
An independent review of Forest Connect

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Executive summary

Overview

Forest Connect is a complex and ambitious pioneering multi-partner international initiative seeking to simultaneously address several inter-connected global, national and local issues: poverty, food and energy security, soil degradation, and rapid deforestation that threatens the global climate and biodiversity. As regions with the last forest frontiers tend to be poor, the challenge lies in reducing poverty through economic alternatives that also maintain forest cover. This is central for both climate programmes such as REDD+ and trade programmes tackling illegal logging.

One alternative to agricultural conversion at the forest frontier is sustainable forest enterprise. Small, locally run agricultural and forest enterprises are the norm in many developing countries, but they are often unregistered and hampered by isolation from potential partners, buyers, services and government. Forest Connect seeks to reduce and overcome this isolation and establish a forest enterprise system based on secure rights to forest resources and strong local producer groups with the business capacity to make products profitably and sustainably. It does this by working through in-country partners who themselves facilitate support to small forest enterprises.

Objectives of this review

- To assess the success of Forest Connect in supporting small forest enterprises through international communication platforms, in-country work, learning events, toolkit development and testing and communication / advocacy work; and
- To distil lessons about the key factors that have led to success (or failure) in order to inform best practice in any follow-on.

Methodology

Forest Connect's two lead partners (IIED and FAO) and two of twelve partner countries, (Nepal and Ethiopia) were briefly visited. Over 60 partners, stakeholders and observers interviewed re their experiences, opinions and perceptions of Forest Connect in general and/or of the performance of the national hubs. Representatives from other Forest Connect countries plus international stakeholders/observers were then interviewed 'ex-situ'. The methods used included timelines and H-forms as part of individual and group semi structured interviews. Some documentation regarding pdf downloads, website hits, membership and a wide range of publications were provided and drawn upon.

Knowledge Exchange

Forest Connect's knowledge exchange activities have attracted, inspired and brought together individual practitioners and respected institutions. Important components of the knowledge exchange strategy have been the steady stream of high-quality Forest Connect publications from both IIED and FAO (with healthy Africa (19 per cent) and Asia (22 per cent) percentage of downloads figures) and the 2 international meetings in 2008 and 2010.

Lessons

- There is a decline in hard copy dissemination systems in the 'south'. With capital city people working almost all the time in soft copy, they seem to have taken their eye off the ball of hard-copy dissemination to the field. Even though they say themselves that

Internet capacity falls off a cliff outside the capital and that field people still need/rely on hard copies, Forest Connect national hubs' hard copy dissemination systems are barely still functioning.

- International meetings and field trips have been too short to optimise the exchange of learning, given the travel involved.

Recommendations

- Keep Forest Connect's publication production going in whatever form is possible (i.e. according to funding) - it is an important mechanism for peer learning - the inputs are of high quality and the formal recognition is appreciated by authors / contributors.
- Remind, prod or even incentivise Forest Connect national hubs to keep their hard copy dissemination systems well-oiled and functioning.
- Have (longer) international meetings and more structured, well-planned field trip(s). If fully funded, international meetings should be twice a year: one SMFE based, the other in/around a trade fair.

Communications Platforms

Forest Connect's communications platforms have initiated and facilitated dialogue between key individuals and institutions. The Forest Connect website established on the commercial 'ning' social networking platform has helped to create a solid membership platform (of 940+ members) and the 10 other Forest Connect websites have also made a contribution. The soft versus hard copy dilemma has been a growing issue / challenge for Forest Connect's communications and there is a need to ensure that the name 'Forest Connect' is still a good fit.

Lessons

- Unless sufficient dedicated resources become available to do a well-designed high quality stand-alone website, it is better to just have a good page (with functioning links) on another partner's website.
- All of the national Forest Connect websites and pages/links look different in terms of branding, design and arrangements - reflecting the scope/flexibility that 'Forest Connect Central' encourages with country partners.
- Most direct bilateral communication was task generated or orientated (tasks set up by Forest Connect central).
- There is some confusion amongst those who when they first hear about Forest Connect wonder what it actually does - not least because 'Forest Connect' doesn't actually do what it says 'on the tin'. Some respondents stated that their first assumption was that Forest Connect is a pressure group for biodiversity corridors/linking patches of forest together!
- Most respondents said that if it is agreed that the name be changed, the new name should definitely include 'Connect', and desirable to keep 'Forest' in any new name
- The 'ning' site has provided a good foundation for Forest Connect social networking, but there are barriers to parts of the Forest Connect constituency joining it and fully participating: it is not business / 'real world' friendly / accessible as it requires users to be proactive in joining and keeping up to date, thereby discouraging groups such as private sector customers / traders in 'southern' slower internet environments, where

the popular / default social networks which they are likely to be already members of are Twitter, Facebook and Linked-In.

- Of these, 'Linked-In' is the most business friendly and popular, and the one where the largest proportion of groups and individuals of the Forest Connect network and constituency are already members.

Recommendations

- It should be investigated if the 'ning' website can be migrated to Linked-In.
- Conduct a consultation process re the name "Forest Connect"
- Create additional categories of Forest Connect membership to increase Forest Connect's internet presence and traffic.
- Partner with more organisations (see page 26) who are big players in elements of support to SMEs but forestry not their core business as (light touch) members of the Forest Connect Alliance,
- Options for increasing the number of hits and return visits to the Forest Connect websites should be investigated, for example search engine optimisation (SEO).

Peer-to-Peer Learning

Forest Connect alliance partners have made successful efforts to initiate and support peer-to-peer learning. This is predominantly due to having been consultative, innovative and selective. Also this has been due to providing strategic small levels of financial and technical support when required and possible. The strong response from the field in, terms of the uptake and use of the publications by both practitioners and 'policy-ers' was due to the quality of the work being undertaken, particularly with regard to the development of the Facilitator's Toolkit (but also during the research for the country level SMFE diagnosis studies). Those who participated in the production of the Toolkit were proud to have been involved and of being named/cited as contributors/authors. The Toolkit is of very high quality and has been well-received, but the hardcopy version requires some stand-alone related fine-tuning and the soft copy made more interactive. There is scope to enhance and broaden Forest Connect peer-to-peer learning via specific interest/topic 'sub-groups'.

Lessons

- The Toolkit's shortcomings remarked upon are more to do with the 'utility' of the format it has been produced than its scope, technical content and usefulness..
- The 'ning' website is not being optimally used with regard to peer-to-peer learning, in particular by non-academics and NGO staff.
- Some thought that the time that the best peer-to-peer learning occurred during the Toolkit's production and editing process, i.e. that having strong thematic content to alliance interactions / meetings greatly improves exchanges and learning

Recommendations

- Other social networking platforms (such as Linked-In) should be considered from a purely peer-to-peer learning point of view.
- Toolkit to be fine-tuned and/or reproduced on CD/DVD in an interactive, 'e-linked' format.

- Hard-copy version of toolkit to be fine-tuned to be more 'stand-alone'.
- Toolkit to be continually updated and reproduced on an interactive internet and non-internet based website, the stand-alone (non-online) website to be on a CD/DVD.

In-country support processes

In the two countries visited for this evaluation it was evident that more than the activities and successes documented in country level reports had been achieved. In all the countries visited and contacted the Forest Connect Alliance has helped those supporting SMFEs to make significant progress with improving the policy situation and political climate with regard to SMFEs as evidenced from meetings with high-level government officials and private sector operators.

This is predominantly due to Forest Connect central having been very reactive to requests and suggestions and proactive in providing knowledge in the form of research reports, advocacy support and practical advice to the national hubs, in some cases providing, via the Forest Connect network, communication platform etc., a de facto 'help-desk' service. It was apparent that Forest Connect's pro-SMFE philosophy and practice has been subsumed into and added to that already held by the national hubs.

Questions arose however, both regarding how much the national hubs have reached out to / involved new players, especially organisations who are de facto competitors; and what happened to the idea of setting up national level Forest Connect steering committees? The latter apparently did not materialise due to the relatively low levels of funding provided.

There was, admirably, evidence in both countries visited, of Forest Connect national hubs using their own resources and blending with other funding streams, to implement Forest Connect work plans (although in the process making it difficult to attribute specific activities/successes to Forest Connect!).

Lessons

- Respondents said the optimal secondary national partners are:
 - democratic, ethical private sector forest produce businesses umbrella organisation (e.g. agriculture producer association)
 - national and regional level chambers of commerce
 - decentralised technical para-statal
- The decision to try and work through in-country facilitators so as to support the capacity of organisation with existing in-country reach and get them to learn from one another, rather than relying on flying in experts from FAO / IIED, was the correct one.
- Most of Forest Connect's published materials, with some modification, could be used for training college and university courses, i.e. to train future professionals/service providers – general SME/business support material in forestry curricula, more specific, detailed SMFE technicalities in business studies/enterprise support curricula.
- Single issue/product groups/networks have started to informally emerge.
- Guatemala and Burkina Faso have found that international (and national) trade fairs/conventions/expos are very valuable for increasing exposure of Facilitators and

SMFEs themselves to markets, customers, importers, exporters, competitors, etc. AND to recruit new members.

Recommendations

- Continue working through in-country facilitators but there should be incentives and measures built in to enhance chances of such support not being overly 'individualised', e.g. that work is put out to competitive tender and no national hub becomes over-reliant on a single contractor.
- A significant proportion (say 50 per cent) of country level work programme should involve 'reach out', training others, expanding the size of the professional base re SMFE support as well as and as much as the knowledge base.
- Over time initiate and develop a topic-based hub structure with Forest Connect v2.0 to be based more around multi-country single-interest sub-groups, sharing innovation/experiences about a single topic, or product, from one place to another – with structured field trips and e-forum discussions.
- Where possible, Forest Connect's published materials should be modified for use in training colleges and universities: SME stuff in forestry curricula, SMFE in business/enterprise curricula.
- Encourage Forest Connect national hubs to try to work directly with more democratic producer groups and less NGOs and government departments.
- Provide resources and technical support where required for ad hoc neighbouring country exchange visits – with structure and report formats, regional, smaller scale meetings and bilateral exchange visits (perhaps via a challenge fund system)
- At major forest product trade vents/expos, Forest Connect should book a display/stand where Forest Connect partner countries could attend and display products, and meet peers (and if possible have Steering Committee meetings, international workshops as side or before/after events).
- Where there are blended funding streams, develop innovative e-based expenditure tracking and recording procedures and reports.

International governance arrangements

The Forest Connect alliance's governance arrangements are well-structured, proportionate and representative but under-used: well-intentioned but under-resourced. They have been reactive more than proactive, with a lot of trust in key personnel of lead partners. As a result they have been operating under capacity.

Lessons

- The two lead figures (Duncan Macqueen and Sophie Grouwels) are very well-respected in and beyond their organisations and both are at liberty (within advisory guidelines set by the Steering Committee) to make day-to-day decisions.
- The high level of flexibility works well if, as in Forest Connect's case, the lead figures are trusted and have big trust in each other.
- The two lead figures are respected by Steering Committee members for attempting to not go into (unnecessary) detail about everything.

- Both IIED and FAO have shared the leadership of Forest Connect and used their complementary strengths to good effect with no problems re adjusting budget/who actually holds the Forest Connect resources.

Recommendations

- If more funding is secured, the Steering Committee should be given a stronger mandate and be extended/increased by:
 - inviting entrepreneurial champions with bright ideas (from outside NGO world)
 - seeking outside experts, private sector experts, government representatives, high political, e.g. regional economic cooperation organisations
 - considering inviting foundations, trade organisations/unions

Future plans: Forest Connect v2.0

It is early, early days with regard to providing bespoke support to SMFEs, especially the 'S' ones, so there should, indeed, there must, be a future for an entity that is trying to do what the Forest Connect alliance has been doing. With the impressive 'reach' (array of networks and partners) it has already established, and its strong technical platform, it is difficult to see what other organisation, or even organisations, could do a better job than the Forest Connect alliance. Even from partners who were expecting much more in terms of resources from Forest Connect there were no dissenting voices - in fact the opposite, a real, unanimous desire to see Forest Connect forge ahead, using the strong platform it has established to scale up and make important positive contributions to many of the international, national and local challenges relating to forests. Both the international hosts and principal donor to date are keen to see the work of Forest Connect continue, and be built on, but with more financial and human resources, and in close collaboration with a new international entity (FAO's Forest Farm Facility). These draft plans all seem realistic and this evaluation has definitely found that there are strong foundations to base that collaboration on, at both international and national levels.

Lessons

- Some donors have not been able to see or have faith in links between what Forest Connect has been doing and their own intentions to work more with the private sector.
- Some donors' interpretation of working with the private sector with regard to forests generally / only means working with / through international companies / agribusinesses.

