ASSOCIATION OF FOREST COMMUNITIES OF PETÉN
Guatemala

Equator Initiative Case Studies
Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative.

To mark its 10-year anniversary, the Equator Initiative aims to fill this gap. The following case study is one in a growing series that details the work of Equator Prize winners – vetted and peer-reviewed best practices in community-based environmental conservation and sustainable livelihoods. These cases are intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication. Case studies are best viewed and understood with reference to 'The Power of Local Action: Lessons from 10 Years of the Equator Prize', a compendium of lessons learned and policy guidance that draws from the case material.

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Acknowledgements
The Equator Initiative acknowledges with gratitude the Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP), and in particular the guidance and inputs of Carlos Kurzel. All photo credits courtesy of ACOFOP and Geoff Gallice (http://www.flickr.com/people/dejeuxx/.) Maps courtesy of CIA World Factbook and Wikipedia.

Suggested Citation
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PROJECT SUMMARY

The Association of Forest Communities of Petén (Asociación de Comunidades Forestales de Petén – ACOFOP) brings together communities in the buffer zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve to manage forest concessions that collectively represent the world’s largest certified forest area under community management.

The initiative has ensured community access to the forest by securing legal forest concessions for sustainable timber and non-timber forest product extraction at the local level. Through pioneering use of certification schemes and biological monitoring, this umbrella organization has helped to conserve the forest’s biodiversity and improve livelihood options for more than 14,000 community members. The association is currently made up of 23 community-based organisations, each of which is represented within an equitable and democratic governance structure.

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KEY FACTS

EQUATOR PRIZE WINNER: 2002

FOUNDED: 1995

LOCATION: Petén Department, Northern Guatemala

BENEFICIARIES: 2,000 families, 30 communities

BIODIVERSITY: 1,400 plant species, 450 animal species
The Association of Forest Communities of Petén (ACOFOP) brings together 23 community organizations that manage community forest concessions in the Multiple Use Zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve in northern Guatemala with the aim of improving the quality of life of their members through sustainable resource management. Since its foundation in 1995, ACOFOP has advanced the extension of forest certification in the reserve, established a good administrative structure, and implemented effective tools for fire control and preventing illegal logging. More than 14,000 people benefit directly from the sustainable use of forest resources and the successful marketing of ACOFOP products.

**Environmental threats in the Selva Maya**

The Maya Biosphere Reserve (RBM) is Central America’s most biologically diverse ecosystem and contains the majority of the tropical rainforest still remaining in Guatemala. Located in the Petén region of northern Guatemala, this reserve is an important source not only of biodiversity but also of livelihoods and the resources upon which the local communities depend. Furthermore, this stretch of tropical forest represents a significant heritage site for local culture and history as it contains over 200 Mayan ruins.

The reserve is located in the heart of the Selva Maya, a large tropical forest which spans neighboring portions of Guatemala, Belize, and Mexico and serves as a critical watershed for local people and as a major carbon sink for the entire planet. In the mid-20th century, the Selva Maya, which had gained attention for its wealth of precious woods and other resources, became a receiving zone for domestic migrants, placing intense pressure on agricultural resources and creating serious national security problems from illegal trafficking in flora, fauna, archeological resources, undocumented migrants, and drugs. As a result of these activities, the tropical rainforest was being rapidly destroyed or degraded, leading to the loss of large numbers of plant and animal species. This began to affect the stability of forest ecosystems and the livelihoods of thousands of forest dwellers and millions of others who depend on the forests for a range of products and services. In the late 1980s, as part of a pro-conservation movement in Mesoamerica, governments in the region began to promote legal tools for the protection of natural resources. However, in the absence of a detailed analysis of the situation, the welfare of peasant and indigenous communities was not taken into consideration.

**Land use in the Maya Biosphere Reserve**

In Guatemala, the Legislative Decree 4-89 Protected Areas Act was passed in 1989, creating the Guatemalan System of Protected Areas (SIGAP) and the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP). The latter became the governing body of all the protected areas in the country. In 1990, after the creation of the Maya Biosphere Reserve (Legislative Decree 5-90), CONAP initiated a particularly rigid policy which was detached from dialogue with the communities that had been living in these zones before the creation of the reserve. Overnight, resident communities found themselves living inside a protected area where their economic and traditional activities were greatly restricted. The lack of communication between the state and forest dependent communities – and the incompatibility of this restrictive policy with the needs of the people – led to a series of conflicts which forced the state to settle on a strategy that reconciled economic and social development with the conservation of natural resources. The new goal was to conserve natural biodiversity and cultural values while simultaneously benefiting the lives of communities living within it. In order to better manage the reserve, the area has been divided into zones: core, multiple use, and buffer zones.

