

## Community Forestry in Honduras: A Path towards Better Governance

**With the aim of better informing policy discussions about community forestry in Honduras, such as those that will be held in the context of the proposed Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA), this Information Brief explores the links between community forestry and local forest governance in the country. It provides evidence that community-based forest enterprises can contribute significantly to forest governance goals, and it argues that more attention needs to be given to reforms that promote and strengthen community forestry approaches.**

### Introduction

Over the past ten years, Honduras has seen multiple efforts and initiatives aimed at improving forest governance. In the first half of the last decade, the protests and marches organized by a grassroots environmental movement<sup>1</sup> – joined by thousands of Honduran citizens – were successful in putting illegal logging and forest degradation at the center of the country's policy debate. In 2005, the Honduran National Commission for Human Rights (CONADEH) started an Independent Forest Monitoring (IFM) project, which has published nearly one hundred reports that have greatly improved understanding and exposure of illegal forest activities. The following years were marked by an unprecedented multi-stakeholder process that helped design a new Forestry Law<sup>2</sup> and created the political momentum for its approval in September 2007.

In 2010, the country's forest authority (the National Institute of Forest Conservation and Development, Protected Areas and Wildlife – ICF) drafted a national strategy for controlling illegal logging and trade (ICF 2010). In 2012, another important step in this sequence of efforts was Honduras' decision to negotiate a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA)<sup>3</sup> with the European Union (EU). Official negotiations started in January 2013. Given the limited wood trade with the EU, most stakeholders in the country view legality assurance of timber exports as a secondary concern, and there is a growing consensus that the VPA should focus on the underlying drivers of poor forest governance, including corruption and contentious forest tenure issues (ICF 2013a).

All these initiatives share common goals. By improving forest governance they hope, *inter alia*, to reduce forest loss and degradation, enhance forest-dependent livelihoods, and encourage sustainable forest management (Sosa and Tinoco 2007, Ley Forestal 2007, CONADEH 2011, ICF 2013a). Importantly, the Honduran experience demonstrates that these same goals can be achieved through 'community-based forest enterprises' (CFEs) engaged in the production, processing and trade of forest products. Even though CFEs do not always work well and there have been cases of mismanagement, there are many examples where CFEs have reduced deforestation and illegal logging, generated employment and income opportunities for impoverished communities, and brought about more sustainable forms of forest use. This Information Brief summarizes the evidence for this assertion and suggests that forest governance goals can be achieved by strengthening community forestry in the country.

<sup>1</sup> The Olancho Environmental Movement (MAO).

<sup>2</sup> Forestry, Protected Areas and Wildlife Law.

<sup>3</sup> A VPA is a binding agreement between the EU and a partner country that sets out the commitments and actions of both parties to confront forest governance concerns (EC 2007).

## Honduras' Community Forestry Enterprises

The relationship between local communities and commercial forest extraction in Honduras goes back to early colonial times (Tucker 1992). Prior to the 1970s, however, local communities had no statutory rights to use forest resources for commercial purposes. It was only in 1974 that a new law (Decree 103) mandated the creation of the Social Forestry System (SFS), with the aim of engaging the rural population in forest resource use and protection (Utting 1993). Since then, Honduras has extensively promoted agroforestry cooperatives and other forms of CFEs.

The history of the SFS has not been easy. Due to changing socio-political conditions, institutional support waned soon after its creation (Utting 1993). Many CFEs collapsed because of market failures, problems with the forest authority, and internal organizational difficulties (Tucker 2004). Notwithstanding, the SFS has existed for nearly four decades, and its mandate has been reconfirmed by successive legislative reforms, including the latest Forestry Law approved in 2007. Some of the first cooperatives are still functioning and new communities are constantly becoming involved. In spite of its problems, the SFS is one of the most enduring and successful examples of social forestry policy in Latin America. Table 1 summarizes the key milestones in its history.

