

The politics of participation:  
Negotiating power relations through community  
forestry in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala

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## Abstract

Since the 1970s, Community forestry (CF) initiatives have sought to combine sustainable forestry, community participation and poverty alleviation. Like other community-based forms of natural resource management (CBNRM), CF has been lauded for its potential to involve local people in conservation while opening new opportunities for economic development. However, CF programmes are not always successful, economically or ecologically, and, by devolving new powers and responsibilities to an abstractly defined “community,” they risk exacerbating existing patterns of social exclusion, and creating new conflicts. In this paper we mobilise a relational concept of negotiation within a political ecology framework to explore how the power relations of CF are addressed and transformed in a region where issues of conflict and tenure security have long shaped the social forest. Specifically, we focus on the emergence and consolidation of ACOFOP [*Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén*], a Forest Based Association in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in the Petén region of Guatemala, where CF has been practised for 25 years. Emphasising the importance of longer histories of social movements and organisations to local capacities for CF, we explore the conditions of possibility that enabled ACOFOP to emerge, as well as the strategies it has adopted to make national regulatory frameworks work for local communities. Through qualitative analysis derived from participatory research, interviews and ethnographic data, we trace four key areas of ACOFOP’s model of accompaniment (participatory decision-making; conflict resolution; advocacy and capacity-building) that have been developed in response to the negotiation of political issues pertaining to, and stemming from, the practice of CF. Highlighting ongoing challenges, and key strategies for CBNRM in other contexts, we conclude by emphasising that systems of community management cannot be “equitable,” or indeed sustainable, if political issues of access and tenure are not kept central to questions of participation.

## Acknowledgements

The research presented in this paper was part of a three-year (2014-17) interdisciplinary project on community forestry in Mesoamerica led by Bioversity International and funded by the Austrian Development Agency; the donors to the CGIAR Research Programme on Forests, Trees and Agroforestry; and the Government of Italy. The lead author's participation was also initially funded through an ESRC IAA impact fund. We gratefully acknowledge the funders for enabling this research. We would also like to extend our thanks to the broader research team, as well as to our hosts and collaborators throughout the Maya Biosphere Reserve. We also gratefully acknowledge our interviewees and participants in all workshops for their participation and critical input throughout the process. Without this collaboration this work would not have been possible. Finally, we would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments as part of the journal's review process.

## **1 Introduction**

### 1.1 Objectives of this paper

Since the 1980s, community forestry (CF) initiatives have integrated forest conservation with international development goals by empowering and regulating communities to harvest timber sustainably (Porter-Bolland et al., 2012; Andersson, 2013; Charnley & Poe, 2007). International development actors support such processes by providing forestry training; helping implement mechanisms to distribute benefits fairly; and identifying markets for forest products (Alcorn, 2014; Gupta & Koontz, 2019). There is, however, some debate about how to configure this support without delegitimising local actors and practices (Leach et al., 1999), unwittingly inscribing state territorial power (Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011; Devine, 2018; Ribot et al., 2006), or reinforcing classed and gendered patterns of exclusion (Thoms, 2008; Nygren, 2005; Gupte, 2004; Garcia-López, 2018). After nearly fifty years of experimentation, important lessons about how to enable effective and *equitable* CF have been consolidated (eg. Arnold, 2001; Larson et al., 2008; Alcorn, 2014), with reliable outcomes linked to cases where communities are supported to develop internal governance structures, and to lead in decision-making (Torres-Rojo et al., 2019).

Despite this institutional learning, however, collective action has often broken down in the long-term. Scholars link this failure with instances where there is: disjuncture between the local “rules” of forest management and national regulatory frameworks (Radachowsky et al., 2012); too much heterogeneity within the user group (Varughese & Ostrom, 2001); or high tenure insecurity (Barsimantov et al., 2011; Larson et al, 2008). Where collective action breaks down, concessions may be revoked, or the benefits derived may only apply to a small section of the eligible population (Agrawal et al., 2018). Meanwhile, even where forest conservation has been improved, the involvement of international actors has exacerbated social conflict (Kashwan et al., 2019), or

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eroded authentic community control (Sunderlin et al., 2008). It is therefore increasingly acknowledged that the “success” of CF schemes needs to be evaluated not only in terms of ecological and poverty indicators, but through an assessment of broader political conditions, including tenure security (Sikor & Lestrelin 2017); meaningful social processes (Cronkleton et al., 2008); and participation across axes of gender, class, and ethnicity (Nygren, 2005).

Those working to develop a “political ecology” analysis of natural resource landscapes have developed this critique by highlighting the *politics* involved in the decentralisation of natural resource management. Now an established, interdisciplinary framework for studying human-environmental relations (eg. Robbins, 2000; Zimmerer & Bassett, 2003; Neumann, 2009), political ecology considers political, economic, and environmental transformations through the histories of their relations. Political ecologists highlight institutional conditions that allow fairer and more democratic control of resources, but they also emphasise the diverse geographical scales, interests, and social hierarchies that clash and mingle as models travel into contexts (Neumann, 2009; Nygren, 2005). Such scholarship reveals the longer histories of political struggle that shape environments: forests, for example, have been grounds for competing visions of nature and territorial control for centuries (Peluso and Vandergeest, 2011; Le Billon, 2001). The framing political-economic conditions through which decentralised management enters forests also becomes critical, with emphasis falling on the continuities (and discontinuities) between community management programmes and neoliberal forms of governance, and the associated recalibration of responsibilities and decision-making powers that may accompany them (McCarthy, 2005; Leach et al., 1999; Kashwan et al., 2019).

By adopting a political ecology perspective and attending to the processes of negotiation entailed within CF across longer timescales, this paper will contribute to understandings of the

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politics of participation within contemporary decentralised resource management practices. Like Nygren (2005), we see negotiation as a power-laden process through which people (re)shape unequal relationships — regulated in turn by wider socio-economic and political conditions that affect what can be negotiated and by whom (see also Edmunds & Wollenberg, 2001). Using this terminology, we explore the negotiation of the power relations of CF in a region where issues of conflict and tenure security have long shaped the social forest. Specifically, we focus on the emergence and consolidation of ACOFOP [*Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén*], a Forest-Based Association (FBA) in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Guatemala, where CF has been practised for 25 years. FBAs, otherwise known as second-tier, or meso-level forestry associations, mediate among social movements, local communities, national and international actors in the development of specific CF programmes. With histories rooted in social processes prior to community-based development initiatives, they, like agrarian organisations, offer insight into the (re)configuration of relationships among states, non-governmental actors and communities through decentralisation (Taylor, 2010; Edelman, 2008). In unpacking this case, our objective is to explore the relational processes of negotiation through which FBAs, as part of broader social and environmental contexts, adapt the regulatory frameworks of CF to address political issues of land tenure security, specific power-relations, and social conflict. Our methodology offers insight into a reflexive institutional process, developed through the negotiation of numerous challenges, and, as such, offers rich material to other contexts.

### 1.2 The case study

ACOFOP was established in 1995 by community members to support the concessionary process established in association with the creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (MBR), a

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protected area of 2.1 million hectares in the Petén region of Guatemala (see figure 1). From its inception, ACOFOP sought to counter the exclusion of forest communities from decision-making in the MBR by engaging with the new process laid out for community-managed forest concessions (Gómez & Méndez, 2005; Cronkleton et al., 2008). The case consequently reveals an important narrative of how a “disenabling” regulatory framework was adapted to work for local communities. ACOFOP also offers insight into community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) more generally, as CF has been practised in the MBR for almost 25 years, despite significant challenges and high levels of conflict<sup>1</sup>. The population of the reserve is diverse; there is a long history of violence in relation to the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-95); and, before the introduction of CF, levels of poverty were high (Merlet, 2011; Carr, 2007). Despite the significant institutional learning in this context, the concessions, due to be renewed in 2021, are also under threat. Governmental will toward the concessions has fluctuated significantly over the past decade, not least because alliances between commercial and international actors have consistently cast doubt on the efficiency of community-managed arrangements, most recently linking the communities with the drug trade and other illicit activities. There is a current process under way to present evidence of the benefits of CF and negotiate longer tenure arrangements.

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<sup>1</sup> For contextual studies, see Monterroso, 2007; Monterroso & Barry, 2007, 2009, 2012; Radachowsky et al., 2012; Taylor, 2010; Barsimantov et al., 2011; Nittler & Tschinkel, 2005.

