Community Forestry and REDD+[1] in Africa:
Lessons Learned and Ways Forward
Issues Brief

Introduction

Given concerns about deforestation and hopes that efforts to better manage forests can contribute to climate change mitigation, what can we learn from experience with community forestry? With considerable effort now being devoted to Reducing Deforestation and forest Degradation (REDD+)[1], it is timely to assess what are key lessons from decades of community forestry. REDD+ proponents do not need to "start from zero," and "reinvent the wheel," but can build on valuable experience and existing systems.

The Forest Carbon, Markets and Communities (FCMC) Program commissioned a series of four reports – three regional and one global synthesis – on *Lessons Learned from Community Forestry and their Relevance for REDD+*. This Issues Brief summarizes key issues from the sub-Sahara Africa report.

People and forests in Africa have co-evolved over the centuries. Throughout Africa, local communities have shaped, managed, and protected the forests that they use to manage timber, non-timber and wildlife resources, to conserve and extend grazing areas, and to maintain important cultural, historical or spiritual sites, including "sacred groves." Even today, some of these areas – for example, in Cameroon, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, and Kenya – remain protected by the local communities, and in Kenya have been declared "national monuments." In much of Africa, state control of forests began during the colonial period, but has continued after independence. Nonetheless, throughout much of Africa rural people have *de facto* use and management rights vis-à-vis forests, even if the state has *de jure* control of those forests.[2] Over the past three decades, **customary community use and management of forests** has been increasingly recognized, and **new forms of community forestry** have been promoted and supported to varying degrees by African states.

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[1] REDD+ is being developed under the guidance of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The "+" (**plus**) in REDD+ (or REDD-plus) refers to Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation, plus conservation and sustainable management of forests and the enhancement of forest carbon stocks. Many also understand REDD+ to encompass more than just carbon sequestration benefits, but also other benefits (referred to as multiple benefits or co-benefits), including important social and environmental benefits.

[2] According to global forest tenure data, in Africa 97.9 percent of forests are administered by the government, whereas 1.6 percent are owned by individuals and firms, and 0.5 percent are owned by – or designated for use by – communities and indigenous peoples (RRI 2012). Although not recognized by governments, one-quarter of the land in Africa is communal forests and rangelands, and 90 percent of the Africa's rural population accesses land through customary institutions (Alden Wily 2008).

What is Community Forestry?

Community forestry has a wide range of definitions. Community forestry systems may be initiated by the community or be developed as a result of outside intervention by governments or various development partners. Participatory Forest Management, Community-Based Forest Management or Joint Forest Management can be considered to be types of community forestry, if communities have rights to participate in significant decisions on how the forest is used or managed. Community forestry may include management of natural forests and woodlands, and also plantations and woodlots.

Types of Community Forestry in Africa

In Africa, the state-sanctioned forms of community forestry are generally designed, i.e., introduced by projects supported by donors or non-governmental organizations, or following programs developed by the national government, rather than being self-created and then authorized by the state. Generally the national government's forest agency authorizes and legalizes specific community forestry systems, although in Tanzania and Gambia such formalities can be handled by local government councils.

Some community forestry systems focus on **conservation** of forest resources, including water sources or watersheds, or **rehabilitation** of degraded areas, whereas others focus on "**sustainable use**" and may allow harvest of forest products for **domestic use**. In some cases, they may even include **revenue-generating activities**, such as the logging and sale of valuable timber or non-timber forest resources, or promotion of eco-tourism. In many part of Africa, other community-based natural resource management systems exist, such as community-based wildlife reserves or community-based fisheries, but rarely are communities able to manage all their resources in an integrated manner.

Community Forest FSC certification.

The Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative (MCDI) in Tanzania has the only Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified community forests in Africa to date. MCDI works with private sector buyers to extract, process and export high-value ebony wood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon,* or *Mpingo* in Kiwsahili) used in the manufacture of musical instruments, such as clarinets and oboes.

Some community forestry systems have engaged in other activities with the aim of increasing the total financial benefits for community members. These may include **forest certification**, which aims to obtain premium prices for forest products harvested from a certified, sustainably managed site. Other possible revenue streams may be obtained from **ecotourism**, and payments **for environmental services (PES)**, including REDD+.

Successes of Community Forestry

Community forestry in Africa has been successful in several respects:

- Improving **forest management**, i.e., some studies show improved forest condition and increased wildlife for community forests, as compared with state-managed or open access forests;
- Improving **local access, use and/or benefits** of the forest, whether in direct terms (resources or revenue) or indirect terms (improved hydrology, increased crop or livestock yields, etc.), and ensuring access by different user groups, i.e., agriculturalists, nomadic pastoralists, etc.;
- Improving **governance** of the forest, i.e., promoting transparency and accountability, reducing illegal activities;
- Supporting general trends towards **decentralization and devolution**; and
- Building **community and individual skills**.

