‘If You Saw It with My Eyes’: Collaborative Research and Assistance with Central American Forest Steward Communities

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>ACICAFOC</td>
<td>Coordinadora Indigena y Campesina de Agroforesteria Comunitaria Centroamericana (Central American Indigenous and Peasant Coordinator of Communal Agroforestry)</td>
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<td>ACM</td>
<td>Adaptive Collaborative Management</td>
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<td>ACOFOP</td>
<td>Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén (Association of Forest Communities of the Petén)</td>
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<td>Campesino</td>
<td>Farmer</td>
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<td>CIFOR</td>
<td>Center for International Forestry Research</td>
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<td>CONAP</td>
<td>Consejo Nacional de Areas Protegidas (National Commission for Protected Areas)</td>
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<td>DFID</td>
<td>Department for International Development (UK)</td>
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<td>FAO</td>
<td>United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization</td>
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<td>FSC</td>
<td>Forest Stewardship Council</td>
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<td>IDB</td>
<td>Inter-American Development Bank</td>
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<td>IMazon</td>
<td>Amazon Institute for People and the Environment</td>
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<td>MBR</td>
<td>Maya Biosphere Reserve</td>
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<td>MUZ</td>
<td>Multiple Use Zone</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental Organization</td>
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<td>NTFP</td>
<td>Non-timber Forest Product</td>
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<td>PCaC</td>
<td>Programa Campesino a Campesino (Farmer-to-Farmer Programme)</td>
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<td>PFA</td>
<td>Project Agricultural Frontier</td>
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<td>UMI</td>
<td>Unión Maya Itzá</td>
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<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td>USAID</td>
<td>United States Agency for International Development</td>
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<td>UNAG</td>
<td>Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos (National Union of Farmers and Ranchers)</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization</td>
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Communities are making unprecedented gains worldwide in forest resource access and management rights. A new conservation actor, the forest steward community, is emerging in Central America as an effective collaborator in forest conservation. How best to support and strengthen this community-based conservation actor while minimizing external dependency? This paper discusses an experience with innovative participatory research in Guatemala and Nicaragua that aimed to strengthen community capabilities in natural resource management. The Grassroots Assistance Project trained community members to document and critically reflect upon local experience with forest management and external assistance. Together with regional context studies undertaken by professional researchers, these local ‘auto-systematization’ studies made possible comprehensive documentation of the multiple dimensions of communities’ resource management, identification of their strengths and vulnerabilities and discussion of future strategies. Their endeavours also reveal an emerging alternative ‘accompaniment’ approach to technical assistance, which promotes a high level of partnership between communities and external institutions, in contrast to traditional assistance, which often creates dependency. Technical ‘accompaniment’ emphasizes long-term social processes, shared learning, community empowerment, validation of local knowledge and continual strengthening of organizational capabilities. It also suggests organizing assistance to pursue closer proximity to communities and their processes, flattening of technical staff hierarchies, flexible response to community input, more horizontal information exchange, and incorporation of social process indicators into assessment. Employed in combination with more traditional assistance approaches, the technical ‘accompaniment’ approach holds promise for strengthening communities’ capabilities as key allies in protecting and managing the environment for the future.

KEY WORDS: Community forestry, grassroots organizations, participatory research, technical assistance, Guatemala, Nicaragua
Communities are making historically unprecedented gains worldwide in forest resource access and management rights. In Latin America, this impressive shift in responsibility for managing forest resources is propelled in part by the growing importance of forest-based social movements promoting community resource rights. The shift is also being produced by greater recognition by governments and international conservation institutions that conventional conservation approaches that exclude community participation have not been effective in protecting highly threatened tropical biodiversity. Today a new conservation actor, the forest steward community, is emerging to become an effective collaborator in forest conservation in the region. How best to encourage and support this new community-based conservation actor? How may alternative ‘accompaniment’ approaches be developed that build strong local conservation partners while minimizing dependency and promoting local capabilities for effective resource management? This paper discusses an experience with innovative participatory research activities in Central America which aimed to strengthen community capabilities in support of greater local autonomy in natural resource management. The experience with and results of this participatory research activity also suggest the outline of an alternative approach to external assistance that is emerging today in Central American forest communities.

1. The Growing Community Role in Managing Forests for Conservation and Development

Faced with alarming rates of degradation of tropical forests worldwide (FAO 2005a) and intensifying competition to claim, exploit and protect forest resources, governments have recently established a growing number of protected areas and reserves in highly threatened Southern forests. Large numbers of local people, already living in and deriving their livelihoods from these newly protected forests, have frequently been assumed to be responsible for forest degradation and have lost customary access to forest resources or have been expelled outright. The stakes in resolving tensions between conservation and local livelihood interests...
are high. As conservation organizations have come to recognize the complexity of the social landscape of endangered forests, many have sought to work more closely with indigenous and traditional communities, often through Integrated Conservation and Development Programmes (ICDPs). Results have been mixed (see Bray and Anderson 2005).

At the same time, because of legal reforms in Latin America, Africa and Asia, community and indigenous control of forests is increasing dramatically (White and Martin 2002; Molnar 2003; Taylor et al. 2006). As much as one-quarter of forests in developing countries are community owned or managed (White and Martin 2002). Molnar (2003) reports that in 2002 communities owned or administered 377 million ha, or 11% of the 3.6 billion ha of global forest. If developed countries in which government-owned forests predominate are excluded, the community share of the global forest increases to 25%. These figures represent a doubling over the last 15 years and are likely to double again in the next 15 years.

The bulk of the world’s forests recognized as being under community control or as legally transferred to communities currently lies in Latin America (White and Martin 2002; also see Klooster (2000); Taylor and Zabin (2000); Bray and Merino Pérez (2003); Bray, Merino Pérez and Barry (2005) on the experience with community-based forestry in Mexico). Significantly, in this region grassroots forest movements have emerged that help introduce a new social actor into the governance of protected forests: the forest steward community. These forest steward communities have attained significant legal and customary access and rights over forest resources. They are becoming a cornerstone of broad-based efforts to sustainably manage natural resources for conservation and development. Their experience suggests that at the local level conservation and development need not be opposing strategies. Rather than being part of the deforestation problem, organized forest communities can potentially be key allies in solutions that protect and manage the environment for the future.

Several crucial questions arise from the growing community involvement in forest management: How may local community capability to pursue sustainable, positive social and environmental outcomes be strengthened? In this paper and its companion paper on environmental governance and grassroots forest movements (Cronkleton et al. 2008), we refer to community ‘capability’, following the distinction that Morgan draws between ‘capacity’—existing skills and behaviour patterns within an organization—and ‘capability’—what an organization can do (Bonis-Charancale et al. 2007)1. How can partnerships be developed that recognize the unique capabilities and potentials that diverse sets of international and local actors bring to forest stewardship? What types of and approaches to external assistance may best support grassroots social movements and encourage the emergence of forest stewardship communities?

A 3-year, Ford Foundation-supported, Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)-managed project, “Support to Grassroots Community Forestry Organizations in Central

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1 Our thanks to Carol Colfer for pointing this out.
America and Brazil”2, focused on four cases in Central America and the Brazilian Amazon in which rural community-based organizations have staked out central roles in natural resource management programmes, and in the process, developed networks of forest steward communities. The Grassroots Assistance Project pursued several objectives:

- to conduct innovative collaborative research on the communities’ experience with forest management.
- to strengthen community-level capabilities by training community members in research, analysis and planning methods.
- to identify strengths and weaknesses of existing models of technical assistance to grassroots forestry organizations.
- to support the development of new assistance models which better acknowledge and strengthen local community-based competence.
- to disseminate information and knowledge about the grassroots forestry movement experience among community members and researchers via field site visits, workshops, conferences and written publications.

Drawing on Cronkleton et al. (2006), this paper focuses on the Grassroots Assistance Project’s work in Central America, where participants developed a collaborative research and assistance approach to strengthening two grassroots forest community organizations: the Association of Forest Communities of the Petén (ACOFOP) in Guatemala and the Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (PCaC) in Siuna, Nicaragua.

The collaborative work developed in Central America built on several decades of experience worldwide with participatory research and development approaches, especially in the agricultural and rural development sectors. Participatory approaches in forest contexts have been slower to develop and gain high profiles, in large part because of unique state regulatory frameworks, common property tenure and usufruct institutions, and highly charged political contexts. The project’s participants strived to develop participatory research activities more appropriate to the Central American forest sector and its forest communities. They gave communities an unusual degree of autonomy in developing indigenous accounts of their experiences with forest conservation and development. The project aimed to strengthen the communities’ forest organizations to cope with the new challenges facing them by enhancing local capabilities for research and analysis, and helping develop more effective models of external assistance.

The Grassroots Assistance Project coordinated research by professional and community-level researchers to develop comprehensive accounts of the experience of community-based forestry in the Petén, Guatemala, and Siuna, Nicaragua. The results of these two sets of studies (also see Cronkleton et al. 2006)
suggest that effective external assistance models are necessary to build strong local conservation and development partners. The results of the project’s research methodology suggest that self-systematization represents one promising means to strengthen local capabilities.

Moreover, a potentially close link exists between collaborative research and the development of new technical ‘accompaniment’ models that strengthen local capabilities and respond flexibly to changing community needs (The authors use the term ‘accompaniment’ to highlight the level of partnership between communities and external institutions promoted by alternative assistance models, in contrast to assistance that creates dependency relationships). As discussed below, collaborative research activities can help identify the strengths and weaknesses of past assistance strategies and suggest features of alternative strategies to support communities. By helping develop systematic community accounts of their own experiences, collaborative research can help strengthen community capabilities for analysis and negotiation, in turn encouraging more equitable relations between communities and external support institutions. At the same time, it can help lay and maintain a foundation for continual organizational learning on the part of external support institutions.

Below, the results of the participatory research activities are summarized and difficulties encountered in designing and implementing the approach are discussed. Based on the experiences of community-based forestry in the Petén and Siuna, a preliminary sketch of the organizational principles and characteristics of an alternative accompaniment model appropriate to community forestry settings is then developed.
The Grassroots Assistance Project aimed to develop a collaborative research approach combining skills and perspectives of both professional and local researchers in Central America. Involving community members in data collection and analysis is not entirely new, of course, but builds on nearly 30 years of experience with participatory research and capability-building approaches and tools. These approaches and methods have aimed to enable local people to ‘share, enhance and analyze their knowledge of life and conditions, to plan and to act’ (Chambers 1983, 1994, 1997; Bunch 1985).