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*Figure 1 Location of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Rainforest Alliance, used with permission.*

To contextualise the negotiation of power relations undertaken through the constitution of ACOFOP as an FBA, we trace the adaptation of a model of “accompaniment” to meet new challenges arising from CF in practice. Accompaniment is an alternative model of development that has been co-created with and alongside forest communities (Cronkleton et al, 2008; Gómez & Méndez, 2005). Through a qualitative analysis of the perspectives of diverse actors in the MBR, we highlight four dimensions of accompaniment that have been consolidated through efforts to negotiate the boundaries and rules of participation to political ends: participatory decision-making; conflict resolution; advocacy; and capacity-building. Our discussion of the development of fresh



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strategies in these areas to overcome challenges emphasises that external support of such processes needs to be sensitive to the complexity of community and to the multiple interests invested in CBNRM. It also highlights the importance of negotiation and skills of facilitation for long-term viability of commons management.

The paper is organised as follows: First, we conduct a literature review of existing CBNRM scholarship to update current understandings of the politics of participation within decentralised resource management, including an account of political ecological approaches to conflicted resource environments. The review section is followed by a contextualisation of our case study, and a presentation of the methodology through which we collected our data. This leads to our analysis of the politics of participation within the MBR in terms of emergent concepts and strategies for accompaniment. In our conclusions we offer suggestions of what this analysis means both for the political future of CF in the MBR, and for CBNRM in other contexts.

## **2 The politics of participation within community-based resource management**

### 2.1 The rise of community-based resource management

The commitment to community-based programmes of natural resource management was articulated in sustainable development theories as early as the 1970s (Leach et al., 1999), following growing critiques of the paternalistic premise of development interventions, and fresh conservation commitments in the face of global biodiversity losses (Richards, 1997; Hobley, 1996). The participatory approaches embedded within CBNRM programmes aimed to correct democratic imbalances by involving lay actors and marginalised communities in decision-making and the elaboration of regional conservation plans (Cleaver, 1999; Roseland, 2000). The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and World Bank adopted forestry for community development in

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1978 on this rationale (Hobley, 1996), while community-led approaches were scaled into international commitments at the Earth Summit of 1992 (Alcorn, 2014). Community forestry was developed from the 1980s to allow communities to extract timber from biodiverse forests, while also participating in their regeneration.

Today, there is barely a country in the world without some form of regulated community management of natural resources, which consistently meets ecological and economic objectives more reliably than individual-focused or classical state-based approaches (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Ostrom 2009). However, the reconfiguration of responsibilities associated with the rise of participatory models also reflects a shift from global concerns with “government” to “governance,” where civil society assumes responsibility for achieving outcomes determined at state and transnational levels (Jessop, 2002; Swyngedouw, 2005). This is important, as participatory mechanisms can consolidate state power under the guise of devolution (*ibid.*), or, through the creation of new bureaucratic mechanisms, coerce local groups in covert ways (Hobley 1996:10). Such effects are particularly linked with the ideas of devolution, voluntary participation, and public-private partnerships, and models of efficiency that shaped the operational vocabulary of neoliberalism through the 1980s (McCarthy, 2005; Kashwan et al., 2019). Importantly, CF was also designed to offset the reduction in budget resources available to forest departments, and in many ways borrows from this vocabulary to achieve its promises (Arnold, 2001).

Through attention to the political-economic context of decentralised governance, scholars in critical development studies, political ecology and human geography have consequently sought to question the politics of community-based approaches, highlighting tendencies to empower existing spokes-people, rather than new ones (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999); a failure to address structural patterns of exclusion (Gupte, 2004); and a tendency to support design formats that are

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short-termist and over-reliant on international expertise (Leach et al., 1999). That CF schemes may entrench existing forms of elitism has been a particularly persistent critique (McCarthy, 2005; Ribot et al. 2006, Sikor and Nguyen, 2007; Blaikie, 2006; Gupte, 2004; García-López et al., 2018). For example, in a review of CF's history in Nepal, Thoms (2008) shows how elite actors obtained new leverage over resource-use under the guise of acting for their community. Such studies reveal how decentralisation may reconfigure power relations in new ways that are not necessarily empowering for local actors (McCarthy, 2005), and may instead contribute toward “elite persistence” (Wilshusen, 2009; Kashwan et al., 2019).

This persistence may be associated with the “flat imaginary” CF imports from neoliberal economics into its ideas about communities and markets, which tend to obscure histories and geographies of unevenness (Peck, 2004) as well as the new “distributive politics” (Ferguson, 2015) established through decentralisation (Kashwan et al., 2019). Neoliberal invocations of civil society tend to obscure – and yet reinforce – this unevenness, by ‘gloss[ing] over enormous inequalities within and between groups, exaggerate[ing] the cohesiveness of voluntary associations, treat[ing] civil society as an actor rather than as a terrain of struggle, [and] treat[ing] very different groups as equivalent’ (McCarthy, 2005:1008). Through such glossing, the abstract conception of “the community” comes to serve as a black box charged with resolving structural contradictions brought about by the withdrawal of state services (Joseph, 2002). Indeed, scholars highlight that the “community” can mean a locality; a group with common interests; *and* a scale of intervention, sometimes all at once (Arnold, 2001), whereas, even in “traditional,” rural contexts, users of common resources are rarely homogeneous, and are often rifted by complex social differences and ethnic and gender geometries (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999).

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Political ecologist Nygren (2005:640) argues from this basis that a ‘consideration of the complexity and fragility of “community” is essential if it is to benefit more than a powerful minority.’ Communities are increasingly understood to be socio-culturally and ecologically diverse, with varied approaches to resource management and decision-making (Torres-Rojo et al., 2019; Andersson, 2013). Ojha et al. (2016) proposes a “delocalised” approach to community to articulate this nuance, which emphasises relationships between actors, within, and between spatial scales, and the complex social relationships that constitute decisions within any “local” space. For local decision-making is, of course, not only influenced by dynamics among local people, but by regulatory norms derived from national and transnational institutions, and by cultural and emotional frames that travel between places (see also Schleicher, 2018). When we refer to “community” in this paper, we imply this delocalised conception.

### 2.2 Negotiating the “rules” of participation

Within CBNRM studies, scholars have turned to “institutional arrangements” to complexify understandings of how coherent collective action is produced in relation to the governance of commons (Agrawal, 2001; García-López et al., 2018; Agrawal et al., 2018). Initially inspired by the work of Nobel-award winning commons scholar Elinor Ostrom, this scholarship models how CBNRM programmes, including CF, are established and maintained in relation to particular “rules” of use (Ostrom et al., 1999; Larson et al., 2008; Barsimantov et al., 2011; Sikor & Lestrelin, 2017). “Institutions,” within this scholarship, refer to the sets of social rules that influence decision-making about resource use, the resolution of conflicts, and the allocation of roles (Leach et al., 1999). A focus on institutional arrangements within the nexus of CF allows us to grasp that an activity like forestry brings diverse sets of rules into relation, including those

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derived from national and international regulations; global markets; regional politics; local assemblies; and context-specific norms relating to gender, behaviours, and the use of money (Richards, 1997; Cleaver, 2000; Dietz et al., 2002). For sustained collective action, there must be agreement on what the rules are, and how they will be enforced.

Through institutional arrangements, formal and informal “rules” of action and different scales of action are also brought into play. This reframes participation as the making of “the rules of the game,” in the sense of defining norms, establishing fields of legitimacy, and clarifying who makes decisions and how (Larson et al., 2008). Thus, institutional analysis, modelled in figure 2, can also help explain why collective action breaks down. For example, in a comparative study of four community forestry enterprises in Guatemala and Mexico, Barsimantov et al. (2011) demonstrate that a lack of clarity in tenure arrangements significantly increase the likelihood that commons management will collapse at the local level, especially in areas where populations are diverse and collective action is already costly. Social conflict and the break-down of CBNRM arrangements are often linked with high levels of heterogeneity, because diverse interests can make consensus-building and norm-enforcement difficult (*ibid.*). The study concludes, however, that such challenges can be overcome by good design – for example, where meaningful authority is devolved to forest-users (see also Varughese & Ostrom, 2001). Longer timeframes that facilitate trust-building also improve the likelihood that user groups will organise effectively (Agrawal, 2001, Ostrom et al., 1999), while dialogue among practitioners and decision-makers allows for mutual understanding (Orozco Vélchez, 2004:31; Nygren et al., 2005).

