NGOs Facilitating Internal Governance Processes in Community Forestry Initiatives

Authors: Kusters, Koen, Benneker, Charlotte, Dangal, Shambhu, De Graaf, Maartje, Faure, Nathalie, et al.

NGOs Facilitating Internal Governance Processes in Community Forestry Initiatives

Koen Kusters[1] ⓘ**, Charlotte Benneker[1], Shambhu Dangal[2], Maartje De Graaf[1],
Nathalie Faure[3], Martin Greijmans[3], John Livingstone[4], Bas Louman[1]** ⓘ**, Alphonse Maindo[5],
Charles Mpoyi[5]** ⓘ**, Sagesse Nziavake[5], Nick Pasiecznik[1], Rosemarie Joy Quetula[6],
Nelissa Maria Rocas[6], Carlos Rodríguez[7], and Amsale Shibeshi[4]**

Keywords

collective forest rights, forest tenure, community forestry, community forest management, forest governance

Introduction

All over the world, Indigenous and local communities use, manage and protect forest lands in their surroundings – broadly referred to as community forestry. Community forestry has the potential to support local livelihoods while contributing to the conservation and restoration of forests – crucial to tackle the global biodiversity and climate crises (Aggarwal et al., 2021; Ding et al., 2016; WWF, 2021). It has been suggested that community forestry can contribute to at least 13 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (De Jong et al., 2018), and it can be a key component of 'other effective area-based conservation measures' (OECMs) as defined by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), referring to areas outside of protected areas where local actors sustain biodiversity, irrespective of their core management goals (Alves-Pinto et al., 2021; Castillo & Tugendhat, 2022; Gurney et al., 2021).

Over the last decades, many governments have installed policies in support of community forestry, allowing communities to apply for formal tenure rights over forest lands, giving them greater control to use and manage forest resources according to their own customs and needs (RRI, 2020). This thus implies the transfer of certain forest-related rights and responsibilities from the state to communities. In this process, a community is often represented by a governance body, which can be based on traditional leadership (e.g. a village chief) or a newly established institution (e.g. a community forest management committee or community forest users groups). The transfer of authority over forest management and the use of land is often partial, resulting in

an agreement between the government and the community about rights, responsibilities and benefit distribution (Cronkleton et al., 2012).

The formalization of community forest tenure rights provides communities with an increased level of protection against expropriation by external actors. It allows communities to secure access to natural resources for their own livelihoods, and may secure or increase opportunities to derive economic benefits from forest management, for example by harvesting and selling timber and non-timber forest products, setting up ecotourism businesses or through carbon payments. The formalization of community forest tenure rights may also contribute to the recognition and reinforcement of customary rights to forests (rights that are rooted in long-standing customs, rather than in state laws), and increase local self-determination (Kusters & De Graaf, 2019).

Local governments are often responsible for the implementation of tenure policies, which offers opportunities for greater local engagement, but also presents challenges in

[1]Tropenbos International, Ede, The Netherlands
[2]RECOFTC, Lalitpur, Nepal
[3]RECOFTC, Bangkok, Thailand
[4]The Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa, Ethiopia
[5]Tropenbos DR Congo, Kisangani, DR Congo
[6]Forest Foundation Philippines, Makati City, The Philippines
[7]Tropenbos Colombia, Bogotá, Colombia

Corresponding Author:
Koen Kusters, Tropenbos International, Horaplantsoen 12, Ede 6717 LT, Netherlands.
Email: koen.kusters@tropenbos.org

terms of capacities and resources (Kusters et al., 2022). This gap may be filled by NGOs (Gupta et al., 2020). They may help communities with the application for formal collective tenure rights, the preparation of forest management plans, and setting up governance arrangements and benefit-sharing mechanisms, among others. In Indonesia, the central government even issued a new forest extension policy that enabled NGOs to get involved in government extension services, in order to help achieve the government's ambitious targets to extend the area under community forestry (Rahayu et al., 2020). In the Philippines, the central government made it possible for local legislative bodies to formally accredit NGOs to function as active partners in efforts to promote community forestry, among others (DILG, 2019).