2.1 Participatory Approaches in Agricultural Contexts

Most participatory research and capacity building approaches have emerged from agricultural contexts and have tended to emphasize farmer participation in improving productivity and community wellbeing. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approaches enlisted professional development practitioners in both scaling up and scaling down participation to local levels (Holland 1998). Farming systems, research and extension, and other approaches sought to recognize local farmer expertise (Richards 1985; Hildebrand 1986; Farrington and Martin 1988). More recently, participatory sustainable livelihood approaches adopted by the Department for International Development – UK (DFID), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Oxfam and CARE (Carney et al. 1999) emphasized the need to ‘place the poor and all aspects of their lives and means of living at the centre of development, while at the same time, maintaining the sustainability of natural resources for present and future generations’ (FAO 2005b).

Early pioneers in participatory research methods were often working with a finite number of agricultural commodities or attempting to transfer new technologies to farmers. When confronted by non-adoption, it was common to view farmers as ‘laggards’ unable to grasp the implications of new practices. Eventually some researchers and practitioners began to recognize that farmers were integral
actors in the development process, rather than simply passive recipients of technology. Farmers needed to be involved not only in the testing and evaluation of new technology but even in the selection of problems to be addressed through research. Researchers began adapting their approaches to gain access to farmer perceptions and evaluations to find solutions to locally relevant problems, a process that entailed sharing power and control over development initiatives (see Holt-Giménez 2006). Although not all agricultural research was refocused in this way, the participatory trend was quite influential in rural development focused on smallholders.

2.2 Participatory Approaches in the Forest Context

By comparison, participatory approaches to research and development in most forest contexts have been slower to develop and achieve a high profile. First of all, as early as the colonial period, forests began to be conceptualized as Crown property and then state-administered domains. Under the latter, foresters were delegated the role of stewards determining not only how forests should be managed but who could legitimately participate and benefit. As a result, forest peoples, whether treated as annoying intruders or wards of the state, were frequently excluded from management planning and policy decisions related to forests. Traditional people’s forest management practices were often invisible, or ignored. Local people and their communities have often been seen as a principal problem underlying deforestation and biodiversity loss rather than as part of an effective solution.

Second, the forest sector poses significantly different conditions for development practitioners, natural resource managers and donors. By contrast with the agricultural sector, characterized by the predominance of private property or individual usufruct and tenure rights, the context of forest communities typically involves the sharing of common pool resources and a collective framework of resource management and tenure similar to those identified in other contexts by Ostrom (1990) and Gibson et al. (2000). State regulatory frameworks often attempt to dictate management rules and restrict local use in ways which are inappropriate, cumbersome and contradictory. In addition, forest communities like those in the Petén and Siuna are often enmeshed in highly complex and politically charged relationships as a broad range of levels of stakeholders pursue conservation and development interests.

Participatory approaches were first tried in large-scale projects in community forestry in the 1970s. Many of these failed because of the disproportionate attention given to technical and economic issues over genuine encouragement of local community involvement (Thomson and Schoonmaker-Freudenberger 1997). In recent years, community-based forest management has gained increasing visibility as a promising alternative for conserving forests and supporting local livelihoods. Indeed, a quiet but dramatic shift is underway toward devolving administrative responsibilities and ownership rights to local communities (White and Martin 2002; Molnar 2003). Scholars of decentralization of natural resource management point out that reforms have frequently fallen short of actually transferring authentic ownership and control to communities.
Nevertheless, cumbersome attempts to exclude forest people have begun giving way to more participatory management approaches as decision makers realize that forest people are not going to go away, and in fact are gaining strength and allies to defend their rights. Governments have increasingly recognized the legitimate claims of indigenous peoples and communities (Taylor et al. 2006). They have begun to recognize that top-down official management has often not produced effective resource stewardship. The positive link between local economic development and environmental protection has become clearer. Devolution of responsibility has also been driven by free market restructuring policies which have progressively downsized states and their activities worldwide over the past two decades. Molnar (2003) estimates that with continued devolution, communities may soon control 700–800 million ha of forest worldwide.

As communities gain more rights to forest resources and as donor and development institutions seek to support them effectively, interest in participatory approaches to research and development in the forest sector has been increasing (Arnold 1991). Collaborative management approaches have promoted joint conservation and development strategies between forest authorities and indigenous populations and communities (Poffenberger 1990; Fisher 1995). Related work has developed tools for promoting and assessing effective local participation (Molnar 1989; Davis-Case 1990; Colfer and Wadley 1996; ISTF 2005; Evans et al. 2006).

The Grassroots Assistance Project has benefited in particular from prior Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR)-sponsored research under its Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM) Programme, which spanned three continents. The ACM programme explored the conditions under which forest stakeholder groups acted collaboratively and adapted their strategies to changing circumstances, identifying tools and methods that promoted social learning processes conducive to collaboration and adaptation. Drawing on experiences of ACM practitioners in 30 field sites in 11 countries, Colfer and her collaborators (Colfer 2005a, b) found that the complexity of the natural and social systems in forest communities calls for alternative partnerships with forest-based populations. ACM can contribute to strengthening of human and institutional capabilities at the community level, which in turn may catalyze other positive outcomes, including higher incomes and sustainable improvements in the health of forests and the wellbeing of forest peoples.
The Grassroots Assistance Project’s participatory research activities start from the recognition that organizational strengthening is one of the most urgent needs articulated by forest social movements in the region. The discussion below of experiences in the Petén and Siuna draws on context studies by Gómez and Méndez (2005) and Cuellar and Kandel (2005). These experiences underscore the fact that one of the greatest challenges facing forest social movements and their allies is how to ensure effective external support which also promotes the progressive assumption of new management responsibilities by communities themselves. For communities to embark on a process of continual learning, it is key that they develop their own indigenous research and analysis capabilities, beginning with systematic documentation of their own experiences from their own perspectives.

3.1 The Petén, Guatemala: the Case of ACOFOP
In Guatemala, the Association of Forest Communities of the Petén (ACOFOP) leads a movement of diverse community-based organizations that have won rights to manage forest concessions in the Multiple Use Zone (MUZ) of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR). The Petén region is located in northern Guatemala, bordering with Mexico to the northeast and with Belize on the southeast (see Figure 1.) The lowland tropical forests of the Petén are recognized worldwide for their great biological diversity, with 1400 known species of plants and 450 species of animals and birds, and its ancient Mayan ruins. The Petén is the location of the MBR, established in 1990 as part of the United Nations’ Man and Biosphere programme. The MBR encompasses 2,112,940 ha and aims to conserve the region’s archaeological and biological treasures, safeguard its diverse ecosystems, and promote opportunities for sustainable use of natural and cultural resources (Gómez and Méndez 2005).

For many years Guatemala’s most geographically and politically isolated region, the Petén has been shaped by competition among diverse groups of actors to control its wealth of natural resources. The Petén was settled by consecutive waves of official and spontaneous settlement aimed at extracting resources including petroleum,
precious minerals and timber, chicle gum (Manilkara spp.), ornamental greenery such as xate (Chamaerdorea elegans, C. oblongata and C. ernesti-augustii) and wildlife; there is also great agricultural and animal-raising potential. The Petén’s civilian population suffered greatly during Guatemala’s 30-year Civil War; after the war, the region was a destination for large numbers of displaced people. The legacy of this conflict continues to shape governance in the region (Gómez and Méndez 2005).

The MBR’s design and implementation have been profoundly shaped by the Petén’s high levels of conflict and frequent absence of formal state control, a condition referred to locally as ‘ingovernability.’ The MBR’s original design did not adequately take into account the Petén’s long history of competition among groups of actors to control its natural resources.

More recently, with peace and a sense of newly emerging governance within the region, new competitive struggles over cultural resources have emerged as national and international groups vie to protect and develop the region’s many ancient Mayan sites and its potential for profitable tourism. A combination of factors, including the 1996 Peace Accords ending Guatemala’s Civil War, created national and international support for greater community participation (Gómez and Méndez 2005). After extended negotiation, 25-year forest management concessions were granted to six local communities within the MUZ, six communities bordering the MUZ and two local forest industry companies (Nittler and Tschinkel 2005; also see Figure 2).

ACOFOP was a key player in the original negotiation of the community concessions and, as their collective representative,
continues to be influential in the operation of the concessions and the national-level projection of their efforts. Today, ACOFOP has 22 member communities and organizations representing nearly 2000 individuals. The community forest concessions generate an annual value of US$ 5 million in wood products and US$ 2-3 million in non-timber forest products (NTFPs). Members of community firms receive an average of US$ 1120 for wood product extraction and processing and on the whole generated over 50 000 persondays of work in 2003 with a value of nearly US$ 360 000 (Nittler and Tschinkel 2005). ACOFOP observes, moreover, that in 2003 its members’ forest concessions generated over US$ 424 000 in taxes (ACOFOP 2004).

Reliable time-series data on the conservation and development impacts of ACOFOP and the community concessions is still relatively limited. Nevertheless, several recent studies suggest that, on balance, the community concessions in the Petén appear to be producing positive impacts on conservation and economic wellbeing in the communities. Dramatic satellite images suggest that protected areas and parks in the MBR, such as Laguna del Tigre, where communities do not have a management role, are more vulnerable to degradation because official protection is less adequate than community protection (WCS et al. 2003, 2004). Other forthcoming research shows significant support for the position that community concessions are better than the Petén’s parks at inhibiting deforestation. A full explanation of differences in deforestation rates will require the exploration of factors such as colonization history and variation in demographic pressures (Bray personal communication). Nevertheless, Nittler and Tschinkel (2005; also see Radachowsky et al. 2004; Roney et al. undated) remark that ‘Despite constant challenges, the evidence indicates that forest management in the Petén is functioning, from the perspective of resource management, community income and conservation of biodiversity’. 
3.2 Siuna, Nicaragua: the Case of PCaC

In the Siuna region of Nicaragua, the Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (PCaC) contributes to the effective management of the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve by developing and disseminating more-sustainable farming and ranching practices and promoting new conservation awareness and attitudes. The Siuna region is located in northeastern Nicaragua, bordering Honduras (see Figure 1). The region holds ecosystems of rich biodiversity and is the location of the Bosawas Reserve, established as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Biosphere Reserve in 1997. Bosawas and its three neighbouring protected areas of Honduras (Río Pataca National Park, Tawhaka Anthropological Reserve, and Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve) form the heart of the Mesoamerican Biological Corridor and represent the largest protected area complex of tropical mountain moist forest north of the Amazon basin (Cuellar and Kandel 2005). Totalling approximately 2 million ha, the Bosawas Reserve’s Nucleus Zone includes almost 800 000 ha; its Buffer Zone represents another 1.3 million ha (Cuellar and Kandel 2005).

