Building Partnerships with Forest Communities

Indigenous and local communities, particularly in forest areas, are increasingly affected by environmental degradation and deforestation, which is often the result of unsustainable land use and global demand for commodities and mineral resources.

A growing number of public and private actors and conservation NGOs, are setting up enterprises and cooperating with local or indigenous forest communities. Often, the main goal is to support socio-economic development without compromising the environment.

Being the owners and the primary users of forestland, local communities are indispensable in efforts to reverse deforestation and forest degradation. Partnerships with forest communities can support sustainable forest management and help to develop alternative livelihoods, for instance through the commercialization of non-timber forest products. Such an approach can promote a shift to more sustainable development pathways for local communities.

Partnerships with local communities look good on paper. Yet some raise concerns that they are unable to provide lasting solutions. Several studies express increasing concern that multi-actor collaboration in the tropics is falling short of expectations (de Jong et al. 2010; Nasi et al. 2009).

Recent growth in global initiatives and policy instruments, such as Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+), highlight the importance of effective partnerships. These initiatives and policy instruments will rely, to some degree, on local actors to adjust forest use and support monitoring of forest areas to combat illegal logging, hunting, or conversion to other land uses.

Assembly of community members to carry out forest monitoring walk. Photo: Torsten Krause

In addition, there are many private sector initiatives through which companies make commitments to halt deforestation and forest degradation, for example sustainability and certification standards such as the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) or the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) (c.f. Deprez & Miller, 2014).

On the basis of lessons learned from past projects, this policy brief compiles strategies for establishing effective partnerships with local communities who use or own forest land.

Land ownership

There is growing attention to forestland ownership in the context of partnerships with forest communities. In 2013 it was estimated that indigenous peoples and communities owned approximately 12.6% of the world's forest, with substantial variation between countries and

About this brief
This brief is based on discussions from the workshop "Building partnerships with forest communities" at Lund University in September 2015 and the workshop attendees rich fieldwork experience from different parts of the world from Ecuador, Mozambique, Nigeria, Colombia, Chile, India, South Africa etc.

continents (Rights and Resources, 2014). However, the vast majority of forestland worldwide is still legally owned and administered by governments, particularly so in Africa. Latin America is considered a progressive case: indigenous people and forest communities own nearly 33% of forestlands, and in Ecuador more than 60%. Communities in the region have become indispensable partners in many forest conservation initiatives, and from a legal perspective, only those with official land rights or legal rights to resources are seen as key stakeholders or partners in projects that concern land and resources.

In practice, however, indigenous people or local communities do not always formally own land and in many countries there are various customary land ownership structures in place. These customary rights need to be respected because with interventions on forestland and restriction of people's use of resources there is a risk of marginalizing communities. Therefore it is crucial that partnerships also take into account those who rely on the resources but do not have legal titles or the legal recognition.

1. Why are partnerships with forest communities important?

The rise in popularity of partnerships with forest communities is partly a response to previously failed attempts to include these communities in forest management interventions. Partnerships implicitly aim to combine local socio-economic goals with global environmental objectives and present an opportunity to bridge competing interests, claims and tensions that exist between global conservation values, national sovereign resource interests, and local livelihoods.

Partnerships are a platform for integrating local or indigenous communities in any decision-making about the land and resource they use. In addition, partnerships provide a framework to uphold international conventions that require complying with various legal obligations (e.g. Free Prior and Informed Consent; consultation and participation, and non-discrimination).

Local people often have a profound understanding of the ecological dynamics at play in the forest areas they own or inhabit, so partnering with them can also support and enhance ecological considerations of a project. This traditional ecological knowledge can be very valuable in a community enterprise, and has already proven to be effective for minimizing resource degradation.

Lastly, partnerships enable collaboration between different agents and stakeholders, and engage local communities as equals. Working closely with communities provides the private sector with social license to operate. By not engaging or forming

llegally cut and processed timber by the river waiting for a buyer.
Photo: Torsten Krause

partnerships with local stakeholders companies may be exposed to increased operational risk, external criticism, general reputational damage, and increased social conflict.

2. What criteria can contribute to a successful community partnership?

Respecting and incorporating local values

It is crucial to have local communities on board through the entire lifespan of any development or conservation scheme. Incorporating their interests and values through participatory methods and involvement in decision-making is a way to guarantee this condition. One way to ensure that local perspective and values are included, while also adding to local capacity, is by supporting and strengthening local leadership and institutions.