A recent multi-country review assessed the ways in which community forest tenure models contribute to local livelihoods and forest conservation, and the role that NGOs play in this (Kusters et al., 2022). The review identified ten conditions for successful devolution of forest tenure rights to communities. One of the conditions is inclusive community-level governance, which is the focus of this article. Community-level governance is highly complex and context-specific, and NGOs that intervene at the community level will need to find ways to support inclusive local governance, without imposing externally defined structures and principles in a top-down manner. Below, we will first describe some of the challenges in community governance, before presenting suggestions for NGOs to support communities.

Examples of Community Governance Challenges

Here, we provide some examples of community-level governance challenges that NGOs may encounter when supporting community forestry initiatives. NGOs may develop community forestry projects based on the assumption that communities are organized around the collective management of the forest and that community members have a shared vision of the forest's future, while this is not always the case. Different members of a community may have different priorities and interests, and even when NGOs actively engage representatives of different community groups in their projects, such differences are often persistent. Resentment or conflict among community members may occur, especially when newly introduced governance structures and regulations imply restrictions to the way they use forest resources, and when expectations in terms of economic opportunities are not being met (Krantz, 2018).

In cases where rights are devolved to newly formed forest governance bodies, customary leaders may be unhappy to see their influence decrease. This has been reported in Liberia, for example, where the establishment of new community forest governance structures resulted in tensions between people involved in those new structures and traditional chiefs and elders (Yiah, 2020). In cases where authorities are devolved to customary leadership, the involvement of community members in decision-making processes is sometimes lacking, and discrepancies may arise between customary governance practices and externally defined good governance principles such as accountability, fairness, participation and transparency. In many countries, it has been found that women and youth tend to have little influence in customary forest governance institutions (Evans et al., 2019; Robson et al., 2020).

There are also challenges related to elite capture and rent seeking (Persha & Andersson, 2014). Community members may decide to use part of the forest for their own economic activities, going against the agreed management plans. Also, external investors in search of natural resources may try to persuade local community representatives to sell or lease out community forest resources. This can be a tempting offer, especially when one or a small number of traditional leaders have most of the decision-making power. Commercial companies may offer lucrative deals for these leaders, with little or no involvement of other community members (Van Kanten & Razab-Sekh, 2020).

What Can NGOs do to Strengthen Community-Level Governance?

The above-mentioned issues raise the question if and how NGOs can support communities to strengthen their internal governance in the context of community forestry initiatives. As a group of practitioners working on community forestry in Bolivia, Colombia, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Nepal and the Philippines, we have been discussing this question. This resulted in the following four general lessons.

First, advocacy NGOs can call on governments to design and implement community forest tenure models that provide more room for communities to develop their own governance structures, adapted to existing customs, practices and needs. NGOs will have to advocate for a policy environment that allows for the bottom-up development of customized community forest governance, adaptable at the community level, within a general framework of regulations and safeguards. Government regulations need to contain key principles, while allowing communities to translate these principles into locally appropriate systems (ClientEarth, 2019). This corresponds with results of research suggesting that communities who have the autonomy to craft their own governance regimes are more likely to sustainably develop their community forests (Van Laerhoven, 2010).

Second, NGOs can support communities to adjust and adapt their internal governance systems to the state-defined regulations that come with the formalization of community forest rights, as well as to the ever-changing internal and external developments and pressures. In doing so, NGOs need to carefully consider the constellation of coexisting customary collective and individual user rights within

community forest areas, without imposing simplistic and idealized ideas of collective or individual user arrangements. Particular attention may need to be paid to identifying internal mechanisms for enforcement and conflict resolution, and their connections to external monitoring and enforcement authorities (Sheil et al., 2017; Van der Zon, 2021). Related to this, NGOs can help build connections to relevant local government agencies, and build the capacity of local officials to support community forestry governance regimes, which may require a change in mindset and organizational culture.

Third, NGOs can promote inclusivity in community forestry initiatives, so that different community members have the opportunity to influence decisions related to the community forest, including those on how benefits are being shared. Although it is unrealistic to expect that all community members are actively involved in community forestry initiatives, NGOs can at least work with communities towards (i) increasing transparency in decision-making processes; (ii) ensuring that information is available, so that people can make their own informed choices; (iii) removing barriers for people who want to engage; and (iv) engaging marginalized groups, such as women and youth (and monitor the effects of activities on women and youth).