Like the Petén, Siuna has a history of geographic, political and economic isolation. It has also had a history of conflict and weak governance, as diverse groups of social actors have competed to extract the wealth of its mineral, forest product and agricultural and ranching potential. Siuna was settled through official and spontaneous colonization, which served to reduce pressure for land in Nicaragua’s interior. The region was the site of some of the fiercest fighting between Sandinista and Contra forces during Nicaragua’s civil war in the 1980s. Since the 1987 Central American Peace Agreements, Siuna and Bosawas have continued to experience a high level of conflict as armed movements have sought reparation for civil war losses, and as indigenous and mestizo groups and national and international extraction industries have disputed resource access and tenure (Kaimowitz 2002; Cuellar and Kandel 2005).

The establishment of the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve occurred with strong international bilateral and donor support. International conservation organizations and donors such as The Nature Conservancy and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and others were closely involved in planning and implementing Bosawas. Yet much like the MBR in Guatemala, Bosawas was established with little consultation and participation of indigenous and mestizo groups already living in the territory. An estimated 25 000 inhabitants of Miskito and Mayanga indigenous communities live in the Bosawas Nucleus Zone. More than 200 000 persons, mostly mestizo campesinos (peasants/farmers), are estimated to live within the Buffer Zone around Bosawas. Community actors within the Buffer Zone were mostly overlooked, as most attention focused on primary or virgin forests with little attention paid to the important role that buffer zones play in maintaining the stability of ecosystems (Cuellar and Kandel 2005).

Organizing 120 communities directly and 300 communities indirectly, PCaC’s network of almost 500 volunteer promoters has helped local farmers slow the advance of the agricultural frontier toward Bosawas. The majority of farmers in PCaC’s area of influence have stopped burning, have begun replenishing their soils with cover crops and have adopted other sustainable practices,
such as planting perennial crops, promoting natural forest regeneration and incorporating agroforestry. The local farmer cooperatives’ members who have adhered to this alternative agricultural programme have emerged as respected leaders in both agriculture and natural resource management, laying the basis for PCaC’s widespread recognition as a programme that plays an important role in promoting effective governance of the region and its natural resources (CIFOR et al. 2004a).

Reliable time-series data on the conservation and development impacts of PCaC is quite limited. Nevertheless, though PCaC is first and foremost a loosely knit association of farmers it has become a major source of support for forest conservation in Siuna, helping slow the advance of the agricultural frontier. Recent internal PCaC reports state that an estimated 3000 farmers in 80 communities use the cover crop *Mucuna pruriens* on more than 5000 ha rather than relying on burning practices. Some 300 families have seen their production operations stabilized, with planned and diversified farms. By increasing family food security, PCaC’s participants have greatly reduced the impetus for new land clearance. Their actions have protected 2500 ha of forest from felling over the previous 8 years and 15 000 ha of forest have been set aside for restoration in those 80 communities. The group has planted approximately 25 000 *Pimienta Pimenta doica* trees and an additional 10 000 trees of other species in agroforestry systems. PCaC and its participants have created 1000 ha of ‘corredores biológicos campesinos’ (Peasant Biological Corridors) which serve as buffer zones to Bosawas (PCaC-Siuna undated). PCaC contributes, therefore, to the effective management of Bosawas by helping reduce pressure on the reserve and promoting new conservation awareness and attitudes among farmers and ranchers.

### 3.3 The Need for Organizational Strengthening

ACOFOP is an association of community forestry concessionaire organizations, while PCaC is a farmer-based training and experimentation programme that builds a network of innovative farmers who teach each other through horizontal learning exchanges. Nevertheless, both ACOFOP and PCaC and their members face similar organizational challenges, some caused by their rapid expansion, others rooted in their very success in managing for conservation and development.

In the Petén, the communities’ right to participate in forest management remains a struggle in a context in which natural resource conservation and development are shaped by powerful external actors (Nittler and Tschinkel 2005; also see Taylor 2007). The community concessionaires as a whole also face continued scepticism and, in some cases, opposition from industry and some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Gómez and Méndez 2005; see Tropico Verde 2005). In 2003, for example, a new proposal to expand and protect the Mirador Basin would have restricted or halted forest management and livelihood strategies in six community forest concessions. The Mirador Basin Expansion Project was halted, at least temporarily, in mid 2005 after ACOFOP, its members and their allies successfully challenged the project in Guatemala’s Supreme Court (ACOFOP 2005).

Yet the future of the Mirador Basin and its relationship to community management
of the MUZ continues to be unclear. A new proposal emerged in late 2005 for UNESCO to declare the region a global Cultural Heritage site (Cortave personal communication). In 2007, new discussions were emerging in the Petén of projects to develop Mirador’s tourism potential. An Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)-supported Sustainable Development Project for the Petén was awaiting Guatemalan Congressional approval. A key difference in 2007, however, was that ACOFOP and its associated communities had succeeded in gaining more formal participation in negotiations related to these and other proposals affecting the community concessions (Cortave personal communication; Córdova personal communications).

In Siuna, PCaC grapples with ongoing problems with resource governance along the agricultural frontier. A thriving but volatile land market encourages land-use change, expanding agricultural and cattle ranching activities and threatening encroachment on the borders of Bosawas. In addition, government proposals to further integrate Nicaragua into the Central American economy include construction of a major new highway improving Siuna’s connection with the Atlantic coast. While a new highway would probably bring economic growth to Siuna, it would almost certainly also bring intensified pressure on Bosawas through upward pressure on land prices, greater land-market volatility and expanded agricultural and ranching activities.

3.4 Responding to Members’ Changing Needs and Interests
Both ACOFOP and PCaC need to adapt to the changing needs and interests of their members. Since access to the forest resource was won in the case of the Petén, and greater resource and food security achieved in the case of Siuna, both organizations face new challenges. In the Petén, ACOFOP and its members seek to move beyond commercial timber extraction to develop a more integrated management approach including the harvest of NTFPs such as xate (jade palm) and chicle (natural gum), environmental services, community-based ecotourism and cultural site protection. They hope that this more integrated approach will help consolidate the community concessions for the future, responding to conservationist concerns about timber exploitation and opening up new opportunities for both concession members and non-members (Taylor 2007).

In Siuna, one of PCaC’s greatest current challenges is to establish a new and more explicit role in environmental governance related to the Bosawas reserve. Cattle raising has recently become an increasingly important threat to the forest. Since many farmers have now stabilized their agricultural plots and homes, thus slowing the advance of deforestation (the agricultural frontier), the introduction of cattle raises new challenges for maintaining these gains. Thus, PCaC’s members have begun to experiment with more sustainable cattle-raising techniques in the forest area.

3.5 Organizational Strengthening via Improving Indigenous Research and Analysis
ACOFOP and PCaC and their member communities have made considerable progress in promoting sustainable forest management in their regions. External technical assistance has been key in making their positive experiences possible. As
these communities have gained experience and new skills, however, they have sought to assume greater management responsibilities and reduce their dependency on external organizations. The challenge facing these grassroots organizations and their institutional allies is how to ensure that external assistance enhances community capability while also providing the necessary support for their changing needs. In pursuit of more flexible assistance approaches, the Grassroots Assistance Project sought to develop a participatory approach to research and analysis appropriate for the region.

The experiences of Latin American grassroots forestry organizations have rarely been documented systematically from their own perspectives. Research and analysis on natural resource issues are typically presumed to be the purview of professionals whose responsibility it is to identify problems and appropriate responses and then, perhaps, to enlist local participation in implementing solutions. Pasos (2004) comments that this kind of research tends to generate information that responds to external rather than community concerns, rarely returns to the community in useful form and, therefore, often fails to contribute effectively to the strengthening of local capabilities.

A key to ACOFOP and PCaC’s success in natural resource management has been their ability to claim roles as active participants and collaborating partners in conservation and development initiatives. Consolidation of these grassroots organizations’ significant success requires their member communities to become adept at managing the complex politics of their resource base. For example, both ACOFOP and PCaC continually seek to balance conservation and livelihood goals. While conservation is an important component of their agendas, participating members expect their organizations to continue to generate concrete improvements in their livelihoods, often measured in terms of employment and income.

Nevertheless, the external legitimacy of grassroots forestry organizations’ claims to manage forest resources greatly depends on the communities’ ability to demonstrate that they are sustainably managing and conserving forest resources. Though state support for community-based resource management has increased, the communities’ credibility with government and conservationist stakeholders often requires that competing stakeholder claims or criticisms, which are often based on overly narrow data and observations, be countered.

The lack of documentation from the community point of view limits grassroots forestry organizations’ ability to share experiences with related movements and hampers their capability to enter into deliberations on behalf of their own interests and negotiate effectively with policy makers. As one participant put it in the Petén International Exchange meeting, ‘community leaders used to go to meetings with decision-makers and it was other people who had the maps and information’ (cited in Taylor 2004). Community groups need to develop their capacity to recount their own experiences more accurately and persuasively, and to visualize and articulate their needs. This requires strengthening of local skills in the collection, analysis and presentation of data related to their forests and their activities in them.
The Grassroots Assistance Project’s methodology developed an integrated response to two related problems: the lack of systematic and in-depth understanding of the communities’ experiences with forest management from their own perspective, and the need for technical assistance strategies which more effectively build community capabilities to manage for conservation and development.

