

Community-based Forestry

Basic knowledge



This module is intended for policymakers, planners and forest managers working with communities, forest user groups, small forest owners, and others interested in community-based forestry. The module highlights key issues to consider when introducing or implementing community-based forestry and provides links to relevant tools and cases.

Community-based forestry – what is it?

“Community-based forestry” (CBF) is an umbrella term encompassing both collaborative forest management regimes and smallholder forestry. In the collaborative form, forestry is practised on lands that have communal tenure and require collective action, while the smallholder form refers to forestry practised by smallholders on land they own privately who manage their forest independently or who may engage in some form of collective activity. In practice, these two forms are expressed in various CBF types according to the rights obtained by, and degree of participation of, communities in planning, implementation and benefit-sharing (Table 1).

Community-based forestry includes “initiatives, sciences, policies, institutions and processes that are intended to increase the role of local people in governing and managing forest resources”. It includes formalized customary and indigenous initiatives as well as government-led initiatives. CBF covers social, economic and conservation dimensions in a range of activities including decentralized and devolved forest management, smallholder forestry schemes, company-community partnerships, small-scale forest-based enterprises and indigenous management of sacred sites of cultural importance (Source: Adapted from RECOFTC, 2013)

CBF has a demonstrated capacity to achieve forest conservation while contributing to general economic development and improving the livelihoods of local people. It aims to empower communities with direct stakes in forest resources to be part of decision-making on all aspects of forest management, including policy formulation.

CBF is based on the rationale that people will take better care of land they own or are allowed to use forest resources sustainably on a secure and long term basis. There is also increased realization among government decision-makers, conservationists and development planners that local people are already key stakeholders in many forest areas and it is unethical to deny them rights or to try to exclude them. Local people often use and depend on forests and in many cases are stewards who have maintained forests over long periods.

Table 1. Types and key characteristics of community-based forestry

Type of community-based forestry	Generic description	Key characteristics
Delegate	Participatory conservation	Some community responsibility to protect forests, but little authority to make decisions. Very few (or no) community rights to access and use forest products. Pressure on the use of forest products is reduced by the application of outside-managed integrated conservation and development approaches, often in the buffer zones of protected areas. This type includes encouraging alternative livelihoods and enforcing protection through external agents or by delegating protection functions to local people. The limited collection of non-wood forest products (NWFPs) is sometimes allowed. Indicative rights - Access – the right to access the forest - Withdrawal – communities sometimes have limited rights to harvest prescribed NWFPs - Management – no right to make forest management decisions - Exclusion – no right to determine who will have access to the forest - Alienation – no right to sell or lease the management and exclusion rights or to use them as collateral - Duration of rights – no defined term - Right to compensation – no right to obtain compensation if rights are withdrawn
Share	Joint forest management	Shared authority – limited and highly prescribed rights for local people to access and use forest products. Forest products and related benefits from government-owned forests are shared between government and local communities to encourage communities to protect the forests. Employment in forest management activities is sometimes available. Indicative rights - Access – the right to access the forest - Withdrawal – generally rights to harvest NWFPs and woodfuel, but government agencies hold the rights for harvesting timber - Management – the right to make forest management decisions held by government agencies - Exclusion – no right to determine who will have access to the forest - Alienation – no right to sell or lease the management and exclusion rights or to use them as collateral - Duration of rights – may be a defined term fixed by a management plan - Right to compensation – no right to obtain compensation if rights are withdrawn
Partly devolve	Community forestry with limited devolution	Limited rights for defined local communities to manage forests and access and use forest products. Significant government authority and oversight. Rights to manage forests and use some forest goods, usually NWFPs and subsistence products, are devolved to local communities, generally subject to the development of management plans. Rights generally do not include selling timber in open markets, but the sale of NWFPs and woodfuel may be allowed. Indicative rights - Access – the right to access the forest - Withdrawal – the right to harvest NWFPs (may be subject to a management plan) - Management – government agencies hold the right to make forest management decisions - Exclusion – limited rights to determine who will have access to the forest - Alienation – no right to sell or lease the management and exclusion rights or to use them as collateral - Duration of rights – generally a defined term fixed by a management plan - Right to compensation – no right to obtain compensation if rights are withdrawn

