

Briefing

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Policy pointers

The role that sustainable community forest businesses can play in forest protection is recognised by the 2015 Belize Forest Policy, but it must now also be legally established in revisions to the Forest Act of 1927 — and furthering such a process is urgently called for.

In any law reform, provisions for community forestry need to extend to all land tenure types, including protected areas, private lands, national lease lands and Mayan indigenous land rights — and claims to land must be possible without tree clearance.

Business incubation has proved a useful approach to improving community livelihoods and incentivising forest protection but requires investment beyond individual projects.

An ongoing learning process that focuses on business incubation approaches and networks could help improve the sustainability of community forest businesses, offering a triple win for the economy, the environment and rural society.

Win–win in Belize: incubating community businesses that protect forests

Belize is a small country with high forest cover, accounting for 61% of the land. But the nation's biodiverse forest landscapes are under threat from company land concessions, agricultural expansion and dry season fires. One approach to reducing this threat involves aligning local livelihood needs (of both men and women) with protected area management, resulting in the founding and growth of sustainable community forest businesses. A project funded by the Darwin Initiative and led by the University of Edinburgh attempted just that. With support from IIED, it developed a model for community forest business incubation that incentivised community fire management in Belize's biodiversity-rich lowland pine savannahs. The approach successfully established viable businesses; it also opened a national dialogue on the role community forest business could play in restoring and managing forest landscapes, both within and outside protected areas. We recommend revision of the Forest Act of 1927 to further enable this approach.

Belize has a population of just under 400,000, 55% of which live in rural areas. The population has undergone periods of rapid growth, increasing by 30% between 2000–2010. Unemployment is high, especially for young women, and expanding communities have placed increasing demand on forest land. This means Belize's extensive forested areas (about 1,393,000 ha) are now under threat. Between 1990 and 2010, Belize lost 12.2% of its forest cover (around 193,000 ha) — a loss of roughly 0.61% per year.¹ And the rate is increasing, with government handouts of forest land to companies (such as shrimp farms and agricultural plantations), local agricultural expansion and late dry season fires all contributing factors to the rate and scope of deforestation. But how has Belize

arrived here and what can be done to better protect its forest resources?

Context: playing catch-up on community forest business

Unlike its neighbours, Belize has little community forest business. In contrast, Guatemala and Mexico both have many timber and non-timber forest product businesses, both on community lands and in protected areas. Good livelihood returns from these types of businesses have incentivised sustainable forest management; this is evidenced by the almost total halt of deforestation in the community forest concessions of Petén (Guatemala's largest regional department) and in some Mexican 'ejidos' (communal land used for agriculture).

Business mentoring emphasises 'linking' community groups with sources of knowledge

The lack of community forest business in Belize stems in part from the outdated, colonial-era Forest Act of 1927 (with minor revisions in 2000 and 2017). The Act maintains that 'no right shall be acquired in or over a forest reserve except by grant, lease or contract in writing made by or on behalf of the Minister'. Fewer than five such grants, leases or contracts have been made to communities in the last 90 years; instead the Act focuses attention on enforcing existing laws on communities.

Under the 1927 Act, no legal provisions exist for 'community forestry' in forest reserves (which are administered by the government). Moreover, few provisions exist for community forestry in other categories of land, such as private land, national land (owned by the government, but including lease land) or 'Indian reservations' (mostly in Toledo). If provisions did exist for community forestry in other categories of land, and land could be claimed without tree clearance, the prospects for community involvement in forestry would greatly increase. Currently, land titling encourages tree clearance as proof of tenure; royalties on timber, even for planted trees on private land, discourage community or individual planting.

But in 2001, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) published a report recognising Maya people's collective rights to land traditionally used and occupied in the southernmost district of Toledo. In 2007, the Supreme Court of Belize ordered the government to recognise indigenous land rights and demarcate and title their land. While the government appealed this decision in 2013, they lost the case with a final ruling in April 2015 that Mayan traditional land rights constitute property equal in legitimacy to any other form of property under Belizean law — superseding any residual notions of Indian reservations.

