

**Rural Social Movements and Forest Governance: Assistance to Grassroots
Organizations to Promote Conservation and Development in Latin America**

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I. Forest Conservation, Governance and Support to Forest Communities

Forested regions in the developing world have historically been the object of competing resource use claims by groups seeking to extract precious minerals, petroleum, timber or non-timber products, to access land for subsistence and commercial agricultural and animal raising, to develop tourism activities, and recently, to protect threatened biodiversity and cultural treasures. In this context of intense competition for control of forest resources, forest dependent people and their livelihoods may be pitted against conservation objectives and local people blamed for forest degradation, lose access to resources or be outright expelled. Yet conservation and community livelihood objectives must be reconciled as part of any forest conservation strategy; in 2002, communities owned or administered about 11% of the 3.6 billion hectare global forest, a share expected to double in the next 15 years (Molnar 2003: ii, 30). Significantly, in recent years in Latin America, grassroots community-based forest organizations have emerged that are helping introduce a new social actor in the governance of protected areas: the forest steward community.

Based on a three year Ford Foundation-financed, Center for International Forestry Research-sponsored research project, this study discusses environmental governance in four Latin American cases where community based groups have maintained control over forest resources, continue to base their livelihoods on forest use and have positively

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influenced conservation. The Project studied the different assistance models these organizations have experienced and which have influenced their current activities. It promoted the systematic documentation, exchange and dissemination of the experiences of grassroots forestry organizations, which had not yet been fully described and analyzed. Overall, the Project aimed to help develop a model of research and technical assistance which had at its center the strengthening of community capacity for analysis, planning and management in conservation and development efforts. The lessons and conclusions generated by the unusual collaborative efforts among research professionals and community members involved in the Project may be useful for other community organizations in the region.

This paper describes the Grassroots Assistance Project's approach to research and strengthening of community analysis and management capacities. It summarizes context studies of four grassroots forest organization in Central America and Brazil, focusing on the conditions shaping their emergence, the roles of the state and external technical assistance, and impacts on conservation and development. It briefly discusses the results of innovative community self-studies in Guatemala and Nicaragua. It then turns to an alternative model of technical "accompaniment" emerging from the communities' own experiences that may more effectively help build community capacity to manage forests for conservation and development. Grassroots forestry organizations are showing that conservation and development need not be opposing strategies. Rather than being part of the deforestation problem, organized forest communities can potentially be key allies in the protection and management of the environment for the future.

II. The Grassroots Community Forestry Assistance Project

The Grassroots Assistance Project was jointly sponsored by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the Central American Indigenous and Peasant Coordinator of Communal Agroforestry (ACICAFOC) and the Amazon Institute for People and the Environment (IMAZON). The Project's dual research and community capacity building aimed to identify how grassroots social movements have influenced forest resource management, to understand the role external agencies and assistance have played in supporting these movements, and to help develop assistance models which better build capacity for broad-based community initiatives. The Project builds on CIFOR's recent pioneering work on adaptive collaborative management (Colfer 2005) and forest management decentralization (Edmunds and Wollenberg 2003). Project activities included comprehensive context studies of selected grassroots forest movements; training of community members to carry out and analyze their own research; and horizontal exchange among communities and their representatives. The Grassroots Assistance Project's methodological approach combined skills and perspectives of both forest community members and external professional researchers to develop a comprehensive account of the community forestry experiences.

Context studies

Regional context studies described and analyzed the events, characteristics and stakeholders structuring the experience of four forest community organizations in Petén, Guatemala; Siuna, Nicaragua; and Acre and Mamirauá, Brazil. Professional researchers carried out exhaustive reviews of available secondary published information, supplemented by in-depth interviews and observation in the field. Context studies in

Central America were carried out by Ileana Gómez, Ernesto Méndez, Nelson Cuellar, Susan Kandel and Eduardo Baumeister, researchers associated with the San Salvador-based development and environmental research institute, PRISMA. In Brazil, Samantha Stone-Jovicich of the University of Florida produced context studies for Mamirauá and Acre in collaboration with IMAZON.

Each of the four context studies provided a unique analysis of historical and structural factors shaping community-based forest management. Nevertheless, the studies were guided by several cross-cutting themes and issues: the historical emergence of the grassroots forest movement; the state's role in shaping environmental governance and community access to forest resources; structural factors shaping environmental governance, including colonization, tenure security, multiple stakeholder competition for resources, or armed conflicts; the types of communities and productive activities related to protected areas and reserves; the role of external actors, including international donors, conservation organizations and NGOs; and communities' experiences with technical assistance.