Recommendations

- Generate and publish figures (re financial leverage, number of start-ups, added-value, livelihoods created per money invested/ha of forests better-managed, carbon offsets, etc.) which show that Forest Connect is a viable alternative to international companies for those donors wishing to engage more with the private sector in their forestry investment/development programmes
- Continually update/improve/add to the Toolkit but in a new format of an interactive CD/DVD/website version of the Toolkit, with videos and PowerPoint presentations being an integral part of it.

- Develop more specific enterprise guidance for the big value sectors of biomass energy / tree supported agriculture / timber / carbon.

In conclusion, the evidence presented during this evaluation, both written and oral, gives an overwhelming impression of Forest Connect being both a going and (potentially) a growing concern. The Forest Connect alliance has well above-the-norm levels of individual and institutional goodwill, a healthy self-critical ethos, appropriate-level national presence and influence, a strong emphasis on proactively seeking and sharing best practice, proportionate (if highly personalised) governance structures - and, for the length of time it has formally been operating, a very impressive list of publications and on-the-ground successes with regard to incubating new and supporting existing SMFEs.

Acknowledgements

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Duncan Macqueen of IIED and Sophie Grouwels of FAO for initial briefings, strategic guidance and support throughout the assignment.

Leianne Rolington of IIED for logistical and general support.

And in particular all the national and international level respondents, who are listed in Annex 2 - List of interviewees.

This report is drawn from both their responses, observations and suggestions, and (as an SME owner/manager, a facilitation method designer and trainer, a practicing process designer and facilitator, an ex-international/multi country programme coordinator and a bilateral donor's forestry adviser) my own.

Andy Inglis
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Acronyms/Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|--|
| CATIE | Centro Agronómico Tropical de Investigación y Enseñanza |
| CBED | (FAO) Community-Based Forest Enterprise Development Programme |
| CBO | Community Based Organisation |
| CIFOR | Center for International Forestry Research |
| CS | Civil Society |
| CSO | Civil Society Organisation |
| DANIDA | Government of Denmark Development Cooperation |
| DFID | UK Government Department for International Development |
| EC | European Community |
| EU | European Union |
| FAO | Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations |
| FLEGT | Forest Law Enforcement, Governance and Trade |
| FPIC | Free, Prior and Informed Consent |
| IIED | International Institute for Environment and Development |
| IUCN | World Conservation Union |
| LoA | Letter of Agreement |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| NORAD | Government of Norway Agency for Development Cooperation |
| NTFP | Non Timber Forest Product |
| PES | Payments for Ecosystem/Environmental Services |
| PROFOR | World Bank Programme on Forests |
| REDD | Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and (forest) Degradation |
| RRI | Rights and Resources Initiative |
| SDC | Government of Switzerland Agency for Development and Cooperation |
| SME | Small and Medium Enterprise |
| SMFE | Small and Medium Forest Enterprise |

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

This independent interim evaluation of Forest Connect was commissioned and funded by International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) through an accountable grant from the UK Governments Department for International Development (DFID). Forest Connect is an international alliance dedicated to tackling the isolation of small forest enterprises. Following earlier work on small forest enterprises by both FAO (since 1987) and IIED (since 2000), Forest Connect was established in late 2007 following discussions between IIED and FAO at an international workshop ‘Small and Medium Enterprise Development for Poverty Reduction: Opportunities and Challenges in Globalizing Markets’ held at CATIE in Costa Rica in 2006.

Forest Connect has to date been co-managed by the Natural Resources Group within IIED and the Community-Based Forest Enterprise Development programme (CBED) of the FAO. It has involved partner institutions with funded facilitation plans in 12 countries: Burkina Faso, China, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guatemala, Guyana, Laos, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mozambique and Nepal plus a broader network of more than 800 supporters in 50 countries linked by an international social networking site (<http://forestconnect.ning.com>).

Initial support came from both IIED framework funds (from DFID, NORAD, DANIDA and SDC) and FAO CBED funds that enabled support of roughly USD15-25,000 per year for 10-12 partner countries which over three years amounted to a conservative estimate of USD 500,000. IIED has managed 4-5 of these partner relationships and FAO has managed 6-7 of these partner relationships between 2008 and 2012. In each country annual contractual work plans have typically followed a sequence from background diagnostics on SMFE sectors, through more detailed value chain analysis or service provision analysis, towards the direct facilitation of support activities (depending on the institutional capacity and context).

In 2008 the World Bank Programme on Forests (PROFOR) intimated that they would support the Forest Connect alliance to develop a toolkit on the facilitation of support to small forest enterprises. It was this dedicated project support that both enabled and shaped subsequent meetings of the Forest Connect alliance. PROFOR support to Forest Connect was channelled through IIED in two phases which totalled USD 153,042 and USD 255,000 respectively.

In July 2008 partners of Forest Connect met in Scotland to assess what guidance practitioners might find most useful to enhance support for small forest enterprises. Representation from international support agencies, more than ten national SMFE support institutions and a number of thematic experts met to define the areas of modular guidance that would be included in that toolkit. Known experts were identified and contracted to write drafts of such guidance – and this was then used to varying degrees in each of the partner countries.

In early 2010 partners of Forest Connect met in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to discuss how to test and enrich the guidance modules within this toolkit. It was this meeting that led to the inclusion of many of the case study boxes that are found throughout the toolkit – that was finally published in May 2012. Case study boxes either drew on past attempts to utilise the toolkit or on-going work in those modular areas.

Since 2010 the Forest Connect alliance has been completing in-country work and developing ideas for follow-on support, some of which were clearly expressed in five countries “in-country” experience reports. In addition IIED has secured funding from a DFID accountable grant mechanism to explore how Forest Connect II (future work) might contribute to

integrated, intensified and climate-smart land use. This review will play an important role in helping to define where best to direct future efforts.

Forest Connect's vision, objectives and expected results

Forest Connect was founded both because high rates of forest clearance are a global threat to our climate and biodiversity and because the last forest frontiers are also centres of poverty. Avoiding deforestation while simultaneously reducing poverty were felt to be critical challenges. 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.

Moving such enterprises towards secure resource rights, responsible production and profitability is not easy. They face huge constraints to do with isolation. They are isolated in various ways, not only from neighbouring enterprises with whom they might work for scale efficiencies and bargaining power, but also from a range of potential buyers that would give them sales options, from financial and business development service providers who would help them with sustainability and upgrading, and from decision-makers governing their forest access and use.

Vision

Locally controlled forestry in which right-holders with secure commercial resource rights, strong enterprise-organisations and competitive business capacity improve local livelihoods and sustainably manage forests.

Overarching objective

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).

Expected results

- A communication platform and international ad hoc alliance of those wishing to support small forest enterprises
- In-country partnerships with institutions with a mandate to support small forest enterprises – and agreed annual work plans for a programme of practical enterprise support work
- Learning events to enable in-country teams to exchange knowledge, design and test a toolkit on supporting small forest enterprises
- A modular framework for a toolkit on supporting small forest enterprises.
- Case study examples of testing and enriching that toolkit through in-country action learning
- A series of communication products that highlight the work of the Forest Connect alliance, the work it does, and build broader international awareness of the need to invest in locally controlled forestry

Timing of this evaluation

This was an opportune time for an initial review/evaluation of Forest Connect: a lot of paid and unpaid time and energy has been put into it at both international and national levels over the past 3 years, with more financial and human resources required if more is to be done, building on the foundations utilising lessons learnt.

In addition, new potential partner initiatives, (such as the Farm Forest Facility hosted by FAO) are in the process of being developed/operationalised, so it makes sense that Forest Connect's experiences can be shared with them, and possible opportunities for new alliances/collaborations with them can be identified and/or catalysed by examining what Forest Connect has been doing well and what it plans to do/change in the future.

Objective of this evaluation:

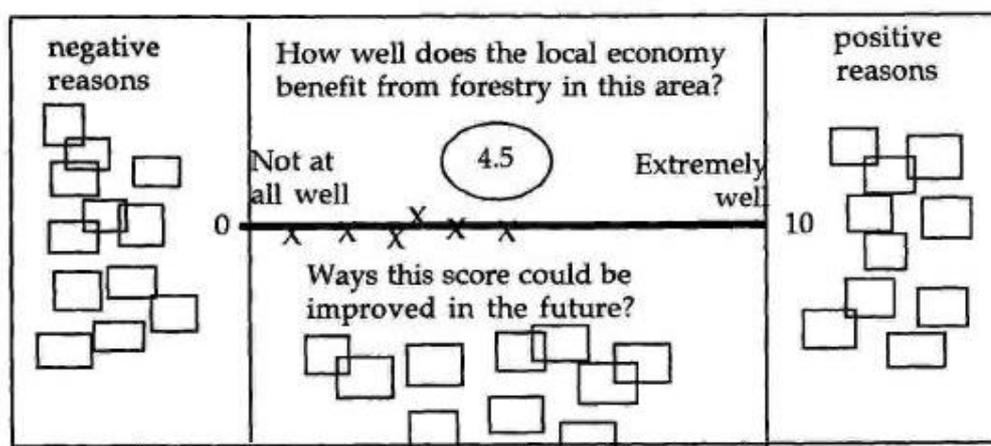
"To assess (i) the success of Forest Connect in supporting small forest enterprises through international communication platforms, in-country work, learning events, toolkit development and testing and communication / advocacy work and (ii) to distil lessons about the key factors that have led to success (or failure) in order to inform best practice in the follow-on". (Annex 4 - ToRs for the evaluation)

1.2 Methodology

The evaluation methodology was 'low-key' and proportionate to the amount of time allocated and sensitive to the availability and commitments of stakeholders and observers. Two countries involved in Forest Connect, one (Nepal) an FAO Forest Connect partner and the other (Ethiopia) an IIED-led Forest Connect partnership, were briefly visited, where over 30 partners and stakeholders were interviewed (see Annex F), either individually or in small groups, with regard to their experiences, opinions and perceptions of the Forest Connect programme in general and/or of the performance of the national hubs. Representatives from the other Programme countries plus international stakeholders/observers were then interviewed 'ex-situ'.

The methods used included timelines, H-forms,¹ semi-structured individual and group key informant/participant interviews. Most of the interviews were face-to-face, some were telephone/Skype, and some by email. Most were informal, a few (in Nepal and Ethiopia) were semi-formal, some pre-arranged, others ad hoc/opportunistic, with no bespoke events.

Figure1. Example of an H-form



¹ A simple letter-'H' format logical open-ended paper-based participatory MandE method www.planotes.org/documents/plan_03415.PDF

All points made by respondents in face to face meetings were contemporaneously hand written in note form then typed up before being utilised to draft the main text of the report. Some documentation regarding pdf downloads, website hits, Forest Connect membership and a wide range of Forest Connect publications were consulted and drawn upon.

1.3 Input from 'Forest Connect central' IIED and FAO

Forest Connect managers in both IIED and FAO staff members were interviewed. They gave suggestions, opinions and supplied information and suggested contacts. In addition they commented on the rough first draft pointing out factual errors and requesting clarifications and expansions of some points. (PROFOR, the main donor, also made an input.)

2 Knowledge exchange

The Forest Connect alliance's knowledge exchange activities have attracted, inspired and brought together individual practitioners and respected institutions. Important components of the knowledge exchange strategy have been the steady stream of high-quality Forest Connect publications from both IIED and FAO (with healthy Africa (19 per cent) and Asia (22 per cent) percentage of downloads figures) and the 2 international meetings in 2008 and 2010.

2.1 Publications

A pivotal part of Forest Connect's knowledge exchange strategy has been the steady stream of high-quality Forest Connect publications from both IIED and FAO.

Since 2010, the Forest Connect alliance has been completing in-country work and developing ideas for follow-on support, some of which were clearly expressed in "in-country" experience reports. In addition, a 'Facilitator's Toolkit', one of the main outputs related to funding from PROFOR that gave increased direction to Forest Connect's work, was always intended to be Forest Connect's flagship publication (see section 4).

At the first Forest Connect international meeting, in Edinburgh, the toolkit development process began, with experts scoping what might be the most useful for those supporting SMFEs. Representation from international support agencies, more than ten SMFE in-country support institutions, and a number of thematic experts were then involved in defining the different modules that would be included in the toolkit.

Renowned experts in the modules' subjects were then identified and contracted by Forest Connect to write drafts of such guidance – and these draft modules were then tested to varying degrees in each of Forest Connect's partner countries.

Then in the second, Addis Ababa, international meeting, it was decided how to further test and enrich the draft guidance modules - primarily to add case studies which drew on past attempts to utilise the methods, which can be found in the many 'boxes' that permeate the final version of the Forest Connect "Supporting Small Forest Enterprises: A Facilitators Toolkit, which was published in May 2012 (and has been downloaded over 800 times from the IIED website – see table 2.3).