What Have We Learned from Community Forestry in Africa?

Empowerment. For community forestry to be successful, it relies upon several key elements. First and foremost, it involves the **empowerment of the communities**, particularly in terms of 1) simple and practical procedures and guidelines for legalization of **community tenure** rights; 2) local community definition of **forest management areas**; 3) legally recognized **community-level management entities**; 4) community establishment of **community forest management rules** governing access and use; and 5) **inclusion of marginalized groups** that hold a stake in the resource.

Empowerment often entails the adoption of **enabling policies** at the country, provincial or local level. In some African countries, community forestry has been promoted through more general policies regarding **devolution and decentralization**, such as in Tanzania. In many countries, governments have adopted policies to support community forestry. These policies may create a **framework for community-level regulations, or by-laws,** to govern use of community forests. Governments may provide **police enforcement and judicial support** to communities to address illegal activities in their forests, particularly by outsiders, i.e., those not members of the communities. Governments may develop programs for **awareness-raising, information dissemination, extension and technical support** for community forestry. In some cases, policies have been adopted allowing for **productive use of forests**, i.e., commercial harvesting of timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) for sale.

In Africa, rights are generally a matter of **government administrative discretion**, and thus liable to be changed or revoked. This situation differs from Latin America, where many forms of community forestry are based upon recognition of human rights, such as the rights of indigenous peoples to control and manage their own territories; while paradoxically the lands and forest actually under customary management is greater. African governments can revoke community rights to manage a forest, or limit their rights to a specified time period, which may be potentially renewable.

> **Herders and Farmers.**
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> The introduction of grazing permits in community forests was well received by Fulani herders in Benin, who were guaranteed grazing rights in designated grazing areas. As part of the planning process, herders were able to ensure that aspects, such as pasture improvement, watering points and even veterinarian support, were included in overall management objectives (Heemans and Otto 1999).

Governance and Stakeholder Engagement. Effective community-level institutions are required to develop and implement rules governing access and use of forest resources, and to ensure that costs and benefits of forest management are shared equitably among local forest users. Community institutions are most effective when built on existing community structures or when communities are given strong leeway in defining them. It is important to carefully consider vertical (upward, as well as downward) accountability mechanisms, appropriate scale and linkages to existing formal and traditional structures. Greater efforts are needed to involve some stakeholders. Many community forestry programs, for example, have done relatively little to address gender issues and women's participation. Others, however, have been successful in engaging women.

Governments need to authorize local communities to exclude outsiders from their forests, and to provide back up support through local government, legal enforcement, and the judiciary system. In some cases, traditional (customary) systems may be useful in resolving disputes on such issues.

Benefits and Incentives: Community forestry is more successful where donor and/or government objectives coincide with community objectives. This is especially true when the benefits and incentives

for communities are: clear, tangible and defined in national laws and policies; greater than the transaction and management costs associated with community forestry; and equitably distributed between national and local level stakeholders, as well as within participating communities.

Overall, the **financial benefits accrued by communities have been limited,** especially where externally-initiated community forestry has focused on conservation. In some cases, the non-monetary benefits, such as environmental services from forest conservation, or increased skills, may suffice to keep community forestry viable.

Capacity building: Local forest managers need skills and knowledge required for community forestry. These include technical aspects of sustainable forest management, record keeping (including finances), and general skills such as leadership, governance, communication and planning. Capacity building is also required for government foresters and others who work with community forestry managers, especially in terms of extension, training and facilitation skills. Some important areas where community capacity has been successfully built include locally-based monitoring of forest conditions, community forest tenure mapping to document customary rights to land and natural resources, and assessing and communicating governance and representation through "governance dashboards."

Scaling up: Scaling up community forestry is possible where governments take strong ownership, donor support is sustained, and community forestry generates concrete benefits to communities. Apart from Tanzania, Gambia and Namibia, few African countries have moved beyond a portfolio of donor-funded community forestry pilot projects to national programs anchored and supported by government institutions. Devolution of forest revenues from government to community-level is being heavily contested by powerful actors with vested interests within or connected to government.

In some areas of Africa, as elsewhere in the world, community forestry groups or organizations have been able to form networks, associations, or federations, which then may have stronger leverage in the political sphere and in lobbying for community rights. The Greenbelt Movement in Kenya, for example, evolved to become a basis for political power. Its leader, Dr. Wangari Mathai, became a spokesperson for environmental issues and social justice, and the first African to be awarded a Nobel Prize for Peace.

Mushrooms from the community forest.

Sustainability:
Community forestry frequently leads to improvements in forest condition and thus greater environmental sustainability. The systems may contribute to increased social and economic sustainability through greater local support for management and greater benefits from the forest for local communities.

