

# Empowerment of Forest-Linked Communities

**BRIEFING SERIES**  
Goal 10: A Closer Look

## What Progress and Where Next?

The New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF) is an international pledge to halt global deforestation. It sets out ten ambitious goals related to protecting and restoring forests. In 2018, the NYDF Assessment Partners published the NYDF Goal 10 Assessment Report, *Improving Governance to Protect Forests: Empowering People and Communities, Strengthening Laws and Institutions*. This three-part Briefing Series takes a more detailed look at key findings from the assessment to highlight and present additional research on progress towards Goal 10.

This brief, *Empowerment of Forest-Linked Communities: What Progress and Where Next?*, was produced by the NYDF Assessment Partners in collaboration with the **International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED)**.

### Key Messages

- Indigenous people and local communities are often the forest's best custodians because they live with the impacts of their forest-related decisions. However, remoteness from power brings vulnerability, so communities often seek greater empowerment to gain or regain authority, secure commercial rights, and develop technical and business skills to sustainably manage forest goods and services.
- Empowering forest-linked communities has been achieved primarily by building organizations that marshal strength-in-numbers and reduce the transaction costs of political and market engagement. These organizations encompass both formal and informal models within and between communities (men and women), and broader support networks for rights and business.
- Securing rights and developing businesses are empowering in themselves, and are also the two best routes to building the kind of organizations that can further empower forest-linked communities. Both need upscaling. Support for forest business incubation is particularly needed and is best delivered by organizations that aggregate market services for many local producer groups.
- Aggregating to provide strength-in-numbers through tiered levels of organization has proven to foster community empowerment at scale. This includes local first-tier forest producer groups, second-tier processing, marketing and service provision groups, and third-tier nationally-federated advocacy groups.
- Most governments have made only minimal improvements in supporting the organizations of forest-linked communities. Governments should prioritize tenure support, reducing bureaucratic steps and costs, and enacting fiscal reforms and extension support in favor of indigenous peoples and local communities.
- Strengthening the organizations of forest-linked communities, combined with making forest-linked business development services and finance directly accessible to communities, has proven to result in rapid gains in business development and local forest management capabilities amongst communities.

## Introduction

The New York Declaration on Forests (NYDF) is an international pledge to halt global deforestation. It sets out ten ambitious goals related to protecting and restoring forests. In 2018, the NYDF assessment partners released a report on Progress on the NYDF for Goal 10, which calls for the strengthening of forest governance. This brief presents the main conclusions of an assessment of progress made on empowerment of forest-linked community organizations and draws out some of the factors that underlie successful empowerment. Our identification of these success factors is primarily based on an analysis of the experience of five years of direct support to 947 forest and farm organizations from the Forest and Farm Facility (FFF), a partnership and multi-donor funding facility co-managed by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).<sup>1</sup>

### Communities need forests; forests need community empowerment

Many indigenous peoples and local communities (IPLCs) rely on forests for their livelihoods by using plants and animals for food, clothing, fuel, medicine, shelter, and sellable products. The economies, social organizations, identities, and cultural and spiritual values of these communities are closely linked to forests. About 500 million indigenous people depend on natural forests for their livelihoods,<sup>2</sup> and a total of 1.3-1.5 billion smallholder forest farmers and non-timber forest product (NTFP) users live in and have a form of customary rights to shifting or sedentary agriculture, hunting, fishing, the gathering of wild forest products, and other activities. Furthermore, there are also those who own, control, or affect smaller areas of forest and trees in land use more generally, such as the estimated 2.4 billion people reliant on fuelwood and charcoal for cooking.<sup>3</sup> Empowering these communities will be vital to protecting the future of forests.

Therefore, we define “forest-linked communities” broadly as groups of people - living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common - who are concerned with goods and services derived from trees and forests. We define “empowerment” as the process by which communities become more capable and confident in pursuing what they value, and claiming authority over it, including commercial rights over forests.

When given effective decision-making power, forest-linked communities tend to create and manage forests well.<sup>4</sup> Yet, local communities are often excluded from decision-making and have limited ability to defend themselves from others who threaten their interests and abuse forests.<sup>5</sup> Initiatives to empower forest-linked communities to respond to deforestation and inadequate forest management are essential.