With an ongoing process of arbitration to respond to this ruling, in 2015 the government of Belize published a helpful new forest policy with specific commercial entitlements for forest managed by communities and indigenous people; this moved away from a previous narrow focus on law enforcement. How this policy will be enacted in law is yet to be seen, but it will almost certainly require reforms to land legislation and the Forest Act and we urge a commencement of those processes.

A virtuous circle: forest business opportunities incentivising fire management

Within this context, a Darwin Initiative-led project was launched in 2015: 'Conservation of pine

woodland biodiversity in Belize through community fire management'. Belize's lowland pine savannas are a critical and endangered ecoregion. They are a regional priority for biodiversity conservation, containing critically endangered species of parrot, tapir, tree and cycad palm — almost half of all Belize's endemic plant species occur in this ecosystem. Intense fires in these pine savannas are becoming more frequent, degrading the ecosystem towards grassland with few pines.

The project sought to encourage stewardship of pine woodlands in Toledo through community fire management. Communities were offered incentives to take part in the form of improved economic opportunities linked to community forest businesses. The project's theory of change had two main strands: by improving fire management, the natural resources used by local communities in and around the Paynes Creek National Park would be protected; and by investing in community forest businesses, the incentive to engage in fire management would increase to protect those investments. But how were such business opportunities to be incubated?

In 2015, a business incubation team was established, led by IIED and involving the University of Edinburgh and the Toledo Institute for Development and Environment (TIDE). A simultaneous global review of forest business incubation² by IIED underpinned the work. Though funded separately, it helped deliver a business incubation model comprising four linked strands.

The first strand of the incubation model was a series of inclusive community meetings over a period of six months in five communities surrounding Paynes Creek National Park in Toledo: Bella Vista, Bladen, Medina Bank, San Isidro and Trio. Communities were invited to consider the market opportunities that could be accessed or enhanced through legal natural resource production that utilises accessible and socially acceptable technology. They were also invited to nominate group members to receive business training. Emphasis was placed on including women's groups and women within mixed groups.

The second strand of the business incubation model was comprised of three sets of group business training. These were punctuated by six-month intervals during which community groups could implement the content of the training. The trainings covered: (i) core business development skills, (ii) proactive risk management leading to start-up business planning and (iii) organisational management. The process involved both theory and practice; for example, the first training introduced participants to five knowledge areas required for business sustainability³ (market

and finance, technology research and development, resource management, legal and institutional, and social and cultural issues). Community groups were then tasked with researching the detailed information they would need to run the business (for example, exploring buyers, competitor prices and costs, technology options, business registration options, community concerns and mitigating them, and so on).

A third strand was a process of business mentoring by TIDE staff during the intervals between training, structured around a Belize Business Primer.⁴ This mentoring emphasised 'linking' community groups with the sources of knowledge they needed through the projects advisors within TIDE, the Forestry Department and the University of Belize Environmental Research Institute (ERI) (see Figure 1). For example, community groups were linked to: relevant government authorities for land permissions and business registration, technical training courses (such as tour guiding and food handling), research institutions such as the University of Belize, the Ministry of Cooperatives to discuss options for social organisation as cooperatives, potential sources of start-up investment finance through collaborative proposal preparation, and to business experts such as tour operators and other same-sector community business groups, through peer-to-peer exchanges.

The fourth and final strand of the business incubation model was a proof of concept phase. Groups started to generate income as a final learning process, prior to making investment proposals to various donors to secure start-up investment. From an initial six groups, four reached the investment proposal stage:

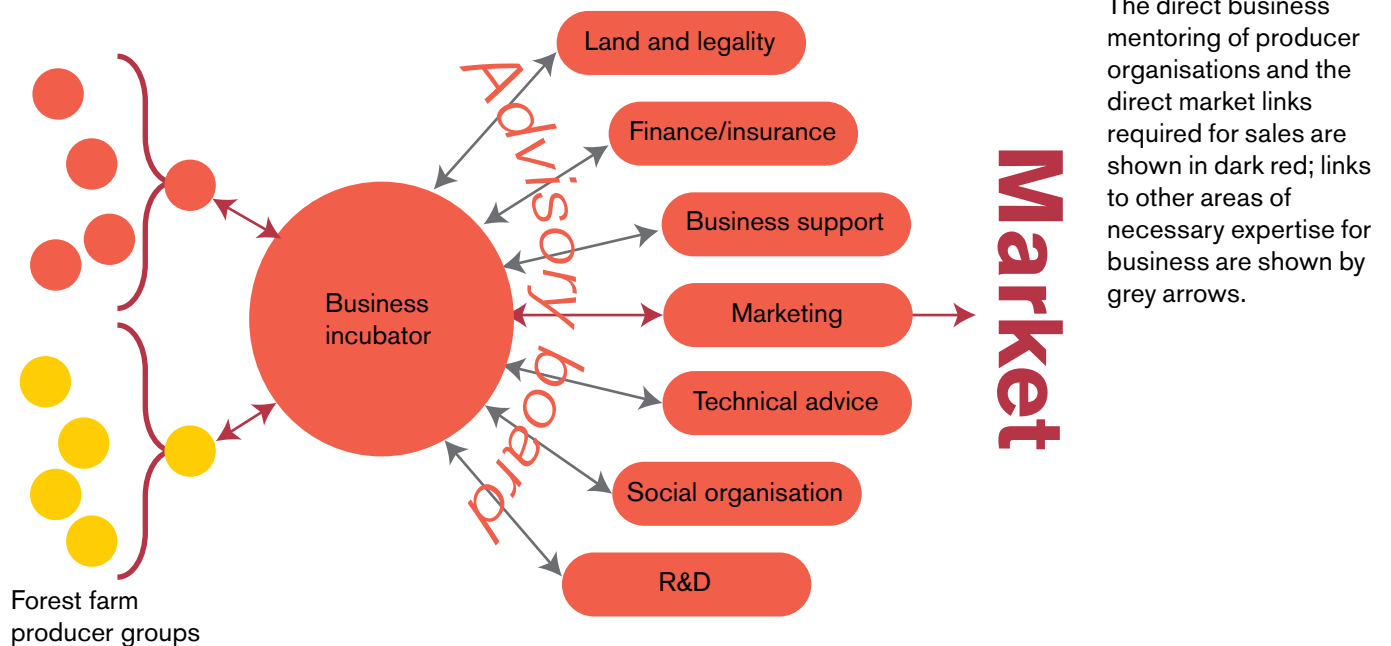
- Adventures in the Last Corridor: a community ecotourism business located in Medina Bank, offering river tubing and caving tours, and selling crafts, with investment plans for a lodge
- Xibe: a women's catering and craft business located in San Isidro, offering school food, snacks and crafts to tourism operators, with investment plans for a roadside restaurant and craft shop
- San Isidro Farming Agroforestry Association: a community farming association based around chicken and cocoa production selling to the local market, with investment plans for expanded cocoa production
- United Hands: a community farming association based in Trio within an integrated agroforestry system, with investment plans for expanded pig rearing and cocoa production.

The two groups that did not reach this stage — a women's jewelry business and a palmetto palm seed collecting association⁵ — did not progress due to lack of trust between group members and because the market for palmetto seed collapsed during the project period, respectively. Those that survived had strong links to each other, including demand-supply relationships between them, and a strong collective vision for how to develop their business.

Sharing experiences to improve policy and practice

Consultative workshop: incubating community forest businesses. As part of its policy engagement work, the Darwin Initiative project team ran a consultative workshop in Belize's capital, Belmopan, in February 2018. The workshop drew together individuals with regional

Figure 1. Visual representation of the 'linking' functions that are vital to our forest business incubation model.



The direct business mentoring of producer organisations and the direct market links required for sales are shown in dark red; links to other areas of necessary expertise for business are shown by grey arrows.

experience of incubating community forest or other natural resource businesses, including seven NGOs, the government departments of Forestry and Youth Development, two funding programmes (Selva Maya and UNDP Small Grants), and experts from Mexico and Guatemala. The workshop explored:

- How community business could help achieve the aims of protected areas, and
- What sort of institutional business incubators might enable that.