**Table 1. A Brief History of the Honduran Social Forestry System**

| Year                            | Event  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| <b>1974</b>                     | Creation of the Social Forestry System by Decree 103 (COHDEFOR Law)  |
| <b>1974-1977</b>                | Decline in political and institutional support for the SFS   |
| <b>Early 1980s</b>              | Approval of the Agricultural Modernization Law <sup>4</sup> ends forestry nationalization and returns forest ownership to landowners, but also results in a 'land rush' in state forest areas (including many CFE areas)   |
| <b>1992</b>                     | New forestry regulations introduce 'usufruct contracts' to assign management rights to SFS organizations, but at the same time establish limits on the volume of timber an SFS organization can harvest (1,000 m <sup>3</sup> per organization per year in pine forests and 200 m <sup>3</sup> per organization per year in broadleaf forests) |
| <b>1993</b>                     | New forestry regulations introduce 'usufruct contracts' to assign management rights to SFS organizations, but at the same time establish limits on the volume of timber an SFS organization can harvest (1,000 m <sup>3</sup> per organization per year in pine forests and 200 m <sup>3</sup> per organization per year in broadleaf forests) |
| <b>1994-1996</b>                | Policy to award long-term (40-year) usufruct contracts to forestry cooperatives  |
| <b>Latter Half of the 1990s</b> | Awarding of usufruct contracts ends because of legal uncertainties and opposition from the private sector  |
| <b>2007</b>                     | Approval of a new Forestry Law which reaffirms the SFS's legal mandate, eliminates restrictions on harvestable volume, and introduces procedures for granting long-term 'community forest management contracts' (of up to 40 years)  |
| <b>2009</b>                     | Beginning of ICF efforts to award community forest management contracts  |
| <b>May 2013</b>                 | 234 CFEs recognized by SFS, but only 83 have officially awarded use and management rights  |

Source: Utting 1993, Wells et al. 2007, ICF 2012a.

Table 2 shows that the country currently has over 230 CFEs, with a combined membership of around 9,300 people. Most CFEs are located in pine forest areas that dominate the country's interior highlands and parts of its northeastern lowlands. Timber production is by far the main economic activity, but resin tapping is also important in pine forest areas.

While some organizations recognized by the SFS (and therefore included in Table 2) may be inactive, there are many unregistered community-based organizations protecting and managing local forest areas. Thus the total number of CFEs may be higher than that reported in Table 2. This situation highlights the need for ongoing monitoring of the magnitude and status of the Honduran community forestry movement.

<sup>4</sup> Law for Modernization and Development of the Agricultural Sector.

**Table 2. Honduras' Social Forestry System: Summary Data**

| Main Forest Type                 | Number of CFEs | Membership |       |       | Number of CFEs According to Main Traded Products  |
|----------------------------------|----------------|------------|-------|-------|---|
|                                  |                | Men        | Women | Total |   |
| <b>Pine Forest</b>               | 172*           | 6,004      | 1,766 | 7,770 | Pine timber: 107<br>Resin and pine timber: 39<br>Charcoal: 2<br>Agroforestry products: 24 |
| <b>Broadleaf Tropical Forest</b> | 62*            | 1,254      | 298   | 1,552 | Tropical hardwoods: 60<br>Agroforestry products: 2  |
| <b>Total</b>                     | 234            | 7,258      | 2,064 | 9,322 |   |

\*The distribution among forest types needs to be treated with some caution since some CFEs are located in areas characterized by a mosaic of pine and broadleaf forests.

Source: ICF 2012a.

## Community Forestry Helps Reduce Deforestation and Illegal Logging

In 1995, a comparative study between twelve broadleaf CFE areas in northern Honduras and the surrounding unmanaged areas found a significant difference in annual deforestation rates: an average of only 0.8% in CFE forests as opposed to 1.5% in nearby unmanaged areas (PDBL 1995). Another assessment of forest loss in the same twelve CFE areas over the two years (1996-1997) following the original study revealed a further decrease to a deforestation rate of only 0.3% per year on average (Castillo and Roper 1998).

More recent evidence comes from the UNESCO-accredited Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (RPBR) in the country's northeast, its largest protected area and last forest frontier, where intense deforestation pressures and illegal logging exist (Global Witness 2009). At the same time, the area has seen an increase in CFEs involved in timber production in recent years. In April 2013, there were twelve active CFEs managing nearly 107,000 hectares of broadleaf tropical forest in or nearby the RPBR. Seven of these operations, comprising 53,115 hectares, have been certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) since 2010 ([info.fsc.org](http://info.fsc.org)).