### Community empowerment in rural land use – only slight improvements in recent years

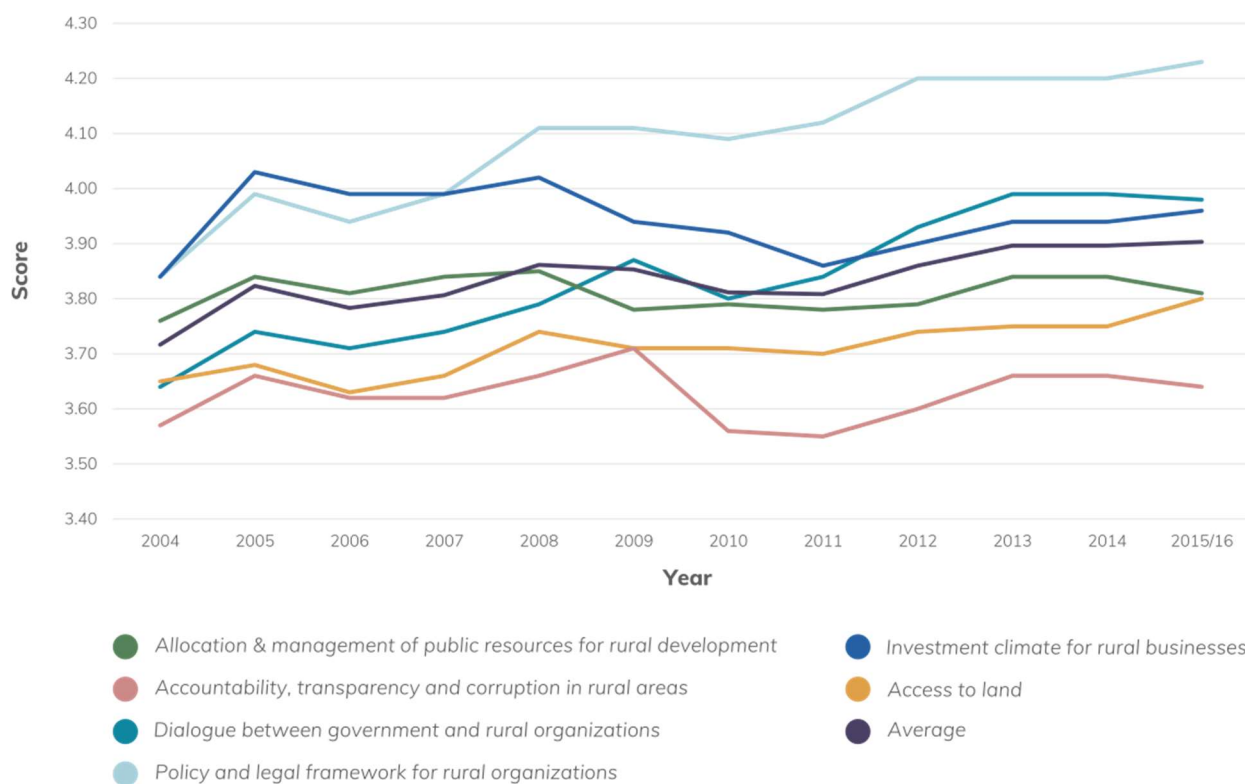
Many factors affect community empowerment in rural areas. In general, evidence suggests that rural livelihoods are under increasing stress, and community empowerment is increasingly constrained. One-third of the world’s soils are moderately to severely degraded.<sup>6</sup> Competition for land is increasing, as is water scarcity and pollution.<sup>7</sup> Across much of Africa, for example, there is a recurring trend towards increasingly commercialized land relations, with land values being pushed up, and more disadvantaged groups being displaced into marginal areas.<sup>8</sup>

Useful indications of the wider picture on community empowerment in rural areas can be inferred from the International Fund for Agricultural Development’s (IFAD) Rural Sector Performance Assessment which measures the quality of policies and institutions for achieving rural development benefitting the poor (**Figure 1**). Slight improvements are evident since 2004, notably in policy and legal frameworks favoring rural organizations, dialogue with government and, to a lesser extent, access to land. Even in these areas, however, gains have been limited to about seven percent over 12 years, while in other areas there has been little to no improvement. Overall, there is little advancement in community empowerment in rural areas.

