

## **Forests, Climate Change, and Communities: Making progress up the learning curve**

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### Introduction

Thank you Niels for that kind introduction. It is certainly an honor and a pleasure to share a stage with such a distinguished moderator, and humbling to follow the poetry of yesterday's speaker.

Let me take the opportunity to commend the IUFRO Organizing Committee and our Korean hosts for the extraordinary preparations that have gone into this Congress. It was a full year ago that I was asked to confirm my availability for this address, and it is not my custom to plan so far ahead!

It's also an honor to be asked to speak to this audience of colleagues from forestry research organizations. But it's also a challenge. Most of my speeches and presentations are designed to bring research results to policy audiences. Today I'll reverse my usual role and share some thoughts about what we as a community of researchers and research organizations need to do to service the urgent needs of forest policy -- more like a sermon than a technical presentation.

Accordingly, you'll note that I'm doing without powerpoint. My father, a Baptist minister, preached a sermon every Sunday for more than 40 years without powerpoint, so I guess I can do it at least once.

### The Topic

My topic today is "Forests, Climate Change, and Communities: Making Progress up the Learning Curve".

My main argument is that we stand at a critical juncture in the history of forestry research and practice. One body of knowledge -- on the roles of communities in forest management -- is reaching maturity, just as another -- on the roles of forests in climate change -- is taking off.

Picture us – the community of forestry researchers -- as a hardy band of mountaineers gradually gaining altitude, step by step, ice axes in hand, ascending the learning curve of knowledge about forests and communities, seeking enlightenment at the top. Just as we thought we were gaining glimpses of the sunlit summit through the clouds, the storm of climate change has blown in, and avalanches of new research challenges have pushed us back down the slope.

As we brush ourselves off, we need to figure out where we are, and we need to survey the mountain's – I mean the learning curve's -- newly-configured topography, and prepare to make a second ascent.

The road map to my talk is as follows:

- First, I will irritate many of you by presenting a dramatic oversimplification of research on forests and communities over the last few decades;
- Second, I will irritate others of you by presenting a dramatic oversimplification of the relevant research imperatives associated with forests and climate change; and
- Third, I will seek to stimulate discussion over the course of the week by advancing some propositions about where we as a research community need to go from here.

### Forests and communities

Most people would date interest in the role of communities in forest management back to the 1970s. When I was doing research for a paper in graduate school, I remember reading about the experience here in Korea, where Village Forestry Associations planted more than a million hectares as part of a national reforestation effort in the 1970s. And some of you will recall that “Forests for People” was the theme of the Eighth World Forestry Congress in Jakarta in 1978. It has proven a hardy perennial: the theme of next year's International Year of the Forest is.....Celebrating Forests for People.

Interest in community forestry came from the convergence of several different motivations among governments, donor agencies, and public interest groups. These included:

- a desire to address high rates of deforestation and degradation
- a search for livelihood strategies that would work for the rural poor
- and a commitment to more democratic and equitable ways of managing societies' natural resources.

Which of these are ends, and which are means continue to be different for different stakeholders.

By the mid-1980s, countries around the world had initiated a sizable population of community forestry projects and programs, along with associated research efforts. So as a research community, we've been climbing this learning curve for about a quarter century. And we've certainly learned a lot.

We've learned just how important forests are as a source of livelihoods for rural communities:

- Local people in East Kalimantan identify more than 2000 different forest species with more than 3600 different uses, 119 of which have no known substitute.
- Rural populations in the Congo Basin derive as much as 80 percent of the protein and fat in their diets from bushmeat.
- Data from the Poverty and Environment Project, collected from more than 10,000 households in forest-adjacent villages, shows that on average, 25 percent of household income in these sites is derived from forest products.

We've also learned about the many constraints faced by communities in managing forests as a source of sustainable income:

- There are constraints on the productivity of the resource base – when non-timber forest products are harvested on commercial scale in the absence of regulation, they tend to be depleted.
- There are constraints on the ability of communities to assert rights to forest land and resources, and even when those rights are recognized by the state, defending them can prove fatal.
- There are constraints on market access. Many forest communities are remote and lack capital, and mechanisms such as certification can be unintentionally biased against small-scale enterprises.
- Communities are not homogenous, and interests of some groups such as women may be different from those of others, and not necessarily represented in decision-making.