Below are all the publications provided for this Evaluation – not an inventory but a reasonable snapshot of Forest Connect's publications (for more complete list see

Annex 3 - List of Forest Connect publications).

Table 2.1: Sample of publications showing rough proportions of publication type

| Published outputs | Quantity/non-English languages |
|--|--------------------------------|
| National Assessments/Situation analyses | 20 / 2 Spanish; 1 Portuguese |
| Presentations at international events | 12 |
| Opinion/Policy papers/briefs | 8 |
| Forest Connect workshop reports | 7 |
| Country specific technical assistance/training reports | 5 |
| Private sector audience | 5 |
| Peer reviewed papers/articles | 3 |
| Funding proposals/Concept Notes | 3 |
| Methodology/practical guidelines (Toolkit) | 1 / 1 French/ 1Spanish |
| Forest Connect flyer | 1 |

2.2 Citations

One of Forest Connect's communications 'pathways' was citations in articles and journals. Below is a snapshot of a range of publications with citation figures - some of which (marked *) pre-date the formal establishment of Forest Connect, but which form part of the then on-going work on SMFEs. These examples, provided on request by IIED, are not a forensic study nor an inventory, but evidence that there has been an Forest Connect impact with regard to influencing and contributing to the international SMFE discourse.

Table 2.2: Formal citations of some Forest Connect publications

| Publication | # cited |
|---|---------|
| The business side of sustainable forest management: Small and medium forest enterprise development for poverty reduction J Donovan, D Stoian, D Macqueen, S Grouwels - 2006 | 28 |
| *Small and medium forest enterprise in Guyana RS Thomas, DJ Macqueen, Y Hawker, T DeMendonca - 2003 - eldis.org | 20 |
| Supporting small forest enterprises: A X-sectoral review of best practice D Macqueen,2008 | 17 |
| *Small and medium forest enterprise in Brazil, PH May, VG da Vinha, DJ Macqueen - 2003 | 17 |
| Working together: forest-linked small and medium enterprise associations and collective action D Macqueen, S Bose, S Bukula, C Kazoora, S Ousman... - 2006 | 16 |
| *Small and medium forestry enterprise in Uganda. R Auren, K Krassowska - | 15 |

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| Forestry Inspection Division, Kampala and ..., 2004 | |
| Raising Forest Revenues and Employment: Unlocking the Potential of Small and Medium Forest Enterprises in Guyana: Discussion Paper A Mendes, D Macqueen - 2006 - books.google.com | 13 |
| Small-and medium-sized forestry enterprises J Mayers - (ITTO), 2006 | 13 |
| Distinguishing community forest products in the market: industrial demand for a mechanism that brings together forest certification and fair trade D Macqueen - 2008 - books.google.com | 12 |
| Governance towards responsible forest business: Guidance on different types of forest business and the ethics to which they gravitate D Macqueen - 2007 - books.google.com | 11 |
| Forest-based associations as drivers for sustainable development in Uganda. C Kazoora - 2006 - books.google.com | 9 |
| Hidden forestry revealed: Characteristics, constraints and opportunities for small and medium forest enterprises in Ghana P Osei-Tutu, B Nhancale - 2010 - books.google.com | 8 |
| Exploring fair trade timber: A review of issues in current practice, institutional structures and ways forward D Macqueen, A Dufey, B Patel - 2006 - books.google.com | 7 |

2.3 Distribution and downloads

Distribution and dissemination of Forest Connect publications has been both conventional (i.e.) packages of hard copies shipped to capital cities, and, increasingly (proportionately), by soft copy, in the form of pdf downloads.

Table 2.3: Number of pdf downloads in 2012 (and totals) from IIED website.

| | Asia-Pacific | Africa | Mid East | South Amer | Cent Amer | N America | Europe | 2012 | Total |
|-------------------|--------------|--------|----------|------------|-----------|-----------|--------|------|-------|
| Toolkit (English) | 171 | 123 | 4 | 35 | 11 | 130 | 189 | 663 | 663 |
| Toolkit (French) | 7 | 27 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 46 | 57 | 138 | 138 |
| Workshop Report 1 | 27 | 4 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 40 | 25 | 108 | 460 |
| Workshop Report 2 | 66 | 85 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 81 | 76 | 314 | 500 |
| Nepal | 47 | 9 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 19 | 15 | 91 | 91 |
| Mozambique | 0 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 |
| Guyana | 8 | 7 | 0 | 7 | 2 | 51 | 18 | 93 | 93 |
| Guatemala | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 5 | 14 | 14 |
| Ghana | 8 | 19 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 20 | 22 | 71 | 71 |
| Burkina Faso | 9 | 19 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 28 | 34 | 92 | 92 |
| Totals | 344 | 298 | 5 | 51 | 18 | 417 | 441 | 1574 | 2125 |
| % 2012 downloads | 21.9 | 18.9 | 0.3 | 3.2 | 1.1 | 26.5 | 28.0 | | |

2.4 Hard versus soft copy dilemma

It was observed that hard copies of the publications that have made it to the capital cities of Forest Connect partner countries tend to have got stuck there (at least in Kathmandu and Addis Ababa), where soft copy is both the easiest and preferred format. Reflecting on the observation that in neither Nepal nor Ethiopia, not one out-of-capital-city facilitator/supporter of SMFEs had a copy of the Toolkit, and more than half of them hadn't heard of its existence,

there appears to be a capital city blockage. As this isn't because the capital city people don't think that the Toolkit is useful (quite the contrary, all praised it) it is necessary to speculate why distribution/dissemination of the hard copy of the Toolkit isn't happening as well as it should.

One suggestion is that it is part of the current bigger picture hard or soft copy quandary, and in particular the resulting decline of hard copy dissemination systems in the 'south': have capital city people working almost all the time in soft copy, having crossed the e-Rubicon themselves, taken their eye off, or even completely dropped, the ball of hard-copy dissemination to the field? Even though they say themselves that internet capacity falls off a cliff outside the capital and that field people still need/rely on hard copies? The answer to both these questions, at least in Nepal and Ethiopia, is yes. Some lateral thinking solutions need to be found or in the near future the whole idea of hard copy distribution will be open to being challenged as to its effectiveness and its value for money.

Another aspect of this hard/soft copy quandary raised a question of how 'stand-alone' the Toolkit is supposed/designed to be. How many Toolkit readers/users will be based in capital cities (where, ironically, they are more likely to use soft copy), how many outside the capitals?

While it is not 100 per cent stand-alone, between them the two formats it has been published in strike a reasonable balance/compromise between capital city and field use. However when used outside the capital there is significant amount of 'further information' most of which is only available via hyperlinks, which is fine if you have access to the internet – but not fine if you don't and also if the 'further information' is actually vital information to the reader/facilitator. Which depends quite a bit on the background/skill-set/experience of the facilitator...(see section 4.3)

As alluded to above, it was questioned why there was not (also) a CD or DVD based format/version which could have all the background and 'further information' available, as whilst most facilitators based out of capital cities don't have reliable internet access, they usually have access to a pc or laptop. This led to discussions with some respondents about the potential added value of something along the lines of the interactive (i.e. hyperlinked to be a de facto website) CD that was produced by an FAO project (details in Table 4.1).

2.5 International meetings

A major component of Forest Connect's knowledge exchange platform (and also peer to peer learning, see 3.1) has been the two face-to-face bespoke international meetings, the first in Scotland in 2008 and the second in Ethiopia in 2011. All respondents spoken to during this evaluation exercise who were at the international meetings were very positive about them. People enjoyed the exchanges and found the informal, interactive facilitation style to be "really rich and rewarding".

All mentioned the peer-to-peer learning achieved, particularly through the country presentations (and all remembered the competition for the presentations rated by participants to be the best). The format of the meetings also enabled participants to make "real and meaningful" contacts.

"It was a fantastic event in Ethiopia, a good mix of interactive sessions, field trips, and looking to the future."

Participants also mentioned that an increased sense of commonality and purpose emerged at both meetings, but also a sense that the momentum and cohesion built, in terms of communication and rapport, hasn't been kept up as much as it should have been

after/between the international meetings. These events have been, in the main, value-for-money not least for being momentum and alliance building successes.

But some concern regarding value-for-money was voiced with regard to the length of the events, given all the travel and time costs. It was mentioned by several respondents that the Ethiopia meeting in particular should have been longer, with more time given to structured field visits - which is what is planned (a two-day field visit) for the next international meeting which will be in Nepal in February next year (2013).²

Knowledge-exchange lessons

- There is a decline in hard copy dissemination systems in the 'south'. With capital city people working almost all the time in soft copy, they seem to have taken their eye off the ball of hard-copy dissemination to the field. Even though they say themselves that internet capacity falls off a cliff outside the capital and that field people still need/rely on hard copies.
- International events with field trips are too short considering the time spent travelling to and from them.

Knowledge-exchange recommendations

- Find innovative and/or lateral thinking solutions to the hard/soft copy 'watershed'. For example remembering that soft copy doesn't have to be delivered via the internet. Or if the Toolkit can be sent in a fine-tuned soft copy format (perhaps in individual sections/modules) which can then be easily adapted and printed out, or, as in Guyana, converted to PowerPoint presentations.
- If successful in generating funding for Forest Connect v2.0, keep publication production going full time - as it is an important mechanism/'engine' for knowledge exchange as well as peer learning.
- Again if successful in sourcing funding, hold (longer) Forest Connect v2.0 international meetings and more structured, well-planned field trip(s). If fully funded, international meetings - twice a year (one field-orientated/based and one market-orientated/trade event based).
- Remind, prod or even incentivise Forest Connect national hubs to keep their hard copy dissemination systems well-oiled and functioning.

² N.B: This did in fact happen; the evaluator attended (in an independent, unpaid capacity) and observed planned positive outcomes.

3. Communications platforms

Forest Connect's communication platform has initiated and facilitated dialogue between these individuals and institutions. The ning social networking site has helped to create a solid membership platform (of 940+ members) and other Forest Connect websites have also made a contribution. The soft vs. hard copy dilemma has been a growing issue/challenge for Forest Connect's communications and there is a need to ensure that the name 'Forest Connect' is still a good fit.

3.1 Forest Connect social media networking ('ning') website

Figure 2. Forest Connect website banner



At the beginning of 2008, the Forest Connect Alliance started a social networking website using the ning platform: <http://forestconnect.ning.com/> The rationale for deciding to set this up was explained in an article for IIED's PLA Notes (see extract in box below).

Box 1. Thinking behind 'ning' website

The co-managers of the Forest Connect alliance targeted a particular audience – civil society groups, government departments and private sector representative bodies – who acted to support SMFE development. Content was designed to build capacity of those organisations by providing guidance on approaches and tactics to supporting SMFEs, as well as national summaries of SMFE activities. The website was not deemed appropriate for SMFE managers themselves, many of whom do not have Internet access, and whose needs are more context-specific. For SMFEs themselves, more accessible country communication platforms have been developed as described above...

... Launching such websites is relatively easy. Finding the time, budget, and incentives for participating users to contribute and keep them going is more of a challenge!

PLA Notes 59:4 ("Web 2.0 tools to promote social networking for the Forest Connect alliance")

It now has a membership (which had to be 'gated' after initial spamming issues) of over 900. Only 16 per cent of them are in Forest Connect partner countries however, and most (39 per cent) members are in high-income countries. This higher figure for high-income countries is more to do with levels of internet access however, and is a healthy ratio compared to most international development websites. And in any case a high presence in high-income

countries is not a completely negative thing, as part of Forest Connect’s mission is to build international support for SMFEs, and as well as being influential policy and research professionals some high-income country Forest Connect members will have links to markets for SMFE products.

Table 3.1 ‘ning’ site membership breakdown

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Total number of members (September 2012) | 918* |
| Members with country specified | 771 |
| Largest national membership: United States | 79 |
| Largest Forest Connect partner national membership: Ghana | 37 |
| per cent Members in high income countries | 39 per cent |
| per cent Members in medium income countries | 25 per cent |
| per cent Members in low income countries | 36 per cent |
| per cent Members in Forest Connect funded partner countries | 16 per cent |
| *November 12th: 942 members | |

Some issues regarding the ning website:

- members are not ‘auto-informed’ via email of new forum discussions nor of messages sent to them by other members, so there is need to regularly log-in to monitor activity/replies;
- it is not easy to access in very slow download environments;
- the ning company/platform has changed ownership since the Forest Connect site was established;
- it has an academic/NGO feel to it and there is a feeling amongst national level stakeholders that it is outside the ‘comfort zone’ of some of their Forest Connect partners who are entrepreneurs, traders, etc.;
- ‘traffic’ use appears to be on the low side at present: there were only 25 views of the post announcing the publication of the English language version of the new flagship Toolkit and 7 for the post announcing the publication of the French language version: over the almost 5 years the ‘ning’ site has been operational, 70 Forum discussions have been initiated and 45 videos uploaded on it. During the past 100 days there were 150 general ‘public’ postings by members.

