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Smallholder forest producer organizations in a changing climate

Forest and Farm Facility

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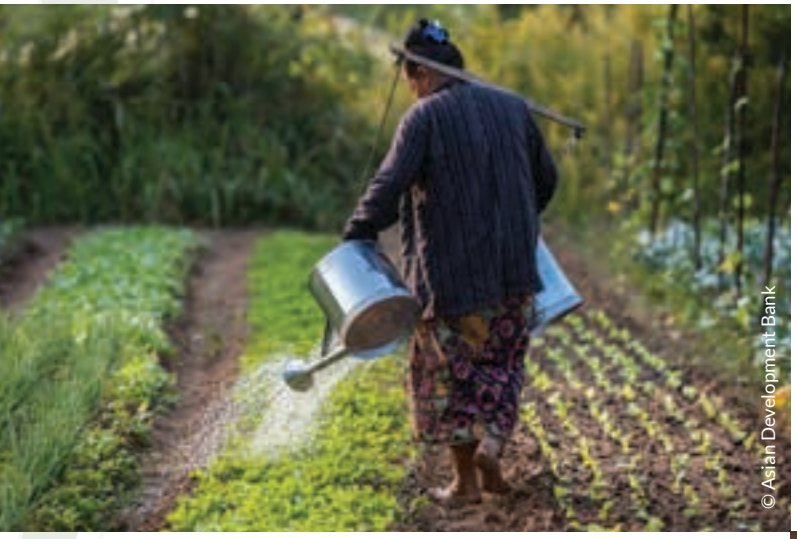
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National organizations and networks of smallholder forest producers play an important part in climate change mitigation and adaptation, through both political and practical action.

These organizations contribute to innovative and successful climate action by building on their particular strengths, and by harnessing both the support of the membership base and organizational alliances in multi-actor networks.


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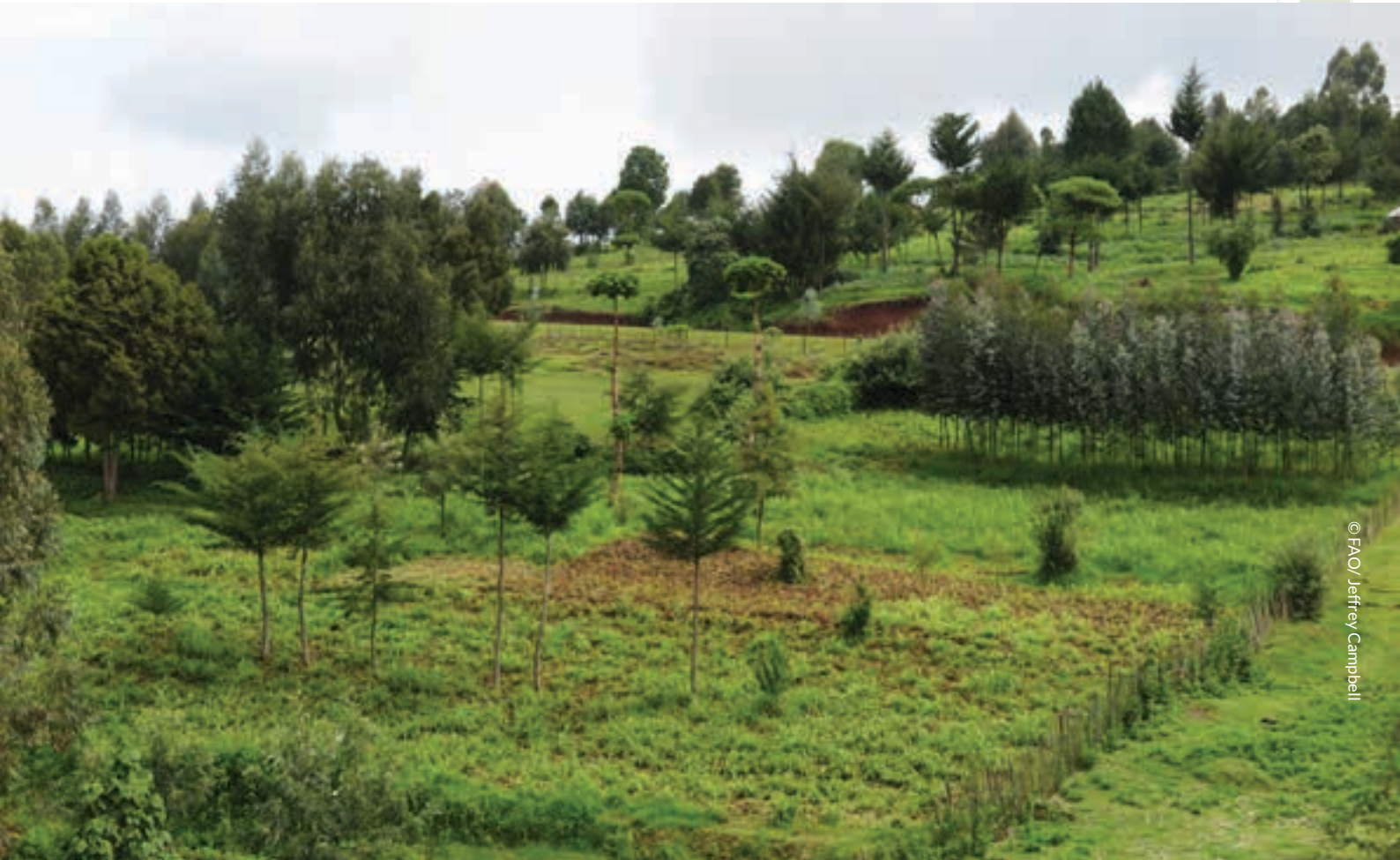
In addressing the wide agenda on forests and climate change, which combines both technical and political issues, organizations require strong capacity and skillful leadership to balance donor interests linked to considerable funding. Organizations must also be accountable to local smallholder members and to long-term strategic goals.

