Reducing poverty by linking small forest enterprises better to each other, to markets, to service providers and to policy processes

Forest Connect

What is Forest Connect?

Forest Connect is an international alliance dedicated to tackling the isolation of small forest enterprises. Established in late 2007, its aims are to avoid deforestation and reduce poverty by better linking sustainable small forest enterprises to each other, to markets, to service providers and to policy processes such as National Forest Programmes (nfps). It currently involves partner institutions with funded facilitation plans in 13 countries: Burkina Faso, China, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, India, Laos, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique, Nepal and recently also the Democratic Republic of Congo plus a broader network of supporters in 58 countries linked by an international social networking site (http://forestconnect.ning.com). Demand for involvement is huge, suggesting the alliance has got its focus right.

The Forest Connect alliance is co-managed by the Natural Resources Group within the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Community-Based Forest Enterprise Development programme (CBED) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). New support from PROFOR and the FAO hosted National Forest Programme (nfp) Facility is helping this alliance to develop and roll out a toolkit for the facilitation of support for small and medium forest enterprises. The formal links to nfps will help strengthen the voice of small forest enterprises to influence the decisions that affect them.
What is the problem?

High rates of forest clearance are a global threat to our climate and biodiversity. The last forest frontiers are also centers of poverty. Avoiding deforestation while simultaneously reducing poverty will be a challenge. Among the few money-making alternatives to agricultural conversion at the forest frontier are forest enterprises. Governments rarely grant preferential rights over forests to local people. But with growing market demand for forest products, and a pressing need for local income, local forest enterprises are the norm in most developing countries - mostly small or medium in scale and often informal. Their use of the forest is largely unavoidable, but there is scope to improve their impacts. Anchoring secure local timber and non-timber forest product (NTFP) rights to responsible and profitable forest enterprises is perhaps the best bet to reduce poverty, avoid deforestation and tackle climate change.

How is Forest Connect helping to solve the problem?

At country level, the Forest Connect supports practical action to facilitate support for Small and Medium Forest Enterprises (SMFE) with substantial progress amongst partners in Africa, Asia and Latin America. There has been a great increase in understanding of the scale and make up of SMFE subsectors and potential service providers through national diagnostics, most recently in Ethiopia. In some cases, national facilitators have catalysed collective action within producer associations and identified, benchmarked and organised service provision - for example in craft design for the Brazilian market for SMFEs in Guyana. Greater exposure to the market has been facilitated through news letters, bulletin boards, mobile phone updates, buyer-seller meetings and trade fairs, for example setting up a system to track and communicate NTFP market prices in Burkina Faso. More detailed value chain analyses to identify opportunities for upgrading are starting to emerge, for example in the bamboo sector in Mozambique. Many have begun to establish local level contact points, for example at village level in Laos PDR often piggy-backing on existing government or private sector infrastructure. Most are also working towards clearer understanding of how forest production could be made more sustainable, for example catalysing paper certification in Nepal. Promoting forest governance in favour of responsible small forest enterprises was a common theme, with major progress in countries such as Guatemala. National steering committees with newly established monitoring systems are emerging in many cases in support of such aims, for example in Ghana and Malawi.

With PROFOR funding the Forest Connect alliance is sharing experience on the facilitation of support for SMFEs. The first step was to organize a first international Forest Connect workshop to explore with practitioners where guidance was felt to be most needed (2-4 July 2008, Edinburgh UK). From the modular framework that emerged, lead authors have been contracted to draft guidance based on experience. Following reviews by Forest Connect steering committee members and NFP-Facility coaches, the guidance will be tested in Forest Connected partner countries. An iterative process of testing and revision, with increasing numbers of specific examples, will help both to develop and spread the capacity of how to support SMFEs in practice.