
Women and Forest Resources: Two Cases from Central America

In Guatemala, in spite of the fact that 20% of the forest regions are under systems of protected areas, the continuous advance of the agricultural frontier, a result of the unequal distribution of means of production --particularly land-- has left a trail of poverty and social exclusion. This situation is more serious in rural zones where most of the population depends on forests.

Indigenous and peasant groups are among the most affected, obliged to settle and inhabit fragile ecosystems lacking basic services. However, groups of women have sought alternative organisational forms to manage natural resources in forest systems. In this article we will present two cases, one set in a coniferous ecosystem in the West of the country (in the Department of Huehuetenango) and the other in the North of the country in one of the most important tropical forest ecosystems of the Central American region, in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, Department of Peten.

The information submitted comes from two case studies carried out by the Environmental Area of the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences (FLACSO) at its Guatemala Academic Centre, as part of its research activities on community-based forestry and local institutionalities. In the Huehuetenango region, groups of Kanjobal indigenous women have organised themselves to manage their forests through a programme of forestry incentives supported by the Government through the National Forestry Institute (Instituto Nacional de Bosques – INAB). Starting with a project to improve the social conditions of Kanjobal women affected by the internal armed conflict, the women organised themselves through the Association of Eulalen Women for Comprehensive Development Pixan Konob (AMEDIK) Corazón del Pueblo. Since they launched the project, 143 hectares have been reforested already and 246 hectares are managed under natural regeneration systems. The forests are jointly managed with three municipalities, as they are located in communal areas and on municipal lands. In this case, the municipalities report to INAB and receive approximately 1.5 to 2.0% on the total accrued from the forestry incentives. This synergy has made it possible for groups of women to have access to the incentives, as without deed titles they were unable to do so. Close on 500 families are presently participating in the project and over the past four years, AMEDIK has received nearly US\$100,000 as part of the incentives.

In the Maya Biosphere Reserve there are community concessions representing rental contracts for 25 years, for organised groups to manage forests in a comprehensive manner. This amounts to approximately 400,000 hectares that are divided into 15 community concessions. This is considered to be one of the most important regions in the world under indigenous and peasant community management.

However, the process involving the women of the region has been slow, and has been marked by generalised opposition by the men, who alleged that economic profit sharing is not fair when two members of the same family are in the organisation. Therefore, there are organised groups with no women members and others where wives and daughters can obtain the right to be member only if the husband is dead or there are no male children. Presently, women participating in the concessions amount to approximately 15%. The groups of women carrying out tasks in the forest are focused on the extraction of non-timber products such as wicker (*Monstera* sp), berries (*Desmuncus* sp) and xate

(Chamaedorea sp), mainly for handicrafts or to make furniture, while others prefer to participate in the eco-tourism projects. Forestry-management activities are classed as needing hard labour and correspond to men.

Summing up, although it is true that the gender issue and involvement of women have been promoted by foreign development bodies, there are certain factors that prevent women becoming involved in forestry-management activities. Firstly, the system for land distribution used in the past did not allow women to have access to land deeds. Other variables, such as education and health show that the most vulnerable groups are indigenous women. In spite of the fact that some groups such as AMEDIK have achieved access to forestry management under forestry incentives, this has not been possible without being accompanied by the municipalities. Furthermore, while forest management changes from timber use to comprehensive management, women participating in community concessions will have to face a long road towards recognition and participation in alternative management of non-timber resources and handicrafts.

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