### Forest governance is not often focused on community empowerment, but sometimes creates opportunities for it

Very few countries focus forest governance discussions on community empowerment. Efforts to improve empowerment have been sparked by political changes or reactive responses to investments in forest or agricultural products, commodities or biofuels, or through opportunities in new supported frameworks such as FLEGT or REDD+. While the context within each country varies, it is possible to discern common trends as to what is ‘on the table’ for stakeholders seeking to empower

Figure 1. Indications of community empowerment in rural areas over 100+ IFAD client countries, 2004-2016



Note: Scores are on a scale of 1 (low) to 6 (high). The International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) has, since 2004, periodically considered a range of criteria under 12 overall dimensions and provides scores based on knowledge generated by IFAD and its partners. The analysis here presents scores for six pertinent dimensions. Assessments are carried out by IFAD country economists in about 100 IFAD client countries (the precise number changes on each assessment) and are subject to centralized review. The assessments are then used in IFAD's performance-based allocation system for distributing resources across countries. Source: Data from the Rural Sector Performance Assessment Indicators program made available by IFAD in 2018.

communities to engage with. **Table 1** captures some of these common situations and the entry points they provide – the typical 'room for maneuver' that stakeholders may have – for efforts to strengthen community empowerment. In many situations, a mixture of some of these contexts may prevail.

Community empowerment opportunities have arisen, for example, to include community resource ownership in definitions of legality in countries where the response has focused on addressing illegal timber trade. However, few openings have developed for a wider look at institutional support mechanisms for empowerment. With a few exceptions, such as Nepal and Guatemala perhaps, systems of forest governance have not focused directly on community empowerment and are thus yet to give concerted attention to the most effective approach for sustaining both human livelihoods and the forests themselves.

### Communities continue to lack secure tenure, women have even fewer rights

Progress in recognizing the rights of indigenous people and local communities has been mixed. An

assessment of 41 countries by the Rights and Resources Initiative found that the amount of forest land where IPLCs have legally recognized rights increased from 11 percent in 2002 to 15 percent in 2017 – by an area about the size of Peru.<sup>9</sup> At the international level, recognition of the principle of free, prior, and informed consent in international law has been growing in recent years – which is highly important in the context of the growing spread of large land-use investments in agribusiness, mining, and infrastructure. But even where such rights and principles are relatively strong on paper, they are often not fully secure in practice. Rights are often not proactively enforced and fail to protect communities from land grabbing and violence by third parties.<sup>10</sup>

Land laws also frequently fall short in providing equal rights for men and women. In one study of 30 low- and middle-income countries, only one third provided for equal rights to inheritance, and only three percent of legally recognized community-based regimes recognized equal voting rights for women.<sup>11</sup> The same study found that: African community tenure regimes ensure greater equality in dispute resolution processes; regimes in Asia provide greater

**Table 1. Some common forest governance situations across many countries and the entry points for community empowerment they may provide**

Main emphasis in debate on forest governance	Entry points for stakeholders to advance community empowerment
1. State control (in states with strong capacity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information and outreach</li> <li>• Policy, legislation and regulation development</li> <li>• Accountability of authorities</li> </ul>
2. State control (in states with weak capacity)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civil society action on noncompliance and corruption</li> <li>• Organization to defend rights</li> <li>• Engage private sector on rights and sustainability</li> </ul>
3. Investments and corporate responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rights and sustainability included in investment deals</li> <li>• Standards and monitoring, supply chain initiatives</li> <li>• Free, prior, and informed consent</li> </ul>
4. Decentralization to local authorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tenure clarification and security, indigenous peoples' rights</li> <li>• Capacity of communities, civil society and local authorities</li> <li>• Deliberative processes, stopping elite capture, accountability</li> </ul>
5. Timber trade legality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining legality and resource conditions</li> <li>• Capacity of institutions to work together</li> <li>• Verification and certification</li> </ul>
6. Climate change and forests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Carbon and forest rights, benefit-sharing mechanisms</li> <li>• Land-use planning and protected area governance</li> <li>• Tree planting, 'greening', adaptation</li> </ul>
7. Integrated goals and sectors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in interdepartmental and cross-sectoral mechanisms</li> <li>• SDGs, 'mainstreaming', 'restoration', 'landscapes'</li> <li>• Recognition of rural-urban migration and other social changes</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Mayers, J., Morrison, E., Rolington, L., Studd, K., & Turrall, S. (2013). *Improving governance of forest tenure: a practical guide*. Rome, Italy: FAO, and London, UK: IIED. <http://pubs.iied.org/pdfs/G03674.pdf>