Community self-studies

“Auto-systematization” studies were carried out in four communities and community-based forest associations in Petén, Guatemala and Siuna, Nicaragua. Forest communities’ capacity to organize and negotiate effectively with external stakeholders has been limited by the lack of systematic description and understanding of their experiences from their own point of view. As one community member remarked in Petén, Guatemala, “community leaders went to meetings with decision-makers and it was other people who had the maps and information” (Taylor 2004). In Central America,

Project coordinators Pasos and Sánchez have developed an innovative participatory method called “*auto-systemization*” which seeks to make research a capacity building process for communities and their grassroots forest organizations (ACICAFOC-PCAC Siuna, 2003; Proyecto Innovativo 2004; n.d.; Sanchez Hidalgo, n.d.). “Auto-systematization” signals a commitment to access local knowledge and experiences and to build communities’ capacity to do their own research, analysis and planning. Ultimately, auto-systematization strives to enhance communities’ political capacity to identify needs and to make proposals for collaboration with third parties.

The Project’s auto-systematization builds on nearly 30 years of experience with participatory research and capacity building approaches and tools. These approaches and methods have aimed to enable local people to “share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act” (Chambers 1994: 953; also see 1983). Participatory approaches were first tried in large scale projects in community forestry in the 1970s, many of which failed because of disproportionate attention given to technical over social and economic issues (Thomson and Schoonmaker-Freudenberger 1997). They have also been greatly shaped by Farming Systems, Research and Extension approaches and others that have sought to recognize the existence of local farmer expertise (Harrington and Trip 1984; Hildebrand 1986; Richards 1985). Participatory sustainable livelihood approaches adopted by DFID, UNDP, FAO, Oxfam and CARE (Carney et al. 1999) emphasized the need to “place the poor and all aspects of their lives and means of living at the centre of development, while at the same time, maintaining the sustainability of natural resources for present and future generations” (FAO 2006).

Nevertheless, with important exceptions (e.g. ISTF 2005), most participatory research and capacity building approaches have emerged from agricultural contexts characterized by private property or usufruct tenure rights. The Project's auto-systemization approach is adapted to the unique conservation and development problems of Latin American forest communities. The forest context of these communities typically involves common pool resources, a collective framework of resource management, and regulatory frameworks enmeshed in highly complex and politically charged relationships.

Community members were locally selected and trained in document analysis, individual and group interview techniques, organization of fieldnotes, and use of audiovisual technologies. Community researchers employed an “assets approach” (FAO 2006) which instead of focusing on development problems and obstacles, systematically documented community assets, including human, social, physical, natural, and financial “capitals” (Sanchez Hidalgo, n.d.; ACICAFOC-PCaC 2003). The process encourages explicit characterization of existing models of natural resource management and technical assistance and allows participants to establish analytical relationships among resources, social actors and institutions.

Exchange meetings

Another key dimension of the Project's capacity building in research and analysis involved organizing horizontal exchange and knowledge dissemination among community members, technical staff and researchers involved. The Project organized an International Exchange meeting, “Learning to Build Models of Accompaniment for Grassroots Forestry Organizations in Brazil and Central America” in Petén, Guatemala, October 9-16, 2004. The event was attended by more than fifty community-based forestry

organization leaders and members, community members, technical support staff members and government officials from Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil and Bolivia. Long used effectively by Central American grassroots organizations, horizontal exchanges allow grassroots leaders and community members to directly present and discuss their experiences among themselves, to visit sites of successes and failures, and to collectively design improved management models. More generally, they also help establish new social networks among grassroots organizations.

III. Grassroots Community Forestry Movements and External Technical Support

The Grassroots Assistance Project focused on four cases of protected areas and community-based forestry. The experiences of the rural families represented by these groups suggest insights into how forestry movements emerge and function. They highlight the critical role played by the state in shaping the local context and responding to community demands. The varied assistance programs experienced by these communities represent multiple examples from which to derive lessons. Finally, the cases provide good indications of the positive impact that equitable collaboration with local community stakeholders can have on natural resource management.

Four cases of grassroots community forestry movements

In Guatemala, the Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP) leads a movement of diverse community-based organizations that have won rights to manage forest concessions in the Multiple Uses Zone of the Maya Biosphere (RBM). The RBM's original design and implementation did not take into sufficient account Petén's long history of competition among groups of actors to control its wealth of natural resources. A combination of factors, including the 1996 Peace Accords ending Guatemala's Civil

War, created national and international support for greater community participation (Gómez and Méndez 2005). After extended negotiation, 25 year forest management concessions were granted to six local communities within the Multiple Uses Zone (ZUM), to six communities bordering the ZUM and to two local forest industry companies (Nittler and Tschinkel 2005). ACOFOP was a key player in the original negotiation of the community concessions and continues to be an influential influence on the concessions' operation. ACOFOP has 22 member communities and organizations representing nearly 2,000 individuals.

