Community-based Forestry Groups
Objectives, Strategies, and Outcomes

Research results from the Ford Foundation Community-based Forestry Demonstration Program

An interdisciplinary and participatory research initiative coordinated by Colorado State University
Background
The last two decades have ushered in a period of profound transformation in the management of the forests that green nearly 36 percent of the United States. During this period, Community-based forestry (CBF) groups have come to play an increasingly important role in managing, restoring, and monitoring the ecological health of U.S. forests on both public and private lands.

The Ford Foundation established the Community-based Forestry Demonstration Program in 2000 to increase the ability of CBF groups to effect positive social, economic, and ecological change through forest stewardship. The program involved 13 CBF groups as implementing partners, technical assistance from the Aspen Institute, and a research team. The research component of this program was completed in 2006.

“We’re basically trying to figure out a way that people who live here can make a living and put the resources to work. And not lose sight of the fact that we want to have resources 20, 50 years down the road for the children who want to live here.” — Implementing Partner Board Member

CBF Research Goal
To better understand community-based forestry groups and their approaches to achieving social, economic, and ecological goals.

What Is Community-based Forestry?
Community-based forestry aims to build the capacity of community members to be stewards of, and benefit from, forest ecosystems. Community members, including forest workers, private landowners, and land management staff collaborate with scientists and other state and federal agencies to find sustainable ways to benefit forests, workers, and businesses. Often, community members find they can work more effectively with local or regional partners when they form community-based forestry groups. CBF groups embrace both new and old ways of working in the forest, including:

- Forest restoration
- Forest inventories and ecosystem surveys
- Sustainable timber harvesting
- Value-added wood processing
- Managing and marketing non-timber forest products, such as mushrooms and ginseng
- Sheep, cattle, and goat grazing
- Biofuel production, such as wood pellets
- Trail construction and maintenance
- Educational activities and community projects

CBF groups play an increasingly important role in collaborative forest management, coordinating among the various stakeholders. Sometimes, CBF groups are facilitators and planners; other times, they implement plans developed by other groups, such as BLM resource advisory councils. They may also perform service contracts on federally owned lands. As the influence of these groups grows, funders, policymakers, and researchers are asking how these groups work, and what kinds of organizations or management strategies have been particularly effective.

A Participatory Research Approach
Researchers took an interdisciplinary and participatory approach to studying the 13 community-based forestry groups who participated in the Ford Forestry Demonstration Program. Leaders of the CBF groups involved in the project helped to identify research questions and provided input and feedback during the research process. These partners also helped to validate and interpret the findings. Research questions and outcomes were designed to explore how CBF groups work, the challenges and limitations they face, and their strategies for successful social, economic, and ecological change.

Methods
The research team used site visits, field tours, project documents, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation to gain a better understanding of partner CBF groups. Team members analyzed the data against the backdrop of current social and natural resource sciences literature, in cooperation with CBF organizations. Researchers also performed statistical analyses of financial data and helped some partners to interpret ecological monitoring results of forest treatments.
Results: Six CBF Group Traits

This research found six common organizational traits among the CBF groups studied:
- Entrepreneurial leadership and operating styles
- Emphasis on action-based social learning
- Focus on collaboration and networking
- Pragmatic approaches to problem-solving
- Awareness of the need to operate across geographic and institutional scales to create change
- Long-term goals that include building resilient forests, communities, and economies

The flexible processes of CBF groups allow them to respond innovatively to diverse needs within their communities. The CBF partner groups in this project also demonstrated three primary outcomes from their activities: social and economic benefits, ecological benefits, and improved platforms for consensus building and collaboration.

Community Benefits of CBF

1. CBF groups create social and economic benefits for local people.

Interview data demonstrates that people in CBF communities see benefits including:
- Access to forest assets
- Job security
- Job quality
- Land retention
- Education and training
- Reduced social conflict

CBF groups provide community leadership, resources, programs, and advocacy, which help members to create social capital and social cohesion. This research finds that CBF groups are effective in creating social change when they expand who makes what decisions about forest management and community development, and who gets access to what resources. Analysis reveals that CBF groups must make, as many do, social equity an explicit goal for individualized benefits to reach throughout the community.

More mature CBF groups may also show economic achievements. An input-output economic analysis of one CBF group shows that in 2005, it put $1,321,910 of new money into the county economy through forestry support, educational programs, sustainable logging, and other programs.

2. CBF groups create ecological benefits for local forests.

Given the recent implementation of CBF field projects, it is hard to determine their long-term ecological effects. Positive, measurable short-term benefits from community-based forestry management in this study include:
- Weed management
- Revegetation and erosion control
- Forest regeneration
- Improved riparian function
- Improved wildlife habitat
- Wildfire mitigation

Overall, CBF management emphasizes landscape-scale planning and conservation, ecological restoration, and collective learning through ecological monitoring of forest systems. The structure and size of CBF groups allows them to respond quickly to changes in community needs or monitoring evidence.

