

Community-based forest monitoring as a tool for securing forest peoples' rights

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Evidence shows that community-based forest monitoring can help safeguard forest peoples' rights and access to land and resources (Funder et al., 2014), and promote their participation in decision-making (Danielsen et al., 2010). It offers a powerful way to ensure that communities are affected positively, and not negatively, by large-scale international forest agendas such as REDD+, FLEGT and the CBD. It also enables these agendas to benefit from the knowledge and practices of forest communities, because with more secure rights, ownership and management authority, forest peoples manage resources more sustainably (ITTO and RRO, 2011), and forests retain greater biodiversity and carbon (Phelps et al., 2010).

REDD+, FLEGT and the CBD have the potential to promote the rights of forest communities by protecting the lands and resources they depend upon. However, without effective efforts to involve and protect communities in their design, implementation and monitoring, such large-scale, top-down agendas could have the opposite effect by encouraging more centralised control and elite capture of forest land and resources, reducing community decision-making powers and alienating them from their lands. There are particular concerns that this could occur due to the financial incentives and standardised planning and monitoring associated with REDD+ (Phelps et al., 2010). If forest communities' rights are compromised, this may not only be detrimental to their cultures and wellbeing, but may also seriously undermine the objectives of the forest agendas (Sandbrook et al., 2010).

To mitigate these risks and ensure that the potential benefits are realised, REDD+, FLEGT and CBD agreements include measures to protect local communities' rights, for example:

- The REDD+ safeguards aim *inter alia* to promote transparency in forest governance and to protect and promote the participation and rights* of forest communities, including (whether directly or implicitly) the rights of indigenous and tribal peoples to land, resources, decision-making powers, and free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) (MacFarquhar and Goodman, 2015).
- Bilateral agreements under FLEGT contain provisions for civil society participation in monitoring the implementation of the agreements (Brack and Léger, 2013).
- The Aichi Targets of the CBD require, by 2020, governments to ensure that 'the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of indigenous and local communities relevant for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, and their customary use of biological resources, are respected' (UNCBD, 2010).

These measures will need to be carefully designed and monitored, in partnership with and in many cases led by communities, to ensure that they achieve their intended results. An important reason for this is that, while external actors may be able to establish and monitor actions taken to promote forest peoples' rights (e.g. by disseminating information or holding meetings), it will be far harder for them to understand the impact of these actions (e.g. communities' experience of consultation, understanding of information disseminated, or sense of participation), without the close involvement of the communities themselves in data gathering and analysis (MacFarquhar and Goodman, 2015).

Community involvement is important not only for monitoring the measures explicitly designed to protect their rights, but also for monitoring the forests themselves. Forest communities often observe the forest as part of their everyday lives, tracking changes in the resources they use throughout the seasons and from year to year. In many cases local rules and

customs may define who can access resources, and who has information about them. Although these informal systems differ from formal monitoring, and can be difficult for external actors to identify (Garcia and Lescuyer, 2008), they may be highly effective and valuable at the local level. By building on existing skills, knowledge and practices, community-based forest monitoring recognises and protects the local culture and residents' rights to manage their resources, rather than imposing a completely alien system that could compromise existing management regimes.

To help avoid the potential negative impacts of externally influenced monitoring initiatives, FPIC principles should be applied to their establishment and operation. Effective ways to do this have already been demonstrated: for example, communities and external partners defined a data sharing protocol as part of a monitoring project in Guyana (GCP, 2015a).

Where monitoring schemes are carried out in truly participatory ways, evidence shows that communities can effectively manage (GCP, 2015b) and expand (Funder et al. 2014) such schemes in ways that help them to assert their rights and claims to territory and resources. Community-based forest monitoring methods also offer communities new tools and channels to respond to external pressures. For example, forest communities have found that 'maps do the talking' (Lewis, 2012), strengthening their voice in negotiations with government officials and timber companies.

Overall, monitoring systems in which communities have significant influence and ownership can provide far greater assurance that their views, decisions and rights will be heard and respected in a way that is meaningful to them. Indeed, having the opportunity to participate in monitoring of these forest agendas is, in itself, a key way in which communities' right to participate in the agendas can be realised – and the denial of this opportunity would constitute a denial of their right to participate.

**These include the rights defined other international agreements and conventions, which implicitly include the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the International Labor Organization's Convention No. 169 (ILO, 1991). Many signatories to REDD+, the CBD and Voluntary Partnership Agreements under FLEGT are also signatories to UNDRIP and/or ILO Convention 169.*

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Additional recommended reading:

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Citation

MacFarquhar, C. 2015. Community-based forest monitoring as a tool for securing forest peoples' rights. Global Canopy Programme: Oxford