Although the ‘ning’ site gave Forest Connect a good start with regard to social networking, from now on putting more effort into improving it for Forest Connect purposes is going to generate ‘diminishing returns’.

3.2 Other Forest Connect websites

To complement the 'ning' website there are several 'conventional' Forest Connect websites or, more usually, pages of or links embedded in other institutions' websites.

Forest Connect 'central' has two websites:

IIED: <http://www.iied.org/forest-connect-linking-small-medium-forest-enterprises-markets-services>

FAO: <http://www.fao.org/forestry/enterprises/forestconnect/en/>

And here are the current Forest Connect national partner sites (i.e. those accessible on 14 November 2012):

Table 3.2 List of other forest Connect Websites

| Country | Website address/link | Comments |
|--------------|---|---|
| Guyana | http://iwokrama.org/forestconnect/products/medicinal.htm | Not stand alone, a page on Iwokrama site (new Forest Connect site hosted by NRDBB planned soon) |
| Nepal* | http://www.ansab.org/Forest Connectn/ | Stand-alone site |
| Burkina Faso | http://www.treeaid.org.uk/our-work/where-we-work/forest-connect-in-burkina-faso/ | Not stand-alone 'dedicated' site) |
| Mali | http://www.aopp-mali.org/spip.php?article48 | Comes across that Forest Connect is an "FAO project" |
| China | http://www.lknet.ac.cn/page-2/index-1.htm | Not stand alone |
| Guatemala | http://www.mipymecomunitaria.com/ | Not stand alone |
| Laos | http://edclaos.com/IForest Connect/ | Website not accessible - 'use warning' |
| Mozambique | http://www.ctv.org.mz/Forest Connect.html | Website/link not working |

Box 2. Forest Connect Nepal website

- Home page links: 'Contact Us', 'Current Projects', 'Team', 'Books and Manuals', 'NTFP Price List', 'NTFPs Network'.
- NTFPs price list (monthly in different markets) an important Forest Connect related output – downloads down though, to less than 100
- Very basic, some links don't work, or under construction, most of those that do are to ANSAB website pages;
- Not easy to find on/via ANSAB website, found it eventually in "Networks" (low hit) page, not in 'useful links';
- All photos just of forests, landscapes, roads (not forest products nor processing nor people); and
- Internal links mostly 'empty': 'photo gallery', 'historic', closed projects etc.
- Referral sites (including Facebook, Feed burner, Wikipedia, Forestry Nepal website, LinkedIn etc.) cover about 12 per cent of the total visitors with Facebook accounting for about 3 per cent.

The various Forest Connect websites are currently not, as a whole, giving a strong nor consistent impression of the alliance's work and outputs. The main problem is the national level websites: the two international level ones are functional and operating as reliable sources of information, downloads, etc. Given that there has been a scarcity of financial resources to date, it was the right thing to do to let the national level websites to be ad hoc and autonomous - in a next (i.e. v2.0) phase if there are more financial resources there should be a concerted effort to systematically support national level websites, especially with regard to enabling them to provide information and resources in local languages to SMFES and those supporting them.

3.3 Partner country to partner country communication

Whilst the 'ning' (and to some extent the national websites) are part of Forest Connect's intelligence and information sharing platform, they are not being used to any meaningful extent for direct 'bilateral' communication (between Forest Connect partner countries) independent of 'Forest Connect Central'.

Partner country respondents reported hardly any bilateral contact at all – some remembered there was some which peaked during the development and testing of the Toolkit or in the immediate run-up to the two international meetings. Most of the few bilateral contacts that do happen are by email, with two countries in Africa also using LinkedIn. Other alternatives in addition to LinkedIn suggested by respondents include Skype (in particular using it for text messaging/sharing links rather than voice calling) Twitter and Facebook. The following is a list of e-communication modes/systems used by the evaluation respondents.

Table 3.3 Mode of electronic communication by Forest Connect partners interviewed

| Mode of e-communication | per cent of respondents who use |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Linked-In | 80 |
| Facebook | 60 |
| Twitter | 40 |
| Forest Connect 'ning' website | 90 |
| Skype | 100 |

3.4 National media coverage

One national level respondent, in Guyana, mentioned that Forest Connect had been given good coverage in their national press, and IIED's records show that since 2010 Forest Connect was mentioned in the national press of 12 countries and included 21 separate stories (in Bangladesh, Belgium, France, Ghana India, Nigeria, Philippines, Switzerland, Tanzania, UK, USA and Zimbabwe).

Communications lessons

- Unless sufficient dedicated resources become available to do a well-designed high quality stand-alone website, is that better to just have a good page (with functioning links) on another partner's website
- Most direct bilateral communication was task generated or orientated (tasks set up by Forest Connect central).
- There is some confusion amongst those who when they first hear about Forest Connect wonder what it actually does - not least because 'Forest Connect' doesn't actually do what it says 'on the tin'. Some respondents stated that their first assumption was that Forest Connect is a pressure group for biodiversity corridors/linking patches of forest together! They were then surprised to be told that Forest Connect is not actually about connecting forests per se to anything, but about connecting people involved in starting, running and supporting forest product based enterprises/businesses. This misunderstanding is probably most acute when Forest Connect is mentioned in the press/media.
- Most respondents said that if it is agreed that the name be changed, the new name should definitely include 'Connect' and desirable to keep 'Forest' in any new name – some suggestions:

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Forest Enterprise Connect | Forest Poverty Connect |
| Forest Product Connect | Forest Sustainability Connect |
| Forest Business Connect | SMFE Connect |
| Forest Market Connect | Forest Trade Connect |
| Forest Community Connect | Forest Connect alliance |

- The last name, 'Forest Connect alliance', is being used already, to denote the informal federation that Forest Connect has become. The international and national entities are all focused on the same objectives and more or less undertaking the same activities but there is no centralisation ethos: all the international and national Forest Connect websites and pages/links look different in terms of branding, design and arrangements - reflecting the scope/flexibility/autonomy that 'Forest Connect central' encourages with country partners.
- The 'ning' site has provided a good foundation for Forest Connect social networking, but there are barriers to parts of the Forest Connect constituency joining it and fully participating: it is not business/'real world' friendly/accessible as it requires users to be proactive in joining and keeping up to date, thereby discouraging groups such as private sector customers/traders in 'southern' slower internet environments, where the popular/default social networks which they are likely to be already members of are: Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn
- Of these, LinkedIn (see Box 3) is the most business friendly and popular, and the one where the largest proportion of groups and individuals of the Forest Connect network and constituency are already members.

Communications recommendations

- It should be investigated if the 'ning' website can be migrated to LinkedIn. (This could lead to a rapid dramatic increase in member numbers and an easier to engage-with format for existing members. LinkedIn will probably be around for another 5 years at least, long enough whilst securing funding for Forest Connect v2.0 and able to be used for Forest Connect v1.2).
- Conduct a consultation process re the name "Forest Connect".
- Partner with other institutions with large, well-resourced communications networks and International organisations with national pages/sites.
- Create additional categories of Forest Connect membership to increase Forest Connect's internet presence and traffic.
- Have organisations who are big players in elements of support to SMEs but forestry not their core business as (light touch) Forest Connect members, e.g.
 - UNIDO <http://www.unido.org/>
 - SNV <http://www.snvworld.org/en>
 - Fair Trade <http://www.flo-cert.net>
 - CERES certification <http://www.ceres-cert.com>
 - Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation <http://www.gatesfoundation.org>
 - COMESA <http://www.comesa.int/>
 - ECOWAS <http://www.ecowas.int/>
 - ASEAN <http://www.asean.org/>

And, conversely, specialist Forestry organisations but supporting SMEs not their core business, e.g.

- ITTO <http://www.itto.int/>
- ICRAF <http://www.worldagroforestrycentre.org/>
- CIFOR <http://www.cifor.org/>
- African Forest Forum www.afforum.org/

Also customers and importers such as SIPPO <http://importers.sippo.ch>

And additional northern peer organisations such as Scandinavian forest owner and producer associations, e.g. <http://www.nordicforestry.org/about.asp>

- Options for increasing the number of hits and return visits to the Forest Connect websites should be investigated, for example Search Engine Optimisation.³

³ Search engine optimization (SEO) is the process of affecting the visibility of a [website](#) or a [web page](#) in a [search engine's search results](#). In general, the earlier (or higher ranked on the search results page), and more frequently a site appears in the search results list, the more visitors it will receive from the search engine's users.

BOX 3. 'LinkedIn' and its potential functionality for Forest Connect

LinkedIn is a [social networking website](#) for people in professional occupations. Launched in 2003, it is mainly used for [professional networking](#). Basic user registration is free.

LinkedIn has more than 175 million registered users in more than 200 countries. 47.6 million monthly unique visitors globally. Asia 16.5 million, Latin America 11.6 million, Africa 4 million. User registration is increasing in all parts of the world, in particular in India, which has over 3 million and has the fastest-growing network of users.

The site is available in [English](#), [French](#), [German](#), [Italian](#), [Portuguese](#), [Spanish](#), [Dutch](#), Swedish, [Romanian](#), [Russian](#), [Turkish](#), [Japanese](#), [Czech](#), [Polish](#), [Korean](#), [Indonesian](#), and [Malay](#).

At first Linked-In was primarily used for recruitment (job hunting etc.). This still happens, but it is now used for a wider range of functions and reasons, some of potential interest and value to Forest Connect:

Peer-peer connecting, communicating and networking

One purpose of the site is to allow registered users to maintain a list of contact details of people with whom they know, have met or have worked with. Users can invite anyone (whether a site user or not) to become a 'connection'. They can then build up a contact network consisting of their direct connections and sometimes the connections of each of their connections. The "gated-access approach" (where contact with any new connection requires either an existing relationship, or the intervention of a contact of theirs) is intended to build trust among Linked-In's users.

Showcasing products, services and finding customers or business partners

- Users can design their own profile in order to showcase their work, products and their experiences. It can then be used to find people and business opportunities recommended by someone in one's contact network.
- Users can now follow different companies and can get notification about new business opportunities.
- Connecting with peers/likeminded individuals or companies.
- Finding new customers/importers/suppliers/trainers etc.

Knowledge transfer

LinkedIn Answers allows users to ask questions for the entire Linked-In membership to come up answers. Questions (and the answers) are usually business-oriented, and the identity of the people asking and answering questions is known. Example question: "What is the market for Essential Oils in the US? What are the importing and distribution channels? Who are the players?"

Groups

LinkedIn also supports the formation of interest groups, which can be stakeholder alliances such as Forest Connect. There are 1.25 million such groups whose membership varies from 2 to 744,662. Groups usually have an interactive discussion area, moderated by the group owners and managers. Groups also keep their members informed through emails with updates to the group, including most-talked-about topics/issues within your professional circles. Groups may be private, accessible to members only or may be open to Internet users in general to read, though they must join in order to post messages.

Communications

Easy real-time link-ups to personal email (e.g. alerts of new Group discussions, publications, events, etc.) and to company websites and other social networking websites/platforms such as Facebook and Twitter.

Sources:

www.linkedin.com/

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LinkedIn>

<http://www.slideshare.net/amover/linkedin-demographics-statistics-july-2011>

4 Peer-to-peer learning

The Forest Connect alliance has made successful efforts to initiate and support peer-to-peer learning. This is predominantly due to having been consultative, innovative and selective. Also due to providing strategic small levels of financial and technical support when required and possible. The strong response from the field was due to the quality of the work being undertaken, particular with regard to the development the Facilitator's Toolkit (but also during the research for the country level SMFE diagnosis studies). Those who participated in the production of the Toolkit were proud to have been involved and of being named/cited as contributors/authors. The Toolkit is of very high quality and has been well-received, but the hardcopy version requires some stand-alone related fine-tuning and the soft copy made more interactive. There is scope to enhance and broaden Forest Connect peer-peer learning via specific interest/topic 'sub-groups'.

4.1 Country level analysis and synopsis documents

The country SMFE situation analyses are considered to be excellent: well-conceived, written and produced to a consistent high quality. They are well thought of and appreciated by experts and facilitators in all the Forest Connect partner countries involved in this evaluation. What was striking and pleasing were the consistently high levels of awareness of and use (in hard copy format) by non-academics and non 'policy professionals', including entrepreneurs and practical NTFP technicians (in fact one entrepreneur who heads-up an association of SMFEs in Nepal stated that he regularly uses data in the country diagnosis paper when lobbying government officials). Not only are they first-rate published products in their own right, but it was reported that the processes of doing research and writing them created a lot of interest, new discussion and debate, leading to new thinking in the countries.