Limited financial returns at the local level can undermine incentives for long-term management. Increased conversion to both large and small-scale agriculture is increasing the opportunity costs of community forestry.

Key investments need to be made to **ensure that community forestry contributes to national economies, greater natural resource governance, and conservation.** Evidence suggests that there is a need for long-term donor support while community forestry becomes institutionalized. A crucial element of support is **capacity building** both for community forest managers and for government and

other partners. In many cases, investments need to be made in terms of updating the relevant policy and legal frameworks that support community forestry. Investments in promoting **more integrated community-based natural resource management** at landscape levels could be useful. Efforts to integrate communities into management of other resources, such as minerals, could be more challenging.

The **key role for government forestry officials** is to be facilitators of community forestry. They can facilitate the development of community forestry by supporting enabling conditions and conducive policies – including devolution of rights. They can work with communities and law enforcement to support and enforce community rights (especially their right to exclude outsiders and punish offences). They can also build community forest management skills and knowledge through extension work.

> **Revenues and Financial Sustainability**.
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> Through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID)-supported Wula Naafa Program in Senegal, 77,000 hectares of forest has been transferred to community management. This initially generated approximately $25,000 per year, of which approximately $15,000 was reinvested into forest management – boosting chances for sustainability once project support ends (USAID-Senegal 2008). In 2012, seven community forestry management groups in the Wula Nafaa program generated $700,000 in revenues for themselves from charcoal sales from management of their dryland savanna forests (John Heermans, personal communication).

Relevance of these Lessons Learned for REDD+

To the extent possible, REDD+ programs should build on community forestry lessons: be flexible; build upon local conditions and interests; and empower local communities through complete delegation of rights. They need to encompass a wide diversity of stakeholders and promote good governance. Communities need to obtain clear monetary and non-monetary benefits – and benefits that outweigh their costs. Scaling up is possible in such situations and often is led by government with donor support. The REDD+ programs need to also consider carefully issues of environmental, economic and social sustainability, which will be enhanced by good choice of sites and good design.

Recommendations to Support Community Forestry and REDD+

Essentially the same recommendations can be made for supporting community forestry and for supporting REDD. For REDD+ to deliver environmental, social and economic benefits, proponents will need to:

- **Support national policy reforms** to provide clear, secure, enforceable and non-discretionary tenure rights **empowering communities** to take management decisions and regulate access and use of forests. This effort can be accompanied by **simple, low-cost procedures** for legalization of community forest agreements and management planning. **The engagement of all stakeholders, including women, poor households, indigenous peoples and other users, such as seasonal pastoralists, is essential.**

- **Significantly increase the communities' benefits from** sustainable use of forests. Reconcile externally driven management objectives of reducing deforestation and forest degradation with **local community needs and interests.** Ensure that community benefits are significantly greater than transaction, management and opportunity costs.

- Grant communities **legal autonomy to adapt or define their own management institutions** for community forestry. Link community management institutions with traditional or formal authorities, while ensuring measures for accountability and avoiding elite capture. Promote both vertical and horizontal equity in the distribution of costs and benefits associated with REDD+.

- Develop effective measures to **confront and mitigate the effects of vested interests** that seek to block community empowerment and restrict the flow of tangible benefits to the community-level.

- **Build capacity at community-level management institutions** to reflect a mix of technical skills (forest management, utilization and planning), administrative skills (financial management and book-keeping), and leadership skills (communication, governance and accountability).

- Foster the **conditions for scaling up** through a mix of appropriate policy reforms, development of donor-supported national government programs for community forestry and increased, more diversified, tangible benefits to community forestry managers.

- **Include measures to control "leakage"** caused by the displacement of harvesting from managed forests to unmanaged areas to ensure environmental sustainability (e.g., the application of community regulations, or bylaws, to manage community forests and working at higher levels of scale).

- **Enhance social and economic sustainability** prospects by strengthening community tenure and rights, enhancing and diversifying benefit flows to communities, and supporting the development of strong, empowered community institutions with the key capacities needed to control and manage their forest lands.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on the issues raised in this document, consult the full report:

Blomley, Tom. 2013. *Lessons Learned from Community Forestry in Africa and their Relevance for REDD+.* Report prepared for USAID. Forest Carbon, Markets and Communities (FCMC) Program, Arlington, VA.   Available at: www.fcmcglobal.org

All citations are found in the full report. All photos by Tom Blomley.

This report is one of four reports on *Lessons Learned from Community Forestry and Their Relevance for REDD+*. The series comprises three regional reviews on this topic, prepared for Latin America (by Janis Alcorn), Africa (by Tom Blomley) and Asia (by Robert Fisher). The global synthesis of the three regional reviews was prepared by Roy Hagen. All four reports have been reviewed and edited by FCMC. Paula J. Williams has managed the reviews and served as overall editor.