Table 1. Various types of climate action which smallholder forest producer organizations may support. The support encompasses both political (securing tenure, representation/"voice") and technical (e.g. forest management, access to finance and markets, monitoring) roles.

Mitigation
Forest conservation (reducing deforestation and carbon emissions)
Sustainable forest management (reducing forest degradation and carbon emissions)
Agroforestry (adding and restoring trees on farms)
Plantation forestry (restoring degraded forests or new plantations)
Soil conservation (reducing erosion and increasing soil carbon)
Alternative and woodfuel-saving energy technologies
Sustainable biofuel production
Production of long-lasting wood products (storing carbon)
Adaptation
"Soft" approaches: information, capacity building, organization
"Hard" approaches: technology and infrastructure-based solutions[1]
Ecosystem-based adaptation, nature-based solutions[2]

1 e.g. selection of drought-tolerant species, improved tree germplasm, irrigation systems
2 e.g. protecting and restoring mangroves and forests for flood regulation, water purification, food production; livelihood diversification, e.g. agroforestry, tourism



Introduction

Millions of smallholder and family farmers are the backbone of rural economies in developing countries. Smallholders will feel the impacts of climate change especially severely because they depend directly on natural resources, they are located predominantly in the tropics, and various socio-economic, demographic and policy trends limit their capacity to adapt (Morton, 2007; Verchot *et al*., 2007). At the same time, smallholders play an important part in responding to climate change and mitigating its impacts, especially through forest-related activities, including agroforestry (Verchot *et al*., 2007) and community forest management. Smallholders have often developed livelihood strategies to reduce overall vulnerability to climate shocks (adaptive strategies) and to manage their impacts (coping strategies) (Morton, 2007). Forests and other natural environments have an important role in subsistence and earnings, contributing up to 28 percent of rural household incomes, 77 percent of which comes from natural forests (Angelsen *et al*., 2014). By conserving and sustainably managing forests and planting trees, smallholders contribute to reducing deforestation and forest degradation. It is now widely acknowledged that farm and forest producers will best meet the challenges of climate change in climate-smart, multifunctional landscapes where the goals of improved food security, economic benefits and adaptation to climate change are integrated in rural livelihood strategies, producing co-benefits for climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction (Harvey *et al*., 2014; Wollenberg *et al*., 2012).

The increasing severity of climate impacts and the vulnerability of rural populations in developing countries mean that smallholders need support in transforming their livelihoods for climate-smart landscapes. Central organizations, networks and other secondary-level organizations of forest producers are well placed to provide such support. In many countries, national and regional associations of forest smallholder and community organizations arose to assist in the struggle to secure local ownership of land and forests, which is considered indispensable for halting deforestation and achieving sustainable climate action (Ding et al., 2016; Larson, 2011). They often have a presence from the grassroots to the national level, affording a strength in numbers that can be harnessed for policy influence. Some even represent the voice of smallholders in international climate change policy processes. They provide technical assistance and build local capacities in sustainable forest management, livelihood diversification and conservation of ecosystem services. Organizations and networks have an important role in exchanging knowledge and information flow among smallholders, governments, experts, donors and the private sector and linking smallholder forest producers to markets, finance and development assistance. They thus have important potential roles in helping to design locally appropriate climate action. See Table 1.