Type of community-based forestry	Generic description	Key characteristics
Fully devolve	Community forestry with substantial or full devolution	Significant rights for defined local communities to manage forests and access and use forest products. Generally some government authority and oversight. Rights to manage and use forests are devolved to local communities, generally subject to the development of management plans. Rights include harvesting of timber and selling forest products on the open market. Indicative rights - Access – the right to access the forest - Withdrawal – the right to harvest forest products including timber (generally prescribed in a management plan) - Management – the right to make forest management decisions (generally prescribed in a management plan) - Exclusion – the right to determine who will have access to the forest - Alienation – no right to sell or lease the management and exclusion rights or to use them as collateral - Duration of rights – generally a defined term fixed by a management plan
Own	Private forest ownership	Most rights to access and use forest products are held by forest owners. Governments may or may not exercise authority over some aspects of forest management, including harvesting and marketing forest products. Individuals, households, groups or communities hold ownership and use rights to manage forests and receive benefits (this type includes smallholder forestry) Indicative rights - Access – the right to access the forest - Withdrawal – the right to harvest NWFPs and wood - Management – the right to make forest management decisions - Exclusion – the right to determine who will have access to the forest - Alienation – the right to sell or lease the management and exclusion rights or to use them as collateral - Duration of rights – generally perpetual - Right to compensation – may include the right to obtain compensation if rights are withdrawn

Source: FAO. 2016. [Forty years of community based forestry: a review of extent and effectiveness](#). FAO Forestry paper no. 176. Rome

Community-based forestry contributes to SDGs:

1 NO
POVERTY



5 GENDER
EQUALITY



10 REDUCED
INEQUALITIES



12 RESPONSIBLE
CONSUMPTION
AND PRODUCTION





Related modules

- [Collaborative conflict management](#)
- [Development of forest-based enterprises](#)
- [Forest management planning](#)
- [Forest tenure](#)
- [Gender in forestry](#)
- [Participatory approaches and tools for SFM](#)

In more depth

Given appropriate enabling conditions, most people living in or near forests are willing to manage those forests sustainably. This section presents key principles and enabling conditions needed for effective CBF.

Tenure and use rights

Trees take a long time to grow and to reach a harvestable age. A strong incentive is needed, therefore, for local people to take on the responsibility of forest protection and management in addition to their other day-to-day work. If the forests they manage could be taken away from them arbitrarily, or they could lose the right to use the forests sustainably, they are unlikely to be prepared to invest significant time and resources in their management. Indeed, a lack of clarity on tenure can lead to rapid forest degradation.

The sustainability of CBF, therefore, requires that local communities have secure, long-term tenure rights to the forests they manage. In some countries, forest tenure rights are guaranteed through constitutional provisions, or by transferring ownership. The approach taken to the provision of tenure security must be adapted to local conditions and national legal frameworks, among other things.

Tenure plays a very important role as it relates to gender equality and this topic within tenure cannot be ignored. Although the situation varies across regions, women tend to be disadvantaged and face limits when it comes to tenure and user rights over land. It is crucial, therefore, that decision makers and policies, at a national and local level, involve women from the community level in the discussion and formulation of policies.

Exclusion rights and capacity

It can be difficult to prevent illegal loggers, hunters and other intruders from exploiting community forests, especially where those forests are easily accessible. It is important, therefore, that communities and smallholders have exclusion rights to their forests, and that they have the capacity and power to enforce those rights, supported by the state.

The right of exclusion must apply to the state itself. Community protection and management efforts would be to no purpose if the consent of the community was not required for the state to issue exploitation licences to third parties.

While the right of exclusion is important for sustainable forestry, there is a risk that the granting of this right to one community will have the effect of diminishing use rights for other customary users (e.g. nomadic herders). Therefore and where relevant, CBF approaches should include provisions for those not living permanently in an area, who might be adversely affected.