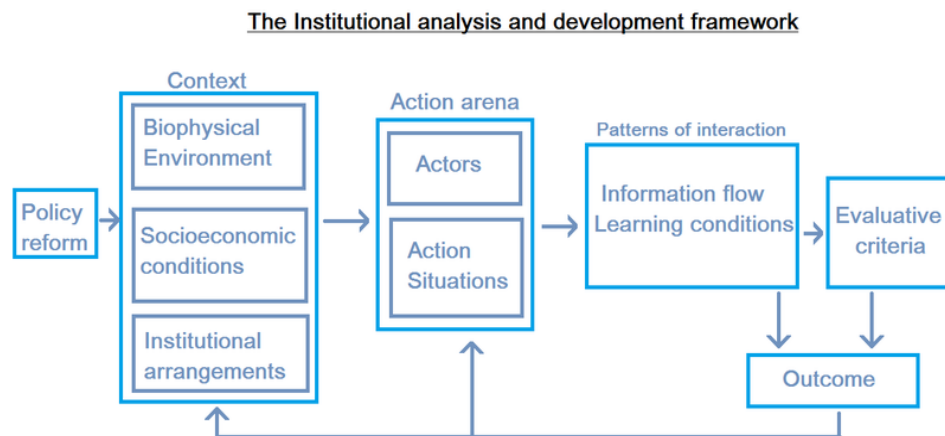


Figure 2 The institutional analysis and development framework developed by Elinor Ostrom. Available under commons licence. See also Ostrom (2009)

Nothing about long-term horizons guarantees success, however, and social rifts may deepen through time. This is particularly relevant in Central America, where internal wars have divided groups by political loyalties, and by conflict over who receives state benefits and protections. Meanwhile certain populations – such as women, or ethnic minorities – may be excluded from purported or perceived benefits. The importance of differential access to benefits and of different codifications of access is a key focus within political ecological accounts of CBNRM, which highlight conflicts over access to environmental resources with the configuration of systems of political and economic control (Bryant, 1998; Blaikie, 2006; Neumann, 2009; Peluso & Vandergeest, 2011). Political ecologists and critical institutionalists have successively challenged the focus within CBNRM studies on local-level institutional design, seen to downplay power relations configured at other scales (Cleaver, 2012; García-López et al., 2018; Kashwan, 2017; Kashwan et al., 2019). CBNRM studies have also been critiqued for treating communities and their spaces in naive ways, and for failing to assess the impact of broader political-economic conditions in their analysis of “success” (Li, 2002; Nightingale, 2003). Political ecologists

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consequently seek to evidence the influence of powerful state and non-state actors over resources and decision-making within CBNRM (Blaikie, 2006; Li, 2002; Peluso, 1992; Ribot et al., 2006) as well as non-state, civil society, and market forces (Büscher & Dressler, 2012). Institutions, here, are inseparable from power relations.

### 2.3 Negotiating the rules of devolved management

Unequal power relations, for political ecologists, need to be understood through the cultural articulations of resources and a broader “knowledge politics,” through which some forms of knowledge or expertise are designated authoritative, and others “primitive” or informal (Watts, 2000; Rocheleau & Edmunds, 1999). When analysing decentralised resource management, political ecologists therefore look beyond questions of ‘what works?’ to consider how, and ‘for whom’ does it work? (Fairhead & Leach, 2003; Escobar, 1996; Peet & Watts, 1996). This is central within feminist political ecology (FPE), which emphasises *gendered* social relations and embodied social practice in the making of histories of oppression – and of resistance (Rocheleau & Edmunds, 1992; Rocheleau, 2008; Elmhirst, 2011). FPE attends to specifically gendered power relations and scales of analysis including the home and household, which — alongside the “community” — are infused with regulatory norms elaborated elsewhere (Li, 2002)<sup>2</sup>. When Whatmore posits relationally that territory and its governance are ‘plastic achievements,’ that hold multiple possibilities (2002:87), FPE scholarship invites us to remember that such possibilities are harboured in codified ways.

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<sup>2</sup> This emphasis strongly complements calls from the mid-1990s for “relational thinking” in economic geography (Massey et al., 1999; Allen et al., 1998), which follows how complex relations among actors go on to transform the organisation of economic activities, and the lived meanings of scale. By connecting actors, moulding institutional conditions, and reconfiguring spatial relations, socio-spatial processes like neoliberalisation reconstitute specific feelings of community, and what is imagined to be the state (Marston et al., 2005; Jones III et al., 2007).

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“Codification,” here, refers to the process through which rules or norms are validated. “Negotiation,” on the other hand, denotes an engagement with the rules of participation in such a way as to change them. In both terms, the “rules” acquire legitimacy through the interlacing of tradition; local understandings; national law; international standards; and the work of institutions operating across sites (Nygren, 2005; Nightingale, 2003). This is why, in Rocheleau and Edmunds’ (1997) gendered account of tree tenure, when attempts to “bring women in” to regulatory frameworks ignore rules of access already codified in customary law, they may actually undermine women’s existing resource-use and rights (see also Gupte, 2004). FPE scholars insist that pre-existing differences within communities, including patterns of influence, wealth, ethnicity, and caste, constantly regulate codes of access and forms of participation. Negotiation is a contextual, situational, relational labour on these codes, which is informed not only by elite power, but by all manner of informal relationships (Kashwan et al., 2019).

Through this emphasis on negotiation and power, it becomes clear that collective action for forest management is informed by longer histories of social movements as much as by the interventions of international actors. The CBNRM literature has sometimes sidelined the role of mass politics and civil associations in its analysis of policy processes (Bebbington et al., 2008; Kashwan et al., 2019), which may unsettle dominant power relations and elite capture in important ways (García-López et al., 2018; Lund & Saito-Jensen, 2013). For example, the four case studies of CF reviewed by Cronkleton et al. (2008) in Central America and Brazil all emerged from strong community organisations that formed as initially weak government institutions imposed conservation and development initiatives to control chaotic frontier conditions. The state’s own capacity to regulate may be less significant in predicting long-term collective action – if



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communities can engage state politics in negotiations to secure rights and support (García-López et al.; Kashwan, 2017; Kashwan et al., 2019).

To better understand and support CF initiatives, we therefore argue, with Taylor (2010), that we need to see institutional arrangements in dynamic terms, in dialogue with longer social and environmental histories. FBAs offer a particularly helpful perspective on the negotiation of governance conditions by and through institutions, and the connections between localised action and larger political-economic structures (*ibid.*, see also Gupta & Koontz, 2019). Indeed, the long history of strong peasant and labour movements that continue to develop in contemporary Latin American politics make the region an exception in relation to most countries in Asia and Africa in terms of the transformation of state-imposed schemes to more democratic ends (Kashwan et al., 2019; Borras et al., 2008; Edelman, 2008; Bebbington, 2007). Using negotiation as a relational concept, in the following sections we explore how problems of participation arising from CBNRM have been navigated through the “lived embodiment of power” (Harcourt et. al. 2015:296).

### **3 Context: Community forestry in the MBR**

Since the 1990s, more than 0.5 million hectares of broadleaved tropical forests in the MBR have been concessioned to twelve communities, four municipal cooperatives, and two forest industries (Milián, 2008; Stoian & Rodas, 2006; Monterroso & Barry, 2007) as part of large-scale transfer of tenure rights to local communities across Latin America (Monterroso & Barry, 2012). The tropical forestry practiced is considered a “state-of-the-art” example of achieving both forest conservation and social benefits (Grogan et al., 2014), especially in relation to mahogany, (*Swietenia macrophylla*), a CITES-protected species and the most valuable timber species of the neotropical forests since the arrival of the Europeans ([redacted], 1998). In the MBR, forest

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management is based on a polycyclic system, where trees are selectively removed in 25 to 40-year cutting cycle with minimum diameter limits (Grogan et al., 2014). Non-timber products, including allspice fruit (*Pimenta doica*); xate leaves (*Chamaedorea* spp) for North American and European floral industries; and the ramón seed or Maya nut (*Brosimum alicastrum*), used in baking, are also extracted.

Distinctively, the forest concessions of the MBR were not the result of land titling but of the introduction of a protected area, itself the product of extensive lobbying on the part of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and donor agencies (especially USAID) (Monterroso & Barry, 2012). Before this intervention, a 200km tourist road had been planned to open the extensive Mayan ruins to new tourist markets. However, international attention was arrested by visual media coverage of the forests and the impending threat to their future, most notably in a special edition of the *National Geographic* in 1989. President Cerezo (1986-1990), who architected the road plan, was eventually forced to concede it, although some suggest that, having failed to achieve peace during his tenure, he settled on the design of the new park as his geopolitical legacy (Ybarra, 2017).