Smallholder forest producer organizations continuously evolve to meet new demands from their constituents and from the external pressures of a changing climate. They offer potential for attuning smallholder knowledge and livelihoods with global climate goals. Global climate efforts will benefit from endeavors to understand and support the innovative ways and good practices through which smallholder forest producers and their organizations contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation.

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Objective of the brief

This brief summarizes the findings of a review of the innovative ways in which **smallholder forest producer organizations** in developing countries are contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation. The review was carried out by the Finnish Agri-Agency for Food and Forest Development (FFD) and the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE), in collaboration with the Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), a partnership among the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and AgriCord. A qualitative synthesis of secondary literature, including academic and grey literature, focused on the experiences of four smallholder and community forest producer organizations engaged in climate change mitigation and adaptation:

- Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén (ACOFOP), Guatemala
- Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN)
- Community Forest Conservation Network of Tanzania (MJUMITA)
- Farm Forestry Smallholder Producers Association of Kenya (FF-SPAK)

The review also explored the experiences of **agricultural smallholder organizations** that diversified into forest-related activities, through interviews and a literature review.

Agricultural producer organizations taking on forests and climate change

Agricultural producer organizations in the global South often have a strong existing membership base and legitimacy among smallholder farmers when compared to newer and sometimes weaker forestry producer organizations. Could promoting sustainable forestry, agroforestry and other tree-based livelihoods through established agricultural organizations and cooperatives offer a quick and effective way of scaling up on-the-ground climate action? Here are some examples with mixed outcomes.

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In Ethiopia, members of the Zenbaba Bee Products Development and Marketing Union in the Amhara region, hoping to make up for the seasonality of markets for bee products, were keen on diversifying their income through tree products that they were already producing on their farms. Increased income from tree products was also expected to encourage farmers to plant more trees and to establish agroforestry systems, thus enhancing livelihood security and soil health and contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation. However, strict government regulations required specialized cooperatives for each marketable commodity. The farmers were reluctant to form new tree product cooperatives because of the transaction costs of establishing and running parallel marketing structures, and selling the tree products individually was not viable because of transport costs. Finally, after persistent dialogue with government experts, supported by a study demonstrating the benefits of combining all forest-related activities in one cooperative (Deresse, Palacios and Tadesse, 2014), the union convinced the government officials of the benefits of allowing bee product cooperatives to diversify their portfolio of marketed goods to include tree products.

The Viet Nam Farmer's Union (VNFU) in Yen Bai and Bac Kan in northern Viet Nam and the Thua Thien Hue, Quang Tri and Quang Ngai Cooperative Alliances in central Viet Nam promote farm forestry and sustainable forest management to harness the potential of forests and trees on the lands of Vietnamese smallholder farmers. Of the 10.5 million VNFU members, 2.8 million are reportedly involved in forest production, and nearly 80 percent of the member cooperatives of the three cooperative alliances have forest. Previously, the Government placed a greater emphasis on forest protection, but in recent years commercial forestry has started to become more important. Forestry extension services have been largely unavailable or tied to specific government or non-governmental organization (NGO) projects. VNFU and the cooperative alliances aim to fill the gap by building farmer capacity in forest management, agroforestry and marketing of timber and non-wood forest products to diversify livelihoods and improve social and environmental resilience. Although their knowledge and capacity are still low, and organizational skills at the local level are limited, these implementing agencies have achieved some promising results. Examples include new collective groups adding value and working together to commercialize acacia wood, profitable sales of saplings by pilot cooperatives that have encouraged other cooperatives to set up nurseries, and increased attention by local authorities and supporting agencies to forest associations. These results are spurring the cooperative alliances and VNFU to scale up the work.

