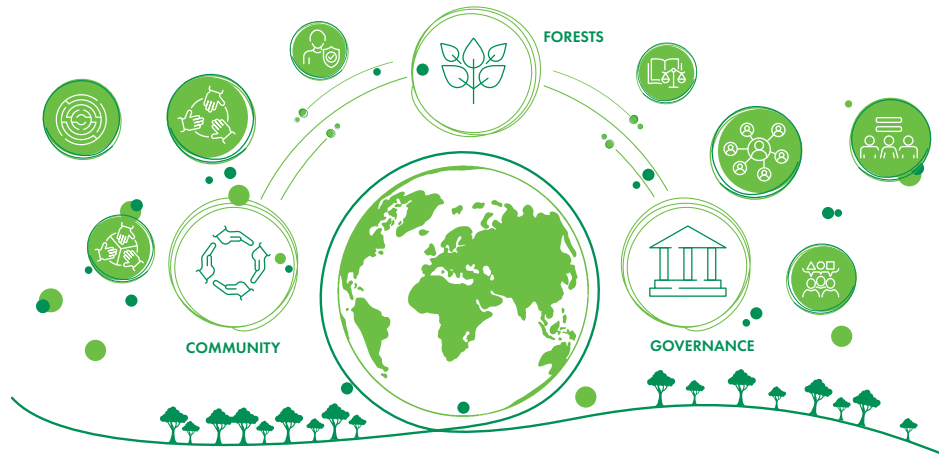




NGOs facilitating internal governance processes in community forestry initiatives



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Community forestry can contribute to local development, while playing an important role in the conservation and restoration of the world's forests — crucial to tackle the global biodiversity and climate crises. In support of community forestry, many governments have installed policies that allow communities to secure formal rights over forest lands. NGOs often help communities with applying for rights, setting up internal governance structures, developing management plans, and establishing community forestry enterprises, among others. The success of such community forestry initiatives is influenced by the strength of community-level forest governance. Below we outline the challenges related to this, and propose four general lessons for NGOs to help strengthen community-level governance, enriched with examples from the work of Tropenbos International and RECOFTC.





Community governance challenges

To understand challenges related to community forest governance it is helpful to distinguish between cases where the government requires that the community establishes a dedicated governance body (such as a community forest management committee) and cases where the community is represented by existing customary leadership (such as village leaders). Where new governance bodies are established that overrule decision making of traditional authorities, tensions and conflict may arise, and traditional authorities may be unhappy to see their power questioned (Box 1). Where the community is represented by existing customary leaders, the state's endorsement of their authority may strengthen traditional governance processes, but there is also a risk of fostering undemocratic decision making, leading to elite capture and rent seeking. Existing power dynamics may enable certain individuals to benefit more from new opportunities (Box 2). This is especially common when investors in search of natural resources try to persuade community representatives to sell or lease out community forest resources with lucrative deals on an individual basis.

FORESTS

COMMUNITY

GOVERNANCE



What can NGOs do to strengthen community-level governance?

The above-mentioned issues raise the question if and how NGOs can help strengthen community governance in the context of community forestry initiatives. As a group of practitioners working on community forestry in Bolivia, Colombia, DR Congo, Ethiopia, Nepal, the Philippines, Suriname and Viet Nam, we have been discussing this question. This resulted in the following four general lessons.



1

There is a need to advocate for more flexible governance models. Rules and regulations for community forestry often leave little room for the adaptation of the community forest governance system to existing customs, practices and needs. NGOs will therefore have to advocate for a supportive policy environment that allows for the bottom-up development of customized community forest governance, adaptable at the community level, within a general framework of regulations and safeguards.

2

NGOs can work with communities to help them adjust and adapt their internal governance systems to the state-defined regulations that come with the formalization of community forest rights, as well as to the ever-changing internal and external developments and pressures. In doing so, NGOs need to carefully consider the constellation of customary collective and individual user rights as they often co-exist within the community forest areas, without imposing simplistic and idealized ideas of collectiveness and the role of communities in forest management (Box 3). NGOs can also help build connections to relevant local government agencies, and build the capacity of local officials to support community forestry governance regimes.

3

NGOs can promote inclusivity in community forestry initiatives. Different community members should have an opportunity to influence decisions related to the community forest, if they would want to. Although it is unrealistic to expect that all community members are actively involved in community forestry initiatives, NGOs can at least work with communities towards: (i) increasing transparency in decision-making processes; (ii) ensuring that information is available, so that people can make their own informed choices; (iii) removing barriers for people who want to engage; and (iv) engaging marginalized groups.

4

NGOs can add value by strengthening the competencies of leadership as well as of other community members – women and youth in particular (Box 4). NGOs can also help with building the ability of community representatives to liaise with external stakeholders, such as government agencies at relevant jurisdictional levels, and with building trust with external agencies (Box 5). This is crucial to reduce the dependence of community forest governance systems on NGO support. Moreover, NGOs can play a key role by fostering the development of institutions for collective action between communities.

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GOVERNANCE





NGOs as facilitators

The success of community forestry is influenced by many factors, one of which is community-level governance. NGOs can collaborate with communities to help improve their access to information and strengthen competencies (Box 6). In addition, NGOs can help with developing and implementing local governance systems, rather than transferring externally defined governance schemes and management technologies. In this capacity, NGOs support communities in social processes of negotiation, consensus building, decision making and conflict resolution (Box 7). It means that NGOs act as facilitators rather than implementers (Box 8). And, facilitating community governance processes will always require that NGOs carefully listen to the communities they aim to support (Box 9). This should eventually contribute to greater local agency and ownership, as key requirements for successful community forestry in the long term. We call upon practitioners to experiment with new approaches and tools for the facilitation of community-level governance in the context of community forestry initiatives, and to document and share the lessons. Such learning is essential and urgent, if we want to ensure that community forestry lives up to its potential.

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GOVERNANCE



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