ACOFOP organizations work in the multiple use and buffer zones while the core zones are strict conservation areas. Multiple use zones constitute approximately 50 per cent of the Maya Biosphere Reserve and are devoted to the sustainable harvest of xate palm (*Chamaedorea* spp.), allspice (*Pimenta dioica*), chicle gum (*Manilkara*...
spp.), wicker (*Philodendron spp.*) and other wild plants, seeds, timber and fauna, and contain restricted areas for carrying out traditional activities and the utilization of non-renewable resources under strict controls. The multiple use zones in turn are divided into special use zones and cultural and archeological preservation areas. The primary objective of the buffer zone is to relieve pressure on the reserve through the stabilization of appropriate land and resource usage in the area adjacent to the southern edge of the Maya Biosphere Reserve. The communities living in this zone comprise native Mayans and Ladino farmers. Environmental threats stemming from human activity in the buffer zone have traditionally included the indiscriminate felling of timber, population growth, and internal migration.

**A community-based forest management solution**

Seeking to address environmental and social problems, the communities of Petén came together to form the Association of Forest Communities of Peten (ACOFOP), an umbrella organization which supports the creation and management of community forest concessions as a legal mechanism for sharing rights and responsibilities between resource users and the state. Prior to ACOFOP’s formation, these concessions were granted almost exclusively to timber companies, and ACOFOP fought to prove that communities possessed the technical and financial capacity to manage the concessions—a fight which ultimately ended with communities gaining control of 445,804 hectares of forest concessions. ACOFOP now comprises 23 local community-based organizations, representing 30 rural communities and approximately 2,000 families. These communities have assumed responsibility for the sustainable management of forest resources within the reserve, and over half of the managed forest has been internationally certified by the Forest Stewardship Council, making it one of the largest certified forest areas under community management in the world.

The original vision of ACOFOP was to train community leaders (both men and women) in the management of forest concessions. Toward this end, the project has organized local and regional workshops on subjects such as administration, business, gender, communication strategies, and legal regulations. An independent body was created and devoted specifically to activities promoting the participation of women and youth in every aspect of the process. As a result, management capacity has increased as has the influence of directors in the political and legal decision-making processes governing management of the reserve. Over time, the vision expanded to include the development of technical and business capacities of community organizations, with an emphasis on the training of community leaders in the technical and administrative dimensions of certification, domestic marketing, and product export. More recently, ACOFOP has begun to promote alternative livelihoods and new uses of non-timber forest products in an effort to diversify sources of income. Examples of new sources of income include ecotourism, the production and sale of medicinal plants, and handicrafts. These strategic actions have placed ACOFOP’s community stewardship program on the local, national, and international stages.

**Governance and organizational Structure**

As part of its institutional structure, ACOFOP encourages transparency, accountability, and social monitoring as permanent styles of management, emphasizing the free flow of information and consultation with all stakeholders. The internal organization is made up of elected officials who serve two-year terms on various decision-making bodies: the General Assembly, the Management Board, the Audit Commission, the Executive Board, and other bodies. The General Assembly is composed of all individual members and organizations, the latter through their respective legal representatives, and is superior in terms of authority to the other decision-making bodies.

The Management Board is made up of nine organizations and/or individuals who are elected by secret vote and are charged with the efficient execution of the General Assembly’s decisions. The posts are president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and four voting members. It is the president who is the legal representative of the Association. The Audit Commission is independent of the Management Board and nominated by the General Assembly. Composed of three active members (individuals or organizations), its main function is to ensure the Management and Executive Boards carry out their activities in accordance with what has been planned and approved by the General Assembly. In this way, the Audit Commission is also responsible for auditing the budgets of each member organization. The Executive Board comprises the executive director who is appointed by the General Assembly and is responsible for implementing, in coordination with the Management Board, the planned activities and mandates of the Assembly. The executive director leads the technical team which is divided into different areas and programs of work, depending on the existing needs. Within the organization there are other entities which, although not regulated in the statutes, are of great importance for the community stewardship process. One such example is the Advisory Council, which is made up of key leaders who have at some point played a role within the community organizations. They give advice on high priority issues in order to help the board of directors and/or Executive Board to make more consensus-based decisions.