The project’s research methodology sought to combine the perspectives and skills of forest community members and external professional researchers to develop a comprehensive account of the grassroots forestry organizations’ experiences. Its multimethod research approach (Brewer and Hunter 1989) combined ethnographic techniques of observation, in-depth individual and group interviews and document analysis. Its comparative analytical approach placed current experiences of community-based forestry within their historical contexts. An emergent study design involved regular face-to-face discussions by local and external participants of common or compatible questions and themes. Data-gathering techniques, common research themes and questions and research logistics were periodically discussed and negotiated in face-to-face meetings among participants held in Mexico City, San Salvador and Belem. Community researcher training workshops were held in the Petén and Siuna in which community-based researchers and external context researchers discussed their progress. These procedures aimed to develop a conceptual strategy that allowed fruitful comparison yet remained inductive and adaptive to deal appropriately with diverse cases across geographic regions.

The project also sought to integrate capacity building into each aspect of research design and implementation. To strengthen participating grassroots community forest organizations, administrative and financial responsibilities for planning and implementing the self-systematization and context studies and exchange workshops were highly decentralized. Decentralization required accepting and managing coordination difficulties caused by the varying organizational and community paces and rhythms of the project’s diverse
participants. Decentralization also meant that project activities and outcomes were not identical in each region. In Central America, the project’s coordinators built on extensive community development experience to develop an innovative participatory method that they termed ‘auto-systemization’ (self-systematization), intended to empower communities to articulate their own perspective of who they are and how they have interacted with external assistance providers (In Brazil, by contrast, the project partner’s focus on environmental and development policy led to a greater focus on the policy context driving community assistance).

4.1 Participatory Community Research: the ‘Self-systematization’ Studies

The Central American project team members understood from prior close contact with the community organizations and leaders that through their struggles for recognition and negotiation with external institutions the grassroots groups had developed a wealth of information, many resident experts and a well developed collective consciousness. Yet little effort had been made to process or document this local knowledge. Opportunities were being missed to promote learning and dissemination and to improve communities’ capability to negotiate. To address the lack of systematic knowledge of local experiences, community members were trained and ‘self-systematization’ studies were carried out in four communities and community-based forest associations: Unión Maya Itzá (UMI) and Laborantes del Bosque in the Petén, Guatemala, and Tadazna and El Balsamo in Siuna, Nicaragua. These community ‘systematizers’ were given a significant degree of autonomy. Once trained, provided with a common conceptual framework and sent into the field, local researchers were given minimal external assistance. The studies they produced (Guerra Baños and Recinos 2003; Lizano and Martínez 2003; Martínez Moran and Mercado Zamora 2003; Matías and Aldana 2003) are their own.

The term ‘self-systematization’ signals the goal of accessing and organizing already existing local knowledge and experiences to develop comprehensive, useful research on community forestry experiences. Self-systematization implies not just data gathering but encompasses collective deliberation, negotiation and analysis of local knowledge. It means the collective process of constructing consensus and dissenstion on the explanations, causes and evolution of the communities’ own organizational history. The rhythms and emphases of research and its major lessons are generated by these local actors themselves rather than by external actors. Self-systematization aims to create an institutionalized, permanent process of reflection led by local experts who were themselves trained in the same process (CIFOR and ACICAFOC undated).

Project coordinators Pasos and Sánchez Hidalgo’s self-systemization approach adapted sustainable livelihood and related participatory approaches to the unique conservation and development problems of Central American forest communities (ACICAFOC–PCAC Siuna 2003; CIFOR et al. 2004a; CIFOR and ACICAFOC undated; Sánchez Hidalgo undated). The sustainable livelihood methodology (medios de vida) adapted for the project’s self-systematization studies of community
forest experiences focused on natural resource management. It employed an ‘assets approach’ (FAO 2005b) which instead of emphasizing development problems and obstacles systematically documented community assets, including human, social, physical, natural and financial ‘capitals’ (ACICAFOC–PCaC-Siuna 2003; Sánchez Hidalgo undated). Community members were encouraged to explicitly characterize existing models of natural resource management and related organizational processes and technical assistance. The concreteness and immediate relevance of this conceptual framework led participants to talk together about the resources they need in order to live, and about productive activities in which they possess high levels of experience and expertise. ‘As the participants talk about what has happened with their community’s assets over each historical period, deeper questions about each type of asset emerge’ (ACICAFOC–PCaC-Siuna 2003). This ‘assets approach’ encouraged participants to establish analytical relationships among resources, social actors and institutions, promoting a critical evaluation process necessary for effective planning.

Ten local ‘systematizers’ were nominated by their communities and associations for training in the Petén and ten in Siuna. The selected individuals received intensive 2-week theoretical and hands-on training in workshops organized in their areas by Project Coordinators Rubén Pasos and Nelda Sánchez Hidalgo. Training included methods for facilitating collective reflection and analysis, individual and group interviewing, organization of field notes, information analysis, preparation of documents and use of visual presentation aids. Researchers were trained to gather information related to the sustainable livelihood conceptual framework. A detailed work plan, with research topics and associated information gathering techniques, was developed. At the end of the workshops, four of the ten trainees were selected to carry out the self-systematization studies during four weeks of fieldwork. Researchers were given a modest stipend to offset the opportunity costs of lost wages and productive work in their communities. The researchers were provided with a backpack containing basic research materials, including paper, notebooks, writing implements, tape etc.

According to Project Coordinator Sánchez Hidalgo, the participatory research process varied somewhat by community, but always involved teams of two trained community members interviewing individuals and conducting focus group discussions. First, a historical chronology of the community was constructed collectively, usually with local leaders or community members enlisted to record the discussion at a whiteboard or rotafolio. A collective diagnosis of productive activities and ‘sustainable livelihoods’ followed. Participants were asked to describe the community’s economic activities, to classify them by type, and to develop a physical map of their distribution. They were asked to describe their leadership and to elicit information about informal as well as formal leaders. They were asked to describe moments of community crisis and to whom people turned to resolve such crises. In similar fashion, participants developed an inventory of local organizations. They also discussed possible scenarios to elicit descriptions of community threats or challenges and to help link them to existing community natural, financial or social assets (Sánchez Hidalgo 2006).
4.2 The International Exchange Meeting in the Petén, Guatemala

A key part of the self-systematization methodology was the organization of horizontal community–community exchanges, a technique which built on the Association of Forest Communities of the Petén (ACOFOP) and Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (PCaC)’s own extensive experience with exchange events. Members and leaders of grassroots organizations rarely have the time to document, articulate and discuss their own experiences, much less the opportunity to consider those of their counterparts in other regions. In many cases, new grassroots organizations end up repeating the errors of others because they do not have information about prior successes and failures. Exchange visits allow leaders and members to interact directly, to present and discuss their experiences among themselves, to visit sites of successes and failures, and to collectively design improved management and assistance models. The exchanges also help establish new social and political networks among grassroots organizations.

To help strengthen community political capabilities, the reflections and lessons learned through the self-systematization studies were taken to a higher level. The project organized an international exchange meeting, ‘If You Saw It with My Eyes – Learning from Our Own Experiences of Community Forestry’ in the Petén, Guatemala. More than 50 community-based forestry organization leaders and members, community members, technical support staff members and government officials from Guatemala, Nicaragua, Brazil and Bolivia met over a period of eight days in a systematic exchange of information and experiences with community-based natural resource management and technical assistance. Professional researchers presented preliminary results of their context studies and facilitated discussion to help ensure adequate coordination of the regional context studies and local self-systematization studies (CIFOR et al. 2004b).

4.3 Do Participatory Techniques Really Lead to Change?

The self-systematization studies and the international exchange meeting sought ultimately to enhance communities’ political capability to identify their own needs and to make proposals for collaboration with third parties. Yet some researchers have questioned the extent to which participatory approaches and methods actually catalyze changes in the status quo effectively. Cornwall (2000), for example, argues that people need to have opportunities to make and shape their own spaces for engagement and that processes must be developed to enhance the accountability of local and global institutions affecting peoples’ lives. In other words, community involvement in research and development planning must go beyond accurately gathering information and identifying needs to enable communities to operate effectively in a political sphere of negotiation.

Sánchez Hidalgo (2006) points out that several ‘proofs of consistency’ should
be required of the self-systematization process, to indicate whether it really produces results. The first proof of consistency requires confirmation that the analysis has been constructed from the peoples’ own experience and perspective. The second proof lies in whether community leaders actually utilize the results of the studies. The third proof comes from whether the studies provoke change. Below, the preliminary impacts of the project’s activities according to Sánchez Hidalgo’s framework are assessed.
The project’s collaborative research aimed to combine the skills and perspectives of both professional researchers and local people in order to develop the most comprehensive analyses possible of community-based forest management experiences. The project’s differently trained and uniquely located sets of researchers brought distinct but complementary analytical frameworks to their research. While this paper focuses mainly on the experience with the community self-systematization studies (see Cronkleton et al. 2008) for discussion of the regional context studies), there were instructive differences in the foci and frameworks employed by professional and community-based researchers.

For example, the context study researchers adopted an analytical framework which placed the Petén and Siuna in the broader territorial context of Central America and within the context of a broad ‘community’ of local, national and international stakeholders in the region’s threatened forests. These professional researchers sought to explain what conditions account for the emergence of highly successful grassroots movements in the Petén and Siuna when such collective action has failed to develop in so many other contexts.

They studied the environmental, political, social and economic factors shaping the organizational trajectories of the communities’ forest management. They aimed to identify the movements’ principal strengths and weaknesses and their needs for assistance. Finally, these researchers documented the communities’ experiences with traditional technical assistance and the emergence of alternative forms of assistance that strengthen communities’ management and political capabilities.

By contrast, the community-based researchers employed an analytical framework which, understandably, explored factors at the local level that directly shape natural resource management and livelihoods. Their research was designed to be highly interactive with community members, with group interviews and community discussion workshops. The self-systematization studies focused more concretely on eliciting consensus on the key historical events that had shaped their communities. Drawing on the assets identification approach imparted in their training by project coordinators, local researchers explored community production strategies which, while largely based on forest resources, also involved diversified subsistence and commercial practices.