We've also learned about trade-offs:

- As Bill Jackson of IUCN reminded us in the CPF sub-plenary yesterday, the large literature on integrated conservation and development projects has chipped away at the notion that biodiversity conservation and income objectives can be simultaneously maximized at the same place at the same time.

But perhaps one of the most important things we've learned is the critical role of institutions in mediating the relationship between communities and forests. It turns out that it matters who makes and enforces the rules. And I hope Elinor Ostrom will not mind my appropriating her

recent Nobel Prize in Economics as a key indicator of progress up the learning curve! She can speak for herself on Friday.

But approaching the summit of knowledge on forests and communities has not always taken the most direct and efficient path. Over the last quarter century, we've probably spent the equivalent of at least a few years just debating terminology. Is it community forestry, participatory forestry, social forestry, community-based natural resource management, joint forest management, or co-management? More than 20 years ago, I remember spending a couple of hours debating with Indonesian colleagues whether it was PERhutanan Sosial or KEhutanan Sosial in Bahasa Indonesia, and confess that I still don't understand the difference.

Another thing that has slowed us down is what I'll call the tyranny of the case study. Earlier this year, CIFOR, CIRAD, and IRD convened a seminar in Montpellier to take stock of research on smallholder and community forestry. Those who started with the presumption that communities are inherently more virtuous stewards of forests had case studies to prove their point; those who believe that communities are rational economic actors who will destroy forests if their incentives are aligned to do so had case studies to prove their point as well. Participants in the seminar identified two needs that I strongly endorse, and that I'll return to later in the context of climate change.

The first need identified at the Montpellier seminar is for more rigorous, global comparative studies to overcome the tyranny of the case study. An enormous amount of effort has gone into attempts to retroactively tease out robust conclusions from heterogeneous studies that were not designed for that purpose. Our stakeholders want to know the answer to the following question: What is the relationship between community management of forests, livelihood outcomes, and forest condition outcomes? And it would be great to be able to have an answer that goes beyond, "It depends".

We've got some good examples out there, including the International Forests Resources and Institutions (or IFRI) Program and its associated data set from 14 countries and 250 sites. Researchers associated with that program have already generated a number of papers suggesting answers to the question, telling us what, specifically, outcomes related to livelihoods and forest condition depend on. But I will boldly assert that there have been too few examples of research designed this way, and our progress up the learning curve would have been accelerated if there had been more of them, sooner.

The second need identified by participants in the Montpellier seminar is for more research that takes into account the political economy of forest management in the countries where we work. Broader political and economic forces condition the outcomes of individual community

forestry initiatives more than we originally thought. Of course a lot of this research has already been done:

- It was clear from the earliest days of “community forestry” that states were quick to surrender management roles to communities where forests were already degraded, and devolve to them responsibility for planting trees. But governments tended to be much more reluctant to give up control over land with valuable standing forests.
- We understand now that concentration of forest-related decision-making in capital cities leads to a systematic “tilting of the playing field” in favor of state and corporate elites and at the expense of rural forest users, not least because of the economic rents available to be captured.
- And we understand that one of the biggest challenges faced by community forestry is that widely heralded processes of decentralization and devolution of forest management remain largely incomplete.

But I’ll boldly assert that overall, research attention to these factors has been too little and too late, and our progress up the learning curve might have been faster had we focused on them sooner.

### Forests and climate change

Let me now turn my attention to our new research challenge, forests, communities and climate change.

The two-way linkage between forests and climate change has been recognized for a long time in the research community, but the policy audience for such research is really brand new; I would date it from the publication of the Stern review in late 2006. So compared to research on forests and communities, which is now of a certain age (along with those of us who were its early practitioners), research on forests, communities, and climate change is still in its infancy.

But the big questions have a familiar ring:

- Under what conditions, if any, can policies and programs for Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation or REDD, be effective in terms of reducing emissions, while also being equitable, not least with respect to local communities?
- Under what conditions, if any, can policies and programs to promote forest-related adaptation strategies be effective in promoting local and societal resilience, while also being equitable, not least with respect to local communities?