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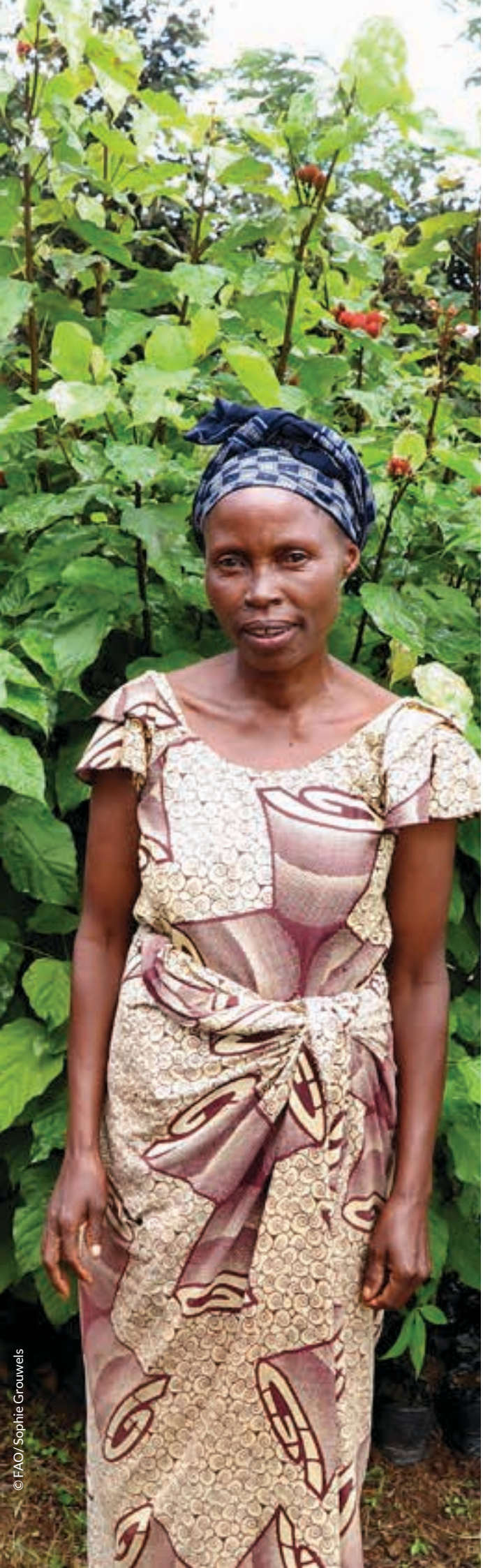
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The Zambia National Farmers' Union (ZNFU) recognized the high rate of deforestation caused by agricultural expansion in Zambia. It also recognized the urgent need to reorient agriculture towards green climate-smart farming practices that would add value to the agricultural sector and enhance its environmental sustainability. ZNFU began to promote growing trees on farms to generate income and provided farmers with improved tree seedlings from two nurseries that were established in Chisamba and Choma. As a farmer organization, ZNFU set up a Forest Commodity Committee in 2014 to lead the process of greening agriculture. The Forest Commodity Committee is evolving into an independent organization, a specialized forest commodity association, in the hope of attracting new members, increasing the visibility of the forest commodity sector in the country and supporting the forest decentralization process in Zambia. The Cotton Association of Zambia (CAZ) is now providing additional incubation support to the Forest Commodity Committee.

These experiences draw attention to the national policy environment, which may either enable agricultural producer organizations to engage in the forest sector or limit their role to sectoral silos. The capacity of key staff is essential in determining whether forestry is taken onto the mainstream agenda of the organization. Eventually, forestry commodity groups of agricultural producer organizations may mature as independent organizations, hand-in-hand with developing national policies and markets.

How do smallholder forest producer organizations help address climate change?

Smallholder forest producer organizations are desirable partners in addressing climate change, as illustrated by their many diverse roles. Among their most conspicuous tasks is the defense of communities' and local forest users' rights, including the right to compensation and rewards for reducing deforestation and forest degradation (REDD+). All the organizations reviewed have an important role in representing forest smallholders and communities in climate change and forest policy discussions, as well as in information sharing and networking – both horizontally among communities and other local actors, and vertically among communities, governments and other external partners. In addition, the organizations offer hands-on capacity building for member communities in forest management, ecosystem services and monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV). Other important functions of these organizations include facilitating links to finance and markets of forest products, including carbon trading and forest certification schemes, as well as supporting livelihood diversification.

Climate change mitigation activities that build on ongoing work and are related to diversifying forest-based benefits, for instance through REDD+, appear more central to the work of community forestry organizations than adaptation actions, which are often presented as secondary goals. For instance, ACOFOP demonstrated its capacity in helping the communities in the multiple-use zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve of Petén, Guatemala, to manage timber concessions sustainably, and then further diversified into non-timber forest activities and REDD+. MJUMITA, initiated by the NGO Tanzania Forest Conservation Group (TFCG), continues to partner with TFCG in climate change mitigation activities related to forest conservation and participatory forest management.

