

Self-systematization of Central American experiences with Biodiversity Conservation and Management



What are the factors that enable some grassroots organizations to successfully negotiate the development assistance that they receive? Which variables are key to certain assistance models generating positive outcomes? What are the characteristics of the aid strategies that facilitate transferring knowledge and control to the communities?

It was precisely with the aim of answering these questions that CIFOR, the International Center for Forestry Research, along with ACOFOP and PCAC, dedicated grassroots member organizations of ACICAFOC, the Asociación Coordinadora Indígena y Campesina de Agroforestería Comunitaria Centroamericana [Indigenous Peoples and Farmers Coordinating Association for Central American Community Agroforestry], combined their efforts and developed the project “Learning to build assistance models for grassroots forestry organizations in Brazil and Central America” for which they were awarded the Prize for Outstanding Potential Innovative Partnership Program during the Innovations Fair organized by CGIAR in 2004.

The CIFOR-ACICAFOC Project



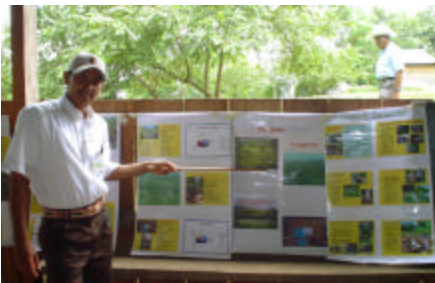
During the 1990s in Central America, which was a period marked by the cessation of political and military conflicts and mounting emphasis on conservation and sustainable management of natural resources, a number of independent and promising experiences were posted by grassroots organizations engaged in substantial undertakings connected with natural resource management. Cases in point are the “Campesino to Campesino” Program (PCAC) in Siuna and the Association of Forest Communities of the Petén (ACOFOP). While PCAC’s influence extends into the buffer zone of the southwestern part of the BOSAWAS Biosphere Reserve along a distance of

120 kilometers in northern Nicaragua and groups together more than 1,500 farming families (producers of basic grains, vegetables, coffee and craft products, beekeepers, flower growers and stockraisers), ACOFOP represents 23 organizations (cooperatives, civil societies and associations) involved in sustainable forest management in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in the north of Guatemala, where its members manage almost a half million hectares of forest, half of which is certified by the Forest Stewardship Council. The two organizations have successfully tackled some of the main concerns that threaten the tropical forests and the biodiversity contained in their respective areas of influence: the uncontrolled expansion of extensive cattle ranching, the widespread practice of shifting agriculture (slash and burn), the advance of the

agricultural frontier and forest fires. And all of this has been accomplished with minimal intervention by the State and the cooperation agencies.

This is the context of the CIFOR-ACICAFOP project, which targets four communities in the two countries concerned: in Guatemala, the Laborantes del Bosque [Forest Workers] and the Unión Maya Itza del Petén Cooperative civic groups, which are associated with ACOFOP, and the communities of El Bálsamo and the Tadazma Cooperative in Siuna, Nicaragua, which are coordinated by PCAC. Started in May 2003 with financial assistance from the Ford Foundation, the project is scheduled to run till May 2005. Its principal objective is to identify, analyze, and publicize technical and management assistance schemes for grassroots organizations in Latin America. Part of the rationale for the project is that the best way to identify new technical assistance schemes is through research and participatory action that combines context studies conducted by researchers from outside the region with self-systematization done by the communities in the two areas.