5. Results of the Participatory Research
agriculture and animal raising. They inventoried existing physical, natural, financial and social resources within the communities, then focused on key vulnerabilities and threats to local wellbeing and resource sustainability. They also assessed the major needs of the community, potential for positive change, and possible allies in improving their management and livelihood capabilities.

5.1 The Self-systematization Community Studies
The documentation of the community self-systematization research was generated with the assistance of project coordinators and included written reports, detailed tables and PowerPoint® presentations. Initial results of the self-systematization studies were presented to communities and feedback was solicited before the final presentations and documents were delivered to community leaders and members. Multiple presentations were also made to external audiences, including participants in the international exchange in the Petén.

Below, the findings of the self-systematization studies in the four communities are summarized and their significance is discussed.

5.1.1 Discussion
a) Relationships between communities and the resource
These four self-systematization studies suggest that a range of direct and indirect community relationships to protected-area management exists. The Unión Maya Itzá (UMI) and the Workers of the Forest in Guatemala are formally and directly involved in management of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR)’s Multiple Use Zone (MUZ), one as collective owner of forest lands, and the other as holder of a 25-year management concession. In Nicaragua, El Bálsamo directly borders the Bosawas Reserve while Tadazna does not. Yet both communities are helping slow the advance of the agricultural frontier by developing more sustainable production techniques and participating in the Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (PCaC)-promoted Peasant Biological Corridor connecting with Bosawas.

b) Conservation and productive strategies
In similar fashion, the four communities show that forest management for conservation is closely integrated with diverse production and development strategies. UMI members pursue agroforestry strategies emphasizing non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and to a lesser degree, commercial timber harvesting and sale while the Workers of the Forest focus principally on timber harvesting, processing and commercialization. El Bálsamo members pursue agroforestry in combination with harvesting of NTFPs such as essential oils, and, to a lesser degree, sustainable small-animal husbandry. Tadazna members are principally involved in cattle production and seek to combine sustainable agrosilvopastoral systems involving NTFPs.

c) Benefits and the boundaries of ‘community’
The definition and boundaries of the ‘community’ participating in natural resource management vary in the four cases. Founded by refugees returning under the 1996 Peace Accords, the UMI is a cooperative. It benefits directly and collectively from forest-related resources,
Petén, Guatemala: Unión Maya Itzá

Unión Maya Itzá (UMI) is a community of nearly 1000 inhabitants located near Guatemala’s border with Mexico. Although the UMI is located in the Maya Biosphere Reserve’s Multiple Use Zone, the people became owners of their 5924-ha forest through the government refugee resettlement programme, part of the 1996 Peace Accords. The community was formed as a cooperative in 1992 by Civil War refugees and today includes 155 families of 8 distinct indigenous ethnic groups, languages and mestizos. UMI’s members pursue small-scale agriculture and animal-raising strategies, within the context of a larger agro-forestry strategy including timber and non-timber forest product (NTFP) harvesting and commercialization, and artisanry. They also receive significant income from remittances from community members who work in Mexico. The UMI’s forests are certified as sustainably managed by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

The UMI’s self-identified social capital includes a village council, women’s organization, artisan and carpenters’ association, and membership of external organizations such as the Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP), and FSC Smart Wood certification. Physical capital includes electricity in the community, eight common piped water sources, a clinic and four community-owned and operated cargo trucks and buses. Productive activities include timber harvesting, xate (ornamental jade palm leaf – *Chamaedororea* spp.) collection, cultivation of basic food crops, small artisanry centres and small-animal husbandry. Natural capital includes their nearly 6000 ha of forest in productive use, including 3700 ha dedicated to timber harvesting, a xate nursery and a 13-ha xate plantation, and 700 ha for cultivation of maize, bean, peanuts and other crops for consumption and small-scale commercialization. Financial capital includes sales of food crops, xate and artisanry, wage labour work, NGO donations, and remittances.

The UMI’s development strategies include planning for forest conservation through the sale of environmental services, sustainable management of timber and NTFP extraction, zoning of use of their territory, agricultural production for subsistence and commercialization, and strengthening of local organizational and management capability.

The UMI’s principal vulnerabilities are migration of young people, forest fires, squatter encroachment, flooding of agricultural areas, and scarcity of markets. The external threats they identified included a planned hydroelectric dam in Mexico and the Plan Puebla Panama, which is anticipated to bring new competitive pressures and stresses on members’ conservation and development strategies. The UMI’s strategies in response to these vulnerabilities include strengthening monitoring of their boundaries, seeking external markets for diversified production, improving storage facilities, and introducing and developing eco-tourism (Matías and Aldana 2003).
Petén, Guatemala: Laborantes del Bosque

The Laborantes del Bosque (Workers of the Forest) are a non-profit ‘civil society’ of 91 members based in the northeastern town of Melchor de Mencos, located on the border between Guatemala and Belize. In 1999, the Workers of the Forest were granted a community concession to manage 19,390 ha in the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR)’s Multiple Use Zone (MUZ). The Workers of the Forest's members do not live in their concession area, but their forest management activities are a principal source of livelihood. Their forest activities and sawmill operations represent a significant source of employment and income both for its 91 members (70 men and 21 women) and non-members in the community of Melchor de Mencos. The Workers of the Forest concession has been certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as sustainably managed.

The Workers of the Forest’s social capital consists of an administrative council and general assembly for the society, auditors’ committee and commission, and women’s group. They also include as social capital a hard-won level of organizational development, including internal regulations and statutes, an annual operating plan for forest management, administrative and functions manuals, and member life insurance policies. Their social capital also encompasses close relations with external organizations including the National Commission for Protected Areas (CONAP), the Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP), the Community-owned Community Forest Services Firm (FORESCOM), other community-based concessions in Melchor de Mencos, and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The Workers of the Forest’s physical capital consists of their office installations, sawmill and timber extraction and processing equipment, fire control tools, and three archaeological sites within their concession. Natural capital refers to their concession area, which has valuable commercial species including Mahogany (Swietenia macrophylla) and Spanish Cedar (Cedrela odorata), and access to the Rio Azul waterway. Financial capital includes the extraction and processing of over 900 m³ of certified wood in 2004, operating loans from banks and NGOs, including ACOFOP, and income from rent of sawmill, carpentry and cafeteria services.

The Workers of the Forest’s development strategies aim at improving their competitiveness in processing and commercialization of wood in local, national and international markets. They are working to further develop a now-incipient activity in furniture manufacture and expand sales of their milling, carpentry and cafeteria services. In the future, Workers of the Forest members want to develop eco-tourism activities in their concession, collect and market seeds from valuable plant species, and develop xate (Chamaerdorea spp.) and community pharmacy activities among women members of the concession group.

The Workers of the Forest’s self-identified local vulnerabilities involve deteriorating road access to their concession area, forest fires and illegal logging, territorial conflicts with neighbouring Belize, and internal divisions within the concession organization. They plan to respond to these local vulnerabilities by improving road maintenance, negotiating new access arrangements with Belizean neighbours and strengthening their monitoring committees’ activities in the concession. Their externally derived vulnerabilities include the possibility of future government policy changes undermining commitment to community forest concessions, and a planned highway to Mexico being promoted within the rubric of the Plan Puebla Panamá. The Workers of the Forest members plan to address these external threats through continued commitment to organizing at the secondary level, as they have done with ACOFOP, and by seeking support from accompanying NGOs (Guerra Baños and Recinos 2003).
Siuna, Nicaragua: El Bálsamo

El Bálsamo is located on the border of the Bosawas Reserve in Siuna, Nicaragua. El Bálsamo is a community of 428 families of small and medium-scale agroforestry producers. This community has, with project and Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (PCA/C) support, mapped and zoned their 2500 ha of lands, of which 2160 ha are under primary and secondary forest cover.

Zone I constitutes a corridor to Bosawas and is dedicated to conservation and permanent (rather than shifting) crop cultivation. Non-traditional forest production is also carried out in Zone I, and includes agroforestry systems in association with *pimienta* (*Pimenta dioica* – Allspice), coffee, cacao, cinnamon, citrus and other products grown in the forest. Here El Bálsamo members produce maize, beans and rice, and other vegetables on a small scale. They have incorporated use of the *frijol abono* – *Mucuna pruriens* – cover crop to eliminate traditional clearing and burning, reporting that yields have nearly doubled. Zone II is dedicated to the sustainable production of animals, including cattle, pigs and chickens, for consumption and marketing.

El Bálsamo’s social capital includes a village council, and committees related to schools, religion, health, non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and tourism. Residents participate in an essential-oils cooperative, and are members of external organizations such as PCA/C. Physical and natural capital consists of productive activities with basic grains, essential oils and seedlings and fish farming. The residents hope to take advantage of the area’s ecotourism potential related to El Bálsamo’s mountain corridor to Bosawas. Financial capital includes sales of basic grains, fruits, vegetables, essential-oil plants and small domestic animals.

El Bálsamo’s development strategies aim at improving food security and diversification of production and income to stabilize community families. They improve agricultural yields using the *frijol abono* cover crops and are developing agroforestry systems to harvest, process and market NTFPs such as essential oils, including *pimienta*, *zacate limón* (*Cymbopogon ciratus*) and *jengibre* (*Zingiber officinale*). El Bálsamo’s members plan for future marketing of environmental services, ecotourism and reforestation to help maintain the peasant biological corridor promoted by PCA/C and the Central American Indigenous and Peasant Coordinator of Communal Agroforestry (ACICAFOC).

The principal threats facing El Bálsamo consist of natural phenomena such as forest fires, droughts and landslides. Uncertain markets and low prices also create problems for local families. Residents also suffer physical insecurity stemming from continuing violence in the area. The community is vulnerable to the effects of its out-migration as Siuna opens the door to newcomers pursuing an extensive cattle-raising model rather than the more sustainable methods pursued by El Bálsamo’s more established residents. External threats include expected price drops with further regional trade liberalization. El Bálsamo’s strategies in response to these vulnerabilities involve organizing fire brigades and intensifying monitoring, increasing diversification of crops, and strengthening community organizations, including formation of a grain cooperative (Martínez Moran and Mercado Zamora 2003).
Siuna, Nicaragua: Tadazna

Tadazna is a community of 213 families (1065 inhabitants) located in the Rio Blanco area of Siuna. Originally established in the 1960s by settlers working on chicle (*Manilkara* spp.) harvesting and timber extraction, Tadazna's principal economic activity today is cattle raising, with some agricultural cropping for local consumption. Like El Bálsamo, with project and Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (PCaC) support this community has mapped and zoned its 6550 ha of land, of which 2900 ha are under pasture and 840 ha are dedicated to agriculture.