As a farm forestry organization, FF-SPAK mainstreams adaptation more to respond to its members' concerns and needs. In the context of dryland, on-farm forestry in Kenya, FF-SPAK promotes technologies such as water harvesting and storage and irrigation technologies to support tree nurseries during dry seasons, tree species diversification and fruit-tree agroforestry for food security. Increased tree planting on farms is in itself an adaptation to increases in droughts and uncertainty related to climatic conditions, which affect many annual crops. Tree crops provide a back-up and alternative livelihood, which increases resilience and spreads risk.

Examples of institutional innovations within smallholder forest producer organizations

Smallholder forest producer organizations build on their strengths in different ways to respond innovatively to climate change. Three noteworthy examples are highlighted.

ACOFOP (Guatemala): accompanying communities in sustainable forest management and climate change


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In the Maya Biosphere Reserve, deforestation rates are close to zero in the multiple-use areas managed by ACOFOP member communities (Hodgdon *et al.*, 2015), and forest management performance is better than in the strictly protected areas (Blackman, 2015).[1] The high performance is in large part attributed to the "accompaniment" model adopted by ACOFOP in supporting its member communities. The approach is based on mutual learning and self-diagnosis by the communities, channeling funding directly to the community organizations, and developing information channels and networks with external organizations for strategic support – including financing – responding to specific needs. ACOFOP thus "walks side by side" with the communities in developing long-term sustainable forestry, to avoid creating dependencies on external assistance and short-term projects. This approach has enabled ACOFOP and its member communities to develop their organizational abilities and capacity and has helped to position ACOFOP as an interlocutor with the Government of Guatemala and an advocate for community forestry around Central America (Cronkleton *et al.*, 2008; Gómez and Méndez, 2007).

Having demonstrated a successful model of community forestry based on commercial timber extraction, ACOFOP and its member communities are experimenting with new organizational structures to diversify into providing other forest-based products and services, including non-wood forest products such as xate (jade palm), ramon nut (the seed of *Brosimum alicastrum*) and chicle (natural gum), community-based ecotourism and cultural site protection, as well as REDD+ through the Guatecarbon initiative (Taylor, 2010; Hodgdon, Hayward and Samayoa, 2013). Guatecarbon uses enterprise

1 There are differences in the performance of the various community concessions, but in the aggregate the management is sustainable (Radachowsky *et al.,* 2012).

development and certification as the basis for generating carbon credits, aiming to get access to the voluntary market and to create an international example of forest enterprise-based REDD+. The carbon payments are seen as additional support for sustainable forestry enterprise, and not as an end goal *per se* (Hodgdon, Hayward and Samayoa, 2013). Other innovative approaches of ACOFOP include training local youth to use drones in forest monitoring.

The success of ACOFOP has gained it several international awards, and its approach is considered a model for scaling up community forestry in Latin America.

MJUMITA (United Republic of Tanzania): pooling emission reductions in a network of village forest reserves

MJUMITA is building on its network of communities engaged in participatory forest management in the United Republic of Tanzania in a pilot REDD+ approach developed together with partner TFCG. The network model allows geographically dispersed communities to aggregate their emission reductions from avoided deforestation and forest degradation and to reduce the transaction costs associated with finding buyers of carbon credits and administering REDD+ rewards. These costs would otherwise be too high for individual communities, considering the fairly small average size of forest holdings. MJUMITA's responsibilities include remote sensing for forest monitoring, contracting third party verification, marketing and payment facilitation. A pilot project implemented in Lindi and Kilosa districts from 2009, which included experimental performance-based payments to individual smallholders in the project communities, achieved 30 percent reductions in forest-based carbon emissions and identified interested carbon credit buyers (Sills *et al.*, 2014).

In contrast to the ACOFOP REDD+ initiative, in which the commercial timber enterprise is at the core of sustainable forest management and REDD+ may provide additional support to its economic viability, the MJUMITA communities did not initially obtain direct economic benefits from their village forest reserves. REDD+ was thus seen as a way to create financial incentives for forest conservation and to compensate for the associated opportunity costs. It was observed, however, that the pilot payments did not fully compensate for individual opportunity costs or for the transaction costs associated with establishing village forest reserves (Mustalahti and Rakotonarivo, 2014). Other challenges making it difficult to rely on REDD+ payments as the sole incentive for sustainable forest management and avoided deforestation include uncertainties in REDD+ funding, insecure land, forest and carbon tenure, weak forest governance, and greater returns from competing land uses such as agriculture.