Local institutional capacity

Local community institutions that are democratic and transparent and respected by community members are the main prerequisite for successful collaborative CBF. Communities are heterogeneous, and the interest of community members in, and claims to, forest resources can differ widely according to wealth, power, class, gender and ethnic identity. The elected officials of community institutions must take the concerns of all members seriously, and they should always take decisions in the best interests of the community and its members, in so doing gaining their trust and commitment. Since women and men face different challenges and play different roles in their communities and in forest management, it is necessary to have a critical mass of female representatives at local, regional and national level forestry boards in order for the women's perspectives to be represented. In this way, women's concerns can be understood and gender-equitable policies and decisions can be made. This requires equitable efforts and in some cases, even quotas or reserved positions for women to balance the equality of men and women. The roles and responsibilities of community members and leaders must be clear to all, and the consequences of breaking rules or agreements must be properly applied. Communities may need to develop bylaws or guidelines to define how profits from community-based forest enterprises are distributed and how labour and other inputs are provided. Clear, well-developed rules will help in avoiding conflicts.

Equity

Based as it is on the principle that all forest users and interest groups should participate in planning, implementation and monitoring, CBF constitutes an excellent opportunity to give voice to women and other marginalized social groups. In many countries, however, ensuring the participation of women and other marginalized groups requires special institutional arrangements, such as explicit access to shares in enterprises, or preferential membership in the executive committees of forest user groups. Without such proactive measures, women and other marginalized groups are likely to face barriers to their full participation in decision-making, benefits may be shared unequally, and the specific concerns (e.g. with regard to time constraints, or the need for easily reachable food and fodder trees) of women and other marginalized groups may be ignored. A gender-sensitive approach should be applied to CBF sensitization, planning and implementation.

In countries where women are traditionally excluded from formal forest enterprises, the organization of women into associations can be an effective way of increasing their access to markets, training and credit, and their power in negotiations.

Participation and communication

The process of engaging in CBF should empower community members and smallholders to demarcate their community forests, assess forest condition, resources and development options, plan and implement management activities, start CBF enterprises, share benefits, and monitor and evaluate their achievements. There are many ways to organize CBF at the local scale, but, in general, the collaborative form of CBF involves membership with equal rights and a democratic decision-making structure (e.g. a community general assembly).

Participation refers not only to the attendance of community members in meetings and their involvement in activities. It also means that members take part in processes of dialogue, interaction, critical thinking and questioning, which, combined, leads to problem-solving and decision-making.

This is particularly true when it comes to women's participation. Despite their valuable knowledge, women are often excluded from high-level forums and policy dialogue. This leads to a waste of precious expertise. Equal participation of men and women in CBF is thus, recommended.

The active involvement of all people with a stake in CBF is essential in all phases of CBF. The neglect of the concerns of a given stakeholder group can lead very quickly to conflict and ultimately to the failure of CBF. An effective communication strategy using well-defined, locally appropriate communication channels is critical for facilitating the exchange of information and experiences among community members, smallholders and other stakeholders and enabling their active participation. Care must be taken to ensure that the information is relevant and communicated in forms that are accessible and easy to understand by all partners.

More information of participation is available in the [Participatory Approaches and Tools for SFM](#) module.

Capacity development in a step-by-step facilitated process

In collaborative CBF, the community members themselves undertake analysis, planning, management and decision-making. They know their forests and lands and their personal needs and capacities and are therefore best placed to decide on the management approach. Nevertheless, the process may need to be facilitated professionally to assist communities in organizing in a democratic and structured manner, enabling full participation in decision-making, and acquiring the necessary methodological and technical skills for the sustainable management of forest resources.

In many cases, a step-wise approach to CBF will be most effective. A gradual process helps in establishing trust, confidence and a sense of ownership among stakeholders and allows administrators, implementers, communities and smallholders to obtain the skills they need to carry out their new tasks successfully.