In Acre, Brazil, the struggle of rubber tappers to secure property rights to maintain their forest livelihoods has allowed rural communities like Cachoeira to gain recognition for their traditional landholdings. Prior to the 1990s, large-scale colonization expansion and associated ranching development had resulted in the forced expulsion of rural families. Communities' resistance coalesced into a grassroots movement of rubber tappers and other traditional peoples. This social movement played a key role in slowing the expansion of the agricultural frontier and in gaining recognition of property rights for rubber tappers and other rural peoples in the Amazon. Since the 1990s, almost half of the state of Acre has been placed into conservation units, so that the state retains approximately 90% of its original forest cover. Acre has become a reference point for good governance, pro-forest policies and support for rural communities, as a progressive state government was recently elected with close ties to the communities and the grassroots rubber tappers movement.

In the Siuna region of Nicaragua, the Farmer to Farmer Program (PCaC) contributes to the effective management of the BOSAWAS Biosphere Reserve by

developing and disseminating more sustainable farming and ranching practices and promoting new conservation awareness and attitudes. BOSAWAS' original design, much like that of RBM, did not take into sufficient account Siuna's history of high levels of forest resource-related competition and its experience as site of some of the fiercest fighting during Nicaragua's civil war in the 1980s. Organizing directly 120 communities and 300 communities indirectly, PCaC's network of almost 500 volunteer promoters has helped slow the advance of the agricultural frontier toward BOSAWAS. The vast majority of farmers in PCaC's area of influence have stopped burning, and have begun replenishing their soils with cover crops and other sustainable practices. PCaC and its participants are also promoting "*corredores biológicos campesinos*" (peasant biological corridors) to connect their communities with BOSAWAS. PCaC is widely recognized as playing an important role in promoting governance of the region and its natural resources (CIFOR/ACICAFOC/IMAZON 2004).

In the Brazilian state of Amazonas, communities faced with the inclusion of their traditional territories within a conservation plan to protect the Ucari-branco primate have negotiated a more equitable plan, the Mamirauá Sustainable Development Reserve (RDSM), that allows them to remain and continue traditional extraction activities under collectively established sustainable management guidelines. The RDSM is the largest reserve dedicated to the conservation of *várzea* flooded forest in the Amazon, a type of flood plain forest landscape interspersed with canales and lakes marked by dramatic shifts in water levels due to seasonal flooding (Queiroz 2001). The region has a long history of intensive extractive activities, including rubber tapping, logging and commercial fishing. Although the Mamirauá reserve was originally designed as a

conservation area to protect the endangered primate Uacari-branco (*Cacajao calvus calvus*), its subsequent transformation to a Sustainable Development Reserve recognizes the rights of local communities to remain and to use its natural resources.

How have grassroots movements emerged?

Each of the grassroots forest movements emerged when protected areas and reserves were established, at least initially, with little or no consultation or inclusion of community interests. Local community members recognized a collective interest in defending against external threats to their resource base. Key actors, including state agencies, national and international donors and conservation groups, recognized that current protected area management and development models were unlikely to achieve conservation goals effectively without better accommodation of community interests. In some cases, this recognition was triggered by organized active resistance to prevailing resource management rules, as in the case of Petén, or to forest clearing, as in the case of Acre. In Mamirauá, conservation stakeholders realized early on the need to incorporate genuine community involvement in resource management.

Though each grassroots movement began as a local indigenous initiative, it then received assistance from external agencies which increased local organizational capacity and laid the groundwork for broader social and political networks. In Petén, for example, ACOFOP has received significant external support to strengthen its capacity to develop community networks in which common agendas and collective strategies can be formulated.

Once these grassroots movements succeeded in gaining more secure resource access, their organizations have shifted focus to better support their members' changing

needs. For example, in Acre the rubber tapper movement and its allies are searching for ways to increase income from forest resources (including a Brazil nut cooperative, decentralized nut processing, and the introduction of timber management). In Mamirauá the coordination of lake management and legalization of sustainable forest management has allowed residents to reduce uncontrolled resource use. In Petén, ACOFOP's community concessionaires are seeking to develop more integrated resource strategies beyond commercial timber to include management of non-timber forest products and services, including tourism. In Siuna, PCaC has focused on green manure and agroforestry to slow deforestation on a closing frontier and is seeking a more formal role in the management of the region's protected areas.