Self-systematization is a creative methodology by means of which local groups reflect upon, appropriate and tap their experience as the first step toward improving their current management models. While the systematization programs are nothing new, the fact that it is the farmers or communities themselves who set them up and carry them out definitely is. As Rubén Pasos, the coordinator of the project, so aptly puts it: “We must not do for people what they can do for themselves.” This methodology breaks with the traditional model devised by desk-bound



bureaucrats, which was usually a response to predetermined agendas or set ways of doing things. Far from being an external process that gathers information and then encapsulates it in a theoretic form, self-systematization of the experience gained in community management and use of natural resources seeks to mobilize a critical mass of local stakeholders capable of processing their own experience and thus generate new knowledge. In the CIFOR-ACICAFOP systematization

project which is virtually at the opposite end of the scale from the assistance-based approach, the communities move on from being mere participants and become consummate protagonists. For all practical purposes, the task of the support agencies is limited to providing them with basic guidance and monitoring them from a distance, while the people of the community then freely and creatively press ahead with restructuring their activities, the resources they possess, their types of organizations and their survival strategies, and also critically reassessing the history of what went before them and so on. And in the process of so doing their awareness grows and they arrive at a consensus about their needs, which enables them to choose and to make better decisions about the type of external assistance they require.

Under the project, the first phase of which has been completed, the following activities were carried out: 1) preparation, organization and deployment of field missions for systematizing the PCAC and ACOFOP community processes; 2) systematization of five community experiences; 3) processing, review, publishing and reproduction of five documents detailing the systematizing of community experiences; and 4), jointly with the regional NGO PRISMA, analysis of the regional context in which the community experiences in Siuna and

Petén unfolded. Unquestionably, it is the community systematization process which has had the most impact on the participating communities. In the case of Petén, the ACOFOP organization has resolved to hire one of the systematizers as a member of its permanent staff, who would then be assigned to spearheading similar work in the rest of the ACOFOP organizations, while in Siuna the systematizers see themselves as “vendors” of services for conducting similar exercises in other organizations.



An international workshop entitled “Learning from our own community management experiences” was held in October 2004. It was the first opportunity for representatives of Nicaragua, Guatemala, Bolivia and Brazil to share their experience regarding the different models for handling technical and official assistance in community forest management and to review the lessons learned in the self-systematization process.

The self-systematizing of experience is being extended and it is spreading like wildfire. Currently in Nicaragua, and using the project methodology, some twenty or so experiences in other local contexts without the involvement of the CIFOR-ACICFOC project have been documented. As a next stage the intention is to organize a regional workshop that will enable an initial formal exchange between communities that formed part of the project and others that did not. Consideration has also been given to extending the concept of systematization to Panama (Darién) and Honduras (Río Plátano). And that is precisely one of the virtues of this project: its potential for phasing and replication in different contexts, since the experiences of ACOFOP and PCAC can expand its influence throughout all of Central America while also serving as sources of motivation and inspiration.

A new horizon of possibilities



The self-systematization process, which may well be the revolutionary approach which as of now governs all relations between the assistance agencies and the grassroots organizations, energizes the community. People used to performing manual labor exchange their tools for pens and paper; men and women who used to spend their free time talking about personal matters are now addressing large gatherings and asking themselves what they are all going to do together; the posters up on the walls are now not only announcing sports events or fiestas but also the holding of the next neighborhood committee or board meeting. To sum it all up, self-systematization has given community initiative a hitherto unknown dimension. But that is not all, the people of the communities where self-systematization has been developed now radiate great confidence and optimism. Knowing that what they do has value has boosted their self-esteem and also their desire to excel. The confidence gained at personal level is projected into the entire community, legitimizing and institutionalizing the community-based process. However, this process rooted in and flowing from the people themselves not only has a palpable effect on the communities but also on the donor agencies and their relations with civil society. Instead of preconceived

technical solutions, the concept and design of their projects will have to take into account the character of the communities together with the local concerns and needs. In place of a vertical transfer of knowledge that is not conducive to self-sufficiency of the communities, tools will have to be developed that will enable the technical cooperation agencies and institutions to dialogue with and work with the communities as partners. As the experience of PCAC and ACOFOP demonstrates, sustainable management of the forests and biodiversity is not possible if local development is not taken into account and fostered.

Links: <http://www.cifor.cgiar.org> <http://acicafo.org> <http://www.acofop.org>
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