Both road and park plans reinforced the place of the rural Petén in national strategy in previous decades as a “safety valve” for people displaced by conflicts generated elsewhere (Schwartz, 1990). Beginning in 1959, state-sponsored colonisation policies had directed displaced migrants into the region while exploiting its timber resources through the creation of the Empresa de Fomento y Desarrollo del Petén (FYDEP), whose mandate was to “colonise” and develop the Petén (Cronkleton et al., 2008). Much land subsequently passed into the hands of national and multinational companies dedicated to extensive agriculture, especially African Palm Oil agrobusiness (Castillo Huertas, 2015; Grandia, 2013), although FYDEP was eventually dismantled

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in 1978. After a period of relative state abandonment, the National Protected Areas Council (CONAP) acquired responsibility for the newly created protected area in 1989, with the explicit role of defining new regulatory frameworks for the Petén's forests<sup>3</sup>. However, the rigorous demands for tree measurements and fire prevention laid out by CONAP were perceived to be unnecessarily complicated by communities, reflecting a bias toward commercial interests. At CONAP's inception, four members of the board represented conservation organisations; fourteen represented development-oriented government agencies and the private sector, primarily logging companies (Acopa & Boege, 1998); and none represented community interests.

Through the shift from the “jungle-clearing” policies of the 1960s to the “tropical forest conservation” programme of the 1990s, the new MBR therefore consolidated a longer history of exclusion from decision-making (Gambetta et al., 2006). The proposed design was the increasingly popular Biosphere Reserve concept, including zoned and managed core and buffer areas (see figure 3), which embeds the participation of local populations in reserve management (Acopa & Boege, 1998).<sup>4</sup> However, the park's new boundaries and rules largely failed to account for pre-existing patterns of natural resource use (Cronkleton et al., 2008; Sundberg, 1998), reflecting national and military zones of jurisdiction instead (Acopa & Boege, 1998). Meanwhile, despite the new conservation policies, by 1998 forest destruction in the Maya Forest still surpassed 80,000 hectares per year, alongside high levels of poverty (60%) and illiteracy (39%) (Merlet, 2011; Carr, 2006; Monterroso & Barry, 2007). New divisions were also provoked when the government's new

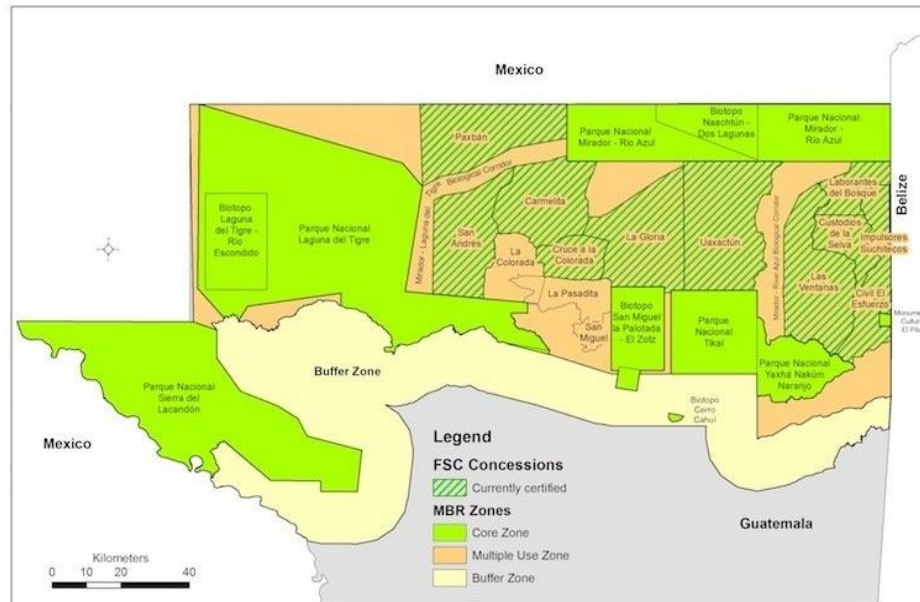
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<sup>3</sup> CONAP is still in charge of administering Guatemala's protected areas, and today works closely with communities to ensure compliance with regulations. The National Forestry Institute (INAB) administers other forest areas.

<sup>4</sup> The Project for Conservation and Sustainable Development in Central America (“Olafo”), funded by Scandinavian agencies and implemented by the Tropical Agricultural Center for Research and Training (CATIE), facilitated an extensive process of zoning design leading to the granting of the first forest concession (San Miguel La Palotada) in 1994, while USAID and CONAP led the process to obtain third party certification of the concessioned forests (Gómez & Méndez, 2005; Gambetta et al., 2006).

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contract with USAID opened the door to an influx of conservation-focused INGOs, including Conservation International, The Nature Conservancy, and CARE International (Chemonics-BIOFOR & IRG-EPIQ, 2000). Before 1990, there had only been three NGOs in the Petén, the Development Association of the Petén, and Cultural Centres of Flores and Poptún: by 1995 there were more than twenty, each running their own internationally-funded programmes for species protection. Economic development institutions, aiming to embed poverty relief into new structures, were quick to follow, including The World Bank, and German, British and US development institutions (Cronkleton et al, 2008). The new “jigsaw” of interventions introduced fresh competition for access to resources, but generally sidelined local people from decision-making, and rarely resulted in joined-up assistance (Hodgdon et al, 2015; Camino & Breitling, 2007).



*Figure 3 Community forestry concessions in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Used with permission from the Rainforest Alliance.*

Tensions over access to incoming funds were exacerbated by the chaotic way that the state had encouraged the settlement of migrants and refugees in prior decades. Land rights for new refugees remained unclear throughout the 1990s, and conflicts had emerged over clashing land management cultures (Cronkleton et al., 2008). While incoming migrant groups favoured farming and cattle-ranching, several of the five major villages of MBR (including Carmelita and Uaxactún) had, since the 1920s, developed a traditional forest society based on the extraction of non-timber products (Schwartz, 1990). Such tensions were not alleviated by the framing of incoming migrant communities as “land-grabbers” in the narratives of the new INGOs, who represented the ‘returned refugee and displaced peoples as criminals taking advantage (*aprovecharse*) of international aid’ (Ybarra 2017:32). This framing legitimised the aggressive policing of rural communities,

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especially Maya groups who had been classed as “insurgents” in prior decades of conflict. In the neighbouring region of Alta Verapaz, for example, the Q’eqchi Maya were framed as nomadic squatters<sup>5</sup> and a threat to forest conservation (*ibid*:36,40). This led to a systematic destruction of their settlements in the name of recovering “governability”.

Against this backdrop of competing interests, Petén community leaders gathered in 1995 to establish the Committee of Forest Communities of Petén, registered two years later as ACOFOP. Early organisers were members of the cooperatives that sold chicle and other non-timber products, and several had visited the thriving Plan Piloto Forestal (PPF) CF project established in 1983 in Quintana Roo, Mexico. Due in large part to ACOFOP’s advocacy, a series of concession contracts were agreed between 1998 and 2001, using PPF as a model, eventually extending to include holistic use of all renewable forest resources (Galletti, 1998; Monterosso & Barry, 2007). Today ACOFOP represents 14,000 individuals from thirty different rural communities and is structured as a non-profit organisation with a General Assembly, led by an elected Board and president, who is the organisation’s legal representative. Community Forest Enterprises (CFEs), at the heart of the organisation, are the individually-constituted cooperatives that create annual management plans in compliance with CONAP; coordinate timber- and non-timber harvesting strategies; and return benefits to their members (Stoian & Rodas, 2006:14). All nine of the community concessions that remain active<sup>6</sup> now run their own sawmills, while the processing infrastructure – such as buildings, sheds, tools and vehicles – they have collectively invested in has been estimated

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<sup>5</sup>The Q’eqchi have historically been considered “less indigenous” by the Guatemalan state than the highland K’iche and Kaqchikels, because they farmed lowland plantations owned by colonists, using techniques such as mixed swiddens, which involve long fallow periods. This contrasts with the highland agriculture other Maya groups are associated with, the relative distance of their communities from Ladino culture, and the distinctiveness of their dress and artistic culture. The practice of leaving land fallow for long periods is what allows other actors to consider this form of agriculture akin to squatting, in Ybarra’s (2017) account.

<sup>6</sup>Two concessions had their contract terminated, while the management plan of a third was suspended in 2009 due to noncompliance with conditions of their contracts (see Stoian et al., 2019).

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at a value of 5.9 USD collectively (Stoian et al., 2019). ACOFOP still receives funding from international organisations including USAID, as well as contributions from its member communities, but retains the autonomy to decide how these funds are used.