Consolidation of their significant success in natural resource management requires communities to develop greater capacities to manage the complex politics of their resource base. While conservation is an important component of their organizations' agendas, participating members expect concrete improvements in their livelihoods, often measured in terms of employment and income. Grassroots community organizations must work to maintain and extend state support for their role, and retain credibility with conservationist stakeholders. Among other things, this requires countering competing claims or criticisms based on narrow data and observations. This requires strengthening local skills in the collection, analysis and presentation of data about their forests and their forest-related activities.

What has been the role of the state?

In the four regions studied, state institutions have been historically weak or absent. Frequently, state policies have seen forested areas as unproductive regions and

explicitly or implicitly have encouraged their incorporation into national development agendas via colonization programs. On these remote and marginalized frontiers, rural people have occupied forest landscapes without formal title or officially recognized ownership rights. Powerful interest groups, such as ranchers or loggers, have benefited from the chaos and often have laid claim to lands traditionally used by smallholders. In recent years, conservation agendas have come to the forefront of political agendas shaping forest resource use and have promoted the establishment of protected areas and reserves. In the face of national and international criticism of the destructive impacts of policy (or lack of policy) on tropical forests, state supported and implemented conservation initiatives have often excluded forest dependent families.

The initial establishment of these conservation initiatives without adequate attention to local community interests generated significant social conflicts and sparked the emergence of organized responses, as illustrated in the cases of Petén and Acre. In response to collective pressure from grassroots movements and from international donors and NGOs, the State has allowed a more level playing field for communities, creating novel mechanisms such as community concessions, extractive reserves, and sustainable development reserves.

However, as the State continues to respond to multiple national and international interests, existing policy commitments to community-based natural resource management are vulnerable. In Central America, the selected grassroots organizations still have a largely adversarial relationship with official agencies and must continually bring pressure to assure that their members' perspectives and interests are considered by policymakers. In Brazil, by contrast, the relationship between government and grassroots opposition has

sometimes become blurred as the national government responds to collective demands by directly delegating responsibilities and funding to local organizations and NGOs. For example, the CNPT delegated significant responsibility and funding to the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS) to co-manage the Chico Mendes Agroextractive Settlement Project. The gradual return of democracy in Brazil meant that rural movements like that of the rubber tappers in Acre succeeded in electing members and allies, first to local government, then to state and national level prominence.

In all four cases in both Central America and Brazil, grassroots community organizations face ongoing challenges to secure and extend solid state policy support for an authentic local role in resource management. While the focus of these grassroots organizations has shifted after initial resource access had been won, the need for effective political capacity has not abated. On the contrary, the political requirements created by an enhanced and diversified community role in resource management are arguably greater than those needed to win initial access. Communities and their grassroots organizations clearly require strengthened capacities to study, analyze and present their own experiences in order to ensure that their interests are adequately represented in the highly competitive resource politics of their regions.

What has been the role of external technical assistance?

Although the grassroots movement organizations studied by the Project grew out of local initiatives and indigenous processes, in each case external assistance contributed to the formation and emergence of these groups as broad-based movements. The assistance received by the organizations varied in type and approach through what Cuellar and Gomez (2005) have called both “official” and “pro-community” models of

technical assistance. Rather than being competing models, these two have served different needs at different stages of communities' involvement in natural resource management.

The “official” or traditional model of assistance has involved greater levels of funding and focused most specifically on technology and skills transfer. In Petén, principle donors have included USAID, the World Bank, the German KFW, and the Ford Foundation. USAID alone invested an estimated \$40 million in Petén between 1990-2004 and promoted the close involvement of international conservation organizations such as Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, and World Wildlife Fund (Gómez and Méndez 2005: 19-21). The official model was also key in efforts by NGOs, state government and EMBRAPA efforts in Brazil to introduce sustainable forest management, including livelihood-focused projects to develop commercial timber and NTFPs such as Brazil nut and fisheries activities.

Nevertheless, this type of technical assistance often arrives as formal projects that require traditional organized hierarchies that often run contrary to the horizontal, process oriented principles of the social networks that structure grassroots movements. For example, according to ACOFOP and its members, external assistance providers in Petén too often “assumed a protagonist role in the process and instead of being accompanists or facilitators, they turned into service providing firms,” effectively becoming new intermediaries (Gómez and Méndez 2005: 22, 23).