4.2 The 'Toolkit'

The Toolkit, another excellent high quality publication in its own right and which created even more dialogue in its development⁴, has yet to have the same reach and impact - partly because it was only published in English in May this year six months ago, in French two months ago and Spanish one month ago - and the hard copy version is still percolating out into the Forest Connect Alliance's network. PROFOR, the main donor for the Toolkit, are of the view that it is an opportunistic and timely product - they had it peer reviewed by the World Bank's Agribusiness support team, who were impressed with its scope and the succinctness and clarity with which the issues and advice are presented.

4.3 Toolkit Audience / User: types of SMFE support facilitator

There will be three general types of in-the-field 'facilitator' for Forest Connect SMFE support work (and therefore three types of actual and potential users of the Toolkit):

- The first are professional development practitioners who are 'participatory methodology specialists'; multi-purpose/generalist facilitators, experienced in a wide range of community-based development sectors, not necessarily forestry. The most

⁴ Some respondents thought that the best peer-peer learning during Forest Connect's existence occurred during the Toolkit's modules production and editing process - everybody had clear roles and responsibilities, needed to read carefully other peoples' writing and there was the momentum generated by it having a publication deadline. Plus a sense of 'mutualism' and common purpose.

experienced of this genre will be able to give any exercise/process in the Toolkit a good go, even if the step-by-step detailed methodology for that exercise is not in the text.

- The second type of Toolkit users will be those who are full-time business support experts, working day-to-day with and for SMFEs. They will include scientists, experts in their own field of biodiversity conservation, wood science, processing, briquette/coffee/honey/essential oils/etc. production, forest management, logistics, marketing, micro-credit, etc. The point is that they are not, in general, experienced participatory process/event facilitators.
- The third genre is a combination/blend of these two: i.e. experienced been-around-the-block community event facilitators who are also expert, or at least conversant with (enough of), the technical aspects of SMFE support. As both participatory development and SMFE support are in their early days, it is a reasonable assumption to make that this group of potential readers/users are in short supply, and in some countries won't exist at all.

So, taking the first two groups, who is more likely to need and to use, on a regular basis, the ideas/tools in the Toolkit? The generalist facilitator with work and/or clients in other sectors? Or the business support specialists and technical experts who are working day-to-day with SMFEs?

In most countries it is likely to be the technical specialists, and there appears to be a lack of the original 'how to facilitate' materials, i.e. step-by-step facilitation methodologies and processes, in some sections of the text of the Toolkit - gaps which by and large are adequately compensated for in links in the 'further information' sections. But these links are only of use if the Toolkit user has access to them via the internet – which if they are field/non-capital-city based they may struggle to access.

Of course prior research and visits to the capital to download these are options, but it does potentially reduce the day-to-day functionality of the Toolkit for less experienced event and process facilitators, and detracts from the intended immediacy of the 'pocket guidance'. An example is given here:

Toolkit Box 62 (right) describes the example of a cooperative health check methodology, using health check methodology in China which was originally developed in Ethiopia, which of course perfectly embodies the spirit and practice of Forest Connect. But in a

Box 62. Applying a cooperative 'health check methodology' developed by Forest Connect Ethiopia in China

Xiao Zhuang Bamboo Cooperative was established in 2007, building on its predecessor, Xiao Zhuang Food Factory. The cooperative had five initial funding members, with a total registered capital of 70,000 yuan (USD 11,122). By 2009, 132 members had joined the organisation and, with five financial investors, the registered capital increased to 1 million yuan (USD 158,894).

The cooperative's main product is dry bamboo shoots, which account for about 80 per cent of production; their other product line is small, dry bayberries. The Forest Connect partners (Institute of Forest Policy Information and Beijing Forestry University) used a cooperative 'health check methodology', developed by the Ethiopian Forest Connect Team, to review gaps in capacity and identify priorities for developing capacity.

The methodology involved four participatory steps: (i) familiarisation by telling the cooperative story (a chronological account by cooperative members of the origins and aims of the cooperative); (ii) a 3R assessment of the impact of the cooperative on forest rights, responsibilities and revenues; (iii) a SWOT analysis of current performance; and (iv) a review of capacity gaps in five areas, production, processing, marketing, market intelligence and overall management.

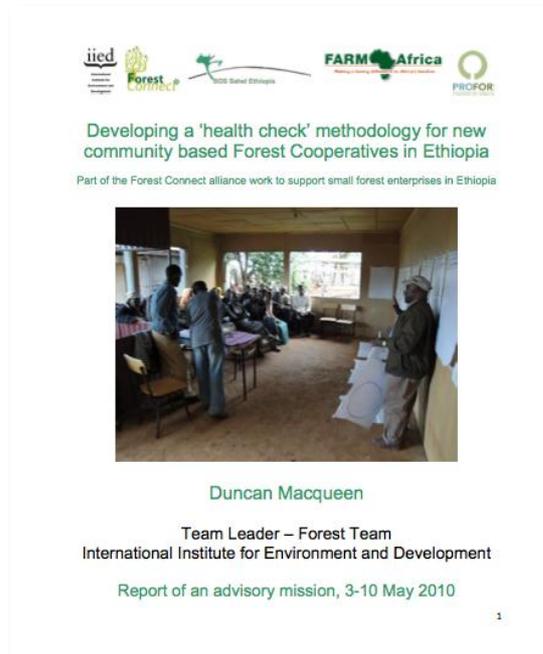
In the familiarisation and 3Rs exercises, many cooperative members thought employment opportunities was an obvious advantage of the cooperative, but that increasing income and village reputation were also an important benefit. In the SWOT analysis, members highlighted weaknesses such as the lack of capital for enlarging the scale of operations, shortages of equipment and management know-how, and difficulties in attracting talent.

Cooperative members identified gaps in capacity regarding knowing how to improve product quality, what processing equipment to opt for, and how to improve market information. The groups struggled with the idea of market research due to their context of currently operating under centralised control. The exercise led the cooperative to prioritise market research to develop new products with an emphasis on technical exchanges.

'Toolkit' is it enough to mention that it was used without providing a detailed step-by-step methodology to the facilitator reading it? Especially a not very experienced participatory facilitator? Is the Toolkit in this instance 'stand-alone' enough?

For instance in the example given, the 'further information' link (which can be found at the bottom of Box 62 in the Toolkit) is to the general FAO Forest Connect page, not to the methodology, which isn't that helpful even if the user has access to the internet. Which is unfortunate because the ideal document with all the required methodological detail exists in the Forest Connect 'archive' (right).

Even the Toolkit soft copy (i.e. pdf) user has quite a bit more work than could have been the case, as the downloaded version of the Toolkit has no hyperlinks, either to the 'further information' sources nor to referenced other parts of the Toolkit.



iiced Forest Connect FARM Africa PROFOR

Developing a 'health check' methodology for new community based Forest Cooperatives in Ethiopia

Part of the Forest Connect alliance work to support small forest enterprises in Ethiopia



Duncan Macqueen

Team Leader – Forest Team
International Institute for Environment and Development

Report of an advisory mission, 3-10 May 2010

1

4.3 Toolkit: future versions / adaptations

Along with the overwhelmingly rave reviews and praise regarding the Toolkit's scope and coverage, observations of the evaluator observed out a few presentational aspects (in all cases identified and/or endorsed by interviewees) of the Toolkit that could do with fine-tuning, and, in some cases, redesign:

- The relative usefulness of a references section (which is there) and a subject etc. index (which isn't there) at the end of a pocket guidance field manual;
- The font size (especially with regard to the hard copy version) is on the small side and whilst fine for reading in an office with good light, is difficult to read whilst in the field/in a vehicle/in bright sun/heavy rain!
- The possibility of it being transformed into primarily being an interactive and hyperlinked (though not necessarily internet-based) 'web-site' format (along the lines of the interactive CD described in Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Contents and salient features of the FAO project “Strengthening Participatory Approaches to Forest Management” interactive CD

| Section | Description |
|--------------------------------|--|
| In the Office | Hyperlinked materials covering the background to, rationale for, and ways to promote organizational change within a middle-manager’s office which support and/or lead to participatory working practices, with additional hyperlinks to relevant parts of other sections (e.g. Methods and Tools). |
| Out of the Office/In the Field | Hyperlinked tips and guidance regarding the design and management of innovative participatory working practices and processes for engaging and collaborating with external stakeholders with additional hyperlinks as above. |
| Methods and Tools | A list of the foundation/core participatory approaches covered during Phase 1 of the mentoring process (with detailed examples and how-to steps) plus some additional useful methods. |
| Topics | An alphabetical list, of international, national and local “hot” topics generated by middle managers, national coordinators and FAO. |
| Tutorials | A growing collection of structured self-learning packages, with readings and scored inter-active tests on the user’s knowledge of the subjects covered. |
| Country specific material | Each with easy to navigate html versions of laws, policies, regulations, guidelines, etc. |
| Case studies | A variety of documented situations which put participatory working practices in various forestry contexts, in the form of referenced papers, short stories, a video and a PowerPoint presentation. |
| Printing | Single pdf (Adobe Acrobat) printable files of most of the documents in the CD. |

Source: Adapted from Table 7 of Evaluation report on FAO project “Strengthening Participatory Approaches to Forest Management in Ghana, Guyana and Uganda (GCP/INT/808/UK). Don Gilmour and Paul Sarfo-Mensah (Rome, May 2005)

Peer-to-peer learning lessons

- Peer-to-peer learning and sharing was very successfully accomplished in the generation of the Toolkit’s contents, which are acknowledged to be of very high quality and comprehensive in their coverage.
- There are some issues with regard ‘utility’ of the way it has been produced (and is being distributed).
- The ‘ning’ website has not been optimally used with regard to peer-to-peer learning, especially with regard to sharing between SMFE support practitioners (as opposed to policy level Forest Connect members).

Peer-to-peer learning recommendations

- Other social networking platforms (such as LinkedIn) should be considered from a purely peer-to-peer learning point of view.⁵
- In the short term the hard-copy version of toolkit should be fine-tuned/edited to be more 'stand-alone'.
- In the medium term, the Toolkit should be continually updated (using the same peer-to-peer learning/sharing methods as in the initial production) and reproduced on interactive internet and non-internet (CD/DVD) based website, along the lines of the FAO interactive CD described in Table 4.1.
- Issue/forest product specific peer-to-peer learning groups should be established to share experiences and advice (probably best done using the LinkedIn group platform) and if resources permit undertake field visits.

⁵ Although there is some uneasiness about using such a 'public' and commercial platform as LinkedIn, in the evaluator's judgement the benefits in terms of reach and accessibility to potentially very large numbers of SMFEs, SMFE supporters and customers outweighs these personal concerns – and in any case Forest Connect should supply guidance on options within LinkedIn etc. to maintain privacy.

5 In-country support processes

In the two countries visited for this evaluation it was evident that more than the activities and successes documented in country level reports had been achieved. In all the countries visited and contacted the Forest Connect Alliance has helped those supporting SMFEs to make significant progress with improving the policy situation and political climate with regard to SMFEs. This is predominantly due to Forest Connect central having been very reactive to requests and suggestions and proactive in providing knowledge in the form of research reports, advocacy support and practical advice to the national hubs, in some cases providing, via the Forest Connect network, communication platform etc., a de facto 'help-desk' service. It was apparent that Forest Connect's pro-SMFE philosophy and practice has been subsumed into and added to that already held by the national hubs. There was the question of how much the national hubs have reached out to/involved new players, especially organisations who are de facto competitors, and what happened to the idea of setting up national level Forest Connect steering committees. These, along with some other external activities, were limited due to the relatively low levels of funding provided? There was, admirably, evidence in both countries visited, of Forest Connect national hubs using their own resources and blending with other funding streams, to implement Forest Connect work plans (although in the process making it difficult to attribute specific activities/successes to Forest Connect!).

5.1 Nepal

As well as the (indirect) increasing levels of success on-the-ground for SMFEs so far in terms of increased trade in forest products and improved forest management in Nepal, the Forest Connect alliance has (more directly) helped its national partner ANSAB (see box 5.2) with the equally important task of raising the profile of SMFEs on national policy and political agenda higher than before.

Box 4. Capacity building and policy arena work in Nepal

A meeting with the Forest Connect resources used to start a national level association of producer groups and community enterprises by expanding the institutional system and capability of an existing institution, the Nepal Herbs and Herbal Products Association (NEHHPA). NEHHPA became a full, active member of the National Chamber of Commerce and submitted 20 recommendations to the National Planning Commission which are under active official consideration with regard to deciding policy and resource allocation for the sector.

