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From disabling to enabling: Evolution of community forest governance in Guatemala and Nicaragua

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Community forest governance, ranging from national policies, rule and regulations to local management and business arrangements, is a key factor for the viability of collective forest management and enterprise development. Based on a comparative analysis of enabling and disabling conditions in Petén, Guatemala and the North Caribbean Coast Autonomous Region (NCCAR), Nicaragua, we reconstruct the evolution of community forest governance in two contrasting settings. In the Petén, usufruct rights have been granted since the late 1990s to local communities in the Multiple Use Zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) through 25-year community concessions. Over the next few years the latter's environmental and socio-economic performance will be assessed by the state authority in charge of the MBR (CONAP), as part of the concession renewal process. In the NCCAR, 16 indigenous territories have been established over the past two decades in recognition of the native communities' ancestral and customary rights to land.

Our comparative analysis of conditions enabling or disabling community forestry in the two regions took into account 16 factors outside of the reach of the communities and six factors directly controlled by them. We show that, overall, conditions for community forestry are more enabling in Petén, particularly as regards sense of ownership among the communities, availability of commercially valuable species (mahogany), market access, degree of community organization, and capacity for forest management and wood processing. In NCCAR, de jure land rights are stronger but de facto security is compromised by massive encroachment and failure of the government to effectively protect indigenous land rights, paired with the communities' low organizational and technical capacities for managing the forest and running forest enterprises.

Given that the conditions at the onset of the concession process in the MBR were similar to those in the NCCAR today, we argue that the case of Petén provides valuable insight into how largely disabling conditions for community forestry can be converted into an enabling environment that ensures both forest conservation and livelihood benefits through community stewardship of forests. We conclude with policy implications for scaling the Petén experiences in Nicaragua and elsewhere in Latin America and beyond.