Zone I is mostly pasture with compacted soils; it is used for extensive cattle raising for milk and meat commercialization. Zone II is dedicated to combined agriculture and a limited amount of small-animal husbandry (e.g. pigs and chickens). Production is principally dedicated to consumption and limited commercialization. PCaC's promotion of the *frijol abono* – *Mucuna pruriens* – cover crop has been influential in this zone and has helped stabilize family food security. Zone III is reserved for agroforestry combinations. In addition to traditional food cropping, non-traditional plants such as allspice (*Pimenta dioica*), cacao, coco and citrus are cultivated. As a significantly forested area, this zone is considered part of Tadazna's contribution to the PCaC-promoted ‘peasant biological corridor’.

Tadazna's self-identified social capital includes community organizations such as a multipurpose cooperative, and community development, crime prevention, civil defence and natural resources committees and women's groups. Physical capital consists of a cooperative meeting house, community roads, clinic, well and latrines, in addition to pastures, gardens and storage facilities. Financial capital includes income from the sale of cattle and firewood, wage labour and local restaurants.

Tadazna's principal development strategy reflects its inhabitants' principal productive activity, seeking more sustainable cattle-raising methods through improved cattle species, better pastures and forest-pasture systems. Tadazna wants to increase yields of basic food grains through greater use of cover crop systems such as those promoted by PCaC.

The main vulnerabilities include continued use of burning techniques by some community members, which reduce forest cover and undermine local water sources. Deteriorating road conditions have encouraged more local sales of grains, provoking a reduction in basic food prices and discouraging producers from investing in improved seeds. The community's response strategy includes farm planning, zoning and use of cover crops to achieve natural regeneration, implementation of forest-pasture systems for cattle management, reforestation of watersheds, improved seed selection, and dedication of user fees to road maintenance (Lizano and Martinez 2003).
income from which is invested in infrastructure such as electricity, potable piped water, a clinic and community-owned stores, cargo trucks and buses. By contrast, the Workers of the Forest is a non-profit ‘civil society’ whose 91 members benefit directly from forest-related activities in the form of income, and collectively owned and operated infrastructure and services; non-members in the town of Melchor de Mencos benefit indirectly in the form of employment income from the Workers of the Forest’s timber harvesting and processing. The entire community of El Bálsamo is involved in and benefits from natural resource management in the form of improved, more stable and sustainable agro-forestry and small-animal raising. Tadazna’s community benefits as a whole in similar fashion through improved food security and the development of more productive, more sustainable animal raising systems.

d) Principal vulnerabilities
The main threats facing communities’ capability to manage for conservation and development are in many ways similar, despite their diverse regional contexts. In addition to natural and artificial physical threats such as fire, all four communities face problems posed by impingement of outside actors engaged in unauthorized settlement and resource extraction and other illegal activities. Less directly, but as importantly, the communities confront pressures from large-scale external development initiatives, such as a planned hydro-electric project in neighbouring Mexico and proposed highway projects related to the Plan Puebla Panamá. At the same time, all four face difficulties in gaining adequate access to markets for forest and agricultural products. The UMI in Guatemala and El Bálsamo in Nicaragua identify the loss of members through poverty-driven out-migration as a major vulnerability.

e) Organizational strategies
All four communities respond to these vulnerabilities by seeking to consolidate their current organizational and management capabilities while working to develop new ones. All four communities are working to improve the productivity and sustainability of their current activities in timber, NTFPs, agro-forestry and animal raising. The UMI, Workers of the Forest and El Bálsamo want to diversify their productive activities in forest-related timber and NTFPs. El Bálsamo and Tadazna are still particularly concerned to further stabilize local food security. The UMI and Workers of the Forest both aim to improve their border monitoring to control illegal access and extraction by outsider and together with El Bálsamo express interest in developing eco-tourism activities, encouraged by their close proximity to forest reserves or cultural sites of interest to outsiders.

All four communities strive to further develop and consolidate their role in formal forest management in their areas. In Guatemala, the UMI and Workers of the Forest are concerned to protect the legitimacy of community concessions in a context in which future official policy support may be uncertain. In Nicaragua, though neither El Bálsamo nor Tadazna have formal involvement in the management of Bosawas, both actively support the Peasant Biological Corridor, express interest in pursuing reforestation activities, and in general want their contributions toward conservation to achieve greater recognition.
f) Technical support needs

These four self-systematization studies signal areas in which external technical support might be fruitfully directed. All four communities express a need for assistance in organizational strengthening, a perceived need underlying their interest in participating in the self-systematization training and research. Organizational strengthening is particularly needed in the substantive areas of commercialization, environmental services, and ecotourism, as well as in strengthening the productivity of timber, agroforestry and ranching within the constraints of environmental sustainability. The communities also signal the need for assistance in making their land and natural resource tenure rights more secure. Achieving greater tenure security requires that communities increase their negotiating capacity with influential stakeholders, including official policy makers and national and international conservation groups shaping the management of protected areas.

Uneven educational levels and literacy skills among community-based researchers led project coordinators to pair participants with stronger educational backgrounds with others possessing weaker literacy skills but strong experience and credibility in the communities. Project coordinators provided editing and organizational support in the development of the study drafts. Each team produced its own final written study. In addition to the written documents which were formally presented to the authorities in each community, significant emphasis was placed on exhaustive direct local feedback and discussion of the studies’ findings.

g) Methodological considerations

The training of local researchers and the conduct of the self-systematization studies faced a number of obstacles. First, the selection of communities to be studied and negotiation of their participation proved a lengthy process. The Association of Forest Communities of the Petén (ACOFOP) and PCaC were crucial sponsors, lending their credibility to the activity. Forest communities and forest management groups were sought whose experiences illustrated both the major achievements and significant problems of community-based resource management in the region. They also had to be willing to commit considerable time and effort to the self-systematization activity. In the Petén, one community initially considered for self-systematization declined to participate, mainly because of members’ fears that systematic research and public discussion could exacerbate existing internal conflicts.

The self-systematization studies in Central America illustrate community members’ existing and potential capabilities to carry out systematic studies of their communities’ diverse resource-related assets (natural, physical, human, social and financial), to identify and prioritize their principal development and conservation vulnerabilities and problems, to develop indigenous strategies of response, and to identify potential sources of external support and collaboration. These studies suggest strongly that community members link conservation and development objectives into increasingly integrated resource management strategies. The studies also indicate areas where outside assistance could appropriately support community-based conservation and development strategies.
In addition, these self-systematization studies point not only to the need for assistance. They also suggest some of the outlines of an ‘accompaniment’ model that could strengthen local participation in natural resource management for both conservation and development effectively. This accompaniment model would recognize the existing knowledge, expertise and analytical capabilities within these four communities. It would employ a flexible approach to designing and implementing support activities, as the communities’ needs for organizational strengthening vary and are likely to change as those capabilities develop over time. All four communities need accompaniment that helps strengthen their political capabilities in order to secure and consolidate resource tenure rights and their right to a place at the negotiation table with influential stakeholders.
A principal objective of the Grassroots Assistance Project and its participatory research activities was to document the forest communities’ experiences with technical assistance and to help develop new approaches which might better build local capabilities. Below, the communities’ experiences both with traditional technical assistance and an emerging alternative model of ‘accompanyment’ are briefly discussed.

6.1 The ‘Official’ Model of Technical Assistance
The external support received by the Association of Forest Communities of the Petén (ACOFOP) and Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (PCaC) has varied in both type and approach through what Gómez and Méndez (2005) called ‘official’ and ‘pro-community’ models of technical assistance. Rather than necessarily competing, these two models have served different needs at different stages of communities’ involvement in natural resource management. These two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive but could play complementary roles in supporting community-based organizations.

The ‘official’ or traditional model of assistance has been highly effective at mobilizing large-scale financial resources, contributing technical knowledge and skills, and recruiting the participation of important institutions in ecological and natural resource management (Gómez and Méndez 2005). In the Petén, assistance from international development agencies and donors such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the World Bank, the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau (KFW), the UK Department for International Development (DFID), the Ford Foundation, international NGOs and their national counterparts helped communities satisfy legal and bureaucratic requirements to gaining forest-concession rights. They carried out socioeconomic and technical planning, and provided valuable technical assistance and training in forest management, tourism and marketing (Gómez and Méndez 2005).

In Siuna, external resources such as those Oxfam channelled through PCaC’s parent institution, the National Union of Farmers and Ranchers (UNAG), helped lay the organizational foundation for PCaC’s community promoter and exchange programmes (Cuellar and Kandel 2005).

Technical assistance programmes often make inadequate provisions for minimizing dependency relations with beneficiaries. In the Petén, according
to many community members and observers, the relationships between communities and the NGOs were ultimately characterized by paternalism and dependency. ACOFOP and its associated communities and organizations complained that the NGOs’ methodology did not allow communities to develop their own capabilities for integrated forest management, administration and business (Gómez and Méndez 2005). In the case of Siuna, PCaC and its parent institution, UNAG, often found themselves at loggerheads over issues of administrative autonomy.

Moreover, traditionally organized technical assistance usually arrives as formal projects requiring traditional, organized hierarchies that may run contrary to the horizontal, process-oriented social networks that structure grassroots movements. Even where projects avoid generating dependency, the demands of formal technical projects often push participants to respond to project objectives and conform to planning frameworks. Pasos (2006) argues that in the Petén the NGOs were designed from the top down, and tended to evolve into project implementers, reducing the community to the role of ‘beneficiary’. Their staff tended to focus on satisfying donor requirements and as they were hired by the NGO rather than selected by the community they ended up working more for the NGO in the community than for the community.