The “pro-community” assistance model, by contrast with the “official” model, has focused more on the formation of community-based organizations and building their institutional capacity. Examples of this type of assistance include Oxfam-UK’s support of

PCaC's farmer-to-farmer exchanges in Siuna, Nicaragua. In Acre, NGOs such as CESE (Coordenadoria Ecumênica de Serviço), and CTA (Centro de Trabalhadores da Amazônia) supported rural education programs that helped strengthen an emerging rubber tapper identity among community members. The “pro-community” model generally involves smaller levels of funding. Because it supports long-term processes rather than aiming primarily for short term outputs, it may be less appealing to institutional stakeholders seeking shorter term results over large geographic areas.

Ideally, communities would have access to both types of assistance. In early stages of community involvement in resource management, traditional models of assistance can help establish basic legal, organizational and technical foundations. When community organizations have developed sufficient institutional maturity, their assistance needs will shift. The strength of the pro-community model (discussed in more detail below) is that it can assist community groups in reaching greater levels of organization and institutional stability, in more effectively representing and integrating their members' interests, and in negotiating on a more equal footing with other stakeholders.

What have been the impacts of grassroots forestry organizations on conservation and development?

These four grassroots movements' assumption of resource management has created greater stability which allows local people to invest in the future of both their forests and their communities. The forest management practiced by these groups is not perfect but has in these cases clearly generated positive results. Satellite images from Petén show that forest areas managed by community concessions suffer much less degradation than neighboring protected areas without a management role for resident communities (WCS et al., 2003; 2004). In Acre, the rubber tapper movement helped

propel a pro-forest state government into office. In Nicaragua, as members of PCaC Siuna gained more secure holdings and recognized that the frontier was closing, they become more interested in investments in cover crops and agroforestry to maintain the lands they held. In Mamirauá, once boundary conflicts between communities were resolved and management practices defined, resident families became much more vigilant to intrusions by outsiders or violations of norms by neighbors.

These four cases show persuasively that conservation and sustainable community livelihoods are not necessarily contradictory. Communities can be effective collaborators in conservation with highly positive impacts on biodiversity and poverty alleviation. As these grassroots groups develop and seek to take on more responsibility in forest management, their needs change. They seek greater autonomy in decision making. They seek to further develop their forest activities, by improving and extending their productive chains or developing more integrated approaches to natural resource management. They also face the need to develop greater negotiating capacity in the increasingly complex resource politics of their regions. New kinds of technical assistance are needed to complement traditional approaches and to more effectively build local capacity for research, analysis and planning. The next section of this paper details the Project's participatory research and exchange activities, part of its efforts to strengthen local community capacities in management for conservation and development.

IV. Participatory Community Self Studies in Central America

The four participatory auto-systematization studies carried out in Guatemala and Nicaragua illustrate community members' existing and potential capacities to carry out systematic studies of their communities' diverse resource-related strategies, to identify

and prioritize their development and conservation vulnerabilities, to develop response strategies, and to identify potential sources of external support and collaboration. The results of these studies show that community members link conservation and development objectives into integrated resource management strategies. These studies also indicate areas where outside assistance could appropriately support community-based conservation and development strategies. Here, two of the community self studies are briefly described, followed by discussion of their significance.

Petén, Guatemala: Unión Maya Itza

Unión Maya Itzá (UMI) is a community of nearly 1,000 inhabitants located near Guatemala's border with Mexico. Although UMI is located in the Maya Biosphere Reserve Multiple Uses Zone, they became owners of their 5,924 hectares of forest through government refugee resettlement programs mandated in the 1996 Peace Accords. The community today includes 155 families representing eight distinct indigenous ethnic groups and languages and mestizos. UMI's members pursue small scale agriculture and animal raising strategies, within the context of a larger agro-forestry strategy including timber and non-timber forest product harvesting and commercialization. They also receive significant remittance income from migrated community members.

UMI's self-identified social capital includes a village council, women's organization, artisan and carpenters association, and membership in external organizations such as ACOFOP, and FSC Smart Wood certification. Physical capital includes electricity, eight common piped water sources, a clinic, and four community-owned and operated cargo trucks and buses. Productive activities include timber harvesting, xate collection, cultivation of basic food crops, small artisanry centers and

small animal husbandry. Natural capital includes their nearly 6,000 ha. of forest in productive use, including 3,700 ha. dedicated to timber harvesting, a xate nursery and a 13 ha. xate plantation, and 700 ha. for cultivation of maize, bean, peanuts and other crops for consumption and small scale commercialization. Financial capital includes sales of food crops, xate and artisanry, wage labor work, NGO donations, and remittances.

UMI's development strategies include planning for sale of environmental services, sustainable management of timber and NTFP extraction, territorial use zoning, subsistence and small scale market agricultural production, and strengthening organizational capacity. UMI's principal vulnerabilities include out-migration of their youth, forest fires, squatter encroachment, flooding of agricultural areas, and scarcity of markets. External threats identified included a planned hydroelectric dam in Mexico and the Plan Puebla Panama, which are expected to bring competitive pressures on members' conservation and development strategies. UMI's strategies in response to these vulnerabilities include strengthening monitoring of their boundaries, seeking external markets for diversified production, improving storage facilities, and introducing and developing eco-tourism (Unión Maya Itzá 2003).

Siuna, Nicaragua: El Bálsamo

El Bálsamo is located next to the BOSAWAS reserve in Siuna, Nicaragua. El Bálsamo is a community of 428 families of small and medium scale agroforestry producers. With Project and PCaC support, this community has mapped and zoned their 2,500 hectares of lands, of which 2,160 ha. are under primary and secondary forest cover. The community's lands are zoned to include areas for conservation and permanent cultivation, including subsistence crops and agroforestry systems in association with

pimienta spices, coffee, cacao, cinnamon, citrus and other forest. The community has created a “Peasant Biological Corridor” protected area linking their community’s lands with BOSAWAS. A second zone is dedicated to sustainable animal production for consumption and marketing, including cattle, pigs, and chickens.

El Bálamo’s social capital includes a village council, and committees related to schools, religion, health, NTFPs and tourism. Residents also participate in an essential oils cooperative, and are members of external organizations such as PCaC. Physical and natural capital include productive activities with basic grains, essential oils, seedlings and fish farming. Financial capital includes sales of basic grains, fruits, vegetables, essential oil plants, and small domestic animals.

El Bálamo’s development strategies aim at improving food security and diversifying production and income to stabilize families. They improve agricultural yields using the *frijol abono* cover crops and are developing agroforestry systems to harvest, process and market NTFPs such as essential oils (*pimienta*, *zacate limón*, and *jengibre*). El Bálamo’s members plan for future marketing of environmental services, ecotourism and reforestation to help maintain the peasant biological corridor promoted by PCaC and ACICAFOC.

Principle threats facing El Bálamo include forest fires, droughts, and landslides. Uncertain markets and low prices also create problems for local families. Residents also suffer physical insecurity stemming from continuing violence in the area. El Bálamo’s strategies in response to these vulnerabilities involve organization of fire brigades and increased monitoring, increased diversification of crops, and strengthening community

organizations, including formation of a grain cooperative (Martinez Moran and Mercado Zamora 2003).

The significance of the community self-studies

The auto-systematization studies represent data and analysis, produced by the community members themselves, for assessment of their own situation to identify strengths and problems and plan response strategies. They show a range of direct and indirect community relationships to the management of Protected Areas. For example, as concessionaire, Unión Maya Itzá holds a formal forest management contract while El Bálamo contributes indirectly to BOSAWAS' management via the promotion of sustainable production techniques and participation in the PCaC-promoted Peasant Biological Corridor.

The community self studies show that forest management for conservation is closely integrated with diverse production and development strategies. UMI members pursue agroforestry strategies emphasizing non-timber forest products and to a lesser degree, commercial timber activities. El Bálamo members pursue agroforestry in combination with NTFPs such as essential oils, and to a lesser degree, sustainable small animal raising.

The principle threats to communities' management for conservation and development include natural and anthropogenic threats such as fire, and impingement by outside actors engaged in unauthorized settlement and resource extraction and other illegal activities. They also face pressures from external development initiatives. All face difficulties in gaining adequate access to markets for forest and agricultural products.

They respond to these vulnerabilities by seeking to consolidate their current organizational and management capacities while working to develop new ones.

The community self studies signal areas in which external technical support might be fruitfully directed. All express needs for assistance in organizational strengthening, particularly in commercialization, environmental services, and ecotourism. The self studies underscore the need for more secure land and natural resource tenure rights, which will require strengthening their negotiating capacity with official policymakers and conservationist groups. Perhaps most importantly, these self studies point to the need for external assistance that builds on their existing achievements, helps deepen local commitments to conservation, and further enhances local natural resource management for conservation and development.