This project stands as one of the largest and most successful forestry projects in Latin America. It has successfully created and sustained a new approach toward forest resources. Communities view the forest as an important part of their livelihoods and heritage and therefore manage it on a sustainable basis.

*“The industrial revolution has provided development and comfort to humanity which will be the balance of debt we owe to our planet. The responsibility is all of ours to repay it.”*

*Carlos Kurzel, ACOFOP*
ACOFOP manages, executes, and redirects international cooperation projects in order to strengthen the social management and economic development of the associated communities with the goal of conserving natural and cultural resources of the region. The activities can be broken up into four main program areas: 1) economic diversification and local management of the community organizations of Petén; 2) capacity-building, planning, and integrated management of non-timber forest products (gum, pepper, xate palm, Maya nut, and guano) and xate enrichment plantations in recovering forests in the reserve; 3) encouraging the integrated management of natural and cultural resources through community participation in ecotourism; and 4) strengthening the institutional, political, and business aspects of community forest stewardship in Petén.

Participatory planning and building local capacity

The first program area focuses on creating and strengthening the technical and administrative capacities of the member community organizations, contributing to an integrated, participatory development model which is necessary for economic diversification and sustainable development in the long term. To this end, they have established a participatory process of planning, monitoring, and evaluation which allows community organizations and institutions to be protagonists in the implementation of projects, facilitating knowledge-sharing at the community and institutional levels through each step of the process. As part of this process, the community organizations take on activities to add value to their products and promote agreements at the local level to help the local governing structure to interact more efficiently with private business initiatives. Through capacity-building efforts, ACOFOP has established open communication channels both among and within the community organizations. Further, regular consultative workshops are held to share information regarding environmental and economic conditions, opportunities, successes, and setbacks.

Income generation and diversification

The second program area promotes income generation and the sustainable management of resources in the Maya Biosphere Reserve by offering capacity building and technical assistance to community members in terms of the cultivation, harvesting, packaging and selling of xate palm and other non-timber forest products, while meeting requirements for Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification. ACOFOP has helped five local forestry organizations create management plans and inventories of xate palm, gum, pepper, Maya nuts, and guano. These plans apply to a zone of approximately 140,000 hectares and satisfy the legal requirements established by the National Council on Protected Areas. ACOFOP has assisted another five community organizations to establish xate palm nurseries and plantations in secondary forests and those damaged by forest fire. Approximately 100 hectares of land (20 hectares for each of the five groups) are administrated by each one of the beneficiary forestry organizations, adding up to about 960,000 plants for each organization, 4,800,000 in total.
Community-driven ecotourism

The third program area encourages community participation in sustainable cultural tourism as a strategy for strengthening the management structure of the reserve and improving the living conditions of the inhabitants of the Selva Maya. ACOFOP aims to contribute first to strengthening the existing community enterprises, analyzing internal and external factors that limit or favor their development. In order to this, the association organizes knowledge exchanges, thus bringing to Petén experiences and insights which shorten the learning curve on strategic issues for member communities and their ethno-tourism enterprises. ACOFOP also conducts trainings on various themes of ecotourism development and administration. The strategy is based on an intensive evidence-based process that promotes understanding among the communities of the value of their natural and cultural resources and the potential to improve their living conditions through tourism, as well as the benefits and risks associated with the tourism sector. ACOFOP has also cultivated strategic alliances with similar organizations in southern Mexico and Belize and is in the process of forming a ‘Great Alliance for Community Tourism’ in the Selva Maya as a vehicle of cooperation and political advocacy for the future of the Selva Maya’s protected areas.

Strengthening community forest stewardship in Petén

The fourth program area contributes to improvements in the institutional and political performance of ACOFOP, through strengthening of social capital as the basis of a new strategy to reposition the agenda of community forestry in a way that reflects recent socioeconomic and political changes in the region. ACOFOP considers its main asset to be the social capital of community stewardship—which takes the form of community organizations, commissions, working groups, and other mechanisms for consultation and cooperation—and is dedicated to capacity-building in this area. Specifically, ACOFOP trains community organizations and individual members in administration and business skills and uses audit processes (undertaken by community leaders and business leaders) to document successes, mistakes, and lessons learned. Through the integrated management of natural resources and the promotion of alternative livelihoods, ACOFOP continues to deepen its successes in the areas of promoting community stewardship.