#### **4 Methodology and sources**

The data informing our analysis was collected as part of a three-year (2014-17) interdisciplinary study of community forestry in Mesoamerica (Guatemala and Nicaragua) assessing the achievements and sustainability of CF after 25 years. The project, led by Bioversity International<sup>7</sup>, involved three components investigating different aspects of community forestry: a biophysical team explored the regeneration of CITES-protected mahogany trees through pollen counts and tree-ring studies; the socio-economic team explored the benefits obtained through CF in terms of human, social, economic, social, and physical capital; and the socio-cultural team explored the forms of social governance, and dynamics of inclusion/exclusion, that characterise CF in the MBR. This paper presents the findings of the socio-cultural team in the context of the investigation, with a focus on dimensions of equitable participation. The wider findings are important: we found that forestry practices in the MBR are enabling the effective conservation of CITES-protected mahogany trees ([Redacted], 2018), while enabling communities to derive income that raises them above the poverty-line (Stoian et al., 2016). The main impediment to ongoing effective management was shown to be the government's limited capacity, or will, to control the illegal occupation of land designated for CF, alongside persistent internal conflicts (Orjuela & de Camino Velozo, 2016). We co-authored eight policy briefings to communicate

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<sup>7</sup> Biodiversity International is a research-for-development organisation that is part of the CGIAR network of research centres. See <https://www.biodiversityinternational.org/>

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findings with community partners and governmental organisations and delivered these in a series of workshops in January 2017<sup>8</sup>.

To produce the data that informs this paper, we carried out a qualitative analysis of data grounded in ethnographic fieldwork. This involved the systematic collection of fieldnotes and archival material, as well as interviews with actors including: CF legislators; members and non-members of CFEs; employees of international development and environmental organisations and local forestry organisations; early and active members of ACOFOP; local residents; and academics. These exercises took place throughout the MBR, but in specific CFEs we also conducted focus groups, informal interviews, oral histories with community “elders”, and group interviews during transect walks. We selected these cases to include areas with long-standing and homogenous populations (Carmelita and Uaxactún); more recent and heterogeneous communities (Cruce a la Colorada (CC)); and a non-resident population (Laborantes del Bosque), as well as for their overlap with biophysical criteria required by the other disciplinary components. Resident concessions are those where members of the CFE live and work in the same area, whereas non-resident concessions draw members from a wider geographical area.

Table 1 contains a summary of the settlement history and concession details of the four communities where we carried out focused interventions. It is important to the investigation that some concessions were established through cooperative structures established for non-timber product extractions as early as the 1920s, whereas other organisational structures were established specifically to meet the concessionary requirements (see 5.1).

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<sup>8</sup> See for example: [https://www.bioversityinternational.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Beneficios\\_Stoian\\_2017.pdf](https://www.bioversityinternational.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Beneficios_Stoian_2017.pdf)  
The full set of Spanish language briefs can be obtained by emailing Bioversity International at [bioversity@cgiar.org](mailto:bioversity@cgiar.org)



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Community	Settlement history and population	Concession authorised	Concession details	Approx number of families
Carmelita	Encampments and non-timber extraction present since the 1920s; more homogenous community	1997	Resident concession, Civil Association, 53797 hectares	88
<u>Uaxactún</u>	Encampments and non-timber extraction present since the 1920s; more homogenous community	2000	Resident concession, Civil Association, 83558 hectares	225
<u>Laborantes del Bosque</u>	Non-resident community primarily based around Melchor de Mencos, Petén, including high number of Belizean immigrants	2000	Non-resident concession, Civil Association, 19390 hectares	96
<u>Cruce a la Colorada</u>	More recently established community with higher number of recent migrants	2001	Resident concession, Integral Forest Association, 22469 hectares	65

*Table 1 Case study communities selected for in-depth social scientific investigation, as part of interdisciplinary research project on community forestry in Mesoamerica.*

To explore the relational negotiations through which ACOFOP adapted its model of accompaniment to address a politics of participation, we analysed our data according to three dimensions derived from a political ecology framework: the negotiation of relationships of power, the (re)configuration of access to resources, and the address of social exclusion within the constitution of ACOFOP and through its elaboration over time. After coding to these themes, we organised the data inductively to highlight areas of negotiation rated of high importance by

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multiple actors. This led to the identification of key areas of participatory practice within CF that have posed challenges to collective action, requiring internal, external and horizontal negotiation, and the creation of new practices. These areas are the qualitative “results” that present in this paper. By showing how problems encountered in the MBR were negotiated and transformed into new solutions, we contribute understanding of the politics of participation in play in CF, and demonstrate how existing rules and practices may be adapted to allow for fuller and wider community participation.

In our fieldwork and analysis we adopt an ethos derived from recent work in feminist political ecology, which emphasises developing critical interventions from a “situated” position in a context, rather than at a scholarly distance (Nightingale, 2005; Rocheleau & Edmunds, 1997; Tsing, 2011). This has meant incorporating participatory, interdisciplinary, and collaborative approaches to knowledge creation, and highlighting existing management practices as loci for reworking colonial, ethnic, and power relations (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999). We worked with community organisations and other actors to diagnose issues faced in the MBR and led our analysis by concepts that emerged from, and return to, reflection and practice in context.

### **5 Analysis: Negotiating the relations of accompaniment**

In this section we present and explain the four areas of participation highlighted by participants as challenges in terms of inclusion, exclusion and voice in the practice of CF in the MBR. Through our focus on negotiation, we explore these areas not only through the challenges and tensions they involved, but through the strategies created to adapt CF and change the meaning of participation within it. As we trace the processes of negotiation that enabled these changes, we aim to build on existing scholarly understandings of the institutional interface of the MBR (eg.

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Cronkleton et al., 2008; Gómez & Méndez, 2005; Monterroso, 2007; Monterroso & Barry, 2007, 2009, 2012; Radachowsky et al., 2012; Taylor, 2010; Sundberg, 1998; Barsimantov et al., 2011; Nittler & Tschinkel, 2005). These studies emphasise the problems of representation and equity that have characterised the MBR since its inception and until 2012, as well as revealing the uniqueness of ACOFOP in its adaptation of strategies to address these problems. In recent years, new challenges have required new tactics: for example, the threat of the non-renewal of the concessions, alongside the challenges of diversifying economic strategies and adapting monitoring processes to incorporate payments for environmental services REDD+ (Sikor et al., 2017). As we update this literature, we add fresh emphasis to the *relational* practices through which these transformations became possible.

In the remainder of this section, we unpack the four areas of participation that emerged as the most important challenges to CF in practice – and thus, the most important areas of negotiation in the history of ACOFOP – through our qualitative research. Table 2 presents these four areas in terms of specific “concepts” of participation; the challenges entailed; strategies devised to overcome these challenges; and tensions that remain. The following four sub-sections treat and each area in turn, giving examples of the elaboration of new ideas, and making clear which challenges remain active in the MBR. As implied by our literature review, these strategies are necessarily interconnected, for CF works across multiple scales, and only functions when the “rules” are coherent among all actors. The founding members of ACOFOP were migrants and indigenous people, men and women, former military and former guerrillas, who collaborated from the outset to establish new bridges across differences. However, as new conflicts and disagreements arose, internally and externally, new mechanisms needed to be created. The discussion of participation in this section will confirm that accompaniment is above all a *process*,

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in which support institutions and communities journey to generate ideas and identify future challenges (Gómez & Méndez, 2005). For one interviewee who works for both CONAP and ACOFOP, this “journeying” is only possible because ACOFOP doesn’t function like an NGO; it functions to *mediate among multiple interests*. One of ACOFOP’s directors echoes this point when she explains that ACOFOP does not organise for any specific community but for “community interests”, which she divides into areas of social representation (maintaining unity internally and through dialogue); political representation (mediation with state and external actors); and giving technical assistance. As these three commitments must be constantly held in tension, negotiation is necessarily at the heart of every aspect of participation that we turn to.

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Key concept	Challenges	Strategies for enhancing participation	Tension
Participatory decision-making	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mediating between national regulations and local interests</li> <li>- Who decides?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Accompaniment</li> <li>- Promoting direct funding to community institutions</li> <li>- Providing training in governance and administration</li> </ul>	Between keeping rules and changing them
Conflict resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conflict between members and non-members</li> <li>- Opportunities for private eco-tourism rival the CFE's provisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Clarifying roles and rules of entry</li> <li>- Developing common ways of working beyond CFEs</li> </ul>	Between establishing unity and connecting between diverse interests
Advocacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Tenure security is threatened by external private investors</li> <li>- Tenure security is threatened by fluctuating governmental will</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Documenting &amp; demonstrating the benefits of CF at multiple scales</li> <li>- Integrating action, research and reflection into organisation strategies</li> <li>- Building a community monitoring and communications network</li> </ul>	Between listening carefully and speaking persuasively
Capacity-building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Scaling up activities for economic viability</li> <li>- Expanding range of processing options</li> <li>- Establishing long-term tenure security</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developing independent institutions that support diversification</li> <li>- Training community organisations to be self-managing</li> <li>- Building horizontal networks</li> </ul>	Between defending territorial rights and addressing internal power dynamics

*Table 2 Four dimensions of participation that pose a challenge to CF in practice, identified through analysis of qualitative social-scientific data.*

### 5.1 Participatory decision-making

ACOFOP's founding members saw opportunities for collective organising in the proposals for the new MBR, but to coordinate a response they needed internal structures to enable the flow

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of information, and to build external alliances (Monterroso & Barry, 2009). This became complicated when some concession residents chose not to take part, and later, when conflict between profit and not-for-profit associations emerged (Taylor, 2010). Further challenges arose in the onerous regulatory frameworks imposed by CONAP, characterised as “chaotic”, “officious” and “disconnected from community livelihoods.” Baseline surveys conducted in 1990 and 1991 confirmed this disconnection, showing that most residents of the Petén did not know the MBR existed, although by then it encompassed half the department (USAID, 1995, in Ybarra, 2017:30).