In the process, Forest Connect has also helped reduce some of the barriers to the taking-up and scaling-up of locally-controlled/community forestry whether SMFEs have been directly involved or set up or not. Both in situations where locally controlled forestry is starting from scratch, and where it is stalled due to policy or implementation issues, one of the primary reasons is usually that a disproportionate weighting has been given to forest conservation – this is particularly limiting when a conservation bias results in either explicit or de facto 'no (legal) use' of local forests. Forest Connect has been able to challenge that thinking in ways that are very attractive to governments (if not their conservation officials!).

5.2 Ethiopia

With respect to specific impacts of Forest Connect in Ethiopia, whilst all country partner and SMFE support facilitator respondents were forthcoming and all generally positive regarding

Forest Connect, it was difficult for them (particularly the downstream, non-primary partners) to determine, what Forest Connect / IIED / FAO had actually supported, did, or was responsible for, apart from those directly implemented by 'Forest Connect central' (training, methodology piloting etc.). This was due to the relatively small amounts of funding provided by Forest Connect, which were blended with much larger funding streams that the hub staff and field partners were already (more) aware of.

5.3 Hub roles and modus operandi

It appears that those primary partners/hubs involved in the evaluation were successful in identifying and engaging with secondary partners, including business support providers, though the formalities involved and the modus operandi employed and challenges varied (see table 5.1)

Table 5.1: Experiences working with/through the different types of national partner

| Type of SMFE related partner organisation(s) | What makes them good to work with? | What makes them difficult to work with? |
|--|---|---|
| Government | Approvals Reach | Bureaucracy, especially to do with money Not always easy to meet |
| Quasi/decentralised government/parastatal | Strong technically Accessible to meet | Technical managers with no business acumen/experience |
| NGO | Strong ethics Logistics | Lack of business acumen |
| Private sector single entities/company | Business acumen Contacts | Can be nervous re attracting increased regulatory responsibilities/taxes |
| Private sector multiple entity/associations | Wide base, lots of experiences and members to draw upon Large areas covered Relatively easy to scale-up | Sometimes not cohesive Can be mixed bag re levels of experience, acumen, judgement, capacity |

Whilst there were early plans and provision for national Forest Connect “steering / advisory committees” there was no mention of them in any country contacted during this evaluation, nor any evidence produced (e.g. minutes) that they are functioning in any of the Forest Connect partner countries. These were meant to have had all key stakeholders in a country involved in the Forest Connect national hub. For example, if an NGO was organizing the hub, they would have the government, private sector, research, in such a committee. It was not clear why these have not been set up, but it seems that in a less-funding-than expected situation this was one of the first activities to be de-prioritised. It may also be linked to a natural inclination to minimise the number of those deciding how Forest Connect resources were allocated, especially when there was less than expected. It may also be connected to

the equally natural inclination for hubs not to create a platform where they could potentially lose some of their comparative (and competitive) advantages.

Box 5. ANSAB as an example of a Forest Connect hub

- A very well organised and respected NGO. Forest Connect's identification/presence/branding was subsumed into ANSAB's – fine for both – less external expectations, explanations, essentially a joint programme but to external world/clients ANSAB's day to day work.
- ANSAB more of a leader than a peer in the Forest Connect Alliance (Forest Connect has been a good showcase for ANSAB – also source of ideas, discussions).
- ANSAB perfectly embodies Forest Connect at national level: evidence of attracting/identifying, engaging, advising, building capacity, mentoring with Intermediaries. NTFPs now strongly represented in chambers of commerce.
- Technical and business and political lobbying advice – also policy development work and lobbying on behalf of – as think tank.
- Also a source - 'spawning', incubating and cultivating entrepreneurs who have become SMFE intermediaries. This has many benefits for Forest Connect: – coming to workshops etc. – probably an advantage that they see ANSAB as having helped them, as happy to give up time (entrepreneurs, like most in private sector, see their time as being very valuable, and they don't get paid for attending workshops like government and NGO staff do).
- One question/issue? Of those who engage with Forest Connect-supported work in Nepal, do most have a previous relationship with ANSAB? Are new (non-ANSAB related) players emerging and engaging..?

All national partners consulted felt that Forest Connect's formal reporting requirements and procedures were reasonable and proportionate. In addition it was reported, and in some cases evident from documentation, that there was a very good level of accessibility, a quick return of emails from someone from 'Forest Connect Central' who was able to make quick decisions (see International Governance, section 6).

It is apparent that the overriding philosophy at 'Forest Connect Central' was "Whatever Works": i.e. whatever approach best gets results in a particular country/situation. Promoting Forest Connect's brand and 'identity' was not the priority, not an objective in itself. Successfully encouraging country partner / hubs to take ownership of Forest Connect and act independently of the other countries, for example with regard to the design of the initial diagnostic studies, what logos to use when publishing etc. This was all well received by Farm Africa in Ethiopia and in Nepal by ANSAB:

In-country support lessons

- Respondents said the optimal secondary national partners are:
 - democratic, ethical private sector forest produce businesses umbrella organisation (e.g. agriculture producer association)

- national and regional level chambers of commerce
- decentralised technical para-statal
- The decision to try and work through in-country facilitators so as to support the capacity of organisation with existing in-country reach and get them to learn from one another, rather than relying on flying in experts from FAO / IIED, was the correct one.
- Most of Forest Connect's published materials, with some modification, could be used for training college and university courses, i.e. to train future professionals / service providers – general SME / business support material in forestry curricula, more specific, detailed SMFE technicalities in business studies/enterprise support curricula.
 - Single issue/product groups/networks have started to informally emerge.
 - Subjects/issues/products include:
 - Experiences legalising / formalising (moving from illegal to legal):
 - Biomass energy (including firewood, charcoal, briquettes)
 - Locally controlled timber production (Pit sawing/chainsaw logging)
 - Hunting
 - Tourism (e.g. forest hotels (see cover photo), trophy hunting, cultural and educational trails)
 - Fires
 - Itinerant / non-local illegal cutters
 - Illegal settlers
 - Domesticated tree crops
 - Forest / tree supported / alongside 'mainstream' agriculture
 - Specific products, such as honey, shea in West Africa, Irvingia and Gnetum in W and Central Africa, etc. Ginger, Vanilla, Pepper
- Guatemala and Burkina Faso have found that international (and national) trade fairs / conventions / expos are very valuable for increasing exposure of Facilitators and SMFEs themselves to markets, customers, importers, exporters, competitors, etc. AND to recruit new members.

In-country support recommendations

- Continue working through in country facilitators but there should be incentives, measures built in to enhance changes of such support not being overly 'individualised'.
- A significant proportion (say 50 per cent) of country level work programme should involve 'reach out', training others, expanding the size of the professional base re SMFE support as well as and as much as the knowledge base.
- Over time initiate and develop a topic-based hub structure with Forest Connect v2.0 to be based more around multi-country single-interest sub-groups, sharing

innovation/experiences about a single topic, or product, from one place to another – with structured field trips and e-forum discussions. These would be particularly well-suited to those intermediaries and SMFEs only serving domestic/national/cross-border markets, therefore not competitors in international markets (although of course there will also be merit in those serving same markets sharing and working together). For instance a Forest Connect African Charcoal week – with a 2/3 country tour of Malawi (where they trying to ‘normalise’ charcoal) or other African countries dealing/not dealing with charcoal issues. Or a briquette technical, marketing and advertising e-forum.

- Where possible, Forest Connect’s published materials should be modified for use in training colleges and universities: SME stuff in forestry curricula, SMFE in business / enterprise curricula.
- Encourage Forest Connect national hubs to try to work directly with more democratic producer groups and less NGOs and government departments.
- Provide resources and technical support where required for ad hoc neighbouring country exchange visits - with structure and report formats, regional, smaller scale meetings and bilateral exchange visits (perhaps via a challenge fund system)
- Forest Connect should book a display/stand where Forest Connect partner countries could attend and display products, and meet peers (and if possible have Steering Committee meetings, international workshops as side or before/after events) at major forest product trade vents/expos, e.g.
 - Paperworld <http://paperworld.messefrankfurt.com>
 - Api Expo <http://www.apitradeafrica.org>
 - International Arts and Crafts Fair, Ouagadougou (SIAO) (getting stronger and more international every year) <http://www.siao.bf/>
- Where national hubs are blending different funding streams (including Forest Connect finance) they should develop and use innovative e-based expenditure tracking and recording procedures and reports (e.g. different colours and/or sizes of fonts in spreadsheets, reports etc.).

6 International governance arrangements

The Forest Connect alliance’s governance arrangements are well-structured, proportionate and representative but under-used: well-intentioned but under-resourced. They have been reactive more than proactive, with a lot of trust in key personnel of lead partners, and have therefore been operating under-capacity.

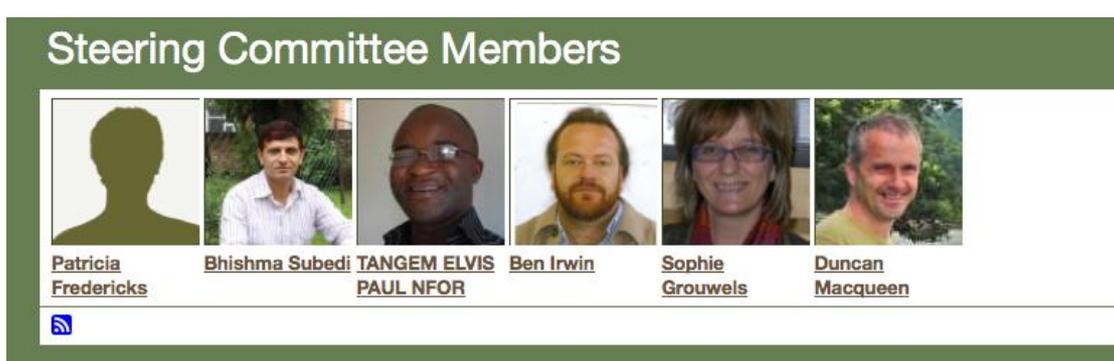
6.1 Steering Committee

Forest Connect’s governance arrangements are nominally primarily comprised of a Steering Committee, with individuals selected by peers on a notionally regional representational basis.

Table 6.1 Forest Connect Steering Committee members past and present

| Present: 2011-onwards | Past: 2008-2011 |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Duncan Macqueen (IIED) | Duncan Macqueen (IIED) |
| Sophie Grouwels (FAO) | Sophie Grouwels (FAO) |
| Ben Irwin (ex Farm Africa Ethiopia) | Leena Chakrabarti (Community Enterprise Forum International – India) |
| Elvis Tangem (TreeAid Burkina Faso) | Daphne Hewitt (Rainforest Alliance – Central America) |
| Bhishma Subedi (ANSAB Nepal) | Mario Rodriguez (INAB Guatemala) |
| Patricia Fredericks (NRDDB Guyana) | Yarri Kamara (Independent Burkina Faso) |
| Francisco Lobos (Tikonel Guatemala) | Ram Subedi (ANSAB Nepal) |

Figure 3. Website photos of Steering Committee members



This Steering Committee, selected at the Addis Ababa International meeting, has met very infrequently. There have been a few ad hoc email discussions/consultations but no face-to-face nor virtual meetings, at least not since the second international meeting in Ethiopia.

6.2 Current ‘troika’

Essentially, the picture gained regarding the governance of Forest Connect is a troika type arrangement – with a triumvirate composed of i) IIED / Duncan Macqueen, ii) FAO / Sophie

Grouwels and iii) the Steering Committee (which itself has Duncan Macqueen / IIED and Sophie Grouwels / FAO as members). This is not really a criticism, just an observation based on feedback. It probably had to be so in order to be flexible and opportunistic enough to make the most of the current limited and unpredictable nature of Forest Connect's funding streams. It reflects the reality of working in an ad hoc funded Alliance. With no dedicated mid or long-term funding nor associated budgeting, there can be no meaningful strategic planning of the work of the Alliance, which is a main task of a Steering Committee. If no strategic activity decisions can realistically be made then that only leaves (abstract) policy decisions, so not really worth all the logistical effort and taking up members' time. So in the meantime it (temporarily) functions more like an ad hoc Technical Advisory Committee than a Steering Committee.

The Steering Committee's current functionality and power issues aside, the Forest Connect Alliance's decision making processes have been deemed by stakeholders to be transparent, and decisions to be fair, prompt and wise – with one respondent going so far as saying that of all the international programmes she has been involved with, "Forest Connect is the only programme with that level of "intelligent flexibility". And all national partner respondents were content with both the amount and the blend of financial, technical, logistical and political inputs they received from Forest Connect.