recognition of women's inheritance rights; and Latin American regimes include better guarantees of community membership rights. But even where laws provide some protections for women's tenure rights, in practice women often have limited rights to make decisions about forests.<sup>12</sup>

### Fragmentation of land holdings is a major barrier to collective empowerment

With competition for land increasing in much of the world, land values tend to be pushed up and disadvantaged groups are increasingly displaced into marginal areas.<sup>13</sup> Government officials and political leaders tend to seek a greater role in allocating land as its value increases, and this can lead to unregulated and, in some cases, corrupt or otherwise illegal transactions to the detriment of forest-linked and other rural communities.<sup>14</sup>

Landholdings are subject to dual trends toward fragmentation and concentration. In densely populated rural areas, demographic factors are driving fragmentation, with growing populations

dividing plots of land into increasingly smaller holdings. This poses a challenge to sustainable land and forest management practices and can exacerbate land degradation and vulnerability to food insecurity.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, in many agricultural areas the rise of medium- and large-scale farming is fostering greater land concentration.<sup>16</sup> This trend favors actors who can leverage opportunities for commercial land use, such as large-scale commercial investors, speculators, and urban elites. These two trends coexist in some contexts, with the wealthy concentrating landholdings and the poor working smaller and more fragmented parcels of land, with patches of forest dwindling in both cases.

### Innovations in community empowerment are coming from local organizations themselves

When communities form locally controlled forestry enterprises, innovations can follow that foster local empowerment. A review of 50 case studies of such organizations identified a number of these innovations which are summarized in **Table 2**.<sup>17</sup>

**Table 2. Empowerment innovations found effective by locally controlled forest enterprise organizations**

Types of innovation that locally controlled forest enterprises used to deliver community empowerment	Percent of 50 case studies that document adoption of these innovations
• Democratic oversight bodies support sustained environmental and cultural heritage.	72
• Negotiated benefit distribution and financial vigilance mechanisms enhance the material wealth and health of communities.	62
• Networks for better access to markets and decision-making build affirmative social relationships.	62
• Branding involves local visions of prosperity and contributes to cognitive identity and purpose.	56
• Entrepreneurial training and mentoring opportunities are gender equal.	44
• Processes for conflict resolution and justice promote security.	36

Note: Fifty case studies covering twenty-four countries were examined. Countries include: Bolivia, Brazil, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, Chile, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Gambia, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Kenya, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Mexico, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Peru, Philippines, Tanzania, and Thailand.

Source: Macqueen, D., Bolin, A., Greijmans, M., Grouwels, S., & Humphries, S. (in press). Innovations towards prosperity emerging in locally controlled forest business models and prospects for scaling up. *World Development*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.08.004>

While there has been a gradual upward trend in investment in the FFF and in related programs such as the World Bank's Forest Investment Programme and the new Tenure Facility, donor investment in community empowerment is still a very minor part of development, climate and private sector finance. This represents a significant missed opportunity, as investments in community organization that favor collective policy action, women's inclusion, reaching financial scale, and upgrading technology have proven to be highly effective in promoting empowerment. We explore these in the following sections.

### Tiered organizations can develop business opportunities

Organization is most powerful when it can aggregate the right functions at the right levels. We can think of tree growers or users of community forests coming together in "first-tier" organizations, of joint marketing structures and associations as "second-tier" and of regional or national federations and advocacy alliances as "third-tier." While first-tier organizations usually coalesce around single product options, second-tier aggregators often enable diversification into a range of product lines – enhancing both ecological and economic resilience – while third tier organizations can spread such resilience through other groups and push through improvements in governance systems for community empowerment.

