

Foreword

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Community forestry, as a project or as a policy intervention, has existed for almost half a century, spreading from its beginnings in Asia in the 1970s to Africa and Latin America more recently. As this initiative has become increasingly salient in forest development actions and policy concepts, it has spawned hundreds of development projects, policy initiatives, and research publications.

With this in mind, the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), the Centre de Coopération Internationale en Recherche Agronomique pour le Développement (CIRAD), and the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD)

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organized an international conference in March 2010 in Montpellier, France, entitled “Taking stock of smallholder and community forestry: Where do we go from here?” The conference brought together researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners to share and assess global patterns in forest resource use and management by smallholders and community groups. The forum was a way to outline the current state of knowledge and identify a course for future research. What do we know, and what do we still need to study? What do we need to implement, and how? What are global patterns, or similarities and differences, across distinct regions of the world?

We present here a selection of papers from that conference to highlight some of the current challenges faced by the community and small-scale forestry sectors, drawing examples from across the globe. Our objective is to contribute to the ongoing debate on the role that smallholder and community forestry currently play—and could play in the future—in preserving forest resources as well as biological and cultural diversity, ensuring the delivery of environmental services, and improving human well-being and governance. This Foreword introduces the papers, while the following Editorial highlights some of the issues emerging from the discussion forums at the conference, suggesting new directions for research and action.

In the first paper, Wiersum et al. document the evolution of community forestry and discuss the increasing influence of forestry certification on the devolution of forest management schemes. Using the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as an example, the authors illustrate the role of multi-level and multi-actor partnerships in efforts to adjust global standards to better reflect local practice.

In the second article, Wright and Andersson build on examples from Bolivia to analyze the role of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the development of community forestry. Interestingly, in the 200 rural communities they studied, the influence of NGOs on community organization was not apparent, but instead local government had more influence on community self-organization for forest governance.

In the third article, Lescuyer discusses the advantages and limitations of formal community forest models in comparison with customary management patterns in Cameroon. Using a village case study where local people had both customary and formal commercial access rights to forests, the author found that, beyond subsistence uses, forest resources did not dramatically contribute to livelihood improvements.

Robiglio et al. follow up the discussion by analyzing small-scale timber harvests in Cameroon, finding that timber from informal sources rivals harvests from the official timber sector. Because much of this timber originates from forests being cleared for agriculture, important questions are raised about the sustainability of timber from this source.

In the fifth article, Rives et al. provide a long-term historical assessment of the evolution of rural markets for fuel wood in Niger. Although policy changes opened market opportunities for rural people in the country, technical norms intended to regulate the wood trade have not successfully limited overexploitation of forest resources.

In the following article, Springate-Baginski et al. describe a clash between the rights of local communities and the interests of State Forest Departments in India, in relation to the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act 2006 (Forest Rights Act). Although the act represented significant devolution of rights for local individuals and forest-dependent communities, full implementation of the reforms has been blocked by local forestry officials resistant to change.

The ecological impacts of community forestry are addressed by Vihemäki et al., who analyze the role of different types of forest and agroforestry management systems on bird and plant diversity on the borders of a protected area in Tanzania. The authors found that the multifunctional land uses that characterized village land—combining forest, fallow, agroforestry, and agriculture—positively contribute to biodiversity conservation.

Finally, Macqueen builds on a global comparison of cases to underscore the main factors of success in community forestry. The author found that three important conditions for sustaining community forest enterprises were: clear commercial forest rights, strong social organization, and competitive business skills.

The papers included in this special issue represent a cross-section of the diverse papers presented at the conference. They illustrate the tremendous polysemy of the term “community forestry” and explore divergent assessments by the scientific and practitioner community. We hope this collection will further ongoing debates over how best to support forest-dependent people, encourage sustainable forest use, and stimulate future research on these topics.