The RPBR appears to be having a positive impact on reducing deforestation. The annual rate of forest loss (1.62% over the 2006-2011 period) in the entire area of the six municipalities where the RPBR is located is nearly double the forest loss rate inside the reserve (0.96% over the same period) (Rivera and González 2011). It also appears that CFE areas inside the reserve are generating an additional forest protection effect. In fact, nine of the twelve CFEs manage areas located inside the RPBR; six in the reserve's so-called 'buffer zone' (predominantly inhabited by colonist settlers) and three in its 'cultural zone' (characterized by the presence of different indigenous groups).<sup>5</sup> Table 3 compares the annual deforestation rates of these nine CFE areas with that of the wider (buffer or cultural) zone in which they are located. In seven cases, forest loss from 2006 to 2011 was significantly lower in the CFE areas. While these differences may be partly attributable to location and distance, the trend appears clear: CFE areas inside the reserve tend to have less deforestation than surrounding parts of the reserve that do not overlap with CFE areas.

The three CFE areas located outside the western boundary of the RPBR in the Sierra de Río Tinto have undergone more deforestation pressure than most of the CFE areas within the reserve, thus confirming the protective effect of overlapping reserve-CFE areas. Even outside the reserve, however, deforestation has been lower in CFE areas than in non-CFE areas, particularly where CFE experiences are more mature, as in the case of the Brisas de Copén Cooperative (Melvin Cruz, pers. comm., March 2013). Thus, while overlapping (reserve-CFE) areas present clear advantages in terms of forest protection outcomes, CFE areas outside the reserve are also contributing significantly to forest maintenance.

Reserve and CFE areas have different implications for the control of illegal logging. Unauthorized extraction of high-value species, in particular mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), has a long history in the reserve. There have been at least two waves of widespread illegal logging activity in and around the reserve in the past decade; the first in 2000-2001 and the second in 2006-2007 (Richards et al. 2003, Global Witness 2009). The key aspects of these two waves are summarized in Box 1. CFE members were involved in these illicit logging practices and some CFEs were used by timber traffickers to launder illegal timber. Still, evidence suggests that illegal extraction in both periods occurred largely outside the CFE areas

<sup>5</sup> As described in the following paragraph, the other three CFEs manage areas located outside the RPBR.

(Avilio Álvarez, pers. comm., May 2013). Most harvesting activities were carried out in open-access areas outside the reserve or in non-overlapping areas (that is, outside CFE areas) in the reserve. The conclusion is that the CFE status helped restrain illegal extraction both outside and inside the reserve.

**Table 3. Comparing Deforestation Rates inside the Reserve**

| RPBR Zones           | Average Deforestation Rates (2006-2011) | CFE Areas     | Average Deforestation Rates (2006-2011) |
|----------------------|---|---------------|---|
| <b>Buffer Zone</b>   | 1.40%                                   | MIRAVEZA      | 0.04%                                   |
|                      |   | Limoncito     | 0.51%                                   |
|                      |   | Maya Tulito   | 0.19%                                   |
|                      |   | El Guyabo     | 0.01%                                   |
|                      |   | Mahor         | 2.26%                                   |
|                      |   | Sawasito      | 4.03%                                   |
| <b>Cultural Zone</b> | 1.22%                                   | Yabal Ingnica | 0.28%                                   |
|                      |   | Won Helpka    | 0.07%                                   |
|                      |   | CAIFUL        | 0.12%                                   |

Source: Rivera y González 2011.

This suggests that while the reserve is helping to reduce deforestation activities, it appears to be less effective in limiting cut-and-run illegal harvesting operations. Recent CFE assessments in and around the RPBR appear to confirm that, albeit not immune, most CFE areas have been more successful at preventing run-away timber theft. An impact evaluation carried out by Fortín et al. (2010) found that local forestry cooperatives have contributed to a “cumulative reduction in illegal logging in their assigned areas.” Similarly, Alvarado (2010a) reports that the above-mentioned Brisas de Copén Cooperative has been able to significantly reduce illegal logging activities in its managed forest.

### Box 1. Induced Illegal Logging Waves in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve

In 1998, Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras. In the following years, the forest authority started authorizing extraction of mahogany *dead wood* ostensibly felled by Hurricane Mitch or by forest conversion activities. Evidence suggests that in the Sico-Paulaya Valley (on the reserve’s western side) dead wood permits served to launder approximately 7,000 m<sup>3</sup> of illegally logged mahogany in 2000 and 2001.

Similar events occurred again in the RPBR in 2006-2007, when the forest authority endorsed a mechanism to legalize so-called ‘abandoned’ mahogany timber, triggering a new wave of illegal logging in the reserve. According to Global Witness (2009), in this two-year period the total volume of illegally felled mahogany timber extracted from the reserve may have been as high as 8,000 m<sup>3</sup>.