To reject the version of conservation proposed by the state, the ideas of participation mobilised by plans to introduce CF were quickly reinterpreted through notions of translation; specifically “translating the rules — with translation being always a two-way process” (Carmelita interviews, 2016). Translation meant decoding the new regulations into practical opportunities, while reflecting community concerns back to CONAP. Given that it is extremely challenging to bring together communities who have not previously worked together around a ‘complicated productive enterprise’ (Nittler & Tschinkel, 2005:7), translation also involved a significant labour of “brokering” between groups. One founding member of the CFE Laborantes del Bosque, who grew up in a family of Belizean migrants and Petén chicle harvesters, found himself in this role. Having worked previously as a primary school teacher, a shoemaker, a chicle-harvester and local politician, R. had learned mediation skills in disputes between teachers and employers, and between chicle cooperatives and migrants in conflict (Oral history, 2016). This, he felt, equipped him in 1995 to facilitate the interpretation of CONAP’s regulations in a series of schoolhouse meetings. Estimating that more than 40% of the population were harvesting timber illegally prior to 1995, while others smuggled vegetables and brought back rice, beans and cheese, R. notes that the change was not as significant as might be imagined — when ‘smugglers became

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conservationists' they already knew about logging! The challenge was to make clear to different groups what was required of them to derive the promised benefits, and so avoid the perception that one group's success would come at the cost of another's.

After forming as an FBA, ACOFOP also worked with CFE members to understand the processes for becoming certified<sup>9</sup> and how to develop Annual Plans in sanctioned forms. Where rules were perceived to be unfair or poorly matched with the specifics of doing CF in the Petén, ACOFOP also proposed alternatives, inviting CONAP members to visit and understand the practical problems. Through this process, CONAP's earlier focus on "control" of the forest shifted to a strategy of encouraging awareness [*sensibilización*]. This shift was articulated by the president of one residential CFE in his fifth two-year term since 2002:

I'm in my tenth year of managing and I've learnt that change happens through dialogue, not by imposing priorities. We've seen CONAP learning that lesson and now we approach the [NGO] projects to try and help them understand it [...] what's different about ACOFOP is that they are *our* organisation, they are always walking the process with us. (Interview, 2015).

A CONAP extensionist based in CC, tasked with promoting cooperation between the two organisations, similarly recalls how CONAP's practices shifted as they reflected on 'the consequences of *failing* to listen,' (Interviews, 2015). Since 2010, CONAP extensionists also partner with CFEs and visit them regularly, ensuring that the reasons for regulations, as well as the consequences of non-compliance, are understood. This has led to a much higher rate of observance, as well as influencing CONAP's priorities, which now include collaborating to secure future tenure. After a series of general meetings on the topic in the mid-2000s, a greater balance of economic decision-making within ACOFOP was also shifted to the CFEs themselves. New strategies included directing funding to community institutions; encouraging the self-diagnosis of

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<sup>9</sup> CFEs were required to be certified within three years under the Forest Stewardship Council to retain concessionary rights (Gambetta et al., 2006).

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needs among CFEs; and the encouragement of horizontal networking between CFEs and partner organisations. More recently, training in governance and administration has been prioritised, to enable decision-making processes within CFEs to be visible and accountable.

This learning experience was vital to overcome challenges presented by the new CF frameworks, because, given the backdrop of conflict among communities and the perceived absence of the state (Cronkleton et al., 2008), misunderstandings could escalate quickly into violence. In the late 1990s, aggression was directed toward CONAP technicians and facilities (Monterroso & Barry, 2007); two resident community concessions with high numbers of recent immigrants (La Colorada and San Miguel) were revoked by CONAP due to contractual incompliance; and the concessionary process looked set to fall apart. A relational perspective helps us to appreciate that this break-down of collective action was encouraged by perceptions of an “basic abandon[ment]” on the part of the state (Carmelita focus group, 2016) combined with social conflict between disenfranchised groups. All “failing” concessions have experienced a similar pattern of rapid population increase and turnover, coupled with rampant illegal land appropriations affecting between 30% and 50% of concessionary areas, and the establishment of large cattle ranches. The involvement of the military in one failed concession also suggests that the state’s interest in breached rules reaches beyond conservation goals to concern conditions of “governability” within the region (Devine, 2018). In this sense it is important to recognise that geopolitical power relations can affect the management of CF ‘all the way down.’

In contrast with the “top-down”, “bureaucratic” and “disconnected” projects interviewees associate with the early 1990s, ACOFOP is conceptualised by community members as a diffuse network constituted by links between forest communities and office-based “hubs.” ACOFOP is imagined as an “umbrella,” as “roots,” “a tree”, “a social movement”, “an HQ” (headquarters), “a



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united front” and “a seedbed” by interviewees. These metaphors articulate the ethos of being alongside communities rather than directing them, and the feeling of protection that derives from belonging to an organisational platform. In the Petén, other pre-existing institutions have also formed hubs for the exchange of relevant knowledge and experience, supporting the horizontal dimension of this process<sup>10</sup>. In Central America, legacies of earlier guerrilla movements, liberation theology practices and experimental agroecology networks add nuance to participation, highlighting the validation of *campesino* experiences and expertise ([Redacted] 2017). The “participatory” strategies of CF are not, thus, primarily the initiative or property of Global North organisations, as is sometimes assumed (Scoones & Thompson, 2009; Rosset et al., 2011). To keep this expanded, bottom-up sense of participation vibrant in the MBR, it has been vital to develop shared practices of accompaniment, direct funding, and training for governance, which allow diverse constituents to transform the mechanisms of CF in an ongoing way.

### 5.2 Conflict resolution

With the CFEs becoming important institutions in the economic and social life of the Petén, conflict between members and non-members has grown. This has been an important cost of community-based management within the region. A decade ago, conflict centred within CFEs comprised of non-forest resident members from several communities (Monterroso & Barry, 2007). More recently, conflicts between members and non-members have escalated in the residential

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<sup>10</sup> For example, the Centro Universitario de Petén [CUDEP] has been a centre for training forestry and agricultural technicians for decades. In an interview, CUDEP’s Director of the Environmental Education Programme noted in 2016, that 67 forest engineers trained at CUDEP were on the payroll of CONAP, ACOFOP and INAB (The National Forestry Institute), while others worked for large INGOs including the Rainforest Alliance. During the 1990s, CUDEP made participatory management central to its training programmes, as well as action-oriented models of institutional learning.

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communities (Taylor, 2010), where – as one of ACOFOP’s female managers emphasises – ‘it is extremely difficult to separate business interests from community interests’:

Because in the end, in a community everyone is family. If they are not related as children, cousins, parents, then they are family who are related by marriage with other families. Thus you have a social fabric [*tejido social*] which isn’t just related by activities but by family relations. (Interview, 2015)

These conflicts are of course exacerbated by the economic and political pressures configured at other scales, especially as competing economic interests divide loyalties within the reserve (Monterroso & Barry, 2012).

Carmelita offers a striking example of such divisions and their relational nature. Ten years ago, the shared history of Carmelita residents had fostered high levels of collaboration, leading to sustainable timber extraction and meaningful profits (Barsimantov et al., 2008; Stoian & Rodas, 2006:14). However, tensions between CFE members and non-members subsequently consolidated in relation to the community’s developing eco-tourism enterprise. Like other CFEs, Carmelita has prioritised tourism as an economic diversification strategy<sup>11</sup>, investing in wooden huts, a small hotel and basic infrastructure for visitors who pay for three-day hikes to the nearby Mirador ruins. Each year, Carmelita hosts between 1000 and 1200 tourists, 60% of whom have bought a package tour through travel agencies based in Flores. However, several families now work for external operators through mechanisms that bypass the CFE, and do not contribute to infrastructural maintenance. Non-member families have opted to join the private enterprises as this provides them a reliable source of income and argue that they should not have to supplement the CFE’s income by paying additional taxes. Meanwhile, members insist that these private arrangements undercut

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<sup>11</sup> Each CFE develops a number of routes to obtaining economic income as a cooperative, to include the sale of processed and unprocessed timber, but also the processing of non-timber products such as chicle, formerly extracted for organic chewing-gum; xate, an ornamental leaf; pimienta, or allspice berries; and ramón, a seed used in baking. Several CFEs have built the infrastructure to support tourism as a further source of income, especially those CFEs located close to uncovered Mayan ruins.

