

# Formal community forest management policies often lead to reduced access, resource rights

November 9 2020

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Community-owned sawmill in Oaxaca, Mexico. Credit: Reem Hajjar, OSU College of Forestry

The most comprehensive global analysis of community forestry ever

undertaken shows that government policies formalizing local residents' land access and resource rights often backfire by resulting in less access and weakened rights.

Led by Oregon State University and the University of Manchester, the research is important because community forest management is promoted as a means of melding conservation and [economic development](#) with recognition of often longstanding, customary rights of local people to use and manage [forest resources](#).

The findings, published today in *Nature Sustainability*, show that community forest management policies do tend toward positive environmental and economic impacts, but they also suggest that community forestry initiatives could benefit from retooling to help ensure success across the spectrum of goals.

"Lots of these initiatives have led to substantial social, economic and environmental trade-offs," said OSU College of Forestry researcher Reem Hajjar, who co-led the study. "While environmental goals are often being met, as well as some development objectives, the negative impacts we're seeing on forest access and resource rights run counter to one of community forestry's primary objectives."

Hajjar, co-leader Johan Oldekop and scientists at the University of Colorado, Yale University, the Center for International Forestry Research and the Global Green Growth Institute looked at data from 643 community forest management policy cases in 267 peer-reviewed studies from 51 different countries.

Simultaneous positive outcomes in all three areas community forestry is intended to address—conservation, economy and resource rights—existed but were rare, Hajjar said.

Around the globe, forests deliver many ecosystem services, and play cultural and economic roles. They regulate climate, sequester carbon, provide a home for a range of animals and plants and contribute substantially to the livelihoods of the people who live in or near them.

Community forest management is designed to take advantage of the idea that local groups with a vested interest in maintaining the flow of resources will likely do a more effective job than planners in faraway government offices. When it works as designed, community forest management means both better livelihoods and more sustainability.

"Right around 14% of forests worldwide and 28% of forests in low- and [middle-income countries](#) are formally owned or managed by Indigenous peoples and local communities," Hajjar said. "Case studies that show positive outcomes abound. But gaining a better understanding of the trade-offs—this outcome got better but at the expense of other outcomes getting worse—is critical for understanding forest governance systems' potential for addressing multiple objectives at the same time."





Logs from a community forest in Oaxaca, Mexico. Credit: Reem Hajjar, OSU College of Forestry

The researchers found that a forest's environmental health improved after a formalized community forest management initiative in 56% of the 524 cases that tracked environmental condition, and that it decreased in 32% of the cases.

Incomes increased in 68% of the 316 cases that reported on livelihood, 26% showed no change in income, and 6.3% of cases reported decreases in income.

Among the the 249 cases reporting on resource access rights, 34% indicated an increase in resource rights, 54% reported decreases, and

12% showed no change.

Of the 186 cases that studied resource rights and forest environmental condition, in 45% of them, one category improved and the other worsened. Most of the trade-offs, 82%, meant better environmental conditions and weakened resource rights.

"In these cases, reductions in rights occurred either for all resource users or for local people who had been left out of the community of rights holders defined in the community forest management intervention," Hajjar said.

If forest condition is getting better but at the expense of subsistence users losing their rights to use that forest, then community forestry is not accomplishing a more just, rights-based approach to forest conservation and management, she added.

"Interestingly, we found that in those cases where rights had in fact increased, most cases saw improvements or maintenance of forest condition, and all saw improvements or maintenance of incomes," Hajjar said.

However, in many of the income/access trade-off cases studied, income gains mainly benefited village elites, while the poor and marginalized bore most of the brunt of forest use restrictions implemented as part of formalized management plans.

Of the 223 cases that explored both income and forest environmental condition outcomes, 46% found simultaneous positive results. But of the 122 studies that looked at all three community forest management goals, just 18% reported positive outcomes for all three.

"Yes, we didn't see many cases with increases in all three dimensions.

But some of the cases had positive outcomes across two dimensions and no change in the third, where no change in that dimension was in fact a desirable outcome," Hajjar said. "For example, three cases from Mexico reported increases in incomes and forest condition and no change in rights, but those communities already had substantial subsistence and commercial rights for decades prior to community [forest](#) management intervention."

**More information:** A global analysis of the social and environmental outcomes of community forests, *Nature Sustainability* (2020). [DOI: 10.1038/s41893-020-00633-y](#) , [www.nature.com/articles/s41893-020-00633-y](http://www.nature.com/articles/s41893-020-00633-y)

Provided by Oregon State University

Citation: Formal community forest management policies often lead to reduced access, resource rights (2020, November 9) retrieved 21 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-11-formal-forest-policies-access-resource.html>

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