Sources: Richards et al. 2003, Wells et al. 2007, Global Witness 2009.

Research findings in pine forest areas also show that forest conservation and maintenance are positively influenced by the presence of local community forestry organizations. A comparative study of five forestry cooperatives (Jones 2003) highlighted the major role they played in defending their forests against threats coming from farmers, ranchers, timber poachers and logging companies. The study underscored the case of the Villa Santa Cooperative in the southeastern Department of El Paraíso, where lands surrounding the cooperative’s forest had been almost completely cleared and the only significant remaining area of forest was the one managed by the cooperative (Jones 2003). A similar outcome was described by an earlier study (Tucker 1999) in the Municipality of La Campa, in the west of the country. Those findings indicated that deforestation was very low in two forest areas under common property arrangements, while it was much higher in individual parcels that had been claimed by local residents for private usufruct (Tucker 1999).

Positive environmental outcomes from CFE experiences have also been documented in conflictive forest areas in the Department of Olancho. In 2004, five forestry cooperatives in the Municipalities of Gualaco and Guata were assigned nearly 40,000 hectares of national forest lands that had been heavily affected by illegal logging and forest fires. A study published in 2010 (Alvarado 2010b) showed that six years later illegal logging had been radically reduced and forest fires affected less

than 2% of the total area. Silvicultural practices implemented by the cooperatives were also able to control pine bark beetle (*Dendroctonus frontalis* and *Ips* spp.) infestations.

These findings in Honduras reflect the wider evidence. Studies from many other countries show that community forests are often better regulated and protected against deforestation and illegal logging than adjacent state forest lands, even if the latter have a strong protected area status (Richards 2013). They also highlight the potential of Honduran community forestry to contribute to climate change mitigation by reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+), underscoring the need for forest communities to play a central role in REDD+ initiatives in the country.

## Community Forest Enterprises Generate Employment and Income Opportunities for Local Communities

As reported in numerous studies (Markopoulos 1999, García 2011, and others referred to below), CFEs often constitute a key employment and income-generating force in the rural communities where they operate.

A study by Fortín et al. (2010) reported that over the 2006-2008 period CFEs generated an average of 1,900 workdays per year in and around the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve, providing more than US\$18,000 annually in local wages. In addition, total income from timber product sales during the same period reached approximately US\$420,000 per year (Fortín et al. 2010). Some CFEs, such as the COATLAHL Cooperative in northern Honduras, have been able to increase employment and income opportunities for their members via vertical integration along the production chain from timber harvesting to export of finished furniture products. For instance, three exports of certified timber products carried out in 2004 by COATLAHL generated 2,100 days of wage labor in the six CFEs involved in timber production, a total gross income of over US\$100,000, and a net profit of nearly US\$20,000 (Del Gatto et al. 2007).

In the pine forest region, a study in three municipalities of the central highlands found that in the ten years between 1994 and 2003 CFEs contributed approximately US\$7 million to the local economy (Portillo et al. 2003). In one municipality, Lepaterique, local residents began to establish small-scale logging operations in 1992. Five years later, a socioeconomic survey found that the income of households involved in logging activities had doubled and that 50-60% of their total income came from forest activities (Nygren 2005). The previously cited study by Alvarado (2010b) reported that in two municipalities of Olancho, five CFEs obtained more than US\$500,000 in gross income from timber products and generated 5,560 days of local wage labor during the 2005-2010 period. Employment generation is particularly relevant in CFEs that combine resin tapping, logging and multiple forest protection activities, as evidenced by the case of a CFE in central Honduras, the Santa María de Chagüite Grande Cooperative, which generated approximately 8,500 remunerated workdays in 2010 (García 2011).

Total nationwide SFS sector employment is likely to go significantly beyond its 9,300 members (see Table 2 above), because many CFEs employ other community members (who are not official members of the local CFE) to help with diverse production or forest management tasks (Markopoulos 1999).

## Community Forestry Promotes More Sustainable Forms of Forest Management

The timber harvesting systems employed by most CFEs in Honduras are based on low impact activities. In broadleaf forests, manual harvesting and the use of watercourses and mules to extract timber result in a limited impact of timber extraction on residual forest stands (Markopoulos 1999). Forest conditions like horizontal structure and floristic diversity also show little or no difference between harvested and non-harvested plots in broadleaf CFE areas (Rivera et al. 2003). On-site conversion of logs into sawn timber, extracted using mules and horses, is also common in coniferous forests. Skidding of pine logs, when it occurs, is often done by oxen teams (Jones 2003). Resin tapping is also widely considered a comparatively sustainable form of non-timber forest production, as witnessed by the fact that it has been carried out continuously for decades in many areas.

