



FAO and indigenous groups

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Two examples of collaborative efforts through the FAO Forest. Trees and People Programme.

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[FTPP facilitator Mrs Rosario León working with a group of Yuracaré to develop a forest management plan](#)

Many local communities, including a significant number of indigenous groups, live in and around forest areas. They are primary users of forest products and they often create their own, locally adapted and accepted rules for how to use the forest part of what is often referred to as local institutions. Support for increased local access to and control of forest resources for these groups, thus legitimizing their role as responsible forest managers, has proved to be a constructive strategy to achieve sustainable forest management.

This article provides two examples from Latin America illustrating how FAO's Forestry Department is exploring new ways of working together with forest-dwelling indigenous communities - a collaboration that has proved to be mutually fruitful for both FAO and the various indigenous groups involved. The first example describes an experience of technical cooperation with an indigenous group living along the Chapare River in Bolivia, while the second example depicts the consultative process with indigenous groups in Central America leading up to the Fourth Central American Forestry Congress, held in San Pedro Sula, Honduras in September 1995.

Technical cooperation with indigenous groups in Bolivia

In October 1991, as part of the FAO programme on community forestry, the Forests, Trees and People Programme (FTPP), a local Bolivian team carried out a study among the communities living along the Chapare River in the Department of Cochabamba, Bolivia. The study focused on the role of forests in sustaining the livelihoods of indigenous groups in the Rio Chapare area. One of the groups taking part in the study was the Yuracaré, a forest-dwelling indigenous community (see Map).

In discussions with members of the Yuracaré community, it became apparent that they were seriously concerned about a new government land-use policy. The new policy defined the land demarcations for a series of protected areas along the Chapare River which would have essentially surrounded the forest area inhabited by the Yuracaré. The Yuracaré traditionally migrated over extensive areas. This historic pattern, which mitigated against overutilization of the forest, has been significantly altered by the establishment of the protected areas to which the Yuracaré would have limited access. The Yuracaré communities felt threatened by this

new policy because, with limited access to the restricted surrounding forests and without any legal provision of user rights to the forest, the Yuracaré could not see how their supply of food, medicine and other essential forest products could be guaranteed.

The National FTTP facilitator for Bolivia, Mrs Rosario León, was asked by the Yuracaré community leaders to provide technical assistance in fulfilling the legal and technical requirements inherent in the procedure to obtain rights to their territory. It was hoped that the group would be able to gain formal control over the protected forest, and be granted state recognition as the legitimate forest users and managers. This request to FAO/FTTP was the starting point of a long-term partnership.

Upon being presented with the management plan proposed by the Yuracaré the provincial officers of the state forestry service, the Centro de Desarrollo Forestal (CDF), accepted an invitation to work with the FTTP in assisting the Yuracaré communities in an appraisal of current forest management. Since 1994, they have been directly involved in the local management planning process. Every two months a joint FTTP and CDF team of five professionals spends three weeks in the Rio Chapare area to assist the communities in the continuous monitoring of the forest management plan.

Through the Bolivian FTTP team, FAO, together with CDF, is now providing technical advice on the process of the elaboration of forest management plans for the forest area used by the Yuracaré. Adapting a user-group-oriented methodology developed by the International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) research programme (see Box, p. 32), the Yuracaré have produced a forest management plan which takes into account the traditional indigenous institutions for Forest USC. Several documents have been produced recapturing the history of the Yuracaré in the area and the vital importance of the forest to these people.

