

Is there a role for forests in addressing the root causes of migration in the Northern Triangle?

Remarks by Iliana Monterroso, Scientist with the Center for International Forestry Research during the virtual event

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Today I will share insights around how community-based forest management initiatives represent locally grounded solutions that can be scaled up to build more resilient societies. These insights draw on research from two CGIAR Programs, led by CIFOR together with local partners over more than 10 years on forest tenure reforms in the global south. During this talk I will argue that communities living in and around forests provide key lessons to transform this crisis and develop solutions based on sustainable resource use.

Around the world, over 1 billion and half people live in and around forests and depend on them. In the northern triangle, forests remain an important source of livelihoods, and large portions of forests overlap with territories of indigenous peoples. In these landscapes, forests are critical to address the climate change agenda. They play a key role in mitigating greenhouse gas emissions, but they are also crucial for building adaptation, providing livelihoods and enhancing resilience to crises, be they natural disasters, economic or pandemic shocks.

The challenges to promote transformation on the ground are huge in a region that is characterized by poverty and progressive environmental deterioration. Addressing underlying causes of social differentiation should be closely tied to actions that **address the unequal distribution and control of natural resources – mainly land and water**. Impacts affect rural, women, youth, indigenous and poor groups more profoundly. The situation is aggravated as around 40% of the population still rely on natural resource-based activities for income and employment.

ETA and IOTA hurricanes are clear examples of the profound crisis, it affected over 4million people in the region - displaced over 1 million only in Guatemala exacerbating food insecurity and chronic malnutrition. These conditions are worsened by insecurity and weak governance - marked by corruption and impunity. Under these circumstances, migration becomes a survival strategy as livelihoods deteriorate and concentration of resources displace entire communities – something we observed during the last migrant caravan where over 7,000 people mostly from Honduras tried to flee these effects.

Surprisingly, in the midst of these scenario two cases highlight opportunities and challenges around the role forests can play in strengthening governance and enhancing livelihood opportunities to address root causes of migration.

The first case - The creation of community forest concessions within the Mayan Biosphere Reserve in Guatemala, represents a shift in government policy regarding land use and tenure, moving from

a focus on agriculture towards a focus on conservation through sustainable use. This led to one of the largest certified forests managed collaboratively by communities – with important investments from the US government who supported both institutional reforms and capacity building. **Today, the community concessions are stewards and last bastion of the largest remnant of Guatemala’s once vast forests of Peten.**

Recognizing community rights provided incentives for long-term community forest stewardship, increasing incomes, generating employment and promoting new forms of investment. Organized communities patrol against forest fires and encroachment, shielding this area from increasing expansion of criminal activities: the deforestation rate is almost zero. By investing in capacity building, communities have established community forest enterprises, diversified activities and obtain economic and environmental benefits. Forest management has become an important source of income, up to 60% for local families. This is large in comparison to only 2% of families reporting income from remittances. This shows forest provide income, employment and keep people from being displaced or forced to emigrate.

The community forest enterprises have helped to address social, economic and governance challenges that neither the state nor the market were capable of addressing alone. Not only do communities pay taxes, they also contribute to public services, health, education, in areas where government institutions are mostly absent, they have become an important ally in strengthening the governance of protected areas.

Initiatives to include forests as key component in development efforts have also been promoted in Honduras. The country has a long history of community forestry. However, threats over forests have been growing from corrupt and criminal interests. In the Mosquitia region, indigenous peoples have achieved titling in the past 10 years, though that titling has been undermined by expansion of illicit activities and increasing influence of criminal organizations.

Threats to modern day Mosquitia are not unlike those that faced the community concessions when they were established almost 30 years ago. Lessons from the community concessions show us that stabilization of violent and chaotic territories is possible where there is real investment in supporting community rights, and sustained effort is placed into reconciling interests at a local level. Just as USAID played a key role in supporting the community concessions in Guatemala, it can today play a key role in supporting more inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies through aid to community rights and organizations.

So what can be done? A number of short-term measures are within reach, focused on the largest forest areas and communities that are under threat from corruption, violence and intense land pressures. These measures include supporting the renewal of community concession rights in the Maya Biosphere Reserve and strengthening recently titled but besieged indigenous Territorial Councils in the Honduran Mosquitia. Any efforts to improve governance should strengthen institutions supporting territorial organizations – community forest enterprises and indigenous territories.

Going back to the initial question. Is there a role for forests in addressing the root causes of migration in the Northern Triangle? These two cases in Honduras and Guatemala, show the importance of understanding the role of land, forests and natural resources in feeding problems of criminality, and by the same measure, recognize that securing rights and guaranteeing livelihoods is key for preventing corruption, and building resilience.

Challenges are not unsurmountable a roadmap to build resilience is possible, **but it starts on the ground. It builds on the recognition of rights and strengthening partnerships** with civil society and community organizations – including those that are struggling to defend their lives, territories, and livelihoods against corruption – and are suffering the impacts of adverse climatic conditions and government inaction.

While many factors are at play, three courses of action to build resilience and contribute to address the root causes of migration emerge:

- First, invest in reform processes that recognize rights and strengthen land and resource governance institutions
 - put rightsholders at the center and ensure processes are inclusive and equitable
- Second, invest in capacity building - those capacities that support collective action and are tailored to the local context
- Third, build resilience by guaranteeing options that enhance livelihoods opportunities and allow for the scaling of resource-based solutions