There are numerous promising CFE forest management experiences. The already mentioned Brisas de Copén Cooperative on the edge of the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve and the cooperatives in Gualaco and Guata are illustrative examples. Both experiences have been recognized as exemplary processes of sustainable forest management in Latin America (Sabogal and Casaza 2010). Besides highlighting their progress in implementing sound forest management practices, the assessment reports of these two cases emphasized their efforts to improve transparency, community participation and social equity (Alvarado 2010a, Alvarado 2010b).



Attention to forest protection is another important attribute of Honduran CFEs. They have placed large forest areas under protection to conserve water sources, to serve as future forest reserves or for other reasons, including inaccessibility. A comparison of CFE management plans with management plans on private lands revealed that, on average, CFE management plans had a larger proportion of their total area set aside as ‘protection areas’ (ICF 2012b).

Certification provides more evidence of CFE achievements. In 1991, twelve CFEs operating in northern Honduras were the first forest producers to be certified in Central America, and only the second CFE initiative to be certified anywhere in the world (Markopoulos 1999). By April 2013, there were four valid FSC forest management certificates in Honduras, all for CFEs comprising in total 72 communities with a combined area of over 150,000 hectares of forest under their management ([info.fsc.org](http://info.fsc.org)).

## Positive Outcomes in Spite of Limited Rights and Many Barriers

The previous sections have highlighted some positive examples of the role played by CFEs in advancing forest governance in Honduras. Notwithstanding many positive experiences, external support has generally been necessary to enable communities to comply with technical and legal requirements; numerous initiatives have faded away once external assistance came to an end; and spontaneous uptake has been limited. Furthermore, there have been multiple cases of mismanagement and even illegality (Box 2).

### Box 2. Mismanagement, Corruption, and Political Patronage

A good number of CFEs in Honduras have been afflicted in varying degrees by mismanagement and corruption. In political-economic contexts molded around local power and hierarchical relations, it can be relatively easy for local elites to manipulate and dominate CFEs. As a result, there have been many cases of CFEs controlled by the wealthy at the expense of the less fortunate, with benefit distribution skewed along lines of socioeconomic position and gender. In some instances, local timber merchants have been able to achieve a “covert privatization” of CFEs, similar to the outcome documented by Klooster (2003) in Mexico. For example, there have been a few cases around the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in which the degree of manipulation by timber traffickers has been so pervasive that local people speak of ‘ghost’ organizations: discredited and dysfunctional entities that exist only ‘on paper’ to facilitate timber laundering and other fraudulent activities by their bosses. Political patronage and hidden ties to power allow these practices to be carried out with impunity.

On the other hand, in many CFEs throughout the country a lack of training has often led to poor bookkeeping and administrative mismanagement, creating confusion and suspicion even when corruption was not involved.

Sources: Nygren 2005, Global Witness 2009.

In spite of these problems, the successes are clear with many CFEs (some with nearly 40 years of history) generating multiple environmental and socioeconomic benefits, as described above. What is most remarkable is that these successes have occurred even in the absence of most of the underlying conditions that the literature considers essential for successful community forestry.

Tenure security is a case in point. Establishing secure tenure is widely recognized as a fundamental component for sustainable forest management and CFE success (Tucker 1999, Pagdee et al. 2006, Larson et al. 2010). Yet, community forestry in Honduras has been characterized by little or no *de jure* rights over forest areas. In the 1990s, there was a widespread effort to award long-term (40-year) ‘usufruct contracts’ to SFS organizations, but the policy soon came under attack from industry representatives who questioned the capacity of communities to implement forest management and the authority of the state to dispose of national forests in such a manner (Markopoulos 1999). They claimed that such contracts were actually concessions, which had been abolished by the 1992 Agricultural Modernization Law (Wells et al. 2007).

The 2007 Forestry Law and its implementing regulations, approved in 2010, clarified these legal uncertainties and established legal procedures for awarding long-term ‘community forest management contracts’ to SFS organizations. These new legal instruments have enabled the current ICF administration to assume a more active stance in granting long-term *de jure* forest rights to local communities.