The meeting recognised that protected areas are vital for preserving the fragile balance between humans and nature, and can rarely completely exclude human communities. But as populations expand and human livelihood aspirations change within market economies, protected areas are in danger of being degraded. Many of the workshop participants were working to align conservation and livelihoods within protected areas, attempting to find market options that generate income whilst ensuring resource conservation. Examples include ecosystem restoration in degraded areas (for example, based around sustainable timber, cocoa and coffee, and farmed seaweed in marine reserves), alternative livelihoods that use conservation in their marketing (such as honey, craft, backyard gardening and livestock rearing) and ecotourism (including allowing tourists to stay in community members' homes and catering).

Several key challenges to community business incubation came up repeatedly. These included the need for adequate investment in:

- Early careful market assessment
- Building organisational structures, roles and procedures to maintain trust internally and with the wider community
- Community drive and entrepreneurship (rather than direction from outside)
- Coordination between support agencies (to avoid 'dependency syndrome' whereby communities participate in training for the potential rewards)
- Follow-up beyond the immediate project funding period.

National symposium: using forest business to engage communities. The 11th National Natural Resource Management Symposium was held in Belmopan in March 2018. Its plenary session, sponsored by the DEFRA Darwin Initiative, was themed 'using community forest business as a

mechanism for engaging communities near protected areas'. The keynote speaker, Dr Elma Kay of the ERI, challenged conservation professionals to take their message to sectors that are not normally noted for their interest in environmental matters.

Following an introduction by IIED, four NGOs presented their experiences of promoting community livelihoods through small business development. A common finding was that 'making business work' provided a constructive framework to begin NGO–community dialogues on conserving protected areas, while meeting community needs in the buffer zone around them. At the symposium, it was agreed that 'family forestry' might be an easier concept to develop business around rather than 'community forestry', due to divisions in some communities in Belize.

This plenary drew the largest number of participants in the history of the event; the importance of the issue was reflected in the interest shown by diverse agencies, including those working in economic development, social services, youth and human resource development, environmental protection and agriculture.

Feeding an appetite for learning

Within Belize, and indeed across the wider Selva Maya region, there is appetite for a further learning process that builds on initial findings from the consultative workshop and national symposium.

More insights are needed on community business development that supports protected areas, in both terrestrial and marine environments. To progress this approach, more could be done to record community business support processes, share methodologies used to develop business capacity (such as needs assessment processes, training methods, financing support mechanisms), and create useful partnerships between NGOs and government agencies.

There is certainly a need to develop a new Forest Act and adequately staff the relevant departments to develop the ambition of the 2015 forest policy by providing business support to forest communities, rather than just law enforcement.

Duncan Macqueen, Neil Stuart, Cathy Smith and Elmar Requena

Duncan Macqueen is a principal researcher in IIED's Natural Resources Group. Neil Stuart is a senior lecturer in geography at the University of Edinburgh. Cathy Smith is a doctoral researcher at the University of Edinburgh. Elmar Requena is a terrestrial biologist at TIDE.



Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

The School of Geosciences at the University of Edinburgh investigates the forces and factors that shape our world and the environments in which we live.

The Toledo Institute for Environment and Development (TIDE) fosters community participation in resource management and sustainable use of ecosystems within the Maya Mountain Marine Corridor in Belize.

Contact

Duncan MacQueen
duncan.macqueen@iied.org

80–86 Gray's Inn Road
London, WC1X 8NH
United Kingdom

Tel: +44 (0)20 3463 7399
www.iied.org

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Notes

¹ Cherrington, EA, Ek, E, Cho, P, Howell, B, Hernandez, B, Anderson, E, Flores, A, Garcia, B, Sempris, E and Irwin, D (2010) Forest cover and deforestation in Belize: 1980-2010. SERVIR. / ² Macqueen, D and Bolin, A (2018) Forest business incubation. Towards sustainable forest and farm producer organisation (FFPO) businesses that ensure climate resilient landscapes. IIED, London. / ³ Lecup, I and Nichol森, K (2000) Community-based tree and forest product enterprises: market analysis and development (MA&D) field manual. Books A to F. FAO, Rome. / ⁴ Macqueen, D (2015) Belize Business Primer. IIED, London. / ⁵ Smith, C and Chambers, J (2015) Palmetto Berry Harvesting in Belize's Toledo District. University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh.