

**Forging linkages: The case of Forest Connect
as a small-scale forest enterprise development network tool**

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Forest-based poverty and the problem of isolation

Small and medium forest enterprises (SMFEs) typically make up a significant proportion of enterprises overall and are often the main source of forest employment in many countries. SMFEs offer particular advantages for poverty reduction¹. They contribute to the accrual of local wealth, empower local entrepreneurship, strengthen social networks, promote local stewardship of natural resources through increased social and environmental accountability and can preserve indigenous cultural values and traditions.

The number of SMFE start-ups in developing countries, particularly least developed countries, is high. Ensuring the survival of these enterprises over time is challenging. However understanding the essential enabling conditions that must be in place for SMFEs to be profitable and sustainable over time can improve success. There are three primary conditions, including: i) clear commercial forest rights, i.e. clear rights of durable access to the natural resource base, ii) strong social organization and iii) competitive business skills.

In developing countries, SMFEs often face problems such as:

- Excessive government bureaucracy;
- Frequently changing policies or regulations;
- Policies or regulations that are biased towards large scale operators;
- Insecure tenure;
- Inaccessible credit;
- Poor market information;
- Inadequate technology and technical assistance;
- Huge distances and poor transport infrastructure;
- Lack of bargaining power; and
- Insufficient business know-how².

Business inefficiencies are often exacerbated by isolation from market information and financial and business development services and by policies biased against small-scale actors. In reaction to these problems, SMFEs frequently group together to overcome scale inefficiencies, adapt to new market opportunities and improve their political and market bargaining power³. In least developed countries, structures that connect with and support SMFEs and their associations are weak. National governments often do not fully understand the potential of SMFEs to contribute to poverty alleviation, sustainable forest management and national development and therefore are unable to formulate appropriate national forest policies responding effectively to the challenge of isolation of SMFEs.

The problem of isolation can also be seen from another angle: Poverty means more than simply receiving little or no income. In a summary of how 40,000 poor people from 50 countries themselves saw poverty, it was concluded that⁴: “Poor people’s definitions of

¹ Mayers, 2006; Macqueen, 2007a

² Auren and Krassowska, 2003; Lewis et al. 2003; May et al. 2003; Saigal and Bose, 2003; Sun and Chen, 2003; Thomas et al. 2003

³ Macqueen et al. 2006

⁴ Narayan et al. 2000

poverty do not only include economic well-being, but also include vulnerability, powerlessness, the shame of dependency and social isolation.”

Reflecting these findings above, the analysis of the most critical common problems facing the forest-dependent poor reveals four closely linked issues⁵:

- A lack of representation of the poor and their enterprises in policy and decision making;
- Inappropriate laws and policies;
- Weak relationships between local institutions resulting in sufficient power to influence policies and regulations; and
- An isolation of the poor from supportive infrastructure and services.

If one had to summarize these problems in a few words, it might be “being disconnected”. This problem is most acute in least developed countries where neither government resources nor private sector initiatives provide the infrastructure, information technology or networking opportunities for forest-dependent people and their enterprises to flourish.

The implications are clear. If poverty is to be lessened in forest-based communities, social isolation and powerlessness must be reduced, and a greater “connectedness” fostered. There is much at stake. Approximately 60 million indigenous people depend primarily on natural forests for their livelihoods. A further 350 million rural people rely on the forests as a safety net or for supplemental income. Up to 1 billion more grow trees on farms or manage remnant forests for subsistence and income. Some 45 million people run or are employed by forest enterprises⁶. Connecting forest-dependent people and enterprises with each other, service providers, markets, and policies will be a significant step towards developing socially, economically and environmentally sustainable forest usage and forest management practices.

While local business associations go some way towards addressing the ‘disconnectedness’ problem, substantial evidence exists on the lack of adequate institutional support networks to assist them⁷. In recent years, ‘Forest Investment Forums’ have concluded that more needs to be done to build productive partnerships or multi-stakeholder processes that link communities and smallholders with companies, service providers and state forest authorities⁸. Strong calls have been made by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the Centro Agronómico de Investigación y Enseñanza (CATIE), the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) and others at these forums and at recent international conferences and dialogues on local livelihoods and forestry in Costa Rica⁹, Vietnam¹⁰, Brazil¹¹, Belgium¹², Panama¹³ and Nepal¹⁴ for SMFEs and their associations to be

⁵ Macqueen et al. 2001

⁶ Scherr et al. 2004

⁷ Bose et al. 2006; Bukula and Memani, 2006; Campos et al. 2005; Figueiredo et al. 2006; Kazoora et al. 2006; Ousman et al. 2006; Weyerhaeuser et al. 2006

⁸ e.g. World Bank 2003a and 2006

⁹ Donovan, et al., 2007

¹⁰ Oberndorf et al., 2007

¹¹ Mayers and Macqueen, 2007

¹² Degawan et al., 2009a

better connected to markets, service providers and policy processes such as national forest programmes. These calls are based on an increasingly widely shared analysis which stipulates that there is insufficient local knowledge and capacity in many national forest sectors of multi-sectoral innovation in strategies and processes to connect small enterprise associations better to markets, service providers and policy formulation.

The Forest Connect Alliance

FAO has been involved in SMFE development through its Community-Based Forest Enterprise Development (CBED) programme since 2000. In 2006 the FAO CBED programme organized an international conference in Costa Rica to discuss with its programme partners and a wide range of stakeholders some of the most urgent gaps not yet addressed by international and national efforts supporting the development of SMFEs. As a direct result of this conference, FAO and IIED partnered to develop an initiative tackling the problem of isolation and lack of connectivity amongst SMFEs, and to help secure local rights, profitability and responsible practice for these enterprises. This initiative was called the Forest Connect International Alliance. From the start, the central aim of the Forest Connect Alliance has been to connect SMFEs to national forest programmes (empowering SMFEs to be heard by policy makers), emerging markets (by enhancing market linkages between supply and demand) service providers (by strengthening their capacity to provide training and finance) and to other SMFEs (by supporting existing SMFE associations).

Today, the Forest Connect Alliance continues to be co-managed by the Natural Resources Group within IIED and the FAO CBED programme. Forest Connect currently involves partner institutions in thirteen countries, including Burkina Faso, China, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, Lao PDR, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique and Nepal. The initiative also has an international presence, linking interested institutions, individuals and groups from around the globe through the use of an innovative online social networking tool.

National

At the national level, Forest Connect hub organizations are selected to take the lead in facilitating support of SMFEs in the country. These hubs are currently in a 'pilot phase'. They can either be registered as CBO's, national NGO's with a mandate of (forest) enterprise development or natural resource management, producer organizations, private service providers or research institutes. National hubs are responsible for conducting:

- Diagnostic studies and existing in-country conditions of and for forest-based SMFEs and their associations;
- A survey on service providers relevant to SMFEs in each country, identifying gaps in service provision and, based on the existing institutional capabilities in the country, supporting the preparation of a strategy for addressing those gaps;
- Collection of information on the main forest decision-making processes in each country and development of a strategy for eliciting the key policy concerns of SMFE

¹³ Castro Diaz et al., 2009

¹⁴ Degawan et al. 2009b

members and enabling participatory representation by Forest Connect members in forest decision-making;

- Preparation of national Forest Connect websites in each country with relevant information for small forest enterprises for use as information platforms, and development of communication strategies based on the information needs of the SMFEs; and
- Sharing of Forest Connect experiences between countries.

Each country hub is also requested to create a steering committee in order to represent all relevant stakeholders and to participate in SMFE related events in the country. Further, each Forest Connect hub looks into different activities, depending on the context and available financing. These activities are mostly focused on facilitating service provision in businesses planning, network development, financial literacy, quality improvement, design, etc.

