

The forestry communities of Mexico

Leticia Merino¹



Collective property rights and forest lands are characteristic conditions in the Mexican countryside. Nearly 75 percent of the country's forest lands are collectively owned, in the form of *ejidos* or *comunidades agrarias*², and more than 50 percent of the collective lands are forest. The agricultural lands of the *ejidos* and *comunidades agrarias* are divided into parcels for private usufruct. The forest areas and a large part of the pastureland have been maintained, in practice, as areas for common use, i.e. as non-parceled areas, over which the *ejidatarios/comuneros* as a whole have rights; access to and use of those areas are often regulated by the community assemblies (*asambleas comunales*).

The emergence of the global environmental crisis and the growing social value of environmental goods and services suggest new frameworks for evaluating and critiquing collective property rights in Mexico. The degradation of the country's ecosystems and natural resources has often been associated with the collective nature of rural property. As happened in the past, with various projects for "modernizing" the countryside, these critiques of collective property rights are highly charged ideologically, and have an insufficient empirical grounding. Even so, in view of the problems of generalized poverty and environmental degradation in many regions of the country, one must ask about the viability of collective property for bringing about conservation and sustainable development. As has been mentioned, forest management is of special relevance for this evaluation.

From the perspective of the theory of institutional analysis, a theoretical distinction of great heuristic value in analyzing natural resources management is the distinction between the *type of resources* and the *type of property rights over them*. The type of resources addresses two major conditions: the possibility/difficulty of excluding potential users from access to a given good, and the rivalry entailed in its use, i.e. the level at which the use of one user affects the possibilities of use by other users. The pressures to which the resources are subjected, and the demands posed by their sustained use and conservation, largely stem from the conditions of exclusion and rivalry. Based on the conditions of exclusion and rivalry, classic economic theory distinguishes four major types of goods: public goods, private goods, fee-based goods, and common resources. Natural common resources share with public resources the difficulty of exclusion, though they present a high level of rivalry that is not present in the use of public resources.³ The conservation of common resources and public resources faces problems of supply; the conservation of common resources also poses problems of appropriation whose solution requires the development of local institutions (rules) implemented through collective agreements.

The types of ownership reflect the nature (public, private, or collective) of those who hold property rights, defined as: right of access, use, decision, conveyance, and alienation. Accordingly, the different types of goods (public, private, fee-based, or common) may be

¹ The author is an anthropologist and social psychologist. At present she is a professor-researcher with the Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.

