

Hope for Liberia's forests

In 2004, scientists from CIFOR and the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) had to use armoured vehicles when venturing into the field on a research trip in Liberia. The civil war had come to an end, but there was still sporadic fighting. 'Since then, there has been a dramatic transformation in Liberia,' explains Ravi Prabhu, who led the research team. 'The country recently elected Africa's first female president, and people are enthusiastically embracing democracy.' Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the forestry sector.

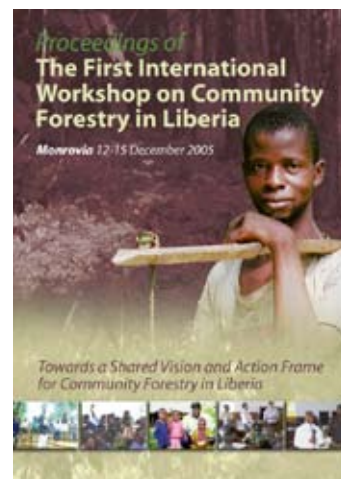
On two separate research trips, the second of which was funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Prabhu and his colleagues explored the way in which local communities were using the country's forestry resources. 'What we found,' says Prabhu, 'is that local people had made use of forests in the past, but not been able to exploit the timber commercially. Government forest policy had been all about two "C"s – concessions and conservation – but the third "C" – communities – had never featured on the agenda.' One of the biggest handicaps to community forestry, the researchers found, was the lack of formal tenure for rural communities.

This is an issue of great importance, not just for rural communities, who have historically benefited so little from the country's natural resources, but for Liberia's economic future. This is because the United Nations' sanctions on timber exports will only be lifted when Liberia can demonstrate that timber profits will not be used to fuel violent conflict, as they were in the past; and – just as importantly – that exploitation of the country's timber will benefit local communities.

How to get communities involved in Liberian forestry was the key theme of an international workshop, co-organised by CIFOR and held in Monrovia in December 2005. The event brought together a wide range of stakeholders, from logging companies to local communities, from NGOs to government departments. This was the first

major event ever held on community forestry in Liberia. The researchers from CIFOR and ICRAF were able to present their findings, and four days of vigorous debate concluded with the adoption of the 'Monrovia Declaration'. This emphasises the need to harness Liberia's forest wealth – the country has 42 per cent of the remaining Upper Guinea Forest – for the benefit of all Liberians by ensuring that community interests and industrial exploitation are closely aligned.

'We must literally kick inequalities out of natural resource management,' Wilbur Thomas, Director of USAID in Liberia, told the workshop. 'As we all know, one of the central dilemmas throughout Liberia's history has been that Liberia's rich natural resources benefited only a small number of people.' The Monrovia Declaration, if put into practice, will put an end to this era of inequitable resource management. The Declaration calls on the government to recognise customary rights to the land and to reform the Forestry Development Authority so that it can provide effective support for community forestry. The Declaration recognises that local communities, civil society and the international community also have an important role to play in this process.



The workshop co-organised by CIFOR in Monrovia was the first major event ever held on community forestry in Liberia (Photo by Daniel Tiveau)