International

At the international level, a social-networking website, <http://forestconnect.ning.com>, has been developed for peer-to-peer exchange of ideas and information targeted towards stakeholders in the member countries, as well as to international donors, NGOs, development agencies and other interested parties.

Additionally, the national hubs are selected by an international Steering Committee of representatives from five of the Forest Connect countries, as well as from the coordinating organizations (FAO and IIED). The Steering Committee also provides oversight and strategic direction to the initiative.

The alliance currently consists of active teams supporting small forest enterprises in 12 countries with more than 700 associate members from 60 countries.

Forest Connect Toolkit

With PROFOR funding, the Forest Connect alliance is starting to share experiences on the facilitation of support for SMFEs. The first step was the organization of a workshop in 2008 to explore with practitioners from Forest Connect member countries where guidance was felt to be most needed. From the modular framework that emerged lead authors were contracted to draft guidance based on their experiences. The guidance material is presented in the form of a toolkit. The intention is to develop this toolkit through action-learning (or learning by doing) – capturing lessons from literature, as well as from the real experiences of partner institutions in the countries in which Forest Connect is active. The toolkit gives facilitators guidance about different areas of enterprise development. The main audience for the toolkit is support organizations for SMFE's, such as the national Forest Connect hubs, and thus not the forest enterprises themselves. The immediate intention is to empower these national hubs by giving them sufficient confidence to engender practical and useful interventions in their own context – boosting their confidence to apply tried and tested approaches and successes from elsewhere.

As much as funding allows, face-to-face exchanges between national Forest Connect hubs are stimulated. A second international Forest Connect workshop was held in March 2011 in

Ethiopia. This workshop provided an opportunity to exchange national experiences, take stock of achievements, identify gaps, connect with peers and forge partnerships between Forest connect stakeholders. On a demand basis, exchange in the form of in-country visits between individual national hubs has also occurred.

FAO and Forest Connect

Support from FAO for the Forest Connect Alliance has been manifold. FAO, through the continuing commitment by its member countries, provides funds for the development and implementation of Forest Connect. The CBED programme is also responsible for identifying and securing new funding sources and donors for Forest Connect activities. FAO provides operational and technical inputs to Forest Connect countries. CBED staff is also attempting to maximize synergies between Forest Connect and other CBED activities and projects, by highlighting linkages and facilitating the connection and exchange of information and ideas.

Impacts of Forest Connect so far – 2 country cases

The recent workshop in Ethiopia made clear that national partners see Forest Connect as a “way of doing things”: facilitating the connection of the unconnected – virtually (through the international and the national websites) and effectively (with a variety of initiatives and actions on the ground). Importantly, the Forest Connect initiative is a process that is run by the countries themselves. The format and status of Forest Connect in the various participating countries is subsequently diverse. It is, in fact, a reflection of the motivation, capacity and interest of the individual national hubs. The following brief overview of the implementation of Forest Connect in Burkina Faso and Nepal illustrates this point.

Burkina Faso

The Forest Connect national hub in Burkina Faso is based in the national NGO TREE AID. TREE AID is a forestry focused development organization providing funding and on the ground training and support to local communities in the Sahel of Africa. Its goal is to reduce the vulnerability of communities to drought and famine in rural Africa's dry lands by focusing on forest management and income, food and medicines from trees. The efforts of TREE AID in the implementation of Forest Connect aim in particular at:

- Increasing the understanding of the non-wood forest product (NWFP) enterprise sector through research and dissemination of information. In 2009, the NGO conducted a comprehensive national diagnostic study on SMFEs, mapping out forest enterprises support services and information needs for SMFEs;
- Sharing information and analysis with government departments, and encouraging engagement between technical services, NGO and private sectors; and
- Improving market understanding amongst SMFEs and helping them to collect market information in a dynamic manner.

