



4.2 FLEGT VPA and REDD+ and community tenure rights in Honduras

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Introduction

Although FLEGT and REDD+ are evolving as different mechanisms, their aims are clearly complementary. FLEGT's efforts to improve forest governance and curb illegal logging are essential to reducing deforestation and forest degradation. The broader focus of REDD+ — to mitigate climate change by keeping forests standing — can help address aspects of forest governance that fall outside the scope of FLEGT Voluntary Partnership Agreements (VPAs).

A community forestry case study from Honduras, the first Latin American country to be simultaneously involved in FLEGT VPA and REDD+ processes, provides evidence that community forestry can significantly contribute to their common aims. That being so, both initiatives should focus on policies that support forest communities, in particular those that strengthen and clarify these communities' rights to land and resources.



BOTH FLEGT AND REDD+ SHOULD FOCUS ON POLICIES THAT SUPPORT FOREST COMMUNITIES.

The FLEGT VPA and REDD+ processes in Honduras

In 2009, as part of its efforts to improve forest governance and reduce forest loss, Honduras started formal REDD+ preparation activities, with the support of the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (FCPF) of the World Bank. The final version of the country's Readiness Preparation Proposal (R-PP) was submitted in July 2013. Interestingly, the document includes a table on the linkages between REDD+ and FLEGT VPA. It highlights two key aspects: a) the need to ensure complementarity and coherence between their respective safeguards; and b) the importance of both processes acknowledging the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities. The importance of tenure rights for forest communities is also emphasized in many parts of the R-PP. However, some observers have noted that despite this attention the document does not include any concrete proposal to address the current lack of such rights.

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The FLEGT VPA process in Honduras is more recent. Official negotiations with the European Union (EU) started in January 2013 and are scheduled to last until mid-2015. Since the process has only recently started and is the first in Latin America, it is unclear precisely what the VPA in Honduras will look like. However, given the limited wood trade with the EU, most stakeholders in the country view the legality assurance of timber exports as a secondary concern. There is a growing consensus that the VPA should focus on the underlying drivers of poor forest governance, including the problematic forest tenure situation highlighted in the R-PP.

Honduras's community forestry movement

In Honduras the relationship between local communities and the commercial extraction of forest products goes back to early colonial times. Prior to 1970, 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 (*Sistema Social Forestal* or SFS), a state-run programme aimed at promoting collective forms of forest use and management by peasant organizations.

The SFS has faced many challenges. Due to changing socio-political conditions, institutional support waned soon after it was created. Many forestry cooperatives collapsed because of market failures, problems with the forest authority, and internal organizational difficulties. In spite of these problems, the SFS has been active for nearly four decades, and its mandate has been reconfirmed by successive legislative reforms, including the latest forestry law, approved in 2007.

Table 1 shows that more than 230 community forest enterprises are registered, with a combined membership of around 9,300 people; new communities continue to become involved. Most community forest enterprises are located in the pine forest areas that dominate the country's interior highlands.¹ Timber production is by far the main economic activity, but in pine forests resin tapping is also important. The long history of the SFS makes it one of the most enduring and significant examples of community forestry policy in Latin America.

In addition, there are many other forms of community-based forest management and protection in Honduras. For instance, hundreds of community water committees, called *Juntas de Agua*, are involved in forest restoration activities related to watershed management. There are also tens of thousands of farmers and land-owners who actively protect and manage trees and patches of forest on their lands. These local forest management schemes are a key part of maintaining environmental stability while contributing to local well-being.

Table 1. The Honduras Social Forestry System: summary data

Main forest type	Number of community enterprises	Membership			Number of community enterprises according to main traded product
		men	women	total	
Pine forest	172*	6,004	1,766	7,770	Pine timber: 107 Resin and pine timber: 39 Charcoal: 2 Agroforestry products: 24
Broadleaf tropical forest	62*	1,254	298	1,552	Tropical hardwoods: 60 Agroforestry products: 2
Total	234	7,258	2,064	9,322	