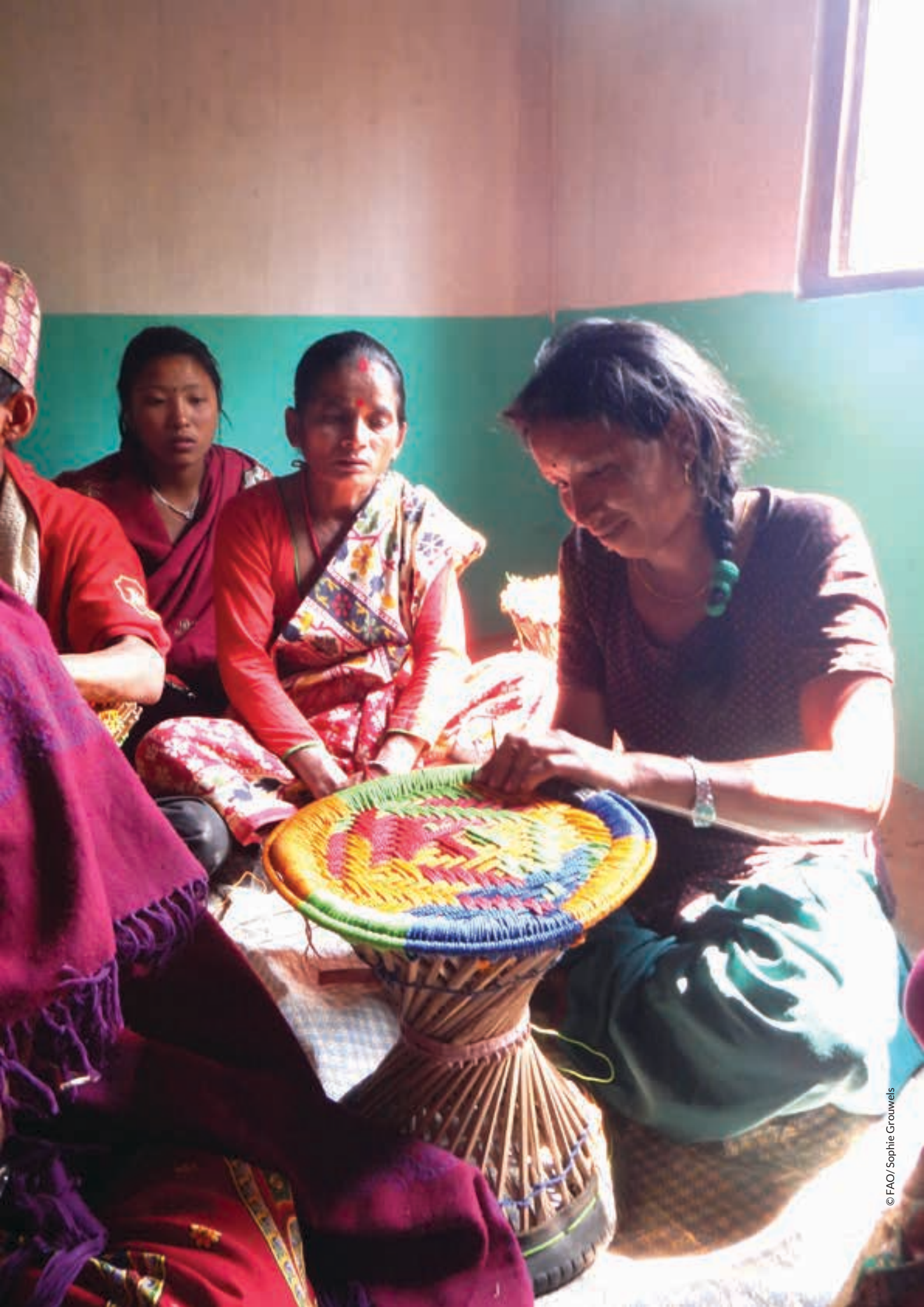
Nevertheless, the MJUMITA model provides an interesting example of a way to reward communities and smallholders for climate action through their networks and central organizations when the transaction costs of obtaining these rewards individually would be too high. Piloting REDD+ by MJUMITA has raised its profile among the national climate policy actors and provided opportunities for international networking and advocacy.