As their roles change from policing to facilitation, public forest institutions will need to develop new capacities and to equip their staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to engage with and support communities and smallholders in CBF; this also applies to service providers in the private sector, civil society, academia and research. Required skills and capabilities include conflict management, participatory techniques, operational planning, meetings' facilitation, market analysis and access, participatory monitoring and evaluation, and time management.

When planning capacity -building activities, two important elements should be taken into account: first, women should have the same rights and opportunities as men have to be equipped with necessary skills and expertise without encountering any barriers; second, capacity-building programmes must be gender sensitive and address both women's and men's concerns with the same attention.

Adapted and simplified methodology

The methodologies and technologies used in CBF should be simple, low-cost, easy to learn, customizable to local needs, and available. Participatory methodology enables local people to produce holistic community forest management plans at a very low cost reflecting their needs, resources and capacities. Governments should ensure that simple forest management plans developed in participatory ways are accepted and approved as legally binding documents within the framework of CBF operations.

Incentives for CBF

Particularly where land is scarce or the rural population very poor, exclusion rights alone may be insufficient for sustainable CBF. To be viable in the long term, it is imperative that CBF contributes significantly to livelihoods by generating income and providing social benefits to individuals and local communities. The net revenue derived from community-based forest enterprises must meet or exceed the income

generated by existing destructive practices.

Several conditions, discussed below, can favour or hinder income generation through CBF.

Natural resources

Forests managed by a community or smallholder can contribute significantly to livelihoods and income generation if it produces sufficient products and services (e.g. woodfuel, timber, NWFPs and carbon sequestration) sustainably. The resource endowment of a forest must be considered carefully, therefore, when determining the boundaries of community forest areas. Forests that are devastated by fire or degraded by unsustainable logging, or which lack harvestable resources, cannot be expected to generate sufficient returns in the short to medium term.

In cases where CBF is established in protected areas, non-extractive means of generating economic benefits, such as ecotourism and direct payments for conservation or carbon sequestration, should be explored; such options may also apply in forests subject to sustainable harvesting.

Carbon sequestration may attract financial payments through [REDD+](#) schemes. There is a risk, however, that elites will take advantage of REDD+ at the expense of poor forest-dependent people and their livelihoods – for example by exploiting unclear land tenure, increases in land values due to REDD+, and legality requirements that favour large forest companies over small or medium-sized forest enterprises.

Regulatory framework

A regulatory framework comprises the formal arrangements – such as policies, laws, the rules and regulations for applying those laws, and operational guidelines – that define how and for what purposes forests are used and who is mandated to carry out particular functions. In many countries, the regulatory frameworks are missing some of these components, such as a formal policy, or they rely on governmental decrees that lack accompanying rules and regulations to define how the decrees are to be applied. In general, the more complete the regulatory framework, the less room there is for bureaucratic discretion and the greater the potential for openness, transparency and certainty.

Entrepreneurship and human capacities

Factors hindering the development of community-based forest enterprises may include a lack of market access, a lack of understanding in communities of the potential for income generation from tree- and forest-based enterprises, and competition with powerful economic interests. Interventions may be needed to increase community awareness of the potential commercial value of forest products and services and to strengthen entrepreneurial and financial skills through training and access to extension services. Communities and smallholders should be empowered to design and develop their own enterprises according to their needs, interests and resources as a way of ensuring their ownership of the process and its sustainability.

Enabling conditions for the development of enterprises based on CBF may include tax exemptions during the start-up phase, simplified access to financial capital or governmental funding programmes, simple registration processes, and access to infrastructure for moving, storing and marketing products.

Access to finance and markets

The availability of financial resources is critical for community investment in forest management, capacity building and the establishment and operation of community-based forest enterprises. Linkages with micro-financing sources, and the creation of savings and credit groups for micro-enterprises, could be useful ways of covering initial operational costs.

CBF is more likely to succeed if producers have good access to reliable, fair markets for their forest products and services. The provision of timely, accurate market information can help local people create forest-based enterprises capable of generating sustainable profits. Value-adding processing can increase the saleability of and returns on products, even in distant markets. A national database on forest-related enterprises and products can support the development of community-based forest enterprises.

Further learning

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Credits

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