In the Siuna case, while UNAG is a traditional, formal organization, many of PCaC’s most important and innovative characteristics are better conceptualized as those of a social movement rather than a formal organization – none of its network of almost 500 volunteer promoters appears in a formal organizational hierarchy. The contradictions that official projects can pose for a movement, for example, were dramatized when PCaC found itself responsible for enforcing loan agreements and collecting debts incurred by members participating in a farmer loan project, a relationship that threatened to undermine its capability to sustain its social networks in the countryside. Significantly, by 1993 PCaC’s strength as an organization and influence in the countryside led to internal tensions with its parent institution, UNAG, particularly with relation to the channelling of external resources (Cuellar and Kandel 2005).

External technical, financial and organizational assistance from the state, international donor agencies and foundations and international and national NGOs has been crucial for the emergence and consolidation of grassroots forest movements in each of the selected regional cases. Traditional technical assistance has made it possible in both regions for forest communities and their organizations to surmount existing legal and organizational obstacles to real participation in resource management. It has also been important for developing the basic skills and knowledge needed by community leaders and members for effective management for conservation and development.

Yet the design and implementation of traditional technical assistance has been shaped largely by external institutional and political considerations and is generally expert-driven. The existing wealth of local knowledge and organization has often been overlooked. Moreover, external technical and financial assistance typically arrives in the shape of formal projects that are fully designed and target predetermined indicators.
The formal logic of projects seeks to determine in advance the principal objectives, methods and indicators of success that are easily quantifiable but not necessarily locally relevant. While a powerful tool for effective formal organization of activities in many ways, it does not lend itself to learning from the field and adapting to unexpected outcomes with modified objectives and methods. Nor does it easily accommodate changes in the role of beneficiary communities as they gain greater management capability. In short, the formal logic of projects tends to measure success in terms of completion as planned of the project itself, rather than in terms of catalyzing greater capability among community members.

Thus, projects’ objectives, timelines and requirements of financial accountability lend themselves to, even require, formal institutional structures. They encourage traditional organizational hierarchies with technical experts at the top and community beneficiaries at the bottom. While such interventions can produce concrete benefits with increased efficiency and transparency, formal project imperatives often run counter to the more horizontal, process-oriented principles of community-based movements. Traditional technical assistance, as a result, often fails to strengthen local capabilities adequately. Communities and grassroots organizations end up being less rather than more able to assume increased responsibilities and autonomy in resource governance.

6.2 The ‘Pro-community’ Model of Accompaniment

The Petén and Siuna context studies, the four self-systematization studies and discussion in the Petén International Exchange meeting suggest that a non-traditional model of technical support is emerging in Central America. This ‘pro-community’ model of ‘accompainment’ (Gómez and Méndez 2005) may under appropriate circumstances be more effective than many traditional assistance models in strengthening community capabilities. It attempts to create conditions through which rural communities can become active participants responding to their shared needs, generating processes of learning and ownership that local groups can sustain after external support disappears.

The use of the word ‘accompaniment’ rather than ‘assistance’ signals an important principle: that external support of grassroots forest movements should aim to develop a role of ‘accompanist’ of a social process rather than acting on the community’s behalf. External support institutions and communities ‘travel together generating ideas and identifying challenges to the consolidation of community forest management’ (Gómez and Méndez 2005). This approach recognizes the legitimacy and importance of the community’s knowledge and history of social organization and utilizes both as starting points for the design of technical accompaniment. Pro-community assistance seeks to avoid taking over tasks, responsibilities and roles already within local capabilities, but rather to ‘do only what local communities cannot do.’

In the Petén, several key international institutions and foundations, including the Ford Foundation, the Agricultural Frontier Project (PFA), the Iniciativa Cristiana Romero (CIR), the Inter-Ecclesiastic Organization for Cooperative and Development, the German Service for Social Cooperation and Helvetas of Switzerland, have explicitly promoted...
the development of communities’ organizational and political capabilities. Though these institutions’ financial contributions have been more modest than those of official assistance, they have invested directly in the incipient community institutions. The Ford Foundation, for example, invested US$ 670,000 between 1999 and 2004 for the institutional development and capability strengthening of ACOFOP. Oxfam’s support of the horizontal farmer-to-farmer exchanges in Siuna, and PFA’s decision to channel support to PCaC-Siuna are other examples of this alternative approach to strengthening local capabilities. In both regions, these institutions have supported social and political networking at national and international levels by providing necessary inputs and resources such as access to information, linking with relevant processes and events worldwide, as well as financial support.

A significant dimension of the experience with alternative technical accompaniment in Central America has been the emergence of indigenous accompaniment to grassroots forest movements. Although its primary role is not to provide financial support to community concession organizations, ACOFOP has developed into a key indigenous accompanist of the community concession process in Guatemala. In Nicaragua, PCaC has assumed a key role of accompanist of its member communities’ social processes. Both ACOFOP and PCaC have also taken on important roles as interlocutors between external state institutions and international donors interested in investing resources in the region. Both are also recognized as principal political representatives of their associated communities and associations at national and international levels.

### 6.2.1 Organizational principles of the acompañamiento model

From the experiences with innovative technical accompaniment of community forestry experiences in the Petén and Siuna, certain organizational principles and organizational characteristics may be distilled in a preliminary fashion.

Underlying organizational principles of the acompañamiento model may include:

a) **A long-term focus on social process**

An acompañamiento model employs a long-term focus on the social processes underlying community self-management as the building block for governance. It implies a more flexible type of cooperation, more horizontal, and closer to populations and their social processes, less tied to a formal logic of projects (Gómez and Méndez 2005). The acompañamiento model tries to avoid paternalism and unnecessary external dependency via a sustained commitment to learning by local actors. Community members should become protagonists in their development processes, even at the cost of errors committed in the process of learning. While it remains important that support activities generate positive results, project results may also be measured in terms of lessons learned and processes strengthened rather than solely in terms of formal outputs.

A more process-oriented approach to measuring project outcomes will require the development of new evaluation indicators. For example, measures of successful process strengthening could include the number of planning and decision-making cycles including local participants, development and implementation of information sharing procedures, community apprentices
trained, number and type of project activities successfully devolved to community participants, and instances of project priority activities appropriately adjusted in response to increasing community capabilities.

b) A focus on shared learning
Both local and external participants in community-based forestry possess significant experience and knowledge to contribute to effective management for conservation and development. An accompaniment model seeks to combine the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of each participating group. It works to strengthen capabilities for research, analysis, monitoring and evaluation and to increase levels of participation, both within the communities (via self-systematization methods, for example) and among external professional support staff (via participation in experiential exchanges with communities and other actors). To do this, it is necessary to make the learning process more explicit by encouraging reflection and facilitating the documentation of these processes.

c) A commitment to community empowerment
The accompaniment model is committed to the empowerment of communities. Empowerment may be viewed in concrete terms as increased control over resources, knowledge of resource rights and responsibilities, and the ability to decide, mediate, negotiate and defend rights. This kind of empowerment is fundamental if communities are to become active managers capable of negotiating and collaborating on an equal footing. This empowerment includes communities’ capabilities to exercise influence over accompaniment activities. Though external support institutions necessarily respond to the priorities of donor and state institutions, they should also take into account community perspectives in designing and implementing flexible programmes. Communities should be able to participate effectively in identifying and prioritizing problems needing attention, negotiating support activities, and assessing the success of those activities. The accompaniment model also seeks to support the political negotiation capabilities of communities and their leaders, in large part through development and strengthening of social networks.

d) Continual strengthening of technical and organizational capabilities
The pro-community accompaniment model strives to progressively devolve growing responsibilities to community members. As one Central American project coordinator described this principle: ‘Do only what the communities cannot do’. This principle does not require external support providers to ‘work themselves out of a job’ but rather to work themselves into a different job most appropriately reflecting a community’s current moment in a process of learning. What communities need will vary at different stages of their development and include, for example, legal assistance, conflict resolution, technical forestry expertise, organizational strengthening, and effective internal and external communication. The accompaniment approach is also reflected in the funding pattern: some funds may be transferred directly to the organization to manage logistics and other activities for which it is held accountable.

e) Validation of local knowledge
The pro-community accompaniment model recognizes that local people
possess in-depth knowledge of their environmental, social, political and economic contexts. This provides them with unique perspectives on what is relevant and what is feasible, as well as the insight necessary to plan and evaluate potential actions. They still need scientific, administrative and political information but this should be delivered in a format as intelligible as possible to local people. This implies not a debate over the primacy of scientific or traditional knowledge but instead an understanding that efforts to facilitate synergy between the two forms of knowledge are likely to lead to promising outcomes.

6.2.2 Organizational characteristics of the accompaniment model

Successful, systematic pursuit of the above-described organizational principles underlying the accompaniment model call for significant reconsideration of some common organizational characteristics of external technical support.

a) Closer proximity to communities and their processes

Support agencies providing effective technical accompaniment should encourage technical staff to develop a closer proximity to communities and their processes. This implies greater time spent in the communities for the purposes of observing and listening, as well as sharing expertise related to concrete support activities. This closer engagement with community processes requires adequate logistical and financial support for the mobilization and housing of staff while in the field. It requires orienting the training of technicians so that they are acute observers and active listeners and have the capacity to recognize their own biases and reach across boundaries of class, ethnicity and gender. It will also require design of staff job descriptions and evaluation criteria so that time spent in the communities is evaluated as time well invested in staff members’ successful performance.

b) Flattening technical staff–community hierarchies

An accompaniment model seeks to flatten unnecessary organizational and social hierarchies separating technical staff from community members. More-horizontal relations between technical staff and community members are necessary to make negotiation of support activity objectives and timing possible. Rather than occupying traditional roles and statuses of service provider and beneficiaries (or project targets), staff members and community members are ideally viewed as colleagues, albeit with differential skills and experiences, in pursuit of common goals. At the same time, underlying unequal power relations between external stakeholders and communities have to be acknowledged and managed.

c) Greater flexibility in responding to community input

Greater organizational flexibility is required to respond to community-identified strengths, needs, priorities and strategies. Technical staff needs to assume a role of facilitator which moves beyond power-neutral approaches to recognize that communities typically begin as the weakest participants in multistakeholder dialogues. As communities gain skills to analyze, plan and manage, their visibility and power to negotiate what they need, will increase. Technical staff are likely to fear that open-ended negotiation with communities will result in their getting pushed ‘off track’ by limitless community expectations. Nevertheless, facilitating
community input into the identification of problems, design of responses and implementation of action can allow for a greater appreciation of complex community problems and priorities, resulting in more effective implementation of support activities. It is not a question of technicians giving up their goals and agenda to respond to the each community’s changing whim, but instead opening up to negotiations so that more needs of each stakeholder can be met. Moreover, the enhanced understanding made possible by more effective negotiation can make it easier for each party to make clear its own capabilities and limitations.

d) Information exchange as a more horizontal, two-way process

In a technical accompaniment model, the intended flow of information is seen as a two-way process. External staff transfers knowledge and skills to community members through training. At the same time, as technical staff and communities participate together in the process of ‘accompaniment’, communities also ‘train’ technical staff in principles and methods of effective accompaniment. Technical staff thereby gain better understanding of local contexts, constraints and opportunities, and the need for research that addresses locally relevant issues. In an important sense, staff originally prepared to act as traditional technical experts become more skilled and effective ‘accompanists’ as they engage in work together with the communities.

