

EL BALCÓN, MEXICO. BUILDING PEACE AND GOVERNABILITY AROUND COMMUNAL FORESTS

By Leticia Merino

The Ejido¹ el Balcón is located in the highlands of the sierra, close to the Pacific Ocean in the region called Costa Grande in the Mexican state of Guerrero. "It has an average elevation of 7,200 feet, with a very rugged topography that leaves parts of the area isolated during the rainy season when some fifty-five inches of rain fall" (D. Bray and L. Merino, 2003, p.65). Guerrero means warrior in Spanish and the region has honored that name; a climate of constant violence has marked life in this sierra for many decades.

During the 1960s and 70s, the region was fought over by guerrillas and the government. In order to eradicate the guerrillas, the army subjected the region to a regime of fierce repression and thousands lost their lives. Today, thirty years later, people still demand that those who are responsible for Mexico's 'dirty war' be brought to justice. Fights over land between 'campesino' groups have made violence a permanent feature of life in Costa Grande. Production of illicit crops thrives in the region, under the ideal conditions of weak or nonexistent local institutions and isolated forests. Drug cultivation and trafficking have introduced new, powerful players to the regional stage of violence and ungovernableness.

The coastal sierra in Guerrero is covered with large forests that have been exploited

for decades. According to the majority of the people in the region, this activity represents an abuse of the forest to the benefit of outsiders. Foreign and Mexican companies alike logged the forests of the sierra during the first half of the 20th century. During the 1970s, the federal government created the state-owned company FOVIGRO (Forestal Vicente Guerrero), which received an exclusive concession to log the sierra. Often, the army was called in to guard the installations of FOVIGRO. Apart from some unskilled employment, people of the region hardly received benefits, in spite of the fact that many privately owned forests were being logged. The concession ended only by the end of the 1980s.

The Ejido el Balcón was formed in 1966 when the Mexican government granted collective property rights to 136 *family heads* over 2,400 hectares. In 1974, another 19,150 hectares of forestlands were given to the ejido (Bray D. and L. Merino, 2003). This was a time of permanent confrontations over the land. In the initial days of the ejido, nearly 20% of El Balcón's community members were widows of under 30.

Within the context of Guerrero, and of rural Mexico, the case of el Balcón is remarkable for several reasons:

The ejido has built a forest enterprise that uses modern technology to produce certified timber for the export market. The ejido enterprise employs all ejido members who want to work for it. Profits have largely been invested in the social welfare of the nearly 600 people living in the ejido (health care, education, public infrastructure).

From satellite images or by simply traveling through high parts of the sierra, one can

readily observe the deterioration of the forests, which constantly suffer from fires and illegal logging. El Balcón is the exception: its lands are covered with well-preserved forests and its forest management has been certified under the Forest Stewardship Council in 2003.

Nevertheless, the most important achievement of el Balcón is the climate of agreement, governability and peace that it has built amidst a region that has fallen victim to illegal logging and drug trafficking. These activities may have brought relative wealth to some in the sierra, but they have also ruptured the social fabric by strengthening deeply authoritarian *cacicazgos*, violence and corruption, and social mistrust. On top of that, conditions have aggravated in recent years by increasing drug consumption among youngsters in the region. These conditions are not favorable to the development of local institutions that are required for collective management of a communal resource and for investment in communal entrepreneurship. During the final years of the 1990s, the Costa Grande acquired international notoriety due to the movement of the so-called 'campesino ecologists'. These are inhabitants of the lowland sierra who opposed forest extraction in the highlands that affects water resources. Rodolfo Montiel and others blocked logging trucks. They were arrested by state police, later tortured and accused of drug trafficking.

Within this volatile context, collective action in el Balcón revolved around management of the forest, its most important asset. The forest has been the axis for the development of social capital and local institutions. Looking back in local history, key factors that may help explain the extraordinary

institutional development of el Balcón have been the quality of the leaders, their preference for negotiation over confrontation in dealing with internal problems as well as with neighboring ejidos, their insistence on the importance of issues such as regulated forest management, transparency of the ejido's business and association with other forest ejidos of the region. Also of help were the presence of agencies that monitored and assessed the ejido enterprise, and the high level of community participation in these agencies, in the forest management and in the enterprise.

The ejido assembly has even been able to take measures to control the cultivation of illicit crops. Those who are found-out planting illegal crops are expelled from participation in collective property rights. Lands that were cleared years ago to produce such crops have been reforested.

The social capital produced by collective action has enabled el Balcón to develop economic and natural assets and, most important, it has enabled its members to maintain a climate of peaceful local governance.

For further information please contact:
Leticia Merino,
Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales,
UNAM and
Consejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura
Sostenible

E-mail: lmerino@servidor.unam.mx

References

David Barton Bray and Leticia Merino; *El Balcón, Guerrero. A Case Study of Globalization* :

Benefiting a Forest Community (P. 65:80). In: Timothy A. Wise, Hilda Salazar and Laura Carlsen, 2003; *Confronting Globalization. Economic Integration and Popular Resistance in Mexico*. Ed. Kumarina Press, Inc. Bloomfield, T.C, USA.

¹ The ejido is a form of collective tenure in México. The formal owner is the group of ejidatarios, but inside the group private rights are recognized, especially over agricultural and urban land. Forest areas tend to be collective property.

Most of these continue to function at a basic level, even though they are hampered by the conflict. Today, CFUGs are the only remaining democratic institutions that operate in conflict-ridden areas. Where support institutions fail to deliver technical assistance to the CFUGs, opportunities for forest management and production are lost. Therefore, the authors propose to initiate discourses on the issue and to train local resource persons who can fill the knowledge gap and deliver the necessary technical input to community forests (CFs).

4. ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY OF NEPAL

By Mani Ram Banjade and Netra Prasad Timsina

Since 1996 Nepal has suffered from an ongoing, armed conflict between the state and Maoist insurgents. The root of the conflict is believed to be in the stratification of economic classes, ethnic tensions and regional imbalance in development. The armed conflict has led to a decline of state services in rural areas, including forestry services. Development has come to a standstill and economic growth is negative. Management of natural resources receives less attention, due to security related issues. Government staff cannot access remote areas and the presence there of bilateral organisations and NGOs is limited.

There are around 13,300 Community Forest User Groups, or CFUGs, in Nepal.

Impact of Armed Conflict

Limited mobility

Because of the armed conflict in Nepal, community forestry has been affected in many ways. As a rule, community members require a permit from the conflicting parties, government as well as Maoist rebels, for each and every activity they wish to conduct in the forest. This restricts mobility and reduces the level of forest management. The insecurity discourages CFUGs from taking development initiatives and obstructs the organisation of group meetings and assemblies on forest management.

Support organisations have seen their mobility restricted in almost all rural districts of Nepal. They either need to get formal approval from the insurgents and/or in some specific cases government has not allowed them to move freely in the areas. Many bilateral organisations, INGOs and NGOs have to limit their outreach to areas close to the district headquarters because of continuous threats from rebels and for the fear of becoming entangled between the two rivals. The limited mobility of support institutions has impaired the supply of technical services and constrained the