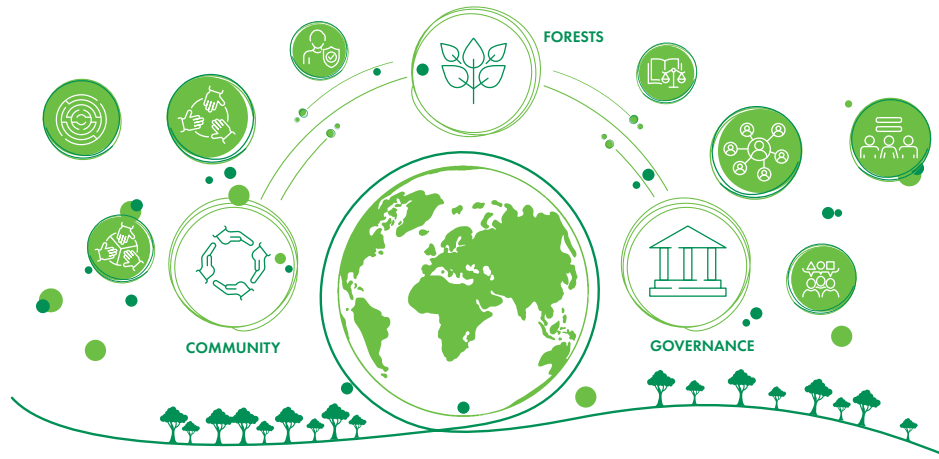




NGOs facilitating internal governance processes in community forestry initiatives



NGOs facilitating internal governance processes in community forestry initiatives

Community forestry can contribute to local development, while playing an important role in the conservation and restoration of the world's forests — crucial to tackle the global biodiversity and climate crises. In support of community forestry, many governments have installed policies that allow communities to secure formal rights over forest lands. NGOs often help communities with applying for rights, setting up internal governance structures, developing management plans, and establishing community forestry enterprises, among others. The success of such community forestry initiatives is influenced by the strength of community-level forest governance. Below we outline the challenges related to this, and propose four general lessons for NGOs to help strengthen community-level governance, enriched with examples from the work of Tropenbos International and RECOFTC.





Community governance challenges

To understand challenges related to community forest governance it is helpful to distinguish between cases where the government requires that the community establishes a dedicated governance body (such as a community forest management committee) and cases where the community is represented by existing customary leadership (such as village leaders). Where new governance bodies are established that overrule decision making of traditional authorities, tensions and conflict may arise, and traditional authorities may be unhappy to see their power questioned (Box 1). Where the community is represented by existing customary leaders, the state's endorsement of their authority may strengthen traditional governance processes, but there is also a risk of fostering undemocratic decision making, leading to elite capture and rent seeking. Existing power dynamics may enable certain individuals to benefit more from new opportunities (Box 2). This is especially common when investors in search of natural resources try to persuade community representatives to sell or lease out community forest resources with lucrative deals on an individual basis.

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Tensions between traditional leadership and community forest governance bodies in DR Congo

BOX 1



[Click here](#)



Village leaders in Suriname benefit from deals with logging companies

BOX 2



[Click here](#)

What can NGOs do to strengthen community-level governance?

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



1

There is a need to advocate for more flexible governance models. Rules and regulations for community forestry often leave little room for the adaptation of the community forest governance system to existing customs, practices and needs. NGOs will therefore have to advocate for a supportive policy environment that allows for the bottom-up development of customized community forest governance, adaptable at the community level, within a general framework of regulations and safeguards.

2

NGOs can work with communities to help them adjust and adapt their internal governance systems to the state-defined regulations that come with the formalization of community forest rights, as well as to the ever-changing internal and external developments and pressures. In doing so, NGOs need to carefully consider the constellation of customary collective and individual user rights as they often co-exist within the community forest areas, without imposing simplistic and idealized ideas of collectiveness and the role of communities in forest management (Box 3). NGOs can also help build connections to relevant local government agencies, and build the capacity of local officials to support community forestry governance regimes.



