

## **Successful Community Stewardship of Tropical Forests: Evidence from Community Forest Concessions in Petén, Guatemala**

*Dietmar Stoian<sup>1</sup> & Aldo Rodas<sup>2</sup>*

### **Abstract**

In 1990, the government of Guatemala created the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR) in the Petén region, bordering Mexico to the West and to the North and Belize to the East. With an area of 2.1 million hectares the MBR became the largest protected area in the country. Oversight rests with the National Council for Protected Areas (CONAP) across the three zones of the Reserve, including a core zone, a buffer zone and a multiple use zone (MUZ). In the latter, 25-year forest concessions have been granted to local communities between 1994 and 2002 on an area of close to 400,000 ha. These zones have taken diverse pathways since their creation, reflected in considerable differences in terms of forest conservation and livelihood benefits accruing to the local population. Deforestation rates over the period 2000-2013, for example, have been high in the buffer and core zones (5.5% and 1.2% per annum, respectively) while they have been low to negligible in the MUZ (0.1% per annum).

In addition to the demonstrated conservation effects of the community forest concessions, our study sheds light on the social and economic benefits derived through the community forest enterprises (CFEs) that have been established in each of them. We show that, if well managed, forest income derived from the community concessions can lift people out of poverty while at the same time conserving the forest. These findings are highly relevant as the concessions need to undergo renewal over the next few years, since they provide the government and local stakeholders with evidence of the concessions' performance. This is particularly important as the communities are confronted with conflicting interests of powerful groups who seek to get hold of the MUZ for oil exploration and tourism development. Further pressure is exerted by the advance of the agricultural frontier through cattle ranching and cash crop production in the buffer zone and associated forest fires that also affect the core zone and the fringes of the community concessions.

Across the 12 community forest concessions, we assessed business viability at the level of community forest enterprises (N=12) and livelihood benefits among households (n=350) who are members to them. In each CFE, we selected 30 member households at random, save for one CFE where their total number did not exceed 20. Household and enterprise-level data were complemented with data obtained through context analysis, with a focus on principal forest product value chains, relevant policies, rules and regulations, and interventions by governmental and non-governmental organizations in the value chains and their enabling environment. Methods included key informant interviews (n=35) for context analysis, focus group discussions with current and past CFE representatives for enterprise assessments (n=12), and structured interviews for the household surveys (n=350). Additional focus group discussions (n=12) aimed at determining the linkages between the building of business assets at enterprise level and that of livelihood assets at household level. They were also instrumental for identifying contextual factors that have shaped asset building.

Our results show that, in the more advanced concessions, the forest income that households derive through their membership in CFEs is equivalent to 1.6-2.8 times the poverty line. In less advanced concessions, forest income allows CFE members to pass the line of extreme poverty and, combined

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<sup>1</sup> Bioversity International, Montpellier, France; corresponding author: [d.stoian@cgiar.org](mailto:d.stoian@cgiar.org)

<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, Santa Elena, Guatemala

with other income, the poverty line. Forest income is reinvested in meeting basic household needs in less advanced concessions and in further assets, such as housing, livestock and higher education in the more advanced concessions. Positive feedback loops in terms of asset building are linked to the economic performance of the CFEs which, in turn, depends on: 1) the availability of mahogany and other precious woods in the concessions, 2) market outlets for lesser-known timber species and non-timber forest products (NTFPs), such as *Chamaedorea* palm and breadnut, 3) the capacity to add value to both timber and NTFP species, and 4) the governance structure of the enterprise.

Overall CFE performance is also shaped by enabling conditions, particularly the existence of an umbrella organization (ACOFOP) which serves as an advocacy group for the forest communities in Petén, the support of the government through CONAP, and the technical, business and financial assistance provided by a number of NGOs and projects. This external support, provided over the past two decades, has been critical to build up technical capacity for forest management and basic business administration skills in the CFEs. This, in turn, has allowed to generate higher added value to timber and non-timber forest products which has been passed on to member households through the generation of employment and in the form of dividends.

Our findings provide new evidence on the socio-economic performance of the community concessions which complements existing data on their contribution to avoided deforestation. Combined, these findings make a strong case for the renewal of the community concessions in pursuit of the twin goal of forest conservation and socio-economic development. They also show areas of potential improvements as the results vary widely both across concessions and member households. Issues to be addressed relate to the inclusion or exclusion of CFE members, the distribution of benefits across and within the CFE member households, and the access of women to decision making at enterprise and household level. In addition, many CFEs face the challenge of an aging membership, with the founding members reaching retirement age and the youth searching out livelihood options beyond forest and agricultural activities. We conclude with opportunities for increasing the viability of community stewardship of tropical forests in Guatemala and elsewhere in Latin America and beyond.