#### • *Scaled up organization serving local businesses.*

In Kenya, FFF supported peer-to-peer exchanges and training in market analysis and development of tree-growing businesses among 12 local tree-growers groups (the first tier) in Laikipia and Nakuru counties.<sup>18</sup> It also helped facilitate and finance six marketing structures at the county level (second tier) and strengthened a national federation (third tier), the Farm Forestry Smallholder Producers Association of Kenya (FF-SPAK). The FF-SPAK increased its membership eightfold to involve roughly 3,500 smallholder households (20,000 people) and has become affiliated with the Kenya National Farmers Federation, which now puts the interests of tree-growers center stage in a grouping of more than 2.2 million members. These organizations have fostered more secure and lucrative contracts with buyers, with the average member household increasing income between 46 percent and 65 percent.

#### • *Diversifying income generation across different value chains.*

In Myanmar, FFF supported exchanges and direct trainings with 17 newly established second tier Community Forest Product Producers Associations, representing 177 local first-tier community forest user groups, and helped facilitate the formation of two third-tier state level associations.<sup>19</sup> By joining multiple first-tier organizations that had different products for sale, the community forest user groups received market access and tapped into new income streams across a wide range of value chains,<sup>20</sup> in turn bringing

economic sustainability to the organizational structures.

- ***Self-financing of forceful alliances and business schools developed for communities.*** In Guatemala, cooperative structures have decades of experience in how to support community forest businesses. FFF channeled small grant support to the National Alliance of Community Forest Organisations (the third-tier “Alianza”) which today comprises 10 second-tier regional groups and more than 400 first-tier producer organizations (77,000 members managing 750,000 hectares of forest land).<sup>21</sup> One second-tier cooperative, FEDECOVERA, opened a new Rural Business School of Agroforestry.<sup>22</sup> The Alianza helps spread such experience, including regionally through the ‘fourth-tier’ Mesoamerican Alliance for Forests and People.

### Collective agency can improve policy and law implementation

Mass mobilization of community voters through forest and farm producer organizations can prove very effective for advancing policy reform agendas. Often, it is not only the advocacy power of community organizations that carries weight, but that these organizations effectively build consensus under agreed rules and regulations.

- ***Policy change at multiple levels through nested multi-sectoral policy platforms.*** In Vietnam, FFF helped put the negotiating power of the 10-million-member Vietnam Farmers Union to the test by supporting policy roundtables on issues affecting producers, including 25 at the commune level, 9 at the district level, 6 at provincial level, and 3 at national level.<sup>23</sup> These resulted in practical changes. At national level, product registration processes were made easier and extended credit periods were adopted to accommodate tree crops; at the provincial level, a new cinnamon development incentive program worth USD 40-130 per hectare was established, as was the covering of FSC audit certification costs; and at the district level, the time to receive forest and land-use certificate issuing processes was shortened.

- ***Legislation to advance sustainability in problematic sectors such as charcoal.*** Since charcoal meets 80 percent of Zambia’s energy needs, FFF offered small grant support to 20 regional groups forming the Choma Charcoal Producers Association. Following dialogues at cross-sectoral platforms at the district-level, the Forestry Department revised the charcoal regulation and the old approaches of

limiting production through licensing and increased patrols are replaced by organizing producers into groups that are affiliated to a national association. This develops sustainable production measures within a new code of practice and forest management plan.

### Critical mass can strengthen women’s roles

Women make up half of the economic agency in forest-linked communities, but it can often take collective women’s action and mentoring by women entrepreneurial champions to help them fulfil their potential. Tailored support to accommodate women’s livelihood realities is also often needed to help break outdated norms.

- ***Increased women’s leadership in business.*** In Nicaragua, FFF facilitated regional peer-to-peer women’s exchanges, market analysis and development training, and women’s leadership training to 18 first-tier producer organisations.<sup>24</sup> Seven of the 18 were comprised entirely of women with the rest having majority women members. Research with the organizations enabled targeted support to help establish a second-tier women’s group to represent 13,525 women from nine Mayangna territories. This is linked to a new municipal policy platform dedicated to supporting livelihood development for local producers (men and women).<sup>25</sup>

- ***Gender-based investment funds for local forest organizations established.*** Among the 51 producer organizations supported by FFF in Nepal, a needs assessment showed that financial management skills were a barrier to access to finance, and that this was particularly true for women’s groups marginalized by conventional financial service providers.<sup>26</sup> FFF supported training in financial management and linkages were brokered with a newly established Women’s Entrepreneurs Development Fund from the district government office that offered low-interest rates and (six percent) collateral-free loans. Support was also effective in establishing a third-tier Central Women’s Entrepreneurs Committee, with backing of FECOFUN and its 16,000 community forest user group members and strong gender equality principles.

