

At Climate Talks, an Answer Grows Outside

Mexico is letting communities manage their own forests to reduce deforestation...and it's working.

By Luis A. Ubiñas

This week, the international community is gathering in the Mexican city of Cancún to address one of the most serious and intractable issues facing the planet today: climate change.

When the conversation turns to **how to protect forests that help reduce greenhouse gases**, the participants need look no further than right out their windows. Mexico has become a global leader in safeguarding its expansive forests. And it has done so not by fencing the forests behind "no trespassing" signs, but by giving local communities ownership rights and an opportunity to take responsibility for their stewardship. Indeed, communities now own more than 60 percent of Mexico's forests.

Surprisingly, this success story is one that most people, and even many Mexicans, are unaware of.

The destruction of forests is responsible for almost one-fifth of all greenhouse gas emissions; that's more than all global transportation combined. Part of the challenge in addressing this issue is that these spaces are often seen as pristine, empty places devoid of people and commerce.

In reality, the world's forests are not only home to hundreds of millions of people, but they also are a key source of these people's livelihoods. For these individuals (many of whom are indigenous, tribal peoples), forests are a **source of food, energy, medicine, housing and income**.

The Mexican model has shown that giving communities the ability to own and manage the forests where they live provides perhaps the greatest incentive imaginable to protect and preserve the forests. Mexico's experience in promoting environmental protection and economic development by expanding community rights to forests is a model that other countries can and must follow.

There are literally thousands of communities in Mexico that own and manage forests, resulting in an array of successful and sustainable forestry enterprises. Ixtlán de Juárez, a forest community near the southern Mexican city of Oaxaca, serves as a good example. Local ownership there has created what one observer calls "an innovative model of community capitalism." Locals have maintained a saw mill, built a large tree nursery, partnered with neighboring communities to launch a furniture business from timber culled from their land and created an ecotourism destination.

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In Ixtlán and elsewhere, **forest ownership** has created tens of thousands of jobs and provided a burst of new economic activity. And with profits being reinvested into social programs, these initiatives are also strengthening the communities and ensuring their long-term viability. Throughout Mexico, these sorts of arrangements have helped stanch the flow of economic migrants and minimize the illegal activities that plague un-managed forests.

But the best news is that community forestry has the potential to **slow down global warming by reducing deforestation**. A 2009 study published by the National Academy of Sciences, for example, looked at 80 forests across Asia, Africa and Latin America and found that giving communities greater control over forests resulted in lower carbon emissions. In fact, in many parts of Mexico and elsewhere, community-owned forests have been at least as effective at maintaining forest cover as even parks or protected conservation areas.

This week's **meeting in Cancún** has the potential to build on these results. One of the main topics on the agenda will be an initiative titled "Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD)," which would provide incentives for reducing greenhouse gas emissions from forested areas.

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It's vital that the nations gathered in Cancún make strong financial commitments to REDD—but more importantly, that they ensure that a significant portion of these funds are dedicated to supporting community-managed forests. They should also ensure that future REDD initiatives respect and promote community stewardship. Doing so can motivate other developing countries with large forest tracts, such as Indonesia and Central African countries, to follow Mexico's lead in preserving forests by giving communities greater ownership over them.

In my own experience at the Ford Foundation, we've seen that even in the poorest countries, a small investment in community forestry can reap enormous dividends. In Guatemala, for example, community-owned forests are bucking a larger wave of deforestation across the country, while in Brazil, the Kayapo Indians are preserving forests that would otherwise fall into the hands of ranchers and loggers.

The fact that sustainable economic development can be done in combination with preventing deforestation represents an all too rare win-win for both the rights of indigenous peoples and the fight against global warming. At a time when the struggle against global warming seems more daunting than ever, Mexico's experience with community forestry shows that we have within our means the ability to turn the tide.