Bolivian communities adjust the management organizations set up by NGOs

BOX 3



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3

NGOs can promote inclusivity in community forestry initiatives. Different community members should have an opportunity to influence decisions related to the community forest, if they would want to. Although it is unrealistic to expect that all community members are actively involved in community forestry initiatives, NGOs can at least work with communities towards: (i) increasing transparency in decision-making processes; (ii) ensuring that information is available, so that people can make their own informed choices; (iii) removing barriers for people who want to engage; and (iv) engaging marginalized groups.

4

NGOs can add value by strengthening the competencies of leadership as well as of other community members – women and youth in particular (Box 4). NGOs can also help with building the ability of community representatives to liaise with external stakeholders, such as government agencies at relevant jurisdictional levels, and with building trust with external agencies (Box 5). This is crucial to reduce the dependence of community forest governance systems on NGO support. Moreover, NGOs can play a key role by fostering the development of institutions for collective action between communities.



Supporting female leadership in community forestry in the Philippines

BOX 4



[Click here](#)



Building trust between local communities and government agencies in Viet Nam

BOX 5



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NGOs as facilitators

The success of community forestry is influenced by many factors, one of which is community-level governance. NGOs can collaborate with communities to help improve their access to information and strengthen competencies (Box 6). In addition, NGOs can help with developing and implementing local governance systems, rather than transferring externally defined governance schemes and management technologies. In this capacity, NGOs support communities in social processes of negotiation, consensus building, decision making and conflict resolution (Box 7). It means that NGOs act as facilitators rather than implementers (Box 8). And, facilitating community governance processes will always require that NGOs carefully listen to the communities they aim to support (Box 9). This should eventually contribute to greater local agency and ownership, as key requirements for successful community forestry in the long term. We call upon practitioners to experiment with new approaches and tools for the facilitation of community-level governance in the context of community forestry initiatives, and to document and share the lessons. Such learning is essential and urgent, if we want to ensure that community forestry lives up to its potential.



An indigenous perspective on the role of NGOs in supporting Indigenous organizations in Colombia

BOX 6



[Click here](#)



The role of NGOs in conflict resolution between Indigenous and settler communities in Colombia

BOX 7



[Click here](#)



Facilitating governance processes with the Saamaka tribe in Suriname

BOX 8



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An indigenous perspective on the role of NGOs in the Philippines

BOX 9



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Box 1. Tensions between traditional leadership and community forest governance bodies in DR Congo



In recent years, the government of DR Congo has been formalizing community forest rights in the form of community forest concessions (CFLCs). Within a concession, a community is allowed to exploit the forest for subsistence and commercial purposes. Each concession is governed by a village forest committee, which consists of several elected community members. Before the introduction of the CFLCs, forest management was in the sole hands of traditional authorities, who were virtually unaccountable to anyone.

Community forest rights formalization requires the support of traditional authorities, but some of them have been opposing the process, because they felt that they were losing control over forest lands and resources. A sector chief who is used to benefiting financially from leasing out a forest area to external actors is typically reluctant to sign the documents for granting a CFCL title over that area.

In response to this situation, [Tropenbos DR Congo](#) has been working with traditional leaders, raising their awareness, and convincing them to support the community forestry process. At the same time, Tropenbos DR Congo has been doing lobby and advocacy work directed at state agencies at the provincial level and the Public Prosecutor's Office. These agencies can put pressure on local chiefs, and can install sanctions when the rights of communities with forest concessions are being violated. Together, these efforts have weakened the resistance among traditional leaders, and contributed positively to society-wide support for community forestry.

For more information see: [Community forestry as a lever for sustainable rural development in the Democratic Republic of Congo](#)



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Box 2. Village leaders in Suriname benefit from deals with logging companies



In Suriname, Indigenous and tribal communities can apply for a community forest permit, giving them the right to practice small-scale agriculture, collect non-timber forest products and harvest timber, both for subsistence and commercial purposes. Permit-holders are also allowed to enter into contracts with commercial logging companies. In 2022 there were around 140 community forests in Suriname, covering close to 800,000 hectares. In the majority of these, the permit-holder entered into an agreement with a logging company.

Until 2008, the permits were granted to the village captain, functioning as the representative of the community. The permit thus handed down all

management power to one person. It was common for companies to persuade captains with lucrative deals to allow them to log the forest, usually paying the captain an amount per cubic meter of extracted timber. Such agreements would be made without much involvement of other community members, and often benefits would flow to the captain. In 2008, the Ministry of Regional Development changed the regulation, aiming to decrease elite capture by captains. According to the new rules, a permit is to be granted to a community-level committee, consisting of the captain and two other community members. In practice, however, it is still often the village captain who decides on deals with companies, and takes most of the benefits.

NGOs like [Tropenbos Suriname](#) have been trying to further increase the participation of community members in community forest decisions, by strengthening community level governance processes, while lobbying for stronger formal requirements related to community participation and accountability.

For more information see: [Improving the outcomes of community forests in Suriname - Recommendations for CSOs](#)



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Box 3. CFOs in Guarayos chart their own path to advance sustainable forest managements




Forest management in Bolivia began to be implemented by law in the mid-1990s. The law formally allows Indigenous and peasant communities to commercially exploit their forest. However, the legislation primarily focuses on giving the private sector access to forest resources, not the communities. Implementing the law, forest areas reserved for community management were demarcated, inventories were made, and indigenous forest management plans were developed. Some NGOs assisted in the organizational, operational, and administrative structuring of the forest organizations, developing skills and technical capacities to achieve this. Attention was mainly focused on the Guarayos region, as from this Indigenous territory over half of the wood available at the local markets in the entire country is obtained.

The government and NGOs promoted community forest management under some assumptions: (1) That forests in Indigenous territories should be managed by the entire

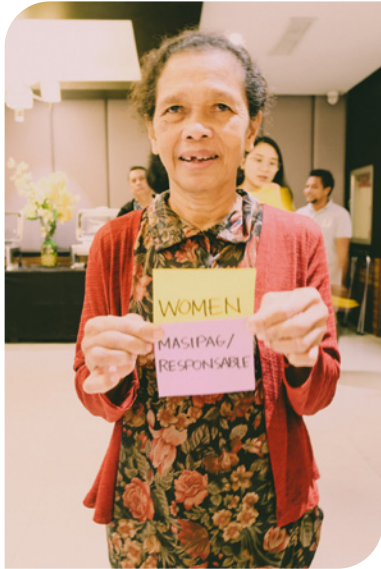
community and not by a section of it. (2) That a greater division into groups complicates control over what happens in the forest and reduces coherence in the community. (3) That community forestry organizations could get involved in timber extraction and processing activities in the same way as private companies. Based on these assumptions, technical forest management organizations were set up, with clearly defined forest management functions. However, over time, the communities themselves began to change the configuration of their organizations.

The main changes in the Guarayos territory were: (1) A change from community-based organizations (where, in theory, all community members have a voice and benefit) to member-based organizations (where those who are interested and participate have a voice and benefit). (2) The development of subdivisions within the entire community organization to manage and exploit smaller, more controllable forest areas, to improve participation, transparency, and benefit distribution among subgroup members. (3) A reduction in the number of functions within the organization, as most activities are carried out by the company that buys the wood, because it has the capital to invest in large equipment and operational costs.

The experiences in Bolivia suggest that local realities and preferences do not necessarily match the assumptions made by external actors, and that communities themselves have the potential to transform their processes and direct their needs based on their experiences. Today, Indigenous communities in the Guarayos territory remain engaged in forestry activities, complying with national legislation with appropriate management techniques towards sustainability, without support from the state and NGOs. There is now a need to further support them with: developing mechanisms to improve profits and contractual relations with private enterprises; guaranteeing the renewal of leadership; integrating young people and women; and improving their skills to advance in the management and protection of their territories and natural resources.


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Box 4. Supporting female leadership in community forestry in the Philippines



The [Forest Foundation Philippines](#) has been supporting female leadership in community-based forest management (CBFM). Training and awareness campaigns on gender and development, initiated and sustained by different stakeholders, helped increase gender equality in communities. In an assessment conducted in 2020, many people's organizations (POs) involved in CBFM had women leaders. Some POs have also increased youth participation, who were provided with education and training on governance. Despite these successes, there are still concerns about the concentration of power with PO leaders. CSOs must therefore ensure that training and assistance is directed to PO members, in support of more participatory and inclusive governance.