And alas, we do not have the luxury of 25 years to answer these questions. This week's heat wave in Seoul is only one of many palpable hints that we should be listening to what the climate data is trying to tell us about the urgency of addressing these problems.

But as we regroup for another summit ascent on the learning curve, let's pause to consider the challenges before us. The first is that while in theory the UNFCCC COP13 in Bali produced a "road map", we don't really have one. REDD is a moving target. We went from RED with one D to the second D to the "plus" in a few short years.

And it's not just that researchers can't agree on terminology, but negotiators are having trouble as well. Even as the theory of REDD – in terms of being an international payment for performance scheme – is not yet well elaborated or understood beyond a small inner circle, the practice of REDD is getting underway in dozens of countries and demonstration projects. So our maps are constantly being outdated, and practice is getting out ahead of theory. If that weren't bad enough, the research community is under enormous pressure to have something useful to say about all this in impossibly short time frames, driven by negotiation schedules and funding cycles.

As a result, I fear that we will be tempted to fall back under the tyranny of the case study, and selectively marshal evidence that supports our pre-existing views. The prospect of REDD seems to be functioning as something of a Rorschach test:

- some look at it and see the possibility for all kinds of unintended negative consequences for communities,
- while others look at it and see possible benefits for communities, including enhanced rural income and improved forest governance.

Especially as researchers, we need to steer between the Scylla of being overly cynical about the possibility of positive change, and the Charybdis of irrational exuberance about what REDD can possibly achieve. Both positive and negative outcomes are of course possible, and we need to focus our research effort on what conditions and approaches are more likely to produce one or the other.

Happily, early REDD research shows signs of accelerated progress up the learning curve, piggy-backing on insights achieved through the decades of attention to communities and forests:

- Some colleagues have already demonstrated that the lack clear forest tenure rights will be a constraint on payment-based REDD schemes.
- Others have used the IFRI data set to illuminate how institutional arrangements affect forest condition, and associated carbon density.
- Still others have enumerated the potential barriers to participation of the poor in REDD.

- And a small army of researchers in conservation organizations have analyzed how to minimize trade-offs and enhance synergies between REDD and biodiversity conservation objectives.

But this “first generation” of literature on REDD is of necessity speculative in nature, given that a global REDD mechanism does not yet exist. Indeed a negotiated agreement appears to be receding on the horizon just now, and REDD policies and projects are just getting started. So the concept itself is being invented simultaneously in the context both of formal negotiations and of associated pilot efforts at national and local levels.

Nevertheless, a theme that appears across all of the early REDD literature is that REDD creates a giant optimization problem, characterized by trade-offs among multiple objectives. For all of these reasons, new research on REDD needs to focus on empirical analysis of what actually happens as REDD policies and projects move from ideas to implementation on the ground.

Before turning to implications for the way forward, let me say just a brief word on adaptation. If anything, the challenges of designing research on communities and forest adaptation efforts are even greater than those for REDD. The theory and practice of ecosystem-based adaptation strategies are even less well developed. As in other sectors, we’ve had trouble distinguishing conceptually between forest-related actions undertaken for adaptation, and those that should be undertaken anyway in the interest of sustainable development. Agreement on financing, and how to achieve equity in funding allocations, is elusive. So research on the impacts of adaptation interventions is at this point even more speculative than on those of REDD.

#### Implications for the way forward

So, where do we go from here? We’ve learned a lot from our decades of experience trying to understand the relationships between communities and forests. But the addition of climate change to the mix means we have a new learning curve to ascend, and it can’t be a leisurely climb.

Just a few years ago, the authors of a review of research on community forestry concluded [and I quote]:

“Community forestry in theory holds promise as a viable approach to forest conservation and forest community development. Gaps remain, however, between community forestry in theory and in practice”.

Imagine the review article 25 years from now....”Gaps remain between REDD in theory and in practice.”

The authors also remarked [and I quote] “It may be too soon to evaluate fairly the social and economic outcomes of community forestry...[as] bringing about change in forest governance is a slow process.”