FECOFUN (Nepal): advocacy from the grassroots to international climate negotiations

FECOFUN emerged in 1995 as a national umbrella organization of community forest user groups (CFUGs) in the wake of decentralization of forest management in Nepal. Its mission is to defend the CFUGs' forest rights and to build their technical capacities. FECOFUN is now the largest civil society group in the country, representing over 18 000 CFUGs, which together manage more than 1.7 million hectares for the benefit of 2.2 million households (Pathak, Parajuli and Pandey, 2015). Its organizational structure spans all levels (local village, range post [subdistrict], district and national). The leadership at each level is democratically elected and has the autonomy to develop strategies based on local priorities.

The multilayered structure of FECOFUN has allowed democratic linkages and the organization of action within different arenas; it has made it possible to articulate local forest user concerns at various levels of governance and to resist a number of policy decisions that threatened to undermine local forest rights. FECOFUN'S strategies include building the institutional and technical capacity of constituent members, assuring that local interests influence public discourse on forest and environmental management, mass mobilization, lobbying and legal action against undesirable government decisions, constructive engagement with government agencies for greater recognition of local rights in forest policies, and international networking with community associations and advocacy organizations. The success of FECOFUN has been partly attributed to the political activism of its founding leaders, who strategically linked the forest rights movement to wider citizens' movements. As a result, the relationship between forest communities and state forest agencies has become more egalitarian and horizontal. FECOFUN has established itself as a strong balancing force as well as a collaborative partner with the Government (Paudel, Monterroso and Cronkleton, 2012; Ojha, 2011).

FECOFUN has been able to exert considerable pressure on the Nepal Government in policy-making on climate change and REDD+, including carbon ownership (Paudel *et al*., 2013). The federation has earned a seat on national forest and climate policy committees. In many public programmes, district forest officers and FECOFUN leaders have equal status (Paudel, Monterroso and Cronkleton, 2010). As an influential actor in REDD+ policy-making in Nepal, FECOFUN has drawn attention and resources to REDD+ piloting by community forest user groups. One challenge in the process has been balancing the needs of important constituencies such as women, members of castes experiencing discrimination, and participants in other community-based regimes such as collaborative forest management and leasehold forestry (Bushley, 2014).



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Challenges for smallholder forest producer organizations

When added to an already-wide agenda of political and practical functions in forestry, new roles related to climate change also present challenges to smallholder forest producer organizations. Some of the most common challenges are summarized here.

Capacity

- A more diversified agenda for forests and climate change puts a strain on the organizational and technical capacities of the central organization as well as those of the member organizations. For instance, the organizations may not have enough knowledgeable and qualified staff to respond to burgeoning requests to attend varied climate policy events or to represent their constituents' interests effectively enough at these events. Furthermore, the constant rapid development of the climate policy field, related opportunities and jargon demands considerable effort if personnel are to stay informed.
- Especially at the local level, the capacity to carry out old and new tasks may be unevenly distributed, and coordination and capacity-building opportunities are limited by geographical distances and isolation. As a result, the performance of the member organizations and communities is uneven, which weakens the overall performance of the central organization's constituency.
- Critics may see diversification as a distraction from the core tasks of the organization (such as defending communities' forest rights or technical support to forest management and marketing forest products), which hampers their implementation.
- Capacity building to meet the increasing demands and functions associated with a diversified organizational agenda adds to the transaction costs of implementing climate action, often creating a need for additional external funding.
- For agricultural organizations that expand into forestry, the capacity of key persons can either limit or encourage diversification of activities, but forestry may still remain outside the mainstream agenda.

Local representation

- Uneven capacity creates a challenge for achieving effective and equitable representation of local interests throughout the organizational hierarchy, as resources and human capital, and hence most of the strategic decision-making may be focused on the national level of the organization or network.
- The more the central organization gets involved in national or international policy debates, the more it may be seen as neglecting local interests and distanced from the reality and needs of smallholder farmers.
- If the agenda and actions of the central organization are not legitimized (seen as purposeful and appropriate) by members, the grassroots support that the organizations rely on, including their financial self-reliance (see below), may be compromised.

Continuity and financial sustainability

- If in addressing climate change an organization depends on external, project-based funding, for example from international development actors, its agenda may shift according to changing

global policy trends. The organization may opportunistically stray far from its core tasks, which can hamper long-term commitment to and focus on strategic goals.