V. The Emergence of a Technical Accompaniment Model

External technical, financial and organizational assistance from State, international and national NGOs, international donor agencies and foundations has been crucial for the emergence and consolidation of grassroots forest movements in each region. Traditional technical assistance has made it possible for forest communities and their organizations to surmount existing legal and organizational obstacles to real participation in resource management. It has also been important for developing basic skills and knowledge needed by community leaders and members for effective management for conservation and development.

Yet the design and implementation of traditional technical assistance has often been greatly shaped by external institutional and political considerations and is generally expert-driven. Traditional assistance often fails to adequately strengthen local capacities

to assume increased responsibilities and autonomy in resource governance. Moreover, much external technical and financial assistance arrives in the form of formal projects, whose objectives, timelines and financial accountability requirements promote or require formal institutional structures. They encourage traditional organizational hierarchies of technical experts and community beneficiaries. While such interventions can produce benefits such as increased efficiency and transparency, formal project imperatives often run counter to the more horizontal, process oriented principles of community-based movements. These problems have been particularly visible in the Central American cases.

The pro-community accompaniment model

The context studies in both regions, the community self studies in Central America and the Petén Exchange meeting suggest that a non-traditional model of technical support is emerging in the Central America and Brazilian regions. This “pro-community” model of “accompaniment” (Gómez and Méndez 2005: 25) can under appropriate circumstances strengthen community capacities more effectively than traditional assistance models. The use of the word “accompaniment” rather than “assistance” signals an important principle: that external support of grassroots forest movements should aim to develop a role of “*accompaniment of a social process*” rather than acting *on the community’s behalf*. The accompaniment model implies a more flexible type of cooperation, more horizontal, and closer to populations and their social processes. Being less tied to a formal logic of projects, this model seeks to maintain a longer term commitment to community processes (Gómez and Méndez 2005: 28). The

accompaniment model aims to build local capacities that make external participation progressively less necessary.

This alternative model of technical “accompaniment” has emerged on multiple fronts. In Petén, its development has been supported by international institutions and foundations including the Ford Foundation, Project Agricultural Frontier, the CIR Iniciativa Cristiana Romero, the Inter-Ecclesiastic Organization for Cooperative and Development, the German Service for Social Cooperation, and Helvetas of Switzerland. In Siuna, Oxfam-UK and the Agricultural Frontier Project has supported PCaC’s role in constructing a farmer-based movement of technological innovation and change. In both Brazilian cases, some of the most effective external support for forest communities has taken a long term perspective and directly supported crucial community organizational processes. Communities initially received long term support at the grassroots level from Liberation Theology-influenced lay Catholic volunteers and union organizers. Follow on support came from rural union organizers and activist intellectuals drawn to the region to support environmental and human rights causes.

The “pro-community” model of technical accompaniment systematically promotes organizational and political capacities of communities and their grassroots organizations. For example, in Petén, the institutions described above invested directly in incipient community institutions. The Ford Foundation’s investment in Petén of \$US 470,000 between 1999-2004 directly supported the institutional development and capacity strengthening of ACOFOP. In Siuna, Oxfam and the PFA directly supported development of PCaC’s farmer innovation and exchange movement. In Central America, external institutions have helped develop national and international forest community

networks by providing access to information, linking with relevant processes and events worldwide, as well as financial support. In Acre, institutions like the Ford Foundation and Cultural Survival channeled funding directly to the CNS during its first years. The Brazilian government “Promanejo” program also seeks to directly fund community forest initiatives.

Organizational principles of the accompaniment model

From these emerging experiences with innovative technical accompaniment of community forestry experiences, certain organizational principles and characteristics may be distilled. Organizational principles should include a long term focus on the social processes underlying community self-management rather than solely on short term, output-oriented project objectives. Community members should become protagonists in their own development, allowing errors committed to contribute to the process of learning. Project results may be measured not solely in terms of formal project outputs but also in terms of lessons learned and processes strengthened.

An accompaniment model focuses on shared learning among local and external participants in community-based forestry, seeking to combine the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of each participating group. It seeks to continually strengthen capacities for research and analysis, both within the communities (via auto-systematization methods, for example) and among external professional support staff (via participation in experiential exchanges with communities and other actors).

The accompaniment model is committed to the empowerment of communities. Communities should be able to participate effectively in identifying and prioritizing problems needing attention, in negotiation of support activities, and in assessment of the

success of those activities. The accompaniment model also seeks to support the political negotiation capacities of communities and their leaders, in large part through development and strengthening of social and political networks.