Box 5. Building trust between local communities and government agencies in Viet Nam



About 20% of the forest in Viet Nam is under the temporary management of Commune People's Committees, which are the lowest administrative units of the government. As part of the national forest land allocation programme, parts of these lands are being allocated to communities.

Due to the lack of incentives for sustainable forest management and a weak institutional setting, the allocated forests are vulnerable to free riders, which has led to more degradation and encroachment, both from outsiders and people from within the communities. Because of this, many government officials lost their trust in the potential of communities to sustainably manage allocated forests. The lack of trust partly explains the

lack of post-allocation support from the government, which further contributes to the problem. Currently, many local government authorities are reluctant to allocate more forests to local communities.

[Tropenbos Viet Nam](#) has been trying to address this situation, by connecting local communities and local authorities in Đắk Lắk province. They started with listening to local people's concerns (e.g., related to sustainable land use, land demands, livelihood models, etc.) and organized separate workshops with women and youth, to stimulate them to express their views and wishes. These activities helped community members with articulating their concerns and needs. Tropenbos Viet Nam then organized workshops where they invited community representatives as well as government officials. Here, local authorities had the chance to learn directly from local people about their concerns, needs and wishes, after which they jointly discussed suitable solutions. This was pivotal to build mutual trust, and a key step towards increased support of local governments to community forestry.



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Box 6. An indigenous perspective on the role of NGOs in supporting Indigenous organizations in Colombia



Herman Mendoza* is the General Coordination Advisor of the Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon (*Organización Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas de la Amazonía Colombiana* – OPIAC). He has been involved with the organization since its foundation in 1995. Here he reflects on the role of NGOs in supporting Indigenous organizations, based on his experiences with OPIAC.

“In Colombia, all laws that affect Indigenous people have to go through prior informed consultation. This means that Indigenous people need to be informed — they need to really understand the issues at stake. As a national organization, we are involved in the Amazonian Permanent Consultation Table, where we discuss matters

related to education, the environment and health with the national government. All these issues demand specialized knowledge, and for this, the support of NGOs is fundamental.

We have member organizations at the regional and local level in the six Amazonian departments, and we see that our members at the local level have difficulties to remain informed about policies and developments that might affect them. We therefore seek to establish agreements with NGOs, so they support and finance training and socialization of local communities.

NGOs have also played an important role in supporting subsistence and economic initiatives in Indigenous communities. At the moment, there are possibilities to access financial resources related to the mitigation of climate change, but this is also creating all kinds of problems. For example, many of the contracts in the voluntary carbon market are generating internal conflicts. Our people need to be able to take on these challenges, but for this we need information and skills. NGOs can help us with accessing information and providing training.

We need NGOs, but we also see the need to articulate our and their actions. It is important to inform each other, and to coordinate in order to avoid misunderstandings. We need to avoid double efforts. We need to seek for ways in which NGOs can complement our own efforts to the benefit of our people.”

**Herman Mendoza passed away on 1 May 2023. He will be greatly missed. Condolences to his family and friends.*



Box 7. The role of NGOs in conflict resolution between Indigenous and settler communities in Colombia



In the municipality of Solano in the Colombian Department of Caqueta there are tensions between Indigenous communities and communities of settlers. The two groups differ in the way they view their relationship with the forest, and the way they use the land. Although Indigenous communities in the area have formal property rights to their customary territories, the cattle pastures of settlers often encroach upon these territories.

Indigenous communities have their own governance structures for the territories, while the settlers have a governance structure in the form of a community action board. However, government institutions in the

area are very weak. There is a vacuum of authority, and a lack of government capacity to resolve conflicts between Indigenous communities and settlers.