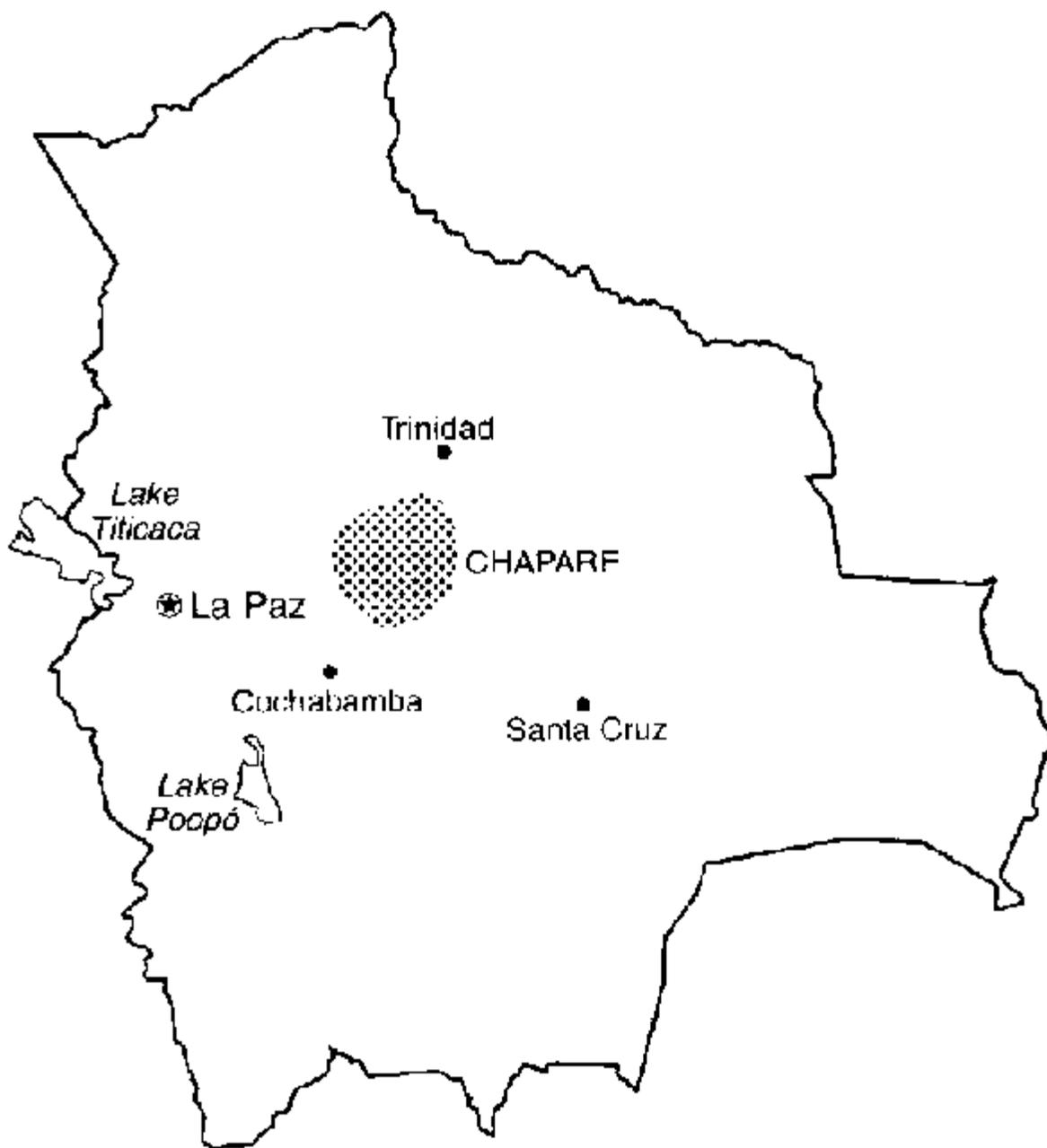
The structure, guidelines and routines for joint forest management are virtually in place. The only bottleneck is the legal clearance for granting the Yuracaré communities exclusive user rights and the formal responsibility to manage the forest. Although the request for user rights and acceptance of the management plan still have not been approved by the Bolivian state authorities, FAO's collaboration with the Yuracaré has produced many significant results and lessons learned, which are outlined below.

Lessons learned

The experience with the Yuracaré should not be seen merely as an FAO extension service to a marginalized group but, rather, as a mutually enriching relationship through which FAO has gained new knowledge.

Through its collaboration with the Yuracaré FAO has added to its knowledge of how indigenous institutions for the local governance of forest resources function in practice. Such experiences have also contributed to a deeper understanding of the significance of legal underpinnings for community forestry. These lessons have been extremely valuable to FAO Forestry Department's normative work on the communal management of forest resources and legal aspects of community forestry.

Bolivia: the area inhabited by the Yuracaré



[Village map demarcation is part of FTTP-Yuracaré collaboration](#)

In addition, the FTTP has had the opportunity to field-test new methods and tools. One concrete result of the reciprocal validation process is a Yuracaré adaptation of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) tools, which employs the Yuracaré tradition in terms of culturally specific symbols, communication and language. Such culturally adapted tools have the potential to narrow the gap and break down communication barriers between development agents and indigenous groups in Bolivia. The lessons learned from this continuous validation process are an important input to the efforts of FAO's Forestry Department to develop new approaches, methods and tools for community forestry.

[A joint FTTP/state forestry service team monitors conditions in the Yuracaré area](#)

By incorporating the state forestry service in the FTTP-Yuracaré activities, three forestry officers have been trained in the IFRI methodology and in the application of participatory tools for community forestry. The new type of relationship between indigenous groups and the forestry service is in sharp contrast with that of the past, which was characterized by suspicion

and distrust. With the new collaboration, the forest management plan is something of mutual interest and concern for both parties. The Yuracaré communities for their part have increased their knowledge of technical forestry aspects - how to grow certain useful species, how to set up a monitoring system to assess forest quality over time, etc.