ACOFOP’s main innovation can be found in its organizational structure which brings together individual community concessions so that natural resources can be used to benefit local people in a sustainable and integrated way. This system was born of the lawlessness that had existed within protected areas. ACOFOP has paved the way for the adjudication and transfer of forest concessions to civil society groups. ACOFOP believed—and has since been proven right—that the sharing of responsibilities related to the administration, protection, and management of the multiple-use zones of the reserve would lead not only to more effective conservation efforts but also to the improved well-being of local people. ACOFOP’s success in bringing communities together for these common goals has made it one of the most successful community steward organizations in the world, and has contributed to the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage of Guatemala.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Economic Diversification and Local Management of the Community Organizations of Petén</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.C. Custosel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arbol Verde</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coop. La Tecnica</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laborantes Del Bosque</td>
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<tr>
<td>OMYC Uaxactun</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impulsores Suchitecos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AFISAP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coop. Carmelita</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.C. El Esfuerzo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coop. Los Laureles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coop. Union Maya Itza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coop. La Lucha</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total:</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ACOFOP website. Amounts calculated at an exchange rate of Q. 8.05 = USD 1.00
Impacts

Biodiversity Impacts

The Petén region of Guatemala is known worldwide for its high biological diversity and cultural wealth, with some 1,400 known plant species and approximately 450 animal species, including jaguars (*P. onca goldmani*), pumas (*Puma concolor*), ocelots (*Leopardus pardalis*), margays (*Leopardus wiedii*), spider monkeys (*Ateles geoffroyi yucatanensis*), howler monkeys (*Alouatta pigra*), tapirs (*Tapirus bairdii*), crocodiles (*Crocodylus moreletii*), red brocket (*Mazama americana*) and white-tail deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), harpy eagles (*Harpia harpyja*), several species of hawk, and scarlet macaws (*Ara macao*).

ACOFOP community organizations hold more than 450,000 hectares of natural forest in the form of sustainable management concessions, as granted by contracts with the government of Guatemala. These concessions guarantee the access and management of natural and cultural resources of the Multiple Use Zone in the Maya Biosphere Reserve for 25 years. As dictated by management plans, only select areas are used for timber extraction, with an average of one tree per hectare cut down, thus minimizing the negative impact of resource use on the forest. The remainder of the area is used for collecting non-timber forest products. Giving forest dependent communities an economic incentive to participate in environmental stewardship has resulted in environmental benefits ranging from the conservation of endemic flora and fauna to the protection of a wide variety of ecosystem services. Additionally, there has been a considerable reduction in the frequency of forest fires and illegal encroachment into fragile ecosystems. So too, the advancing agricultural frontier has slowed in areas managed by communities thanks to the investment of more than USD 250,000 each year in the monitoring and fighting of fires. Changing attitudes in the community away from slash and burn agriculture towards sustainable forest management has greatly contributed to the sustainability of conservation efforts. Community management has also meant the promotion of non-contaminating organic technologies in local food production.

Global forest management standards are applied through the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Participating communities invest in technology, manpower, financial resources, and the control and surveillance of areas under management, ensuring their protection and conservation. Scientific studies have been conducted on the multiple-use zone in contrast to the core (conservation) areas and national parks. The results obtained are encouraging and show that the protection of natural resources of the Maya Biosphere Reserve has been effective in the hands of communities. According to a study conducted by RainForest Alliance from 2002 to 2007, the average annual deforestation rate for the entire Maya Biosphere Reserve, including the core protected areas, was twenty times higher than the deforestation rate for the community-managed concessions. Based on current trends, the Reserve is expected to lose 38 percent of its 1986 forest cover by 2050, with most of that loss within the western core protected areas and the buffer zone. This means that, in the future, the community concessions are expected to constitute an increasing percentage of the remaining forest cover. Further, the frequency and extent of wildfires within the Reserve have varied greatly and shown little signs of decreasing—7 to 20 percent of forest area is burnt annually—since 1998, while the area burned within community-managed concessions is much lower and has been steadily dropping—from 6.5 percent in 1998 to 0.1 percent in 2007.

Socioeconomic Impacts

Approximately 14,000 people benefit directly from sustainable forest management in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Community members and their families now benefit from the financial security of newly created jobs as well as revenues received from the annual distribution of profits generated by the sustainable management of land concessions. The average local wage is now more than USD 12.00 per day. In addition, revenues generated by the sustainable management of forests are being reinvested in the construction of classrooms, study grants, teachers’ wages, and basic community services. Further, the association has contributed to training, infrastruc-
ture, and equipment for healthcare centers, an investment which has had a substantial and positive impact on reproductive and maternal health in the communities.