- Strong partnerships with development actors may come at the cost of important linkages with the private sector.
- Nascent forest enterprises – timber and non-timber based – may struggle to cover organizational costs from meager profits in the context of high management costs, low productivity, weak markets and limited access to finance. Preparation for many climate-related schemes may require up-front investment, diverting limited resources. These challenges may complicate efforts to build financial independence through membership fees paid by communities and member organizations.

Accountability

- Dependence on external funding can lead to skewed lines of accountability towards donors or the government, while weakening internal accountability towards the grassroots. It may also result in potentially conflicting dual roles; for example, members of an organization advocating for local forest rights in REDD+ may be concerned that their positions could be compromised if they also benefit from early-action funding streams through pilot projects and consultancies.
- Forest organizations may become attractive targets for political appropriation, especially when they grow in influence, if the lines of accountability are not clear. In the context of an increasing scramble for major resources, such as those provided by the Green Climate Fund, this can present new governance challenges.

Equity

- Although the networks and organizations that were reviewed pay specific attention to achieving and promoting gender equality in their strategies, all acknowledge that a lot of work still remains to be done in practice.
- National organizations of forest producers may be dominated by members of certain political parties or socio-economically privileged groups, while marginalized groups, such as the ethnically discriminated against, poorest and formally landless forest users, may not be represented or may remain under-represented.

Broader governance context

The climate change related efforts of smallholder forest producer organizations are also conditioned by challenges in the broader governance context, which may include:

- tenure insecurity;
- competing land uses, including agriculture, infrastructure development mega-projects and exclusionary approaches to nature conservation, and strong interest groups related to these;
- weak forest governance and enforcement/rule-of-law, unclear, overlapping and/or conflicting mandates of different government organizations, undemocratic practices and corruption;
- power imbalances and paternalistic attitudes of governments and donors towards smallholders; and
- illegal activities and organized crime in certain areas.

Conclusion

Many national organizations and networks of forest producers in tropical developing countries are harnessing their potential to support smallholders in mitigating climate change and adapting to its impacts, while enhancing the resilience of rural livelihoods and ecosystems. They employ diverse strategies, from policy advocacy to on-the-ground support for climate-smart livelihoods. Importantly, the organizations draw on their particular strengths in developing appropriate climate action in each context – for instance, the support to the sustainable forest enterprise of ACOFOP, the network structure of MJUMITA and the effective multi-level presence of FECOFUN.

Smallholder forest producer organizations engage effectively in partnerships with other civil society groups, governments and international allies to respond to the multiple and diverse needs brought about by climate change. Alliance building through inter-organizational networks is crucial, as the obstacles to climate change adaptation and mitigation by smallholders are often too complex and deep-rooted (e.g. weaknesses in forest governance), and resources too limited for smallholder forest producer organizations to achieve impacts alone. At the same time, current modes of governance which allow networking across the international and national spheres have paved the way for smallholder forest producer organizations to participate in and influence climate change policy-making.

A more diversified agenda for forests and climate change puts a strain on the organizational and technical capacities of the organizations and may require that more resources be mobilized for capacity building and sometimes for expanding the organization. Increasingly, governments and international alliances, including the Forest and Farm Facility, AgriCord, and others, demonstrate the importance of mechanisms for providing direct support to strengthen the capacity and networks of smallholder forest producer organizations. In seeking external support to cover the transaction costs of increased climate action, the organizations must achieve a balance in their relationships with members, donors, government agencies, civil society organizations and the media in order to maintain their internal accountability and legitimacy – on which their strength in numbers is based. They must also ensure a focus on long-term strategic goals, which is essential for tackling the myriad challenges of climate change.

Forest and farm producer organizations offer the potential for enhancing the scale, monitoring the results and ensuring the long-term continuity of climate responses. Yet given their current roles and potential, relatively few resources have been channeled towards building their capacity in relation to climate change. Smallholder forest producer organizations should be recognized as important actors addressing climate solutions that benefit rural economies while also enhancing social and environmental resilience.

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This publication summarizes the findings of a review of the innovative ways in which smallholder forest producer organizations in developing countries are contributing to climate change mitigation and adaptation. The review was carried out by the Finnish Agri-Agency for Food and Forest Development (FFD) and the Finnish Environment Institute (SYKE), in collaboration with the Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), a partnership among the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and AgriCord.

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