

Certification in communally managed forests - Perspectives from Mexico

by Dawn Robinson

Mexico is a leader in community forestry certification. Of the 23 community forestry operations certified under the FSC system at the end of 1999, 5 of these were in Mexico. One year later a further 10 operations, involving 18 different communities, have been evaluated and are awaiting the formalisation of their certifications. Four more groups involving 12 communities have been evaluated and given preconditions so the area is expected to continue to increase. According to Enrique Alatorre, Certification Coordinator of the Mexican Council for Sustainable Forestry (CCMSS) in October 2000 the total area of certified forests in Mexico was 853 765 ha¹. The great majority of these (91.5% by area) are managed by 21 *ejidos*.² In addition 7 indigenous communities and 3 private landowners manage 8.5% and 0.01% respectively.

These numerous experiences in community forestry certification make Mexico an ideal location to seek answers to the following questions:

- What are the hopes and expectations of the communities regarding certification?
- What are the impacts to date?

During the period of May to September 2000, the author visited 7 different operations in the Mexican States of Durango, Oaxaca (both primarily pine-oak forests) and Quintana Roo (semi-

deciduous tropical forest). Based on discussions with different people involved in these community forestry certification initiatives, she documented a range of experiences of forest certification³.

What is a community?

Before presenting the results of the study it is important to note the inadequacy of the word 'community' in conveying the diversity of social contexts in which forest management takes place. It is not appropriate to refer to the opinion of the 'community' without clarification. In Mexico certifications have been received by both indigenous communities and *ejidos* which in English tend to be lumped together under the label communities. In reality there are important differences which directly affect their land use management and collective decision making practices. For example indigenous communities generally assign commoner status to all adult males in the community which also gives them a voice in the community assemblies and brings obligations in the form of *cargos* (year-long duties). In *ejidos* the division and sale of plots of land by individuals is now permitted and the number of

¹ This figure includes those awaiting the formalization of their certifications.

² There are two types of 'social' land tenure in México. These include the *ejidos* which were founded by the state allocating land to a group of people who jointly share the land rights and *indigenous communities*, in which the State legally recognises a community's ancestral rights to land which they had occupied before colonialism.

³ The information presented here combines the author's research experience in the certified *ejidos* of Quintana Roo, Mexico with the information collected during a field study. Visited sites include: *Ejid*os Echeverría de la Sierra, El Centenario, San Isidro, Agustín Melgar, Pueblo Nuevo (Durango); Communities: Capulalpam (a member of the *ejido* group UZACHI) and Ixtlán de Juárez (Oaxaca). *Ejido* Caobas (a member of the *ejido* group SPFEQR) (Quintana Roo). The study is an analysis of the impact of Fair Trade and Forest Certification on poverty and injustice using Mexico as the principal case. It was commissioned and is being funded by the Ford Foundation (New York Office) and the report will be published early 2001 as part of a series about Environment and Development. For more details contact Michael Conroy, Ford Foundation, 320 E 43rd Street, NY, USA (Tel: + 1 212 573 5154; Email: <m.conroy@fordfound.org>)

members of an *ejido* is now fixed. Consequently an increasing proportion of *ejido* residents do not have access to agricultural land, nor a voice in the *ejido* assemblies.

In the Petén region of neighbouring Guatemala, some of those operations referred to as 'communities' may in fact be a group of individuals who collectively seek permission to manage forest concession for a 25-year period. They may live many kilometres from this forest and not necessarily in the same village as one another. Even where all concession-holders live together in the same village the internal organisation of a group of colonists who have recently been given land rights tends to be very different to that of a community with many decades of common property management. This is particularly the case with regard to conflict resolution mechanisms and collective land use planning.

Another important variable is the area of managed forest, which may correlate to the volume of timber marketed. In the Mexican State of Durango there is one *ejido* with a certified production forest of over 80 000ha⁴. There are others in the same state with barely 3,000ha.

As a result of all this diversity the experiences of certification in the different villages and groups of villages (unions or societies) are wide-ranging and cover everything from their reasons for participating to the benefits they expected and have actually received. In the two boxes on the next page, a summary of the variety of opinions of several stakeholder groups is presented. The respondents have been divided into two broad groups: those enterprises which received certification more than three years ago and those who are currently applying for certification. Each group represents a composite of experiences from communities and *ejidos*; from large and small holdings; and from tropical and temperate forests.

Other important findings

One other important finding is that certification remains an almost entirely externally driven process. More than just acting as information sources about certification, national and international NGOs have actively promoted certification in these operations, generally also financing the greater part of the evaluations. In the case of Durango in Mexico, this role as catalyst has been played by a well-informed charcoal production business (Noram de Mexico). In most cases the leaders of the first *ejidos* and communities to be certified were very confused over the certification process and were generally ill-prepared for the evaluation visits. The *Ejido* San Isidro in Durango was evaluated and approved for certification but decided to withdraw from the process because they were unclear of how it would benefit them and fearful that certain changes in forestry management, such as clear-fells, would be imposed upon them. Today, this type of confusion is less often the case, and the NGOs or businesses which have sponsored certification are careful to discuss the process fully with community or *ejido* leaders.