Okay, I admit that if you look up the word “impatient” in the dictionary, you’ll find a little picture of me beside the definition. But surely you’ll agree that with climate change already upon us, we’ve got to accelerate progress up that learning curve!

How do we do that? I have three suggestions:

1. First, we need to do whatever we can to communicate what those of us in Forestry World know about forests and communities to colleagues in Climate World.

Here, I pick up where Eduardo Rojas-Briales of the FAO left off yesterday in his point stressing the importance of communications. We forget that what’s already conventional wisdom to us are fresh insights to policy analysts and negotiators who came to climate debates from the energy sector or from financial institutions or from other non-forestry backgrounds. It won’t be very interesting to conduct research on how mistakes of the past have been repeated, so it’s in our own self-interest to ensure that they’re not!

We’ve got to get out there in climate-related policy arenas and practitioner communities, and push the research results that we already have in hand. We have to be relentless – and if possible, charming rather than boring -- in stressing:

- the significance of forests as contributors to rural livelihoods,
- the importance of secure rights and tenure and of local institutions,
- of the risks of excluding women and other marginalized groups,
- and the role of the broader political economy that can support, or thwart, real community management of forest resources.

A great opportunity to share such knowledge will be at a happy confluence of geography and timing when the UNFCCC COP 16 meets in Cancun this December. The venue will make it possible to showcase experience with community forestry in Mexico and Central America to a captive audience of people who otherwise live in Climate World. You are all hereby invited to participate in the fourth annual Forest Day on December 5<sup>th</sup>, where CIFOR and other members of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests are putting together a full slate of events to do just that.

2. Second, we need to build our forest and climate research agenda on the foundation of what we’ve learned from research on forests and communities.



There are a lot of things we've learned on our progress up the learning curve on forests and communities that can speed our progress on forests and climate change. In the new context of climate change, we need to understand the institutions and governance mechanisms needed to underpin solutions that yield effective, efficient, and equitable outcomes:

- How can REDD and adaptation schemes find the optimal position between centralized and decentralized approaches?
- How do local property rights and other institutional variables influence their effectiveness?
- What are the actual impacts of forest adaptation and mitigation actions on the rights and livelihoods of forest communities?
- How can synergies be maximized and trade-offs reduced?

As we stand on the mountainside and look back down, we can take heart from the progress already made on these questions before they were specifically posed in the context of climate change.

But climate mitigation and adaptation actions also bring new questions:

- Will REDD's innovation of payment-for-performance shape, or be shaped by, the pre-existing political economies of forests?
- What institutions are most supportive of community-level adaptation initiatives?
- Does it matter that climate change mitigation and adaptation are now becoming the overriding objectives of involving communities in forest management?

So there's a lot of climbing to do, but there's scope for accelerating our learning.

One proposal that may be hopeless is to spend less time debating definitions. Let's define what REDD is for the purposes of research and get on with it.

A second is to overthrow the tyranny of the case study. Let's not wait for case study material to accumulate and superimpose research design later. Instead, we can proactively work with policy-makers and project designers to build in from the beginning features of REDD and adaptation interventions that will facilitate impact assessment later on.

Let's not repeat the experience of Integrated Conservation and Development projects. Those who have tried to draw lessons from that experience have struggled not only with very different approaches in different places. In many cases, project approaches did not appear to be the result of well-thought-out design that made plausible linkages between interventions and expected outcomes.

Compared to our colleagues in the health sector, for example, those of us in Forestry World have done very few rigorous Before/After/Control/Intervention impact assessments. It's time to up our game by engaging practitioners, and helping them design interventions that can plausibly be evaluated later. And we need to ensure that livelihood and governance variables are measured along with carbon emissions. When it comes to forests and climate change, we will need to have robust answers to the question, "What works?" in more like five years rather than 25.

Another way to accelerate progress will be to focus much more attention, earlier, on the broader political economy of forests and climate change. Our research needs to illuminate not only the underlying causes of deforestation and degradation, but also the interests that they serve, and the institutions through which those interests operate, both formal and informal. Such analysis can help inform proponents of REDD and adaptation measures of the potential for unintended negative consequences. A lesson from the community forestry literature is that even well-intended interventions can serve to entrench vested interests and social injustice.

In many ways it should be easier to include an explicit political economy dimension to our research this time around. Many topics such as corruption and indigenous peoples' rights that were difficult to talk about in some countries even ten years ago are now on the table for discussion.

To give you just one example, earlier this year, CIFOR published an analysis of the history of the Reforestation Fund in Indonesia, and the lessons learned from that experience for financial management in future REDD schemes. In the past, such an analysis might have caused serious friction in our host country relationship, dealing as it did with the sensitive issue of corruption. But this time, our colleagues at the Ministry of Forestry welcomed the report, and even contributed to a joint press release in which they embraced recommendations for increased transparency in the management of forest finances to avoid repeating mistakes of the past.

3. Third, we need to be brave enough to commit to "big science" on forests, communities, and climate change.

What do I mean by "big science"?

Last year, the CGIAR's Science Council commissioned a review of the state of social sciences in the CG System, and suffice it to say that not all of the findings were flattering. Let me read you the paragraph that resonated with me:

“CGIAR social science today is plagued by too much “small think”. The CGIAR has a hard-earned reputation for micro-level studies in rural areas of developing countries and it must continue excellence in that area. But it also needs to aggregate better to larger-scale, more strategic issues concerning agricultural development at regional and global scale, both for strategic research prioritization and for policy analysis and advocacy. The present void at larger scale impedes the emergence of a culture of evidence-based agricultural and rural policymaking, in both public and private spheres, which hampers the pursuit of CGIAR goals.”

The review team went on to recommend that the CGIAR invest in a network of “sentinel sites” at which quantitative and qualitative research would take place over the long haul. Through the use of standardized methods for data collection and analysis, the sites would generate a metadata set sufficient to answer some of the big questions about the drivers of changes in landuse, livelihoods, and governance.

I’m quite sympathetic to both the review team’s diagnosis and its prescription. In fact, as mentioned by Tony Simons of ICRAF in yesterday’s CPF sub-plenary session, we and other CGIAR Centres are trying to address them in a new research program being developed under the CGIAR Consortium.

It seems to me that one of the lessons from research on the relationships between communities and forests has been that it has consistently proven “worth it” for our organizations to invest in ambitious global comparative studies. I think of the one undertaken earlier this decade on livelihoods and non-timber forest products, the soon-to-be ready Poverty and Environment Network data set, and the IFRI Program mentioned earlier.

But let’s be clear how hard this is:

- Since no single organization has the capacity to do big science alone, it requires subsuming our narrow individual and institutional agendas to a collective effort. Next month, a group of policy research and advocacy organizations are getting together with help from the World Bank and FAO. Their objective is to try to agree on approaches and indicators for measuring governance conditions relevant to REDD. I commend such attempts to pool resources rather than to compete with each other.
- Big science also requires long hard negotiations to standardize data collection and analysis methods and rules for managing and sharing data. Many of you might have seen the article in the New York Times earlier this month, describing how agreement on common methods and data-sharing among Alzheimers researchers had dramatically accelerated progress in understanding that disease.

And if we were ever going to do big science, now is the time, as climate change has generated political attention and associated funding opportunities as never before. At least based on CIFOR's recent experience, being ambitious can create a positive feedback loop:

- Having big plans attracts research partners, who want to be part of something significant.
- Having big plans also attracts interest from target audiences among both policymakers and practitioners – especially in an era of payment for performance, we find that there's never been so much interest in our research results.
- And not least, an ambitious research agenda attracts funding. What with billions on the table for REDD alone, it doesn't take much of a percentage for research to add up to real money.

If we build it, they will come.

Let me close by dispensing with the mountain climbing image and leave you with another one. As I was preparing this "sermon", I struggled to think of a metaphor for the multiple tasks I'm proposing that we as forestry researchers take on – communicating to Climate World, engaging with project designers, launching big science. And doing them all at the same time.

And last night at the welcoming reception, it came to me:

All we have to do is dance, play the drum, and keep the streamers off the back of our hats doing circles in the air. All at the same time.

Can't wait to see us try.

Thank you.

***This transcript will be updated with references by early September 2010.***