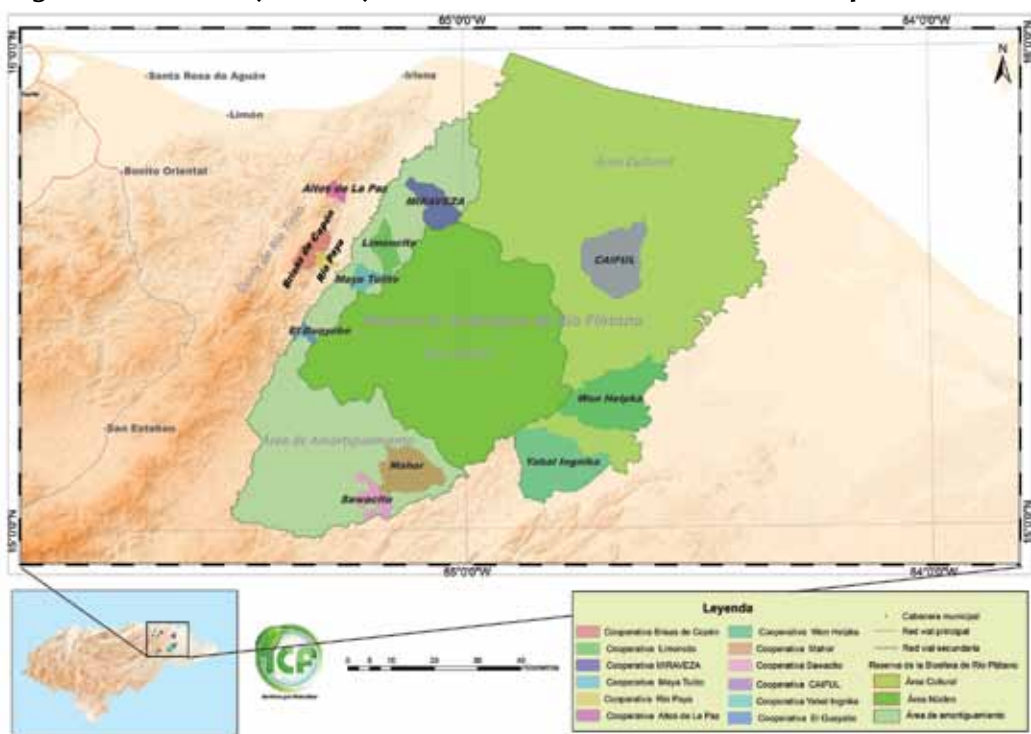
*Note: The distribution of community forest enterprises among forest types needs to be treated with some caution since some community forest enterprises are located in areas characterized by a mosaic of pine and broadleaf forests. Source: ICF 2012

A case study: the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve

Estimates of annual forest loss in Honduras range from 60,000 to 120,000 hectares (ha) per year. This amounts to a deforestation rate between one and two percent, among the highest in Latin America (FAO 2005; FAO 2010). However, there are important local variations that result from specific demographic, institutional and environmental contexts. There is, for instance, growing evidence that community forestry schemes established under the SFS are often associated with lower rates of deforestation in both pine and broadleaf forests.

A prominent example that illustrates such evidence comes from the UNESCO-accredited Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve in the northeast of the country. With more than 800,000 ha, the reserve is the country's largest protected area. It is, however, threatened by intense deforestation and illegal logging pressures. Over the past 15 years, the area has seen an increase of community forestry initiatives in timber production. In June 2013, there were 12 active community forest enterprises managing nearly 107,000 ha of broadleaf tropical forest in or near the reserve (Figure 1). Seven of these operations, comprising 53,115 ha, have been certified by the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC) since 2010.²

The reserve appears to be having a positive impact on reducing deforestation. According to recent research (Rivera and González 2011), the annual rate of forest loss inside the reserve (0.96% over the 2006–11 period) is just over half of that in the entire area of the six municipalities in which it is located (1.62% over the same period). Community forestry areas inside the reserve also appear to have an effect on forest protection. As shown in Table 2, forest loss from 2006 to 2011 was significantly lower in most of the areas of the reserve under community forest management.³ Although these differences may be partly attributable to the remoteness of the respective areas, the trend is clear: community forestry areas inside the reserve tend to have less deforestation than the parts of the reserve that are not involved in such initiatives.

Figure 1. Community forestry areas in and around Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve**Table 2. Deforestation rates in the Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve (RPBR), 2006–11***

RPBR zones	Average annual deforestation rate for the entire zone (%)	Community Forestry Enterprise (CFE) areas	Average annual deforestation rate (%) for each CFE area
Buffer zone	1.40	MIRAVEZA	0.04
		Limoncito	0.51
		Maya Tulito	0.19
		El Guayabo	0.01
		Mahor	2.26
		Sawasito	4.03
Cultural zone	1.22	Yabal Ingnica	0.28
		Won Helpka	0.07
		CAIFUL	0.12

*This table compares the annual deforestation rates of CFE areas with that of the wider (buffer or cultural) zone in which they are located. Source: Rivera and González 2011

The three community forestry areas located outside the boundaries of the reserve have undergone higher deforestation pressure than most of those within the reserve, which confirms the protective effect of overlapping (reserve-community forestry) areas. Even outside the reserve, however, deforestation has been lower in community forestry areas than in nearby unmanaged areas. This is particularly true in places with a longer experience in community forest management, as in the case of the Brisas de Copén Cooperative. In summary, community forestry areas inside as well as outside the reserve have clear advantages in terms of forest protection.