Fourth, NGOs can add value by strengthening local competencies (especially of local leadership), including the ability to liaise with external stakeholders, such as government agencies at relevant jurisdictional levels. This is crucial to reduce the dependence of community forest governance systems on NGO support. Moreover, NGOs can play a key role by fostering the development of institutions for collective action between communities (Van Laerhoven, 2010).

Discussion

The success of community forestry is influenced by many factors, one of which is community-level governance. As part of community forestry initiatives, NGOs can help communities with developing and implementing local governance systems, rather than transferring externally defined governance schemes and management technologies (Boedhihartono et al., 2018; Pokorny et al., 2010). NGOs thus need to focus on facilitating social processes of negotiation, conflict resolution, consensus building and decision making at the level of the community, and beyond. This should eventually contribute to greater local agency and ownership, as key requirements for successful community forestry in the long term.

For NGOs to play this role effectively, investments are needed in the training and careers of conservation and forest management professionals (Sheil & Nichols, 2022). They should not only be trained in technical and management skills, but also in the facilitation of highly complex and dynamic social processes. Also, practitioners will need to team up with action researchers in 'communities of commitment', for continual learning and adaptation (Langston et al., 2019). Although the above lessons are far from new, taking them seriously requires time and flexibility, which does not match well with short-term and tightly planned projects. We call upon national governments, development banks and donors to make longer term commitments, and we call upon practitioners to experiment with new approaches and tools for the facilitation of community-level governance in the context of community forestry initiatives, and to document and share the lessons. Such learning is essential and urgent, if we want to ensure that community forestry can live up to its potential.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

ORCID iDs

Koen Kusters https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6128-6418
Bas Louman https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7958-3178
Charles Mpoyi https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7913-7928

References

Aggarwal, S., Larson, A., McDermott, C., Katila, P., & Giessen, L. (2021). Tenure reform for better forestry: An unfinished policy agenda. *Forest Policy and Economics*, *123*(2), 102376. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2020.102376

Alves-Pinto, H., Geldmann, J., Jonas, H., Maioli, V., Balmford, A., Latawiec, A. E., Crouzeilles, R., & Strassburg, B. (2021). Opportunities and challenges of other effective area-based conservation measures (OECMs) for biodiversity conservation. *Perspectives in Ecology and Conservation*, *19*(2), 115–120. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pecon.2021.01.004

Boedhihartono, A. K., Bongers, F., Boot, R. G., van Dijk, J., Jeans, H., van Kuijk, M., Koster, H., Reed, J., Sayer, J., & Sunderland, T. (2018). Conservation science and practice must engage with the realities of complex tropical landscapes. *Tropical Conservation Science*, *11*, 1940082918779571. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940082918779571.

Castillo, A. R., & Tugendhat, H. (2022). *Indigenous Peoples, local communities and area-based conservation targets*. ICCA Consortium and Forest Peoples Programme. https://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/oecms_5.pdf

ClientEarth. (2019). *Communities at the heart of forest management: How can the law make a difference? Sharing lessons from Nepal, the Philippines and Tanzania*

Cronkleton, P., Pulhin, J. M., & Saigal, S. (2012). Co-management in community forestry: How the partial devolution of management rights creates challenges for forest communities.

Conservation and Society, *10*(2), 91–102. https://doi.org/10.4103/0972-4923.97481

De Jong, W., Pokorny, B., Katila, P., Galloway, G., & Pacheco, P. (2018). Community forestry and the sustainable development goals: A two way street. *Forests*, *9*(6), 331. https://doi.org/10.3390/f9060331

DILG. (2019). *Memorandum circular 2019-72: Guidelines on accreditation of civil society organizations and selection of representatives to the local special bodies*. The Department of the Interior and Local Government

Ding, H., Veit, P., Blackman, A., Gray, E., Reytar, K., Altamirano, J. C., & Hodgdon, B. (2016). *Climate benefits, tenure costs: The economic case for securing indigenous land rights in the amazon*. World Resources Institute

Evans, K., Flores, S., & Larson, A. M. (2019). Participatory monitoring in forest communities to improve governance, accountability and women's participation. *Small-Scale Forestry*, *18*(2), 165–187. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11842-019-09413-9

Gupta, D., Lele, S., & Sahu, G. (2020). Promoting a responsive state: The role of NGOs in decentralized forest governance in India. *Forest Policy and Economics*, *111*, 102066. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2019.102066.