Tropenbos Colombia has been helping Indigenous and settler communities to solve their conflicts. In this work, they made use of conflict resolution techniques rooted in community psychology. For example, they helped people with the formulation of the conflict, and then created an open space to generate empathy by telling their stories and visions to each other. They also organized joint walks to visit the areas of conflict in the field, which helped with creating empathy. There was much attention to the joint development of agreements, assuring that they were expressed in a language that everyone understands and agrees with. Finally, it was of the utmost importance to create a body that can monitor compliance with the agreements. Tropenbos Colombia is currently promoting that these agreements are formally registered with the municipality of Solano, to further increase their legitimacy.



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Box 8. Facilitating governance processes with the Saamaka tribe in Suriname



[Tropenbos Suriname](#) works with the traditional leaders of the Saamaka people in the interior rainforest of Suriname to help strengthen the tribe's territorial governance. The Saamaka are one of six tribal peoples in Suriname. They are descendants of enslaved African people who successfully freed themselves and established communities deep in the interior rainforest. Over centuries they developed their own distinctive culture, including customary laws and territorial boundaries. In the 1990s, the Surinamese government started granting industrial logging and mining concessions within their territory, as it regarded large parts of these lands as state property. But this is about to change.

An upcoming law will ensure the collective land tenure rights of Suriname's Indigenous people and tribes, including the Saamaka. The new law will come with new responsibilities. For example, the Saamaka tribe, which consists of 12 Clans, will need to develop its own formal governance system to serve as legal entity. This is no easy task. Developing a formal governance system will require an internal process of negotiation, conflict resolution and consensus building.

In 2021, Tropenbos Suriname agreed with the Saamaka, to support this process of internal governance building. On behalf of Tropenbos Suriname, a Saamaka lawyer has taken on the role to facilitate discussions and consensus building. He is a specialist in legal matters, widely respected within the tribe, and has extensive experience with facilitating complex social processes involving the tribe's traditional authorities — all of which are considered crucial qualities for effective facilitation.

For more information, see: [A new collaboration between Tropenbos Suriname and the Association of Saamaka Authorities](#)



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Box 9. An indigenous perspective on the role of NGOs in the Philippines



NGOs play a crucial role in supporting Indigenous communities' forest governance, according to representatives of Samahan ng mga Katutubong Agta/Dumagat/Remontado na Ipinagtatanggol at Binabaka ang Lupaing Ninuno (SAGIBIN). SAGIBIN is an organization of the Agta-Dumagat Indigenous group from Quezon province on the island of Luzon, the Philippines. NGOs can help Indigenous people to stand up for themselves in the case of oppression, to claim their rights on ancestral lands, and to develop income generating activities from the forest resources. This implies capacity-building activities for individuals and organizations, as well as help with lobby and advocacy for better policies and laws pertaining to Indigenous People's rights and representation, and their implementation. However, they stress there is a risk that NGOs may take too much control and start acting on behalf of the communities. Sometimes NGOs may even monopolize support to communities, preventing other organizations from providing additional external assistance to those specific communities. Such behaviour defeats the purpose of capacitating and empowering Indigenous communities. NGOs should never stop listening to the people they mean to support, say the SAGIBIN representatives.

[Source: interview of the Forest Foundation Philippines with SAGIBIN representatives]



This is an adapted version of the following article:

Kusters K, Benneker C, Danga S, de Graaf M, Faure N, Greijmans M, Livingstone J, Louman B, Maindo A, Mpoyi C, Nziavake S, Pasiecznik N, Quetula RJ, Rocas NM, Rodríguez C and Shibeshi A. 2022. NGOs facilitating internal governance processes in community forestry initiatives. *Tropical Conservation Science* 15(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/19400829221128551>.

This publication was produced under the Forests for a Just Future, a programme of the Green Livelihoods Alliance (GLA) – Gaia Amazonas, IUCN NL, Milieudefensie, NTFP-EP, SDI and Tropenbos International, with WECF and FERN as technical partners. Financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of the Netherlands through the DSO Power of Voices policy framework.

The opinions and views expressed in this publication are the responsibility of Tropenbos International and do not necessarily reflect the opinions and views of the GLA alliance partners or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of the Netherlands.

Published by: Tropenbos International, Ede, the Netherlands

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Citation: Tropenbos International. 2023. NGOs facilitating internal governance processes in community forestry initiatives. Ede, the Netherlands: Tropenbos International

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