Community forestry is also helping to control illegal logging. Unauthorized extraction of high-value species, particularly mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*), has a long history in the reserve. Two waves of widespread illegal logging in and around the reserve, the first in 2000–01 and the second in 2006–07, have been extensively documented (see, for example, Richards et al. 2003 and Global Witness 2009). Community members were involved in these illicit logging practices and some community forest enterprises were used by timber traffickers to disguise the sale of illegal timber.

Nevertheless, it has been observed that illegal extraction in both periods occurred largely outside community forestry areas (Avelio Álvarez, pers. comm., 2013). Community forestry helped to restrain illegal extraction both inside and outside the reserve. Therefore, while the protected area status of the reserve is helping to reduce deforestation, as argued above, it appears to be less effective in limiting cut-and-run illegal harvesting operations. Although most community forestry areas (inside and outside the reserve) are not immune from timber theft, they have been more successful at preventing it.

Positive outcomes in spite of limited tenure rights

Río Plátano Biosphere Reserve is only one example of the numerous community forestry initiatives that provide significant conservation benefits in Honduras. The potential of community forestry to reduce deforestation and illegal logging is also shown by the fact that many of the positive community forestry initiatives in Honduras have occurred even in the absence of most of the factors considered essential for successful community forestry.

Tenure security is a case in point. Establishing secure tenure is widely recognized as a fundamental component of community forest management (Pagdee, Kim and Daugherty 2006; Larson, Barry and Ram Dahal 2010). Yet community forestry in Honduras has been characterized by little or no de jure rights over forest areas. Despite the efforts of the current forest authority, after 40 years only 83 out of 234 community forest enterprises possess legally valid contracts assigning them (limited) usufruct and management rights over specific forest areas (Table 3). Most community forestry initiatives have only de facto rights derived by local recognition of their management and protection efforts.

Table 3. Summary of existing community forest management contracts

Forest type	Number of community enterprises	Number of community enterprises with contracts	Duration of contracts (years)	Number of contracts
pine forest	172	38	40	11
			10	3
			5	23
			3	1
broadleaf forest	62	45	40	26
			30	2
			5	17
total	234	83	40	37
			30	2
			10	3
			5	40
			3	1

Note: The term “community forest management contracts” was introduced by the 2007 Forestry Law. Contracts granted before 2007 were called “usufruct contracts.” The data in the table include both types of currently valid contracts. Source: ICF 2013

In theory, formal recognition should increase the legitimacy of local rights holders, making it more likely that outsiders will respect these rights. However, the contracts granted by the forest authority 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 organizations. The forest authority and other state institutions have consistently failed to support community forest enterprises in their efforts to defend their exclusion rights, and at times have even supported or encouraged competing claimants.

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. As described in Box 1, regulations on forest resource use and management remain very strict and their application is overly complicated.

Box 1. Barriers to legality

Preparing a comprehensive forest management plan is often beyond the capabilities of local community forest enterprises, and the up-front costs in terms of time and money to draw it up and get it approved are a major disincentive. 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 forest communities. According to Sánchez, Navarro and Sandoval (2007), in Honduras the process of obtaining and implementing a logging permit involves 20 actors, 53 procedures and 71 steps. The difficulty and costs of such requirements reduce the economic benefits for communities and are barriers to legality that have constrained the growth of community forestry in Honduras.

Conclusions

Community forestry in Honduras has been undermined by limited or non-existent rights to forest resources. Even when community forest management contracts have been issued, their restricted rights over lands defined as public domain do not meet forest communities' need for clear and enforceable rights.

In spite of this situation, remarkable results have been achieved by community forestry in Honduras. This suggests that much more positive outcomes could be achieved with more secure rights. FLEGT VPA and REDD+ processes can contribute significantly to community forestry in the country by promoting reforms that grant full tenure rights to communities involved in the SFS (and to other types of forest steward communities), so that they can legally own the forest land that they manage and use for their livelihoods.

The bureaucratic requirements described in Box 1 indicate that regulatory reforms are also necessary. Tenure rights can be viewed as a precondition to regulatory reforms: the government can establish any regulation on resource use if a community is not a right-holder, but the situation is very different if the community has legally recognized title (RRI 2012).

At the end of September 2013, numerous community forestry representatives and supporters gathered in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, for a major conference organized by the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests. The conference, entitled *Community Forestry as the Basis of Governance and the Starting Point for FLEGT and REDD*, focused specifically on the links between FLEGT VPA, REDD+ and community forestry. Its conclusions highlighted the fundamental need to strengthen rights and tenure security for forest communities in Honduras and other Mesoamerican countries. Considering that FLEGT VPA and REDD+ processes in Honduras are still in the early stages, there is a real possibility for them to be key contributors to fulfill this demand and explore the immense potential of community forestry in Honduras.

Endnotes

1. Honduras is one of the few tropical countries with large areas of natural pine forest.
2. See info.fsc.org.
3. The only exceptions are two areas (Mahor and Sawacito) located in the southern part of the reserve, where poor governance and cattle ranching pressures are particularly problematic.

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