The fact that communities have not actively sought certification is partly a reflection of the newness of the concept generally. Five years ago community leaders, NGO promoters and foresters were all unclear of what the process entailed and whether their expectations would be fulfilled. Even the certification evaluation teams were learning as they went, particularly in trying to adapt the FSC standards to the Mexican reality. In 2000 there has been an explosion in the number of requests for certification which reflects a greater understanding of certification at many levels, particularly at regional government level, among NGOs and, increasingly, among industrialists.

The early participants in certification today admit that they were mistaken in their assumption that they would gain easy access to international trade, niche markets and higher prices. The early optimism has given way to a healthy realism that



A member of *Ejido* San Isidro felling a pine tree. Despite being evaluated and approved for certification this *ejido* recently withdrew from the process as they did not fully understand it.

Photo: Dawn Robinson

⁴FSC evaluation completed, agreement pending signatures.

Box 1. Perspectives of communities / ejidos certified more than 3 years ago on:

The expectations at the time (according to community leaders):

- To enter a niche market.
- To find a market for lesser known tropical forest species.
- To get recognition of social and environmental management.
- To obtain higher prices via international markets.

The impacts of certification (according to community/ejido leaders and foresters⁵)

- The organisation (community/ejido/union) has received positive publicity.
- International funding has been easier to attract.
- The government foresters and environmental protection agency are more supportive.
- Innovation in silviculture is supported, since weight is given to forest management proposals, which need to be approved by the government.
- Certification has helped to consolidate organisational structures and the recommendations and conditions have been used to promote change within the *ejidos*.
- In most cases, there have been no sustained international sales and no price increases. In Durango State, a slight price differential for oak cuttings is paid by the charcoal industry which financed the certifications, but the main products (pine and oak timber) remain unaffected. In Quintana Roo some sporadic sales of lesser known species to Europe and the USA have resulted.

The certification situation and issues (according to NGO and government workers):

- Communities are unable to pay for the annual re-evaluations since their profit margins are so low and certification has not provided tangible financial benefits.
- There is a strong need for Mexico to develop its own national standards for certification. Sometimes the conditions and recommendations from outsiders are unrealistic.
- It is important that certification not 'prostitute itself'; high standards must be maintained.

capacity in administration, quality control, marketing and negotiation are the keys to accessing these benefits. Nevertheless, certification has proven to be extremely useful as an internationally accredited seal of approval for the advances made in community forestry nationally. This has helped to reduce intimidation from sceptical politicians and environmentalists who previously had barely distinguished between community based timber extraction and illegal logging. This is very important. Newspaper reports

associating forestry with environmental degradation in Mexico are common, and those communities with management plans and sustainable harvests have been wrongly implicated. An additional benefit has been the attraction of financial assistance from international funders, as for example the funding Quintana Roo received from The MacArthur Foundation and the International Ecological Institute in the mid 1990s. Certification is still an important 'selling point' when seeking funding today. In some

Box 2. Perspectives of communities / Ejidos applying for certification on:

Hopes and expectations (according to community/ejido leaders and foresters⁵):

- Society in general will recognise the forest management work we have been doing.
- It will help to obtain funds from both government and foreign foundations.
- We will be prepared for the time when certification may be a government requirement or when it may be impossible to export without it.
- It will help our future entry to an international market.
- It opens the possibility of a niche market in the long term.

The certification situation and issues according to those financing/promoting certification:

- We have targets for certification set by our funders. We can not confidently promise a financial benefit but we are advising that changes in the market are coming and that they should be prepared. (NGO, Oaxaca)
- Certification is a way to improve and regulate forest management, when the federal government is unable to do so. (State government, Durango)
- While no sales of timber (only residual oak cuttings) have been made from certified *ejidos*, the participation of two large timber exporters in the financing of recent certification evaluations is a signal that this may be about to change. (industrialist, Durango)

⁵ In many cases these foresters are themselves members of the *ejido* or community so it is difficult to differentiate.

states, such as Durango, there are plans to make some government subsidies in support of forest management conditional on participation in certification.

Despite these positive experiences, the overwhelming impression is that certification remains a low priority for most communities. Their efforts are rather directed to consolidate their forest enterprises, increasing their efficiency and moving from roundwood sales to timber or finished goods production. At the same time they are shrewd enough to accept the offer of financial support for certification, whether it be from international donors, NGOs or industry. This gives them immediate credibility and recognition for good resource management in the eyes of the general public, politicians and urban-based environmentalists, plus some small financial benefits. They also know that they will be in a strong position to enter the international market when their

own capacity to produce the quality and quantity required is reached, or when regional buyers begin to actively seek certified timber. □

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She welcomes comments on and interchange of ideas about the issues raised in the article. You can reach her at the following email address: drobin@mpsnet.com.mx).



At the sawmill in the newly certified indigenous community of Ixtlán de Juárez, a female worker from a neighbouring community is giving an anti-fungus treatment to timber which will be made into palettes for a beer distributor.

Photo: Dawn Robinson