International governance lessons

- The two lead figures at IIED and FAO are well-respected in and beyond their organisations and both are at liberty (within advisory guidelines set by the Steering Committee) to make day-to-day decisions.
- The high level of flexibility works well if, as in Forest Connect's case, the lead figures are trusted and have big trust in each other.
- The two lead figures are respected by Steering Committee members for attempting to not go into (unnecessary) detail about everything.
- Both IIED and FAO⁶ have shared the leadership of Forest Connect and used their complementary strengths to good effect (e.g. Duncan Macqueen / IIED have led on most of the proposals while Sophie Grouwels / FAO's main contributions have been contracts re. networks and partnerships) and are both comfortable with funding going to only one entity (e.g. PROFOR to IIED). No problems re adjusting budget /who actually holds the Forest Connect resources

International governance recommendations

- If more funding is secured, the Steering Committee should be given a stronger mandate and be extended/increased by:
 - inviting entrepreneurial champions with bright ideas (from outside NGO world)
 - seeking outside experts, private sector experts, government representatives, high political, e.g. regional economic cooperation organisations
 - considering inviting foundations, trade organisations/unions

⁶ A post-script to this Governance section: The recently created FAO Forest and Farm Facility, with very similar ethos and mandate to Forest Connect, is establishing a new Steering Committee: the pros and cons of amalgamating the two governance structures into one should be examined.

7 Future plans: Forest Connect v2.0

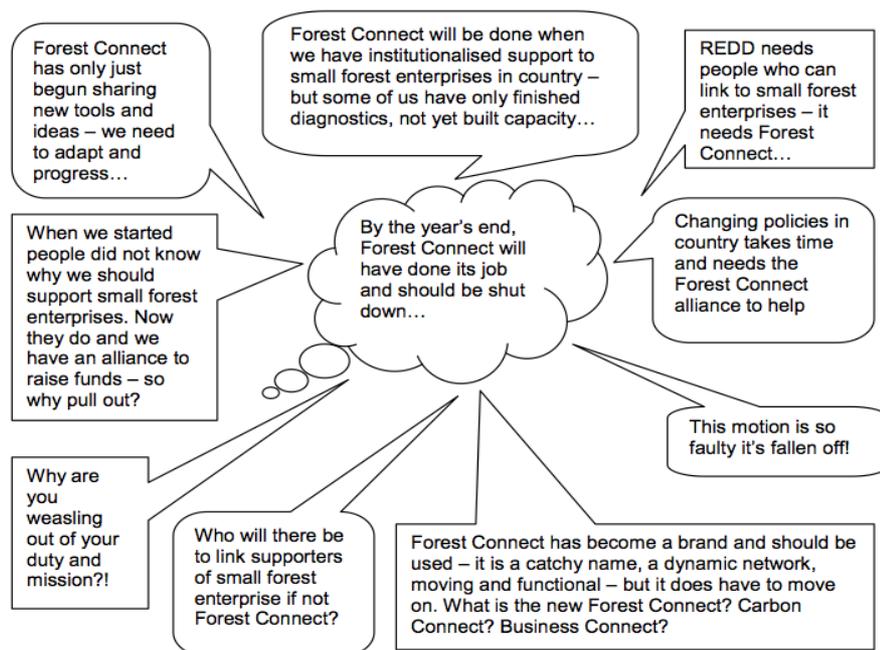
The evidence presented during this evaluation, both written and oral, gives an overwhelming impression of Forest Connect being both a going and (potentially) a growing concern. The Forest Connect alliance has well above-the-norm levels of individual and institutional goodwill, a healthy self-critical ethos, appropriate-level national presence and influence, a strong emphasis on proactively seeking and sharing best practice, proportionate (if highly personalised) governance structures - and, for the length of time it has formally been operating, a very impressive list of publications and on-the-ground successes with regard to incubating new and supporting existing SMFEs.

As an evaluation respondent stated, it is early, early days for SMFEs, especially the 'S' ones, so there should, indeed, there must, be a future for an entity that is trying to do what the Forest Connect alliance has been doing. With the impressive 'reach' (array of networks and partners) it has already established, and its strong technical platform, it is difficult to see what other organisation, or even organisations, could do a better job than the Forest Connect alliance. Even from partners who were expecting much more in terms of resources from Forest Connect there were no dissenting voices – in fact the opposite, a real, unanimous desire to see Forest Connect forge ahead, using the strong platform it has established to scale up and make important positive contributions to many of the international, national and local challenges relating to forests.

7.1 Overall to-date appraisal

With limited and 'ad hoc' resources the Forest Connect Alliance has helped raised the international profile of, and issues facing, SMFEs. Both globally, and in several countries it has improved the technical assistance situation and policy environment surrounding SMFEs. But on both counts, as some of the participants at the second international meeting stated (below), the work has just begun. During the evaluation the hypotheses that Forest Connect should end was put to respondents several times, with unanimous rejection.

Figure 4. Summary of points made in debate on the future of Forest Connect in Addis Ababa



Motion rejected unanimously!

There are strong messages that come from Forest Connect's experiences so far: the completely blended combination of poverty reduction, development of microfinance, improving security of tenure, livelihood gains, new enterprise and trade opportunities, private sector enlargement, reduced government staffing (required for forest guarding); which are compelling with respect to carrying on, moving on to Forest Connect v2.0!

As well as secure tenure being a critical issue for SMFEs, it also is for REDD+, this being just one of the dotted-line connections between Forest Connect and REDD+.⁷ If REDD+ is going to happen, initiatives such as Forest Connect will be required to provide a counterbalance, give support to on the ground activities which will deliver all the benefits that REDD+ intends to deliver, especially with regard to REDD's second D (reducing forest degradation) which is not getting enough attention, and where SMFEs are working more than with the first D (deforestation).

In this regard Forest Connect inputs to the 'Investing in Locally Controlled Forestry (ILCF) framework'⁸ are relevant, adding three other ingredients to secure commercial tenure; namely (ii) enterprise-oriented organisation; (iii) business capacity and (iv) fair asset investment deals.

It is the summation of these four ingredients (rather than tenure alone) that REDD+ has to invest in if it is to transform landscapes and livelihoods towards poverty reduction and avoided deforestation. While this framework could usefully direct REDD+ funds - it also has the potential to go beyond REDD+ to embrace all development funding to the forests sector.

7.2 Attracting core and full funding

SMFEs have been given an overdue focus and fillip by Forest Connect and it must be hoped that this will lead to donors and other influential organisations giving it higher priority after focusing on REDD+ (and to a lesser extent on FLEGT) for the past few years. In addition there is now a drift away from funding projects which rely on generating (projected, if not hypothetical) REDD+ related carbon related finance: SMFEs, immediately dealing with real products for real markets in real time whilst simultaneously reducing GHG emissions can 'fill the gap'.

Forest Connect has general messages / themes that donors usually like to hear – for example it is:

- not technologically difficult;
- addressing market failures;
- promoting ethical trade;
- (in a lot of cases) implementing existing laws: not needing a lot of, if any new legislation compared to other sectors as existing laws and policies adequate on paper but not being implemented/enforced;

⁷ Ironically, given the pivotal importance of clear and secure tenure to make REDD workable, the prospect (or at least the sales pitch) of REDD has made some governments LESS likely to implement reforms to formally recognise community and customary land etc. rights – not wanting to take risk of 'signing away'/losing future sources of revenue – this has implications for the promotion, security and sustainability of SMFEs.

⁸ The ILCF framework has been developed by rights-holders groups, namely the International Alliance for Family Forestry (IFFA), the Global Alliance for Community Forestry (GACF) and the International Alliance of Indigenous and Tribal Peoples of the Tropical Forests (IAITPTF) – who assertively call themselves the 'G3' on account of their control of roughly 25 per cent of the world's forests.

- generating brand new tax revenues;
- reducing government personnel (as less forest patrols);
- creating new opportunities for CSOs/NGOs/private sector entities as intermediaries/ service deliverers;
- enhancing local rights and tenure;
- pro business;
- pro enterprise;
- backed by strong numbers / metrics;
- cross-society and cross-party political positive consensus;
- adding to economic growth;
- improving stewardship of international / global public goods, with positive national and local impacts;

It is baffling to the evaluator that an initiative which ticks so many donors' boxes has failed to fully click, be more on donors' radar - possibly due to:

- (erroneous) belief that funding SMEs in general is inherently risky;
- not realising how large and costly SME support has to be - the transaction cost of lining up secure commercial rights, functional enterprise-oriented organisations, business capacity development at a scale that rewards asset investors is relatively big – not a dabbling poorly funded alliance type activity
- Forest Connect philosophy being too much about markets (albeit fair and ethical ones) for some community development funding streams
- Forest Connect philosophy not appearing to be 'hard headed' enough business-wise, and related to that, investment opportunities not large enough - for conventional trade and enterprise funding streams
- not being aware that people tend to move from Forests/forest products on to other things – poverty reduction/income generating 'gateway', not necessarily increasing demands/pressures on forests...
- not realising how 'cross-cutting it is - that so many parts of society in some way potentially involved/connected with SMFE activities, albeit in differing ways (affecting individuals and families in urban elites as well as poor urban and rural: poor people living in or near forests, urban and rural elites involved in the timber trade)

In order to improve chances of attracting core donor funding, Forest Connect v2.0 will require national partners to have better systems in place to capture evidence / stats / metrics / numbers such as:

- Actual improvements in forest condition(s) plus downstream benefits (economic activity, tax returns, etc.);

- SMFE survival rates, and positives of successful SMFEs vastly outweighing (in terms of tax returns etc.) negatives of when SMFEs don't deliver what is expected of them;
- Interest/communications/take-up: site hits, page hits, number of downloads;
- Data/evidence of beneficial links of increasing/improving/supporting SMFEs to climate change (adaptation and mitigation) - also forest governance – and of course trade

One possible reason why Forest Connect v1.0 didn't attract core funding is that it is so well blended, so well inter-connected, so complex, so multi-faceted and multi-pronged that it comes across as not 'specific' enough regarding donors' headline themes/priorities. And / or just it all somehow goes over the head of most donors! If true, the pitch for Forest Connect v2.0, should utilise the experiences, evidence / figures of Forest Connect v1.0, so not a pilot proposal, but immediately shelf / shovel ready to scale up and deliver where others can't reach!

In rural areas, agricultural and forest enterprises remain the two main options for generating income. If it is accepted that meaningful or sustainable poverty reduction doesn't occur through large-scale industrial forestry, prospects are much brighter for small forest-farm enterprises in where income accrues and is reinvested locally, business capacity is strengthened, social organisation are built and cultural norms are respected.

The challenge is to convince government actors to cede commercial control to local people within an enabling environment that helps to build capacity and ensure sustainability. Some donors are increasingly looking at the private sector to be aid delivery partners, and in order to achieve scale, reduce transaction activities and costs, they are looking at large, often multinational, entities – who tend to either be active players or supporters of large-scale, 'non-local' forestry. Forest Connect and its associates in the framework of 'Investing in locally controlled forestry' (ILCF) offers such donors a feasible alternative private sector partner / pathway – one which is more likely to produce sustainable on the ground benefits and locally-sensitive and appropriate practices than via multinationals.

Whether it be with regard to management of existing forests, plantation establishment or agribusiness development, the indigenous private sector has the potential to tick more sustainable development boxes than through implementation by multinational agribusinesses. Often local private sector know a better way to do but it is generally difficult for donors to find an entry point, and/or do it at the required / desired scale: Forest Connect has the proven potential to be such an entry point / pathway / partner, a solution to many donors' private sector quandaries.

7.3 Possible changes and new features for Forest Connect 2.0

There has been disproportionate interest during Forest Connect v1.0 in NTFPs (as opposed to timber), with too much focus and comfort-zone thinking with respect to NTFPs by Forest Connect's national hubs. Whilst in many cases this was caused by prohibitive national policies and laws (and in some cases the undue influence of Big Conservation organisations) this was remarked upon by several respondents as being a weakness and something to be addressed in Forest Connect 2.0.

Community PES, including carbon, is another area where partners and observers felt more could be done / promoted by the Forest Connect Alliance. However it was also remarked that as it is very, very early days with regard to SMFE development in general, it is not surprising that the first products in any situation are the simplest ones, the lowest hanging fruit

(sometimes literally!). Linking up with voluntary carbon market and community development focused and benefit sharing carbon/PES standards such as Plan Vivo <http://www.planvivo.org/> should be a priority for Forest Connect v2.0.