Rights

It is fundamental to uphold the rights of communities, including legal rights, such as the right to consent and to reject projects or any other form of partnership with external actors. The right to meaningful participation in all negotiations is a basic criterion for partnerships. Most countries have a legal obligation, specified by the United Nations Declaration on the Right of Indigenous Peoples

Presentation of research project to community assembly in the Ecuadorian Amazon. Photo: Kimberly Nicholas

(UNDRIP) or the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (C169), of the International Labour Organization.

In addition, partnerships must include the right for communities to determine how to use resources independent of coercion or pressure, as well as the option to pull out of partnerships when the conditions agreed at the beginning of a partnership are no longer fulfilled. Lastly, all parties should have the responsibility to fulfil the terms of a partnership once it has been negotiated and agreed on.

Time perspective

Short-term interest should not stand in the way of long-term perspectives and responsible resource management. It is important for actions to be organized around a long-term vision to manage forests and resources for the benefit of current and future generations. It is necessary that implementation strategies also include principles and objectives for effectiveness and equity, which should be established and agreed on at an early stage. Implementation strategies should also incorporate adaptive learning systems, ensuring development of a partnership's institutions. Naturally, such partnerships are cross-cultural arrangements, usually intertwined with the different socio-economic backgrounds of the parties, therefore it is crucial to establish procedures for conflict management, and allow for timely and effective mediation.

3. What are the main challenges to building effective partnership?

- **Funding tends to be short term and often over-reliant on external financial support.** This frequently leads to a lack of long-term perspectives on the aims of partnerships,

for example on how financing can become endogenous, and how people envision the situation in the long term.

- **Partnerships need to respond more directly to interests, impacts, roles and responsibilities of the parties.** A partnership might be understood differently by a community or a group of people who have rights to a specific resource than it might by a business. It is important to be clear about expectations and definitions and not define partnership design basing on the position of power.
- **Unclear or misleading promises made to communities to get access to their resources,** undermining the vision of partnerships among equals.
- **A lack of strong result-orientated mechanisms to hold all actors accountable**, such as contracts (written and verbal) and other culturally appropriate agreements.
- **Lack of organizational, institutional and individual capacity:** in many cases establishing a partnership between diverse actors needs to be understood as a learning process, particularly with regard to the capacities of communities as well as local governments, which often need to be fostered, strengthened and supported. This process takes time and resources (financial, and non-financial), which have to be taken into consideration at the inception of a partnership.

4. What principles and mechanisms can help overcome these challenges?

- **Build flexible governance structures and design adaptive management approaches that allow goals to be revisited and revised if necessary**, and which account for changing circumstance. For longer-term partnerships it is necessary to design the process with intermediate steps, or nodal points, when decisions can be made to continue or end the cooperation.
- **Clearly define communities' rights and responsibilities.** It is crucial to move away from a one-way (i.e. donor to recipient) view of partnerships. A partnership involves mutual rights and responsibilities among all parties involved. All partners' rights and responsibilities must be jointly negotiated and devised. Rights should be in accordance with legal rules and informal norms.

- **Make community values a priority and use of existing structures and institutions in communities as a basis to work from.** Depending on the type of partnership and the geographical and cultural context, the advice of local experts, such as sociologists and or anthropologists, might be useful.
- **Establish clear joint goals and exit strategies:** consider the ambitions of people in a community and what will happen if these ambitions and goals change.
- **It is important to focus on strengthening the capacity of local institutions**, especially in forest management, accounting, community governance, and conflict resolution. This might be done through learning sessions and training workshops carried out by local experts and people who are skilled trainers. In addition, sharing experience about best practice with people from communities can be a useful, and supports the ongoing exchange of information, mutual learning and trust building.

5. How can we better integrate research into practice?

First, communication is key. Meaningful dialogues have to be set-up and facilitated among all the stakeholders, including those who are involved in design and implementation. Feedback loops from research findings should allow for continuous learning and improvement as well as for realignment of objectives. Action research can offer valuable insights about how to effectively include local communities, empowering people as active partners in generating new knowledge and building lasting partnerships.

Second, it is necessary to think long-term and have a clear vision of the future. The aim is to negotiate ongoing involvement of research in community partnerships to offer advice and insights through the lifespan of a venture. This is particularly important because behavioural change takes time, and environmental change that affects communities' manifests gradually.

Third, there should be more focus and resources on basing partnerships on respect, rights and responsibilities. Broader collaboration between governments, NGOs, and the private sector would support this. There is also a need to develop a framework and a sound methodology for research, which can respond to sustainability challenges relevant to local people and which follows good practice and ethical guidelines.

This brief is written by Torsten Krause, PhD in Sustainability Science.
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