Moreover, the accompaniment model contemplates that ultimately the community itself will play a central role in mobilizing outside experts. External donors may channel funds to the community, which then may participate in final decisions on hiring of technical staff. This more horizontal relationship is key for ensuring that the two sets of parties learn from each other.

e) Incorporating social process indicators into performance benchmarks

The strengthening of community capabilities requires direct investment and should be incorporated explicitly into objective benchmarks of organizational success. In the case of projects, social process needs to be represented in explicit ‘outputs’ rather than representing vaguely identified ‘preferred means’ toward traditional project objectives. Benchmarks of successful staff performance need to reflect and reward their commitment to community processes and capability strengthening, including skills in effective negotiation. Examples might include designing objectives such as the successful training of apprentices, specific skills transferred to community members, specific functions devolved to communities over the life of the project, and periodic transition to new support roles to be assumed by the accompanying organization in response to new community capabilities.

6.2.3 Combining traditional assistance and alternative accompaniment models

The authors do not suggest that traditional technical assistance be replaced with an alternative accompaniment model. Indeed, one of the limitations of the alternative accompaniment model is that supporting institutions’ financial contributions have tended to be more modest than those of institutions providing more traditional assistance. Moreover, the accompaniment model’s commitment to social process implies the need to stay close to the
rhythms of participating communities, an approach which may be more appropriate for smaller-scale donor programmes. There remains an important role for larger-scale financial and technical support organized more traditionally. A more traditional technical assistance model may be more appropriate for making possible larger-scale, coordinated efforts to promote appropriate conservation and development outcomes at regional levels. At the same time, alternative accompaniment approaches might build local organizational capability to take more effective advantage of traditional technical assistance programmes.

Rather than seeing the choice as being between traditional assistance and alternative accompaniment models, effective approaches to supporting grassroots natural resource organizations might build on the strengths of both traditional technical assistance and of such ‘pro-community’ models of accompaniment. With an adequate understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of both traditional and non-traditional technical assistance approaches, new models of support might be developed which will have more consistently positive outcomes, conceivably at significantly lower cost. Such combined approaches will also help frame and nurture new and more effective forms of collaboration among the diverse stakeholders. These stakeholders, despite their widely varying identities and interests, nevertheless share a commitment to protecting biodiversity through managing resources for conservation and development.
7.1 The Emergence of Forest Steward Communities

The experiences of the Association of Forest Communities of the Petén (ACOFOP) and the Farmer-to-Farmer Programme (PCaC) suggest that a new social actor has begun to emerge in the governance of protected forests in Central America, the forest steward community. These forest steward communities have attained significant legal and customary access and rights over forest resources. They are poised to become integral partners in broad-based efforts to sustainably manage natural resources for conservation and development.

An important question for government policy makers, international donors and development agencies, international conservation organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and other stakeholders in Latin America’s threatened forests, is how best to support these grassroots community groups and to encourage the emergence of others? How to provide assistance which provides needed knowledge and skills but which recognizes and builds on communities’ hard won experience and expertise?

7.2 Innovations and Preliminary Impacts of the Collaborative Research

The Grassroots Assistance Project’s collaborative research activities in Central America helped address a need for stronger indigenous capabilities for research and analysis. The project’s innovative collaborative approach supported communities’ needs to document their own experiences, while drawing on professional expertise for analysis of the larger context. Drawing on external and local ‘experts’ helped create more comprehensive, multi-sided accounts of the successes and problems of community-based forest management. The collaborative research process and its results also aimed to help strengthen the grassroots organizations’ capabilities to negotiate in an increasingly complex political context. Finally, the project self-consciously attempted to identify and implement in its activities characteristics of an alternative model of technical ‘accompaniment’ that may more effectively strengthen forest communities and their secondary-level organizations.

What has been the impact of this project’s collaborative research activities in the
Petén and Siuna? Although more time is needed to properly assess the long-term impact of these grassroots experiences, Sánchez Hidalgo’s three proofs of consistency (Sánchez Hidalgo 2006) provide several angles from which to assess some preliminary impacts. Her first ‘proof of consistency’ requires that analyses be constructed from peoples’ own experiences. The results of the four self-systematization studies and the International Exchange meeting represent data and analysis produced by the community members themselves. They show a significant step forward in community members’ assessment of their own situation, identification of strengths and problems and planning of response strategies. The catalyzing effect of this method in promoting increased interest in collective action has been recognized by the community members themselves and by their respective organizations.

The second proof of consistency lies in whether community leaders actually utilize the studies (Sánchez Hidalgo 2006). ACOFOP in the Petén and PCaC in Siuna collaborated closely with the project because they saw potential for great utility in the participatory research activities. In both the Petén and Siuna, several additional communities solicited inclusion in the self-systematization studies after the project was under way and as the process became better understood. ACOFOP has independently financed additional studies in two communities; the organization and its community members put a significant amount of their own resources into the Petén International Exchange. In Siuna, PCaC has begun utilizing the community-based studies to facilitate discussion of its current situation and possible future strategies. Leaders of both ACOFOP and PCaC have expressed their intention to utilize the information generated in community and context studies in negotiation with outside institutions.

The third proof of consistency comes from whether the studies provoke change (Sánchez Hidalgo 2006). It is still early to assess systematically the extent to which the self-systematization experiences have contributed to enhanced community negotiating strength. Nevertheless, both grassroots organizations strengthened their administrative capabilities through exercising significant direct financial and administrative responsibility for the project’s self-systematization studies in their regions. Both have begun adopting key elements of the project’s methodology into their own organizational procedures. In an interview in July 2005, ACOFOP’s Executive Director remarked that the experience with the Grassroots Assistance Project has become a model for ACOFOP in negotiating collaboration with external organizations, which helps strengthen organizational capabilities (Cortave personal communication).

7.3 The Link between Collaborative Research and Alternative Accompaniment Models

A potentially close link exists between the collaborative research discussed in this study and the development of alternative accompaniment models. In a sense, collaborative research activities in these Central American forest communities have revealed some of the key strengths and principal weaknesses of past assistance strategies. Collaborative research has suggested some of the features of innovative accompaniment activities that are emerging in the region, thus contributing to the development of a new model of accompaniment. Finally, collaborative research could
have an ongoing role in alternative accompaniment as one important instrument by which appropriate support activities in beneficiary communities may be designed, implemented, evaluated and redesigned.

In other words, collaborative research activities and the alternative accompaniment model outlined in this paper can potentially have a mutually supportive relationship. The collaborative research process can help strengthen community capabilities in analysis and negotiation. This in turn can help establish more equitable relations between communities and external support institutions. The information gathering and analysis capabilities enhanced by collaborative research can help support communities’ efforts to assume new management and technical activities once provided by external institutions.

Collaborative research can also help lay and maintain a foundation for continual organizational learning on the part of external support institutions. It can provide a mechanism for accompanying institutions to work jointly with beneficiary communities to identify priority local needs and to seek synergies between these needs and external institutions’ own strengths. Collaborative research can help external institutions gain a more complex understanding of local context and develop more appropriate accompaniment activities by incorporating communities’ own experiences and perspectives. Finally, collaborative research could be an important ongoing instrument to help ensure that accompaniment activities continue to respond flexibly and change in ways appropriate both to community needs and the institutional objectives of the accompanying entity.

7.4 Lessons Learned
A number of significant lessons are emerging from the experience of community-based forestry in the Petén and Siuna.

- Rather than necessarily representing driving forces behind deforestation and biodiversity loss, local communities can be effective stewards of the forest while simultaneously pursuing sustainable livelihood strategies. Effective partnerships are necessary between external interests and local communities promoting conservation, especially given the social, political and economic realities underlying conservation in regions like the Petén and Siuna.

- Local communities are capable of being full partners in generating information and contributing knowledge about development and conservation, and can contribute valuable perspectives through their analysis of their own situation. They need to develop their own accounts and analyses of their experiences with forest access and resource management as a step toward becoming more effective negotiators with powerful external interests.

- Assistance models are needed that can better contribute to developing, rather than substituting for, community capability to manage conservation and development effectively. A ‘pro-community’ assistance approach may be an effective and more cost-effective means of supporting grassroots forest communities by conceptualizing the relationship between external support entities and local communities as a shared ‘accompaniment process’
rather than as one-way ‘assistance.’ The accompaniment approach may be best implemented, where appropriate, in combination with more traditional forms of assistance.

- Elements of the accompaniment approach can be incorporated into the operation of secondary-level community organizations, strengthening their capability to adjust and fine-tune relationships with their membership base. The approach can help build capabilities for effective decision making and adaptive management where social, political and economic conditions continue to change.

The authors believe that common ground exists for more effective collaboration among the major stakeholders in conservation and development in southern forests. Assistance models need to be developed which build more effectively on the perspectives and skills of both external and community expertise. Developing such models may help make easier the striking of a balance between stakeholder interests too often seen as irreconcilable. It might also make possible conservation and development outcomes that are at once more sustainable and more equitable.


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