The pro-community accompaniment model seeks to progressively devolve growing responsibilities to community members. As project coordinator Rubén Pasos describes this principle: “Do only what the communities cannot do.” This principle does not require external support providers to “work themselves out of a job” but rather to *work themselves into a different job* most appropriate for communities’ moment in a process of learning. What communities need will vary at different moments in their development, including for example legal assistance, conflict resolution, technical forestry expertise, organizational strengthening and effective internal and external communication.

Organizational characteristics of the accompaniment model

Successful, systematic pursuit of the organizational principles underlying the accompaniment model calls for reconsideration of some of the organizational characteristics of external technical support. Support agencies providing effective technical accompaniment should encourage technical staff to reach a closer proximity to communities and their processes. This closer engagement with community processes requires adequate logistical and financial support for the mobilization and housing of staff while in the field. It will also require adjustment of staff job descriptions and evaluation criteria so that time spent in the communities is perceived as time well invested in staff members’ successful performance.

An accompaniment model seeks to flatten unnecessary organizational and social hierarchies separating technical staff from community members. Rather than occupying traditional roles and statuses of service provider and beneficiaries (or project targets), staff members and community members are ideally viewed as colleagues, albeit with differential skills and experiences, in pursuit of common goals. At the same time, underlying unequal power relations between external stakeholders and communities need to be acknowledged and managed.

Greater organizational flexibility is required to respond to community-identified strengths, needs, priorities and strategies. Technical staff need to assume a role of facilitation which moves beyond power-neutral approaches to recognize that communities typically begin as the weakest participant in multi-stakeholder dialogues. As communities gain skills to analyze, plan, and manage, their visibility and power to negotiate what they need will increase. Technical staff are likely to fear that open-ended negotiation with communities will result in their getting pushed “off track” by limitless community expectations. Nevertheless, facilitating community input into the identification of problems, design of responses and implementation of action can allow for a greater appreciation of complex community problems and priorities, resulting in more effective implementation of support activities.

Training should be seen as a two way process. External staff transfer knowledge and skills to community members through training. At the same time, as technical staff and communities participate together in the process of “accompaniment,” communities also “train” technical staff in principles and methods of effective accompaniment. Staff

originally prepared to act as traditional technical experts become more skilled and effective “accompanists” as they engage in work together with the communities.

The strengthening of community capacities requires direct investment and should be incorporated explicitly into objective benchmarks of organizational success. Formal indicators of successful staff performance need to reflect and reward their commitment to community processes and capacity strengthening, including the local capacity to negotiate effectively. Examples might include designing objectives such as the successful training of apprentices, specific skills transferred to community members, specific functions devolved to communities over the life of the project, and periodic transition to new support roles to be assumed by the accompanying organization in response to new community capacities.

Combining traditional assistance and alternative accompaniment models

We do not suggest that traditional technical assistance be replaced with an alternative accompaniment model. One of the limitations of the alternative accompaniment model is that supporting institutions’ financial contributions have tended to be more modest than those of institutions providing more traditional assistance. Moreover, the accompaniment model’s commitment to social process implies staying close to the rhythms of participating communities, an approach which may be more appropriate for smaller scale programs. Rather than seeing the choice as one between traditional assistance and alternative accompaniment models, effective approaches to supporting grassroots natural resource organizations should aim to build on the strengths of both traditional technical assistance and of such “pro-community” models of accompaniment.

VI. Conclusion

The grassroots forest organizations with which the Grassroots Assistance Project has worked are helping introduce a new social actor in conservation and development in their regions: the *forest steward community* (Proyecto Innovativo 2004b). In Latin America, the *campesino* [peasant] has typically been viewed by decision makers, conservation organizations, and many donor institutions as the problem behind deforestation and biodiversity loss. Nevertheless, these grassroots organizations are demonstrating that instead of being a predator on the forest, the *campesino* forest steward/conservationist can exercise a positive impact as an effective collaborator in conservation and development. The Grassroots Assistance project has supported the emergence of this new community actor and its role in conservation, first by directly strengthening research, analysis and planning capacities of forest communities and grassroots organizations. Secondly, the Project has helped support the development and dissemination of more participatory and comprehensive accounts of communities' experience of forest management.

Too often, conservation and development, and external expert or community control, have been pitched as “either/or” propositions. We believe that common ground exists for more effective collaboration among the major stakeholders in conservation and development in Southern forests. Yet collaborative accompaniment models are needed which build more effectively on the strengths of both external and community expertise. These models can help promote dialogue to facilitate striking a balance among stakeholder interests too often seen as irreconcilable. Collaboration with grassroots organizations represents not only a potentially successful strategy for conservation, but a

necessary step toward more equitable and sustainable outcomes in the threatened forests of the global South.

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