[FTPP-organized consultation with a women's group in Quepos, Costa Rica in preparation for the Central American Forestry Congress](#)

A major challenge remains - that of sorting out the legal difficulties, including disentangling complicated tenure systems. Until a suitable structure for joint forest management is formalized by law, the Yuracaré communities cannot be certain that the forest they use will be theirs to manage and also protect in the future

Learning, from our own experiences: community forestry in central America

In September 1995, the Fourth Central American Forestry Congress was held in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. The main issue discussed during this intergovernmental meeting was community forestry. The congress was unusual in the sense that participation was not merely a main subject of discussion but it was a real feature of the meeting. Grassroots organizations played a central role, presenting their views on community forestry development in the region. Previous to the meeting, two regional umbrella organizations for indigenous farmer groups, the Coordinadora Indígena Campesina de Agroforestería Comunitaria (CICAFOC) and the Consejo Consultivo Regional de Mujer y Desarrollo Forestal (CCR MDF), invited their members to a series of national consultation meetings with the objective of producing an agenda for development reflecting members' priorities and concerns. The F TPP participated and supported preparatory meetings at the grassroots' level in each of the seven countries in the subregion.

The origins of CICAFOC and CCR MDF

In 1994, the Central American facilitator of the F TPP, Carlos Brenes, organized a meeting in which more than 60 representatives from national cooperatives shared their experiences on forestry activities. Natural resource management, production methods, adaptations of scientific knowledge to local expertise and commercialization were among the main issues presented. For the last two years, CICAFOC has been linking base groups together at the regional level by promoting national discussions to define priorities, guidelines and future activities which could be presented for the consideration of projects and policy-makers. The organization's regional plan of action has been adopted by the General Assembly of the Central American Council for Forests and Protected Areas (CCAB-AP).

In preparing for the Central American Forestry Congress, the F TPP recognized that women representatives were not being sufficiently integrated in the national groups in the CICAFOC consultation process. To address this concern, the F TPP asked the CCR MDF to promote a number of parallel consultation meetings with women's groups with whom the F TPP had been working during the past five years. Ten local meetings were organized with the participation of more than 500 women from different ethnic groups, local organizations and forestry projects.

Through this process, women had the opportunity to share their experiences on forest management, cultivation, traditional medicine, wildlife management, handicrafts, etc. In September 1995, in connection with the Forestry Congress in San Pedro Sula, a regional workshop was organized with women farmers and indigenous groups in which the women presented their priorities. With the support of the F TPP, participants produced a document which was presented at the Forestry Congress.

Among the main issues were the need to:

- identify mechanisms at the formal and informal levels that recognize the value of women in productive and reproductive activities;
- revise the national policies to guarantee women the right to own land as well as access to credit and technical assistance;
- review training programmes on agroforestry issues to ensure that they include gender aspects;
- encourage forestry projects to recognize the domestic activities and general workload of women, and to support women's efforts to reduce domestic and institutional violence.

Through CICAFOC and CCRMDF, men and women farmers (primarily indigenous people) have a formal place where they can discuss forestry concerns and a direct channel to decision-makers in the region. Both institutions are now recognized by the CCAB-AP as advisory groups and are invited to the General Assembly in which all the representatives of the National Forestry Action Plan and the directors of the forestry services participate. They also participate in the Advisory Committee of the FTPR. An effort to bring the two organizations together as one is now being supported by both the CCAB-AP and the FTPR.

Lessons learned

The most important result to emerge from the consultation process and the Forestry Congress itself was the recognition, respect and integration into management of indigenous knowledge. The congress and the preceding meetings brought technicians, decision-makers, men and women farmers and indigenous groups together in a joint effort to decide the most appropriate ways to manage natural resources. General criteria for natural resources management were established, and the key elements to be taken into consideration in the development of projects, policies and strategies were proposed by the local organizations and eventually included in the Forestry Congress policy document.

The IFRI research programme

The International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) research programme is a global programme generated by the search for a scientific understanding of the interface between people and the forest. A relational database has been developed in the programme which integrates socio-economic aspects of forest user institutions with the biotechnical information of the forest resource. Three Bolivian professionals have been trained in the application of the unique methods and database management at Indiana University in the United States and, together with the FTPP, have established three local research centres where local communities and researchers have joined forces to systematize information about locally managed forest lands. The methodology employed by the IFRI programme has proved to be very appropriate for joint forest management planning because of the emphasis put on both local governance and biotechnical aspects of forest management. In this way, both community members and forest extension workers are assigned complementary expert roles, the community providing the essential information related to local institutions and traditional knowledge. (For a more detailed description of the IFRI methodology and how it is being used in the context of systematizing knowledge on common property forest resource management, see *Unasylva*, 46(180): 10-11.)