One of the focus-areas of the Forest Connect national hub in Burkina Faso has been the encouragement of participation of members of government institutions in the initiative through the Forest Connect Steering Committee. The participation of key government staff is seen as a means of generating high-level support and interest as well as guidance on the implementation of the Forest Connect initiative. In line with this goal, TREE AID has

maintained a strong connection with a FAO technical cooperation project to formulate a national strategy for the promotion of NTFPs in Burkina Faso as well as with the currently FAO supported follow-up project to improve the sustainable management and use of NWFPs.

Thus, one of the indirect impacts of Forest Connect on the capacity of SMFE development in Burkina Faso is the mainstreaming of NWFP and SMFEs into national forest and economic policies, with official recognition of their contribution to livelihood and environmental conservation. TREE AID's efforts in Burkina Faso are also considered to have contributed to the decision of the Government of Burkina Faso to set up an 'Agence de Promotion des Produits Forestiers Non Ligneux' (APFNL), a government agency with the sole aim of developing policies and implementing strategy for the NWFP sector. This is the first of its kind in the West African region. The current FAO technical cooperation project mentioned above, in which TREE AID is also participating is in fact a project with the Government of Burkina Faso supporting the establishment of and providing technical input to activities of the APFNL.

Furthermore, through Forest Connect, value chain actors are beginning to establish local level contact points (e.g. at village level) often piggy-backing on existing government or private sector infrastructure, allowing them to achieve greater access to markets and service providers and realize economies of scale.

As the organization hosting the national Forest Connect hub, TREE AID is currently undertaking NWFP based enterprise development projects using the Market Analysis and Development (MA&D)¹⁵ approach, in Burkina Faso, Ghana and Mali. TREE AID has been able to draw lessons from these projects across West-Africa to contribute to the Forest Connect toolkit for facilitation of support for SMFEs, particularly in the areas of:

- Market understanding – setting up market information systems for community-based forest enterprises;
- Business and financial planning – implementation and review of enterprise development plans;
- Delivery of financial and business development services (BDS) – partnerships with financial institutions and BDS providers; and
- Building (environmental) sustainability – implementation of environmental plans contained in the MA&D business plans.

Finally, through TREE AID's implementation of MA&D in Burkina Faso and its close cooperation with the Government of Burkina Faso, the Government has now also adopted the MA&D approach for its 'Agence de Promotion des Produits Forestiers Non Ligneux' (APFNL).

Nepal

In Nepal, Forest Connect is implemented by the Asian Network for Sustainable Agriculture and Bioresources (ANSAB). ANSAB is a civil society organization working in South Asia

¹⁵ Market Analysis and Development (MA&D) is a participatory training methodology developed by FAO that aims to assist people in developing forest-based income-generating enterprises while sustainably managing and conserving natural resources (see: <http://www.fao.org/forestry/enterprises/en/>).

and headquartered in Kathmandu, Nepal. Its main focus is on biodiversity conservation and economic development through community-based, enterprise-oriented solutions.

Forest Connect Nepal aims to:

- Contribute to the goal of Forest Connect as a whole by increasing the visibility of the SMFE sector of Nepal;
- Increase the level of organization and connectedness of SMFE members to markets (by supporting existing SMFE associations), to service providers (by strengthening their capacity to provide trainings and finance) and to policy processes (by empowering SMFEs to be heard by policy makers); and
- Increasing the viability of 'Forest Connect' members in the market.

The approach of Forest Connect Nepal was initially focused on knowledge generation, data gathering and analysis. Within the first two years of becoming the national hub for Nepal, ANSAB:

- Conducted a diagnostic study on SMFEs and their associations in Nepal;
- Carried out a comprehensive review of five NWFP species as well as associated enterprises to explore the relationship between forests, poverty and livelihoods;
- Facilitated stakeholder consultations nationally and internationally;
- Documented a value chain analysis process and developed a reference document for future applications of the value chain approach in SMFE development; and
- Created an electronic directory of existing SMFEs in Nepal.