Through the UNDP/GEF-Small Grants Program, USD 400,000 has been invested in economic diversification projects, allowing the community-based concessions to add value to their products, thereby generating more income for their respective organizations. Twelve new community businesses were established in the Maya Biosphere Reserve, all with viable long-term business plans. Some communities have even begun to export certified and sustainably harvested timber to international markets, leveraging ACOFOP’s connections with the commercial forestry sector.

ACOFOP also works actively toward the development of new opportunities for income generation, such as community-based ecotourism and the production and marketing of medicinal plants and crafts. Through capacity-building workshops, community members have gained skills related to these alternative livelihoods as well as forest management and administration. These skills have better positioned communities in the labor market to find employment and earn additional income. The minimum salary in these communities is now USD 7-10 per day, compared to the national average of USD 4 per day. Further, ACOFOP directly generates approximately 40,000 days of paid employment per year.

In addition to income generation and investment, ACOFOP has contributed to economic progress in other ways. For example, leaders (both men and women) from community organizations have developed technical skills related to the administrative and marketing aspects of forest management, all thanks to the community stewardship process. The issue of women’s participation in development and stewardship projects has been controversial and challenging, but significant achievements have been made. Women hold key positions in decision-making boards in the communities, manage projects, and are behind many of the activities involving non-timber forest resources, such as xate, gum, pepper, bayal, wicker, and Maya nut, as these are products that are traditionally harvested by women.

### Table 2: Training in Management of Non-Timber Products

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Civil Impulsores Suchitecos</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Civil Laborantes del Bosque</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Civil El Esfuerzo</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Civil Custodios de la Selva</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Civil Arbol Verde</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociedad Civil OMYC</td>
<td>244</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asociacion Forestal Integral San Andres</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperativa Carmelita</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cooperativa Union Maya Itza</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Bendicion</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1,237</td>
<td>262</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: ACOFOP website.

In addition to income generation and investment, ACOFOP has contributed to economic progress in other ways. For example, leaders (both men and women) from community organizations have developed technical skills related to the administrative and marketing aspects of forest management, all thanks to the community stewardship process. The issue of women’s participation in development and stewardship projects has been controversial and challenging, but significant achievements have been made. Women hold key positions in decision-making boards in the communities, manage projects, and are behind many of the activities involving non-timber forest resources, such as xate, gum, pepper, bayal, wicker, and Maya nut, as these are products that are traditionally harvested by women.

### POLICY IMPACTS

The communities holding Maya Biosphere Reserve forests have achieved a high level of national and international representation and, through the leadership of their representatives, gained legitimacy and credibility in policymaking fora. As a result, ACOFOP is given political breadth to participate actively in policy discourse in areas that affect its constituent communities. The association has been delegated authority over migration as well as the illegal appropriation of lands inside the concession boundaries. Further, action has been taken to ensure that external pressure to grant oil concessions in the forest have been resisted.

The management of forest concessions has necessitated a significant investment in monitoring to prevent theft and illegal human settlements and to prevent, combat, and control forest fires. Monitoring activities required a cooperative relationship with government authorities, and provided a basis for developing what has become a mutually beneficial relationship. In a meeting with national authorities, ACOFOP obtained a commitment from the Executive Secretary of the President of Guatemala to continue supporting the communities in their arduous work of conserving forests in the Petén region. ACOFOP also prompted the previous government to strengthen control and surveillance, who provided the community with 4x4 vehicles to patrol forest areas and the tools needed to improve strategic checkpoints. Owing to its lobbying efforts and strong track-record, ACOFOP has also launched a payment for ecosystem services (carbon credits) initiative which will provide another revenue stream to fund community monitoring. While the association has been able to create a strong relationship with government authorities, cooperation remains limited by a lack of long-term consistency in national policy and the turnover in government every four years.