There should be more efforts made to work with other sectors (e.g. energy, agriculture, fisheries, health) which have SMEs and which interface/relate to trees. Connections to farming SMEs should be the easiest, with lots in common, for mentoring etc., involving farmers with more experiences of product value chains, of dealing with market(s) and customers, logistics, storage, etc. The forest/farm dichotomy is a false one, a 'construct', and it was mentioned several times by respondents that SMEs and those supporting them have a lot that they can learn from their neighbouring farmers and support organisations. Collaboration/seeking synergies (both practical and governance) with the new Forest Farm Facility hosted by FAO <http://www.fao.org/partnerships/forest-farm-facility/en/> should be a priority at 'Forest Connect Central'.

The universal praise for the high technical quality of the Forest Connect Alliance's publications, in particular the Facilitators Toolkit, was accompanied by some concerns about languages, practicalities and soft/hard copy issues. Some suggested improvements, fine-tuning and adding value suggestions, (which are covered in section 4) have already been suggested for Forest Connect v2.0 to take on. Plus there is a case to be made for there to be 'non-stop publishing; in Forest Connect v2.0, keeping the knowledge exchange momentum going, requiring partner countries to communicate with each other on a regular basis.

Future lessons

- That some donors have not been able to see or have faith in links between what Forest Connect has been doing and their own intentions to work more with the private sector.
- That some donors' interpretation of working with the private sector with regard to forests generally/only means working with/through international companies/agribusinesses.
- As some thought that the time when the best peer-peer learning had occurred was during the Toolkit's production and editing process, i.e. that having strong thematic content to alliance interactions / meetings greatly improves exchanges and learning – this could easily be revived, with the aim being to continually update/improve/add to the Toolkit in the form of a website/interactive CD/DVD version of the Toolkit. One advantage of this will be that videos and PowerPoint presentations will be able to be an integral part of it.

Future recommendations

- Generate and publish figures which show that Forest Connect is a viable alternative to international companies for those donors wishing to engage more with the private sector in their forestry investment/development programmes
- Continually update/improve/add to the Toolkit but primarily in a new format of an interactive CD/DVD/website version of the Toolkit, with videos and powerpoint presentations being an integral part of it.
- Develop more specific enterprise guidance for the big value sectors of biomass energy / tree supported agriculture / timber / carbon

Annex 1 - Comments on adapted table of OVIs agreed with PROFOR

| Concrete outputs | Expected impacts | Objectively verifiable Indicator (OVI) | Means of verification | Evaluator's observations |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| Short term – within the life of the project | | | | |
| Knowledge exchange at workshops and through communication platform to share tactics and progress in supporting SMFEs in 13 countries and plan testing of guidance materials | Stronger international network of SMFE support practitioners with clearer vision for how to do their work | Written commitment to continue to work together as an alliance to pursue SMFE support and share tactics with each other on how to best do this | Workshop reports | Appears to have been achieved (in all countries consulted re this evaluation) |
| Framework for designing, enriching and testing of guidance modules agreed on SMFE support through contractual plans in six partner countries | Systematic, yet locally relevant testing of the SMFE support guidance modules | Captured examples that illustrate and give contextual depth and tips or tactics to guidance modules on SMFE support | At least 10 guidance modules and 12 new boxed examples of country specific SMFE support inserted into newly revised guidance modules | Achieved – toolkit with 14 well-researched and tested modules |
| Active in-country support to small forest enterprises including experimentation using specific guidance modules for forest enterprise support in at least six countries | Strengthened capacity and experience in SMFE support coupled with actual examples of flourishing SMFEs as a result | Credible accounts of improvements to SMFE-based livelihoods through facilitated support of Forest Connect | National SMFE support stories documenting the Forest Connect approach and outcomes from at least four countries. | Achieved in the two countries visited (Nepal and Ethiopia) |
| Promotion and improved accessibility of materials in electronic and | Country contact points aware of the content of guidance materials and | Emergence of strong institutional facilitators of SMFE support in | Downloads and publication statistics for guidance modules | Institutional capacity for and interest for this in place in 1 of countries |

| | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|---|
| published forms on the need for, and how to go about, supporting small forest enterprises | other documents which have been widely distributed to support agencies of SMFEs | and beyond partner countries | available for hard and electronic formats – plus independent reports | visited, Nepal - but as yet no systematic capture of download data etc. |
| Medium term – 3-5 years after the commencement of the second phase | | | | |
| | Guidance materials on SMFE support become a well established resource in international activities | Institutions make reference to SMFE support in official policies | Public reports of forest authorities and NGOs | On track internationally (see citation and media figures) Beginning to happen in both countries visited |
| | Financial investments newly programmed and dispersed into specific SMFE support activities in countries beyond the initial 6 partner countries | Plans and programmes in government and NGO budgets devoted to SMFE support | Detailed workplans of government and NGO activities | Too early to say for most countries but already happening in Ethiopia |
| | SMFE subsectors and financial and business service sectors show greater signs of organization and sustainability | Industrial sub-sector reports show increasing returns from newly formalized SMFE | Independent market information | On track in both countries visited |
| Long term 5-10 years after the commencement of the second phase | | | | |
| | Gradual formalization and revenue capture from emerging legal SMFE sectors | Formal registration of SMFEs and representative associations | National registers of business and business associations | On track, in already fact started, in Nepal |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|--|
| | Political voice of SMFEs helps to secure increasing areas of forest resource for SMFEs | Public campaigns for resource access and policy change in favour of SMFEs | Independent news coverage and reports by watchdog NGOs | On track, in already fact started, in Ethiopia |
| | Secure well-organised SMFEs increase local incentives to conserve forest resource and provide contact points for engagement on climate change and REDD | SMFEs incorporated into plans on avoided deforestation and sustainable forest management | National plans for REDD and specific financial mechanisms include SMFE associations | On track and pilots in place in both Nepal and Ethiopia but requires more lateral thinking, e.g. beyond REDD – Carbon +PES schemes |
| | More diverse income generating options help forest-dependent communities to improve livelihoods and adapt to social, economic and climatic. | Resilient local economies adapt to climate change without loss of forest cover | Poverty statistics and indices of deforestation / ecosystem services | On track in both Ethiopia and Nepal |

Annex 2 - List of interviewees

ANSAB HQ staff, Kathmandu, Nepal

Ben Irwin, KPMG, ex farm Africa. FOREST CONNECT Steering Committee member

Charcoal briquettes entrepreneur, Kathmandu, Nepal

Coffee and Honey SME members, Bale, Ethiopia

Diji Chandrasekharan Behr, PROFOR/World Bank

Elvis Tangem, FOREST CONNECT national hub (Tree Aid) Burkina Faso and FOREST CONNECT Steering Committee member

Eucalyptus leave collectors group members, Bale, Ethiopia

FAO and Farm Forest Facility officials, Rome, Italy

Farm Africa HQ and fieldstaff, Ethiopia

Forest Enterprise para-statal officials (HQ and regional), Ethiopia

Forestry sector independent expert, Kathmandu, Nepal

IIED Forest Connect staff

NTFP/herbs association/Chamber of Commerce, Kathmandu, Nepal

NTFP/paper entrepreneur, Kathmandu, Nepal

Pekka Jamsen, AgriCord, Brussels

SNV Ethiopia

Vanda Radzik, FOREST CONNECT national hub, Guyana

Womens credit union members, Bale, Ethiopia

Yam Malla, IUCN Country Representative, Nepal

Annex 3 - List of Forest Connect publications

(in alphabetical order by first-named author, then date)

Pre-formalization of Forest Connect alliance

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Annex 4 - ToRs for the evaluation

Objective of the evaluation

“To assess (i) the success of Forest Connect in supporting small forest enterprises through international communication platforms, in-country work, learning events, toolkit development and testing and communication / advocacy work and (ii) to distil lessons about the key factors that have led to success (or failure) in order to inform best practice in the follow-on”.

Tasks for the evaluation

Assess the outputs and impact delivered by Forest Connect – in terms of:

- Knowledge exchange at learning events and through the international communication platform
- Modular guidance design, enrichment and testing
- Active in-country support to small forest enterprises including experimentation using specific guidance modules
- Promotion and improved accessibility of materials in electronic and published forms on the need for and how to go about supporting small forest enterprises

Specifically the evaluation will assess:

- The international communication platform
- The background documents and toolkit on supporting small forest enterprises
- In-country support activities (through review of documents and phone interviews in at least six countries plus field visits to 2-3 countries)
- The additional communication and outreach efforts of the Forest Connect alliance.

Assess the process through which the Forest Connect alliance delivered those outputs and impacts. Specifically the evaluation will assess the timeliness, effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy and appropriateness of:

- the established international **institutional governance** arrangements,
- the specific international institutional **work plans and activities**,
- the **in-country processes** including issues of ownership, facilitation and capacity building
- the **knowledge exchange activities**
- the **communication activities**, including engagements with other international processes and events
- the evolution of **plans to continue the Forest Connect initiative**

Distil from the above a set of lessons about how to build on and improve the Forest Connect initiative in both content and process terms. Specifically the evaluation will:

- Identify **lessons on alliance management**: how best to structure organisational governance arrangements for facilitating and managing initiatives of this sort.
- Identify **lessons on strengthening active membership within the Forest Connect alliance**: what key factors might be decisive in this regard.
- Identify **lessons on peer-to-peer learning**: how best to build the capacity of in-country individuals and institutions that support small forest enterprises
- Identify **lessons on focus**: how best to direct limited resource for small forest enterprise support into sectors that are likely to have the greatest impacts on improved livelihoods and sustainable forest management
- Identify **lessons on best practice and innovation**: how best to identify, develop, encourage and/or implement best-practice approaches to small forest enterprise support
- Identify **lessons on communications**: how best to develop mechanisms for engaging with a wide range of stakeholders and for influencing policy making processes towards support for small forest enterprises
- Identify **lessons on contributing to long-term impact: how best to ensure the sustainability** of partnerships developed by such an initiative.

Make recommendations based on the final evaluation

Based upon the assessment of the outputs and impacts, process and lessons learned, make recommendations as appropriate, with a particular focus on:

- Opportunities, constraints and recommendations for any further development after the end of 2012. This is a key component of the evaluation and should address the core vision and objective of the alliance, what the need is for such an alliance, how best to select and engage national facilitation institutions, what would be the minimum expectations for any initiative to go forward, and what the main programmatic elements might be.

Inception report

An inception report outlining how the consultants plan to address the TOR, the methodologies they plan to use, a work plan and a timetable will be produced within **four weeks of signing the contract**. It will then be discussed with and agreed by IIED.

Evaluation methodologies

- Undertake a thorough analysis of all the project documents and communication products. This will include the contracts, work plans agreed between IIED and FAO and in country teams, and all progress reports, diagnostic reports, analysis documents, reports on meetings and communications outputs;
- Review progress reports submitted by the IIED to PROFOR; and
- Carry out visits to 2-3 Forest Connect hubs (Ethiopia, Guatemala, Ghana, Nepal, Burkina Faso, Mali) to meet with in-country teams and key stakeholders.
- Meet with co-management teams at their offices in Rome, (FAO), and Edinburgh (IIED).

- Carry out interviews with key in-country contacts in at least six countries beyond the 2-3 chosen for field visits

Qualifications / experience of the evaluation/review team

Essential knowledge, skills and experience:

- **Postgraduate qualification** in relevant discipline such as natural resource science, business studies or environmental economics
- Sound experience of carrying out **evaluations**
- First-hand experience in **working in developing countries** in Africa, Latin America and Asia
- Knowledge of **family, community and/or Indigenous Peoples'** forest enterprises and the challenges they face in conducting business
- Excellent understanding of the **practicalities of small forest enterprise support** at local, national and international levels
- Knowledge and understanding of the challenges to **investment in the forest sector**
- An understanding of how **lessons sharing and communication** from local to international levels can help build capacity
- An understanding of **forest governance** and the main national and international policy processes that define the enabling environment for small forest enterprises
- Excellent knowledge of **English and Spanish and good understanding of French** (for Burkina Faso and Mali hubs)

Expected outputs

The final report will include:

- A three page (max) executive summary outlining the key conclusions and recommendations for the co-management institutions and in country and international partners; and,
- No more than 50 pages for the full report which will include a section that provides a clear description of the methodologies used to gather and analyse information; and
- Annexes and references to be appended to the full report as appropriate.

The evaluators will send IIED monthly progress reports on the various stages of the draft and will prepare an accompanying PowerPoint presentation that highlights the key findings of the report. This will be presented at a meeting of the alliance during early 2013.

The evaluators will consider and respond to the comments by IIED and partners on the draft report.

Management and coordination of the final evaluation

The final evaluation will be coordinated by IIED through Duncan Macqueen (forest team leader and co-manager of the Forest Connect alliance) but will also involve close liaison with the FAO co-manager of the Forest Connect alliance – and include a visit to FAO.