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Optimizing synergies between livelihoods development and forest conservation: Evidence from Community Forest Enterprise Development in Peten, Guatemala

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In the Multiple Use Zone (MUZ) of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) in Peten, Guatemala 25-year concessions have been granted to local communities since the late 1990s. We studied the socio-economic benefits of community forestry to substantiate the communities' claim for concession renewal which they see threatened by powerful groups interested in oil exploration and tourism development in the MUZ, and the advance of cattle and cash crop production in adjacent areas. We assessed livelihood benefits among households (n=90) and business viability at the level of community forest enterprises (CFE) in 3 out of a total of 12 community concessions selected along a gradient from less to more advanced in terms of enterprise development. Focusing on human, social, natural, physical and financial capital, we determined asset building at household and enterprise level by comparing our 2013/14 data with baseline data obtained in 2009. We revisited 30 households selected at random in each of the concessions, organized focus group discussions with CFE representatives, and interviewed key informants. Our results show that CFE development has allowed households in the two more advanced concessions to move out of poverty by increasing daily forest-based income to \$22.2 and \$12.7 per capita (poverty line: \$10.0 and \$7.8, respectively). In the least advanced concession, households were able to move out of extreme poverty (daily forest-based income of \$7.7 per capita, against the extreme poverty line of \$6.7), but further value adding is needed to move above the poverty line (\$10.7). Our findings, combined with the demonstrated conservation effects of the community concessions, make a strong case for their renewal in pursuit of the twin goal of forest conservation and livelihoods development. They also provide insights on the design of viable models of community stewardship of tropical forests elsewhere in Latin America and beyond.