### Increasing scale advances finance and market options, yet too little finance reaches communities

Access to markets and finance can be supported by achieving greater scale, and scale itself reduces transaction costs for potential supporters of forest-linked communities. But for vulnerable community

organizations, accepting commercial-rate finance from outside is often a high-risk strategy, especially if collateral is required. For this reason, community organizations often establish some form of savings and loan scheme, and as these funds grow and financial management skills strengthen they can form a major source of co-funding for investments (such as the credit program run by FEDECOVERA in Guatemala, which runs to millions of dollars).<sup>27</sup> This in turn reduces perceptions of risk for other financiers such as value chain partners, micro-credit agencies, banks, national funds and climate or development funding.

- **Consolidation of production that increased prices and revenues.** In the Gambia, FFF has channeled support to more than 100 community forest producer groups making value chain advances in six main product lines: eco-tourism, tree nurseries, timber, fuelwood, handicraft, beekeeping, and cashew nuts.<sup>28</sup> A facilitated merger of two second-tier cashew nut associations helped to strengthen technical capacity, product quality, and negotiate a 500 percent increase in market prices, while two separate national beekeepers associations merged to strengthen their market position.

- **Group leverage of financial incentive programs, higher quality, and prices.** In Bolivia, with a high level of pre-existing producer organization, FFF supported 11 third-tier national producer organizations to negotiate investments.<sup>29</sup> One of them - the National Association of Coffee Producers (ANPROCA) – represents 85 first and second-tier coffee groups involving 17,500 households and was able to negotiate a USD 30 million investment incentive program with the Government over the next five years – linked to a new coffee control laboratory and technical assistance program.

However, restricted access to land and limited connections to official processes and information continue to be barriers to communities seizing opportunities linked to land markets and the cash economy. While various sources of international climate and development finance seek to support the empowerment of forest-linked communities and sustainable land use, not enough of this finance is reaching the areas where forests are managed or cleared and where local communities live.<sup>30</sup>

## Technology developments offer both promise and threat to community empowerment

Changes in technology are fast-moving and it is critical that organizations can pool capabilities and knowledge to help understand and adapt to change. In Kenya, for example, mobile banking solutions are rapidly expanding credit access into forest-linked communities who are learning how to make use of new facilities in organized groups.<sup>31</sup> In Indonesia, social media platforms and motorcycle delivery providers are opening up new marketing and sales possibilities for forest-linked products.<sup>32</sup> A bundle of developments may be involved: biotechnologies, machine learning and artificial intelligence, distributed ledgers, and communication technologies. At the heart of many of these innovations lie exponential advances in digital processing. As with other approaches to empowerment, the most promising – and threatening – relate to organization strengthening.<sup>33</sup>

Technologies are likely to simultaneously create and stifle opportunities for forest-linked community empowerment in the coming years. For example, opportunities may arise from automation, enabling industrial agribusiness to develop more profitable business models, but this could drive further waves of commercial land acquisition, which, under weak land governance, would put the asset base of poor households or forest-linked community organizations at risk. Similarly, digital management of supply chains will increasingly integrate production, processing, and marketing, and smallholders and community organizations may struggle to engage with these changing distribution systems. Equipping the organizations of forest-linked communities with insights into these rapidly evolving fields and finding ways to harness the enthusiasm and mobility of rural youth to allow such organizations to compete will become increasingly pressing.

**In conclusion,** the future for forest-linked communities looks to be fast-changing but the effects of those changes are highly uncertain. Community empowerment has strengthened only slightly in recent years. Yet the evidence that it is the most effective approach for sustaining both human livelihoods and the forests themselves is strong, and the ways in which it could now be greatly strengthened are increasingly clear and proven. The time has now come for concerted support to community forest organizations.

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To learn more about the NYDF Progress Assessment, please visit [forestdeclaration.org](http://forestdeclaration.org).

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