Despite all of its successes, there is still scope for ACOFOP to improve its standing in public opinion at the national level. Attempting to infuse community interests into policy debates and decision-making processes is crucial for the successful conservation of natural resources. Both in the Petén region and nationally, there has been little dissemination of community-based management successes. A lack of knowledge about the project’s actions has led to limited popular support for certain projects. Dissemination of information on successes and failures to the population “en masse” and to communities undertaking similar projects in environmental stewardship is of critical importance.
Sustainability and Replication

SUSTAINABILITY

Social sustainability: In the early days of ACOFOP, strengthening social capital was a priority and one of the main challenges. It was difficult to convince forest dependent communities to place collective concerns ahead of individual ones. Accumulation of the social capital and trust needed to fuel ACOFOP activities took years. The process, however, was essential for creating a common vision. The principle of unity that is now the glue of ACOFOP makes it one of the most pioneering and socially sustainable initiatives in the region. Community ownership over conservation activities is strengthened and reinforced through extension support, trainings and workshops, and advice to community organizations. The training and participation of community leaders are key components of the process, and ACOFOP has offered leadership training to over 500 individuals in member communities. The consistent and frequent flow of information to and from community members on administrative and management processes has been central to the project's social sustainability and success.

Environmental sustainability: Annual investment in surveillance and control has been one important remedy for the problems of deforestation and forest degradation in the Maya Biosphere Reserve. Without question, however, the community philosophy of seeing the forest as an economic asset and source of development has been the crucial element in slowing the progress of the agricultural frontier. Thanks to ACOFOP’s leadership, the forest is now seen as an indispensable element for achieving economic and social development, the means by which communities benefit directly and indirectly, and the promise for future generations to inherit an environment suitable for living.

Economic sustainability: Income diversification, through the sustainable use of forest resources, generates the livelihoods necessary for poverty reduction and long-term economic sustainability.
REPLICATION

ACOFOP’s successful experiment in community stewardship has most certainly inspired and strengthened other community management processes. The work and experiences of ACOFOP and its member community organizations are transmitted through conferences, summits, and seminars. In the experience of ACOFOP, the exchange of knowledge farmer-to-farmer has been essential in shortening the uptake time of best practice. Groups are able to learn from (and ultimately avoid) past mistakes. Peer-to-peer knowledge exchanges have consolidated relationships between community organizations and have proven to be key instruments for leveraging community development processes. In the early stages of ACOFOP’s involvement in peer-to-peer learning it encountered the issue of a lack of follow-up. This problem was overcome through the creation of an association-wide monitoring and evaluation mechanism and by promoting community networks.

The ACOFOP model has not been replicated in the Peten region for the simple reason that there are no further areas of forest that can be given in concession under the forest management model. The model is, however, being replicated in Honduras, Nicaragua, Brazil, and Bolivia, countries where ACOFOP has had a direct role in disseminating the Petén community experience. There are several key elements that stand out as factors affecting the successful replicability of the project. ACOFOP has found that strengthening the technical, administrative, and management skills of community leaders is necessary for successful replication of the model. In the case of ACOFOP, the pre-existence of regionally-based trade organizations devoted to the marketing of timber and non-timber forest products was extremely valuable. The participation of foreign technical assistance organizations was also critical in shoring up political support and in developing the necessary financial and technical capacity. Finally, active community participation and dedication to the project was a prerequisite that cannot be overstated.

PARTNERS

Each partner represents a strong strategic alliance and contributes to the success of the organization. ACOFOP has developed a special capacity to address the most key actors in each sector: legal, environmental, advocacy, and financial. The Single Union of Rubber Tappers and Wood Workers (SUCHILMA), a community-based organization which pre-dates ACOFOP supported the project from its inception and at one time hosted ACOFOP’s central administration offices. ACOFOP has received financial support from the Inter-Ecclesiastic Organization for Development Cooperation (ICCO), the Ford Foundation, the German Technical Social Cooperation Service (DED), the Christian Romero Initiative (CIR), Swiss Cooperation (HELVETAS), and the community-based organizations constituting ACOFOP. Government partners include: National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP); National Forestry Institute (INAB); Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Food (MAGA); and the Congress of the Republic. Non-governmental partners include: ASOREMA, a national association of conservation NGOs which has supported with national policy advocacy; the Center for Legal and Social Action of Guatemala, who specialize in the protection of natural resources by leveraging Guatemalan law; Rainforest Alliance, who have supported ACOFOP with certification, business development and production issues; the Nature for Life Foundation (NPV), who support with technical forest management issues; the Central Mayan Association; and the National Network of Community Organizations, who are working with ACOFOP to create a nation-wide movement of coordinated community-based conservation initiatives.

“The lack of shared will, conscience and commitment to protecting our planet can only result in an environmental debt that we are not able to pay off... We are part of biodiversity. We must foster a philosophy of sustainability that recognizes this fact. Wealth is not only measured in money, but in the quality of life nature offers us. Let us be sustainable in every sense.”

Carlos Kurzel, ACOFOP