Gurney, G. G., Darling, E. S., Ahmadia, G. N., Agostini, V. N., Ban, N. C., Blythe, J., Claudet, J., Epstein, G., EstradivariHimes-Cornell, A., Jonas, H. D., Armitage, D., Campbell, S. J., Cox, C., Friedman, W. R., Gill, D., Lestari, P., Mangubhai, S., McLeod, E., & Jupiter, S. D. (2021). Biodiversity needs every tool in the box: Use OECMs. *Nature*, *595*(7869), 646–649. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-02041-4

Krantz, L. (2018). *Applying a community-based approach to tenure formalization. A case study from northern Mozambique*. Department of Economy and Society, Göteborg University

Kusters, K., & De Graaf, M. (2019). Formalizing community rights to forests: Expectations, outcomes and conditions for success. *Tropenbos International*.

Kusters, K., de Graaf, M., Ascarrunz, N., Benneker, C., Boot, R., van Kanten, R., Livingstone, J., Maindo, A., Mendoza, H., Purwanto, E., Rodríguez, C., Ssemmanda, R., Thang, T. N., & Zagt, R. (2022). Formalizing community forest tenure rights: A theory of change and conditions for success. *Forest Policy and Economics*, *141*, 102766. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forpol.2022.102766.

Langston, J. D., Riggs, R. A., Kastanya, A., Sayer, J., Margules, C., & Boedhihartono, A. K. (2019). Science embedded in local forest landscape management improves benefit flows to society. *Frontiers in Forests and Global Change*, *2*. https://doi.org/10.3389/ffgc.2019.00003.

Persha, L., & Andersson, K. (2014). Elite capture risk and mitigation in decentralized forest governance regimes. *Global Environmental Change*, *24*, 265-276. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2013.12.005.

Pokorny, B., Sabogal, C., Jong, W. de, Pacheco, P., Porro, N., Louman, B., & Stoian, D. (2010). Challenges of community forestry in tropical America. *Bois et Forêts Des Tropiques*, *303*(303), 53–66

Rahayu, S., Laraswati, D., Pratama, A. A., Sahide, M. A., Permadi, D. B., Wibowo, W., Widyaningsih, T. S., Suprapto, E., Andayani, W., & Maryudi, A. (2020). Bureaucratizing non-government organizations as governmental forest extension services in social forestry policy in Indonesia. *Forests, Trees and Livelihoods*, *29*(2), 119–129. https://doi.org/10.1080/14728028.2020.1753585

Robson, J. P., Wilson, S. J., Sanchez, C. M., & Bhatt, A. (2020). Youth and the future of community forestry. *Land*, *9*(11), 406. https://doi.org/10.3390/land9110406

RRI. (2020). *Estimate of the area of land and territories of Indigenous Peoples, local communities, and Afro-descendants where their rights have not been recognized*. Rights and Resources Initiative

Sheil, D., & Nichols, J. D. (2022). Forest protection: Invest in professionals and their careers. *Nature*, *603*(7901), 393. https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-022-00706-2

Sheil, D., Sanz, N., Lewis, R. C., Mata, J. P., & Connaughton, C. (2017). Exploring local perspectives and preferences in forest landscapes: Towards democratic conservation. In: *Tropical forest conservation: Long-term processes of human evolution, cultural adaptations and consumption patterns* (pp. 262–283). UNESCO

Van der Zon, M. (2021). Community-based enforcement for successful conservation – lessons from the Peruvian Amazon. *Tropenbos International*.

Van Kanten, R. R., & Razab-Sekh, G. R. (2020). *Improving the outcomes of community forests in Suriname. Recommendations for CSOs*. Tropenbos Suriname / Tropenbos International

Van Laerhoven, F. (2010). Governing community forests and the challenge of solving two-level collective action dilemmas—a large-N perspective. *Global Environmental Change*, *20*(3), 539–546.

WWF, UNEP-WCMC, SGP/ICCA-GSI, LM, TNC, CI, WCS, EP, ILC-S, CM and IUCN. (2021). *The state of indigenous peoples' and local communities' lands and territories: A technical review of the state of indigenous peoples' and local communities' lands, their contributions to global biodiversity conservation and ecosystem services, the pressures they face, and recommendations for actions*