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the investments of the cooperative. This situation has led to considerable tension, since the eighty member and eight non-member families inhabit the same rural area.

Critically, the relational understanding of community we mobilise in this paper unsettles any easy account of “social exclusion” to describe such tensions. Those who participate in private tourism are perceived to be ‘working against the forest’, because they avoid the “tourism tax” that the CFE imposes (Focus group, 2016). However, the attachment CFE members feel to this tax links directly to the broader tenure regime and the reliance of the CFEs on this income to underwrite costs. Meanwhile, divisions in decision-making form among *family* loyalties and interests, rather than individual differences. In Carmelita, for example, it is always some *families* who participate in tourism activities outside the cooperative’s jurisdiction, and not some *individuals*. These divisions in turn are affected by patterns of internal migration and settlement – if a son living in Flores acquires work through a tourist-operator, he may force his family to choose loyalty to him or the CFE. The social fabric is thus a key site of working out major tensions aggravated by broader political-economic transformations and a lack of governmental will to make clear the legal future of the concessions. As a result of such tensions, ACOFOP has invested in a clarification of the roles of CFEs within their communities as well as of rules of entry<sup>12</sup>.

Strategies for enhancing and deepening conflict resolution have also been achieved by establishing common activities between members and non-members. Young CFE members in Carmelita, for example, have recently established an agroecological and medicinal garden, which they hope will be a common space for education and overcoming tensions. Meanwhile, CC, inhabited by ethnically diverse colonists from throughout Guatemala and Mexico, has overcome

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<sup>12</sup> Historically, these rules have not been consistently followed, and CFEs have been reluctant to admit new members (Nittler & Tschinkel 2005:11).

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significant challenges to collective action, partly by broadening common activities<sup>13</sup>. In focus groups, both members and non-members highlighted activities of “sharing” in the improvement of relationships, including regular meetings but also common spaces for social activity. The schoolhouse has become an important site for activities such as film-screenings, and meetings for organising the duties of fire wardens and fire prevention (a task shared by members and non-members). ACOFOP technicians have also recently organised field visits to CFE sites for the teachers and their classes. These activities highlight the importance of investing in relationships outside the FBA for maintaining legitimacy and mitigating conflict. Other residential concessions have, since the mid-2000s, also adopted agroforestry and beekeeping as complementary activities to forestry —generally organised outside the CFE framework (Monterroso & Barry, 2009). Such examples of “commoning” activities have been an important part of expanding the meaning of conflict resolution from the averting of potential violent conflict, to a deeper sense of mediating misunderstanding via increased relational understanding.

### 5.3 Advocacy

The rise of competing models of tourism in Carmelita also link to a reiterated threat to the future of the concessions that has required alliance-building and communication at other scales. ACOFOP’s directors and CFE members use the terminology of “*incidencia política*” [political advocacy] to articulate this “transversal” concept of accompaniment that ties together the

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<sup>13</sup> When CC was authorised as a CE in 2001, the community was composed of farmers and cattle-ranchers not accustomed to forest management (Stoian & Rodas, 2006:14). This diversity initially led to a break-down in collective action (Barsimantov et al., 2008) and ten years ago, CC was one of four CFEs at risk of losing its concession (Taylor, 2010). However, by 2015 these tensions had diminished significantly. The community now has a sawmill; successfully runs a variety of apprenticeships for young people in added-value skills like carpentry; and is one of the first concessions to establish a bakery for ramón-based goods. Importantly, ramón bakeries create a new option for women to work – in other CFEs, women are otherwise mainly employed in xate processing, and artisan crafts.

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organisation's activities<sup>14</sup>. These activities initially revolved around procuring the concessions; from 2001 they centred on countering proposals to turn the MBR into an archaeological park; and today they focus on building allies to secure a renewal of the concessions. Advocacy is a relational principle that has focused increasingly on communicating the *capacities* of CF to external audiences, to secure legitimacy and future tenure.

The constitution of eco-tourism as a threat to the concessionary model surfaced most dramatically in 2001, when plans for new hotels and a train-line were released by the organisation FARES (Foundation for Anthropological Research and Environmental Studies)<sup>15</sup> as part of a proposals for new National Park called "Cuenca Mirador." With the support of powerful government and petrochemical allies, FARES' principal archaeologists, involved in uncovering the Mirador ruins near Carmelita, succeeded in persuading the then-President Portillo to sign a governmental agreement (129-2002) to create the Special Archaeological Zone of the Mirador Cuenca (Gómez & Méndez, 2005; Monterroso & Barry, 2007). The "wilderness" zone in the proposed park overlapped with several active concessions, to be revoked if the plans were implemented. FARES strengthened its case by arguing that these were inefficiently managed and were harbouring the activities of drug-traffickers. In response, ACOFOP invested considerable resources into presenting a case that could demonstrate the value of the concessions, economically, ecologically and culturally, and thus the detriment the plans would cause. Critically, they were able to demonstrate how the concessions *were already* sustaining the forests (Gómez & Méndez 2005:41), and ultimately in May 2005, the decree 129-2002 was revoked (*ibid.*:39). These

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<sup>14</sup> This terminology was used consistently by interviewees to describe what makes ACOFOP distinctive (used without prompting by 65% of interviewees).

<sup>15</sup> FARES manages a museum in Guatemala City, supported by the Guatemalan petrol company PERENCO, where artefacts extracted from the Mirador ruins are displayed; it also coordinates visits to the Mirador ruins that bypass the community of Carmelita (FARES, 2013; interviews with Petén organisations, 2016).

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strategies were consolidated in the following years through the mitigation of threats presented by a planned hydroelectric plant (Usumacinta, a US-backed initiative) and African oil palm speculation.

Undertaking this advocacy marked important new strategies for competing with the ‘circles of power’ being assembled to delegitimise the concessions (Interview with Propetén, 2016): participatory monitoring and communication. In practice this led to the planning for two experimental “learning networks” aiming to involve young people in the systematic production of evidence of the positive impact of CF on forest cover, local economies, and heritage sites within the Petén. The plans were widely supported, partly through concerns with succession planning – the leadership of the CFEs was ageing and static, and local NGOs released reports that found young people were not being equipped for more than a narrow range of careers (Nittler & Tschinkel, 2005:10). Initiated in 2016<sup>16</sup>, the two new networks involve at least one person from each concession, although around 75% of participants are men — forestry still being considered a “dangerous activity for women” (Interviews, 2018). The communication network trains young people in a suite of skills to publicise the achievements of CF to a wider audience. Meanwhile, the monitoring network operationalises ideas of participatory monitoring from other settings, training members to collect forest data at regular intervals, reflect on areas where CF could be improved, and produce maps and graphics that communicate results. Practices include conducting pollen counts, creating experimental nurseries, and reviewing data obtained through satellite systems and drones — an important example of how local knowledge production is mediated by ideas

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<sup>16</sup> Financing for these schemes came directly through ACOFOP’s existing funding streams, which today includes substantial investment from USAID and the Inter-American Foundation, as well as contributions from member CFEs (see 5.4) and return from ACOFOP’s involvement in the REDD+ payments. REDD+ compliance and payments are managed through ACOFOP’s sub-organisation Guatecarbon, also supported by CONAP. ACOFOP retains the right to determine how donations and funds are used, and determines its priorities through internal decision-making processes.

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transported from other contexts (Ojha et al., 2016). Throughout 2018, the monitoring network completed intensive training in building and using drones, to be used to create visual testament to both illegal logging practices, and the successful conservation undertaken through CF.

Importantly, then, the monitoring network is a relational strategy for negotiating internal practices of CF, with young people taking a lead in diagnosing limitations and potential solutions. At the same time, the network produces weighty evidence for external negotiations — revealing, for example, the correlation between CF and the maintenance of forest cover (see figure 4).<sup>17</sup> Active learning networks build inquiry, questioning and evidence-creation into the heart of advocacy strategies, on the one hand supporting a case for the effectiveness of CF, to protect the future of the concessions; while on the other hand ensuring that young people have a voice to affect the future of the MBR and the concessions.

