so much from community to community. This belief has been reinforced by my time here. What I do think Mexico and Guatemala have to share with African partners, more than anything, is some of the **facilitative tools that NGOs and governments can use** to help communities determine what they want to do with their land and how they want to organise themselves. Both countries have been developing and improving on these tools for decades, and I think people working on this in Africa could really benefit from knowing how they have done this.

From various peoples' advice, I compiled the following sequence of tasks for developing community forest management, which might be helpful to people working in Africa:

- 1) Do an inventory of the resources on the community's land, by having community members take a tour around the community's land, led by community members who work with the various types of resources and productive activities on the land.
  - The Mexican NGO GAIA has extensive experience of doing this in Oaxaca.
- 2) Develop a vision of what the community wants to do with these resources.
- 3) Draw up a land use plan, with clear boundaries between areas to be used for different purposes (e.g. forests, agriculture & houses).
  - Mexico has several interesting tools to facilitate land use planning, including the *evaluacion rural participative* (ERP) and the *ordenamiento de territorio comunitario* (OTC).
- 4) Draft a **community constitution** to set out how decisions are made, how leadership posts are chosen, sanctions.
  - It could be helpful for community members and NGOs to see an example of a community constitution from Mexico or Guatemala.
- 5) Come up with a **business plan** to implement the community vision - which activities the community will do (based on an analysis of what is commercially viable), in which areas, and how they will organise groups to do these activities.
  - Rainforest Alliance Latin America has done a diagnostic of the top five potential NTFPs for all the Latin American countries they work in, and have a methodology for this diagnostic which they would be willing to share.
  - Reforestamos Mexico has some useful tools to help communities develop a

business vision.

- 6) Do **technical studies and management plans** for the different activities the community has decided to do.
- 7) Help communities develop **transparency and accounting systems**.
  - The Consejo Civil has various tools to help with this, including templates to present annual accounts, expenses log sheets, etc.
- 8) Ensure communities get necessary **training**—whether in technical forest management, accounting, NTFP production, or other things. This may include bringing in specialists (such as forest technicians or accountants) to work with communities over an extended period of time, as Mexico and Guatemala have both done.
- 9) Help communities **connect to new buyers**.
- 10) Help communities with annual **investment planning**.
  - Reforestamos Mexico has some tools to help communities assess commercial viability of investments (i.e. assessing costs of production versus price at market), as does the University of Minnesota. The Consejo Civil can share how they do this for timber operations specifically.
- 11) Keep **monitoring** how the community is doing, to see where they may need more or different support with any of the above tasks. This is an ongoing role.
  - One interesting approach taken by the Guatemalan government (CONAP) is to have a meeting once per year with each community, where they assess how things have gone in the past year and identify needs and set goals for the year ahead (which the government will then help them seek funding for if necessary).

- To achieve all of the above, support from outsiders in the first few years is vital. It can come from various actors - government, NGOs, and independent technical specialists—and indeed seems to work best when a variety is involved. Anyone trying to develop community forestry in other countries should focus on building up such a network of supportive actors.
- For an NGO with limited resources trying to promote community forestry in a new country, the strategy everybody recommended to me was to choose one or two pilot communities and work closely with them for a few years. This will then develop experiences that can then be shared with the rest of the country.
- It is important for people working with communities to do as much as they can to encourage collective action. They should work with the whole community as much as possible, though it may sometimes be necessary to work with smaller groups to initiate new activities.
- It is also important that people working with communities build networks between communities, and eventually take a regional approach to their support, connecting producers together and building regional markets. Mexico and Guatemala have useful experiences of different models of community alliances that benefit from the advantages of working together, whilst conceding to issues around lack of trust. It may be helpful for Africans working on this to be in touch with Latin American counterparts, to see how they have responded to problems as they arise.

### 3. For government actors:

Governments can learn from Mexico and Guatemala's experience in several ways.

Firstly, it can be helpful for them simply to see that community forests can work, in order to build political support. This can be presented via easily digestible data (such as infographics, or the map of Guatemala showing the results of community conservation), or even more effectively by including them on a community exchange visit. This would have the added benefit of building links between community members and government actors, and involving them in constructing a shared forward vision at the end of the visit which would be very helpful for political support going forward.

In particular, government actors could learn from the successes and failures of various different policy approaches in Mexico and Guatemala. An exchange visit could include a presentation on different government policies, how they worked and what their effects were. It is also helpful if people with experience in Mexico and Guatemala can provide longer-term advice governments in Africa- as Gerardo Segura at the World Bank is currently doing for Liberia.

**Considerations that may be helpful in drafting legal frameworks:**

- Many of our partner countries in Africa may still be quite far away from making communities owners of forest land. Mexican communities, after all, were only able to gain land rights after a long and violent revolution. Guatemala's experience shows that limited-term concessions can be a stepping stone to communities who are not in a position to be able to demand full ownership rights. Groups in West/Central Africa may want to consider this as an option.
- Mexico's experience teaches us that ownership and management of forest land must remain communal, or the model will not be successful at protecting forests. It is vital that the legal form prohibit pieces from being broken off and sold individually as they have been in the ejidos.
- It is also important to ensure that rules around who is a member of the community are relatively open-ended, based as much as possible on who is actually living on the land. This will have to depend on the local culture, but people working to develop this in other countries should take note that the Mexican and Guatemalan community model—which allows participation from anyone over 18 that comes from the community—has been much more successful at this than Mexico's ejido model, where the rights are limited and inheritable.