Based on these activities, ANSAB identified major challenges and barriers for SMFEs in Nepal. A national consultative meeting was organized to discuss these issues and challenges, which can roughly be grouped in policy, market and service constraints. A round table discussion was organized to further discuss the prioritized issues and to develop broad strategies for addressing each issue.

Taking on the role as national hub for Forest Connect reflects only a small part of ANSAB's overall activities. Given its nature and general goals, prior to joining the Forest Connect initiative, ANSAB was largely involved in more theoretical, knowledge creating work. But with the technical input from FAO through the Forest Connect initiative, ANSAB is in the process of initiating and supporting national level associations of producer groups and community enterprises, improving collaboration and coordination among supporting organizations and enhancing their linkages with SMFEs and community forest user groups. The first concrete activity supporting such a national level producer association is the expansion of services of the Nepal Herbs and Herbal Products Association (NEHHPA), a national membership based association of herbal business entrepreneurs. NEHHPA has until recently only represented and worked with intermediate herbal manufactures, traders and exporters of the plants and its products. ANSAB is now technically supporting NEHHPA to enable them to also open up their services to the micro entrepreneurs further down the value chain, such as the collectors and primary processors at the resource base.

Lessons learned

Some of the key observations and lessons learned from a management and coordination perspective of Forest Connect are:

- Experience in Forest Connect member countries has shown, that, from the range of organization types that can serve as national hubs for representing, linking and supporting SMFEs, commercial associations, such as forest producer organizations and cooperatives seem to be best positioned to further SMFE interests, not in the least for their ability to reach out to the most remote geographic areas.
- Each type of organization serving as national hub joined Forest Connect with a preexisting mandate and agenda – establishing a new initiative such as Forest Connect and aiming it to become a self-sustaining mechanism often requires some reorientation in such organizations and technical support from outside therein.
- A tremendous amount of new data and knowledge has been generated so far through the work of Forest Connect members – the application of this new knowledge to generate real changes however is still lagging behind. Forest Connect member countries will need more technical support from partner organizations in putting their wealth of data to good use to promote, support and effectively connect SMFEs.
- The international Forest Connect social networking website took off very well, generating many interesting discussions and exchanges. To continue the success of this tool however, it is essential to dedicate additional human resources to facilitate the exchange-process, start discussions, share new reports and findings and so on.
- Uncertainty about funding is ever-present throughout all Forest Connect activities. The initiative was created with much ambition and little funding, and secure and stable funding is needed in order to sustain the initiative's momentum.
- The ultimate goal for the coordinating organizations (FAO and IIED) of Forest Connect is to achieve sustainability of the national hubs as effective service providers for SMFEs once funding and technical support end. It is now clear that, besides providing technical and coordinating inputs to the hubs, this also means providing more substantial initial financial support.

What happens next?

The Forest Connect initiative has had a successful start in facilitating more connectivity between small and medium forest enterprises, within markets and the policy sphere. The Forest Connect approach is now well established in its member countries and is being recognized as a promising means to facilitate the creation of more organized enterprises and groups that can:

- Take advantage of economies of scale and improve income generation opportunities;
 - Improve and secure access to finance;
 - Have a louder voice and ability to lobby in policy processes;
 - Achieve lower costs for and reach more people in capacity development activities;
- and

- Enable peer-to-peer learning.

Because in-country experiences with the facilitation of support for SMFEs have been rich and diverse, there is a need to consolidate the lessons learned in these national contexts and further promote the exchange of ideas, approaches and tools globally. FAO is currently working with IIED to enrich the Toolkit for Forest Connect, which will collate this information into a single easy-to-use reference document.

In addition, FAO and IIED will work with six of the Forest Connect countries to develop country case studies, each telling the story of the work, experiences, success stories and challenges encountered during their implementation of activities under the Forest Connect initiative. The case studies will be written for a wider audience and are intended to serve as a basis for further refining the Forest Connect message and approach internationally, as well as in each of the participating countries.

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