3. CBF groups bridge gaps and span boundaries.

Institutional analysis reveals that CBF groups play essential intermediary roles, as they:
- Directly provide services such as educating community members about forest assets and opportunities; ecosystem workforce development; business development; and marketing and branding of value-added goods and services.
- Share and mitigate financial and political risks with community members who wish to try something new through cost-sharing, capital equipment purchases, and demonstration projects.
- Create a foundation for the next generation through youth education programs.

These actions build trust that can overcome interest group conflicts and give community members a way to make their voices heard in land management decisions. And, as management partners, communities increase their access to information, funding, and expertise housed in other institutions.

Collaborative Monitoring

Ecological assessment and monitoring is an important activity for CBF groups in the U.S. Assessments determine the location and condition of natural resources such as plant species or fish numbers. Monitoring tracks these attributes over time to measure changes due to environmental conditions and management actions. Assessment and monitoring activities can provide:

1. Social Benefits. Collaborative monitoring can build trust among adversaries as they set objectives, design monitoring plans, and interpret data. Local forest knowledge, together with scientific knowledge, is valued and used to create management plans.

2. Economic Benefits. Community members can be recruited, trained, and paid to help collect data. Baseline ecological data is also essential to communities applying for private or public restoration or stewardship funding.

3. Ecological Benefits. Assessment and monitoring processes are the cornerstones of adaptive management, a process that allows for continuous learning and management adjustment to meet healthy, sustainable forest objectives.
Furthering CBF Goals: Expanding Economic, Ecological, and Social Benefits

This project adds to existing research indicating that CBF groups have had significant local impacts in retraining workers, reinventing forest-based livelihoods, and building local capacity to cope with changing economies. CBF groups may be contract administrators, employment agencies, youth mentors, conflict mediators, business incubators, workforce trainers, limited liability corporations, or policy advocates.

This diversity of scope is one of the great strengths of CBF. CBF groups vary widely in their organizational structure, styles, and strategies because they are adapted to specific ecological, economic, and social contexts. Nonetheless, CBF groups have together raised the visibility of issues affecting forest communities and workers, and have successfully implemented regional and national forest management policy reforms.

This research points to the importance of “scaling up” CBF to realize the full range and distribution of benefits that CBF groups seek to achieve. International studies suggest that successful scaling up happens when community-based organizations work at the most local level, but establish linkages at regional, national, and international levels. For example, local CBF groups could thin overstocked trees in community forest areas, but could also network with other CBF groups to share practices and monitoring protocols.

Individual by individual, place by place, and year by year, CBF groups continue to bridge the gaps in agencies’ and communities’ capacities for forest stewardship. As this research demonstrates, CBF efforts have changed communities in meaningful ways. With support, CBF appears to offer a viable means for community members to participate in, and benefit from, natural resource management.

Funders and policymakers
- Enhance CBF group capacity by
  - Providing small amounts of steady funding for group capacity building.
  - Supporting social goals of CBF efforts, in addition to economic and ecological goals.
- Encourage ecological benefits by
  - Creating and funding agency policies that allow for greater CBF group involvement.
  - Promoting understanding of CBF within government and agency management structures.
  - Providing funding and incentives for long-term monitoring of ecological effects.

Universities, extension agents, and NGOs
- Encourage ecological benefits by
  - Providing technical assistance for monitoring, thinning, or other forest activities.
  - Assisting with research design, implementation and evaluation plans, and data analysis.
  - Promoting management strategies that involve a synthesis of local and scientific knowledge.
- Enhance CBF group capacity by
  - Supporting grant writing and grant management.
  - Facilitating collaboration with university students, researchers, and partners.

Local businesses and civic organizations
- Facilitate social and economic benefits by
  - Networking to advocate for greater understanding of CBF activities and lobby for policy change.
  - Partnering on business opportunities.
  - Partnering on ecological monitoring efforts.

Local Efforts, Regional Cooperation

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This would allow groups to assess thinning effectiveness and outcomes more broadly, and to advocate more effectively for regional policy and management changes.

The collaborative nature of CBF, and the need to directly invest in individual groups while supporting regional collaboration, requires local, regional, and national support. Table 1 indicates roles for external actors that would strengthen CBF groups and further CBF goals. Scaling up CBF efforts is also an opportunity to promote attention to social equity. The Ford Foundation’s Demonstration Program is an example of an investment in CBF that seeks to promote more equitable distribution of social benefits. Linkages outside CBF may also be critical for CBF groups: sustainable agriculture, rural community development, and sustainable community movements share many common goals and strategies with CBF and could prove important sources of innovation and collaboration.