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<sup>17</sup> Resisting the idea that the future of the forest is premised on entirely new ideas, the curriculum also involves revisiting social and environmental histories of the forest, through field visits and talks from older members of the communities, to understand their contributions to CF in the present day.

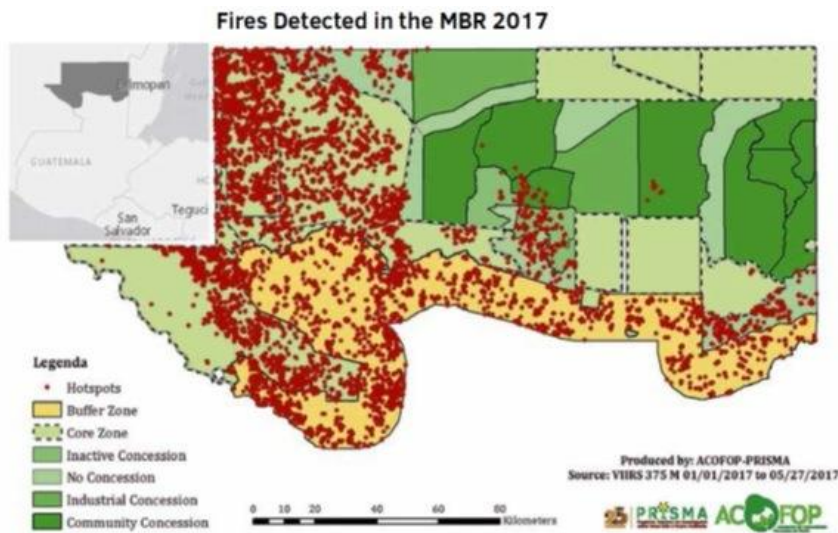


Figure 4 Graphic image to illustrate fires detected in the Maya Biosphere Reserve in 2017, produced by ACOFOP with GIS data. Used with permission.

#### 5.4 Capacity-building

Capacity-building involves a scaling up and diversification of economic activities within a given institutional and relational context to ensure long-term economic viability, at the same time as building resources to address internal power relations (Beckley et al., 2008). The history of CBNRM has revealed important strategies for engaging the relational dimensions of capacity-building, such as the need to incorporate landscape-level linkages in institutional design, decentralise planning and budgeting, and establish equitable benefit-sharing (Hobley 1996:178). These principles emphasise institutional learning across scales, and everyday actors playing a leading role in defining the shape of regulation. Indeed, recently, it has been emphasised that capacity-building in effective governance is fundamental to all other areas of growth (Ojha et al., 2016; Torres-Rojo et al, 2019). For ACOFOP, developing independent organisations to support



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economic diversification and supporting training in governance to support the CFE's capacities for self-management have been crucial to establishing long-term economic viability. Viability in the future meanwhile crucially depends on building capacities to obtain future tenure security.

Providing support to their members' activities in external markets comprises one of the most important activities for rural social movements (Bebbington et al., 2008), and must be balanced against the political roles discussed in the previous sections. The collectively-organised diversification of forest production and integration of commodity chains with diverse logics into global markets has posed considerable governance issues for ACOFOP, challenging it to find a new balance between its political and economic functions (Taylor, 2010). These tensions have been partially negotiated through the consolidation of an independent enterprise, FORESCOM, in 2003, with its own principles of governance and board of directors (Stoian & Rodas, 2006; Gómez & Méndez, 2005). FORESCOM provides quality control in relation to timber and non-timber products and allows the CFEs to process higher volumes; access new markets; and negotiate better prices and conditions. In recent years, this has included finding markets for rare varieties of mahogany destined for ukelele and guitar production; developing the viability of the ramón seed for national markets; upgrading timber-processing facilities; and reviving chicle harvesting for buyers of organic chewing-gum.

In practice, building capacity for diversification also means working with diverse stakeholders to improve market information, better horizontal integration and participation platforms as well as the availability of technical and managerial resources (Torres-Rojo et al., 2019). Within CFEs consequently refers to training in "soft skills" such as administration, accounting, and governance. In a women's focus group with CFE members at CC, one group emphasised the importance of facilitation skills as a key capacity that would mean projects would

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or would not “develop.” This is because debates over how diversification should take place and who will benefit sometimes leads to problems of decision-making over how profits are used — issues that are at the heart of issues of participation, accountability and benefit-sharing (Stoian & Rodas, 2006). This involves what one of ACOFOP’s senior female directors names “managing power relations,” which she sees as a fundamental task for both CFEs and the FBA (Interview, 2017). Capacity-building does not (only) mean getting larger or doing more, she emphasises: it is about negotiating relationships within and between communities, and shaping an ever-widening vision of management. The creation of FORESCOM has also helped create a buffer of independence between ACOFOP’s economic and political activities, but the former is only possible to the degree that participation continues to broaden and strengthen. The involvement of young people and of women remains a constant challenge here: membership of the CFEs is made up of 68% men and 32% women, with only two CFEs reaching 50% membership of women (Stoian et al., 2019).

Among young people, the new communications and monitoring network are seen to be a vital part of this capacity-building process, partly because they feel themselves involved, but also because it is a route toward both improving practice and ‘evidencing the good of what we do already [...] to those who cannot see it’ (young peoples’ focus group, Uaxactún, 2016). Gaining legitimacy increases the likelihood of concession renewal, and it also attracts potential future markets. Like political advocacy, this critically involves:

Explain[ing] to politicians what the reality is like here... what it means to manage a seed from the ramón tree, or what “allspice” is, or how to manage the xate palm. [...] Sometimes they make decisions quite remotely, so it’s up to us to make them see that a proposal or a law can have big effects. (ACOFOP interviews, 2016).

Capacity-building, for ACOFOP is thus not only about diversifying economic products, but diversifying forms of knowledge production and communication, in turn linked with its processes

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for distributing decision-making; mediating conflicts; and political advocacy. In the MBR these four activities now centre on securing the future of the concessions in 2021, without which even the most innovative CF practices cannot continue.

## **6 Conclusion**

In this paper we have mobilised negotiation as a relational concept to explore how the power relations of CF have been addressed in the MBR to engage political dimensions of participation, conflict, and tenure security. Drawing on a political ecology framework, we have emphasised that systems of CBNRM like CF cannot be “equitable” or indeed sustainable, if they cannot respond to the politics of participation in an ongoing way. With other authors, we agree that land tenure security, expressed through well-defined rights, is one of the most important elements for addressing forest degradation and local wellbeing, even if it does not, on its own, guarantee success (Larson et al., 2010; Monterroso et al., 2007; Torres-Rojo et al., 2019). In Guatemala, the recognition of these rights, as of collective organisational capacities, are essential to future collective action (Monterroso & Barry, 2012). However, a politics of participation extends to a negotiation of power relations at every scale, and the possibility of tenure is crucially tied to the adaptation of processes of decision-making, conflict resolution, advocacy, and capacity-building to mediate among multiple internal interests and to mitigate external threats.

The consolidation of FBAs have, historically, central to the adaptation of regulatory frameworks into forms that fit with the norms and needs of those they are designed to support (Taylor, 2010; Cronkleton et al., 2008). Central to understanding ACOFOP, and to understanding its position today, is the longer history of social movements that coalesced around demands from socially and economically excluded actors, and led to the creation of this dynamic and distinctive

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platform. Successful CF in the MBR is tied to the development of institutions that learn through negotiation, and embed learning into their regulatory practices. Each area of negotiation we have outlined in this paper involves navigating specific tensions: between keeping rules and changing them; between establishing unity and linking diverse interests; between listening carefully and speaking persuasively; between defending territorial rights and addressing internal power dynamics. These constantly threaten to undo the possibility of collective action, but they also keep participation open, fostering inquiries that lead to enhanced participation. They are tensions that never should be finally resolved, if participation is to remain a political concept and not a notional one.

Strategies devised as part of the politics of participation practised by ACOFOP include: the provision of direct funding to community institutions; enabling CFEs to gather information, monitor progress and diagnose their own issues; and cultivating learning communities with cultures of questioning, especially where these centrally involve young people. Furthermore, the development of alliances at national and international levels has enabled effective campaigning, which is necessary to guaranteeing a renewal of the concessions in 2021. “Accompaniment,” which describes the principles through which these changing horizons are negotiated, is not about “helping” poor forest communities, but a collectivisation of claims to tenure; a collectivisation of capacities to meet the technical and legal demands of CF, *and* a shared basis from which to rework the meaning of participation in an ongoing way. An implicit principle of accompaniment defined thus is that it entails complex socio-cultural negotiation at every scale. For this institutional history to be useful in other settings it is essential to recognise this feature. On the other hand, the *politics* of participation requires that questions of “who decides” are never finally closed.

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