Despite the efforts of the current ICF administration, after 40 years only 83 CFEs (out of 234) possess legally valid documents assigning them usufruct and management rights over specific forest areas, as shown in Table 4. Most CFEs have only *de facto* rights derived by local recognition of their management and protection efforts, although such rights are at times strengthened by the existence of an approved management plan.

**Table 4. Summary of Existing Community Forest Management (or Usufruct) Contracts**

| Forest Type             | Number of CFEs | CFEs with Contracts | Area Covered by Contracts (in Hectares) | Duration of Contracts  |
|-------------------------|----------------|---------------------|---|--|
| <b>Pine Forest</b>      | 172            | 38                  | 275,174                                 | 40 years: 11 contracts<br>10 years: 3 contracts<br>5 years: 23 contracts<br>3 years: 1 contract                          |
| <b>Broadleaf Forest</b> | 62             | 45                  | 219,856                                 | 40 years: 26 contracts<br>30 years: 2 contracts<br>5 years: 17 contracts   |
| <b>Total</b>            | 234            | 83                  | 495,030                                 | 40 years: 37 contracts<br>30 years: 2 contracts<br>10 years: 3 contracts<br>5 years: 40 contracts<br>3 years: 1 contract |

Source: ICF 2013B.

In theory, formal recognition should increase the legitimacy of CFE use rights, making it more likely that outsiders will respect them. However, the contracts have not always guaranteed respect for the rights involved. In many cases, state forest areas have been subject to recurrent competing claims (often of doubtful validity) even after being granted to local CFEs. Such claims have involved poor peasants, wealthy ranchers and at times even businesses interested in developing hydropower generation or tourism. The forest authority and other state institutions have consistently failed to support CFEs in their efforts to defend their exclusion rights, and at times have supported or encouraged the competing claimants.

In summary, community forestry in Honduras has been undermined by insecure, limited, temporary and easily abrogable rights to forest areas and products.

Even in cases where communities have secure tenure rights and/or do not face disputes with outside claimants, legal requirements and restrictions hinder community access to forest products and their markets. Regulations on forest resource use and management remain very strict and their application overly bureaucratic. Such regulations establish high transaction costs of compliance that reduce the economic benefits for communities, act as barriers that have constrained the growth of CFEs in Honduras, and leave legal producers vulnerable to market competition from lower cost illegal timber. They also facilitate elite capture, as described in Box 2.

Preparation of a comprehensive forest management plan is often beyond the capabilities of local CFEs, and the upfront costs in terms of time and money to draw it up and get it approved are a major disincentive for local communities. Even after a plan has been approved and the timber has been cut, additional burdens hinder the transport and marketing of forest products, in particular because transport permits are issued by understaffed local offices that are far away from the forest communities. According to Sánchez et al. (2007), the entire process of obtaining and implementing a logging permit involves 20 actors, 53 procedures and 71 steps. Such a process is cumbersome for logging industries and unworkable for small operators.

The regulatory framework accompanying the SFS has therefore resulted in modest benefits to communities and households. Excessive bureaucratic requirements have made it almost impossible for communities to participate in formal forest operations and markets without external support or without losing resource rents through elite capture.

## Conclusions

In the face of weak political commitment, insecure tenure and heavy state regulations, the results achieved by CFEs in Honduras have been remarkable. Many CFEs are engaged in a range of timber and non-timber production activities that are also providing significant conservation and local livelihood benefits. This suggests that much more positive outcomes could be achieved with a more supportive regulatory and governance framework. Unfortunately, national planners and international development agencies have often overlooked the successful role played by CFEs in managing forest resources and improving local forest governance.

As noted in the introduction, Honduras and the EU started formal negotiations on a Voluntary Partnership Agreement (VPA) in January 2013. VPA processes in Africa and Asia have opened up considerable political space for forest reform to benefit vulnerable or forest dependent peoples, including those involved in community forestry efforts. Key instances are discussions on changing the legal regime encompassing tree tenure in Ghana, legalization of pit sawing in Liberia, and a new law giving new rights to indigenous peoples in the Republic of Congo (Bollen and Ozinga 2013).

Similarly, the VPA process in Honduras represents a new *opportunity* to recognize greater and more secure rights for forest communities, to shift away from top-down schemes in community forestry, and to promote a more enabling regulatory framework. Such reforms will not happen by themselves. In other countries they have often been the product of long and continuing struggles by strong community alliances (Pulhin et al. 2010). Investments in building such community alliances and ensuring their genuine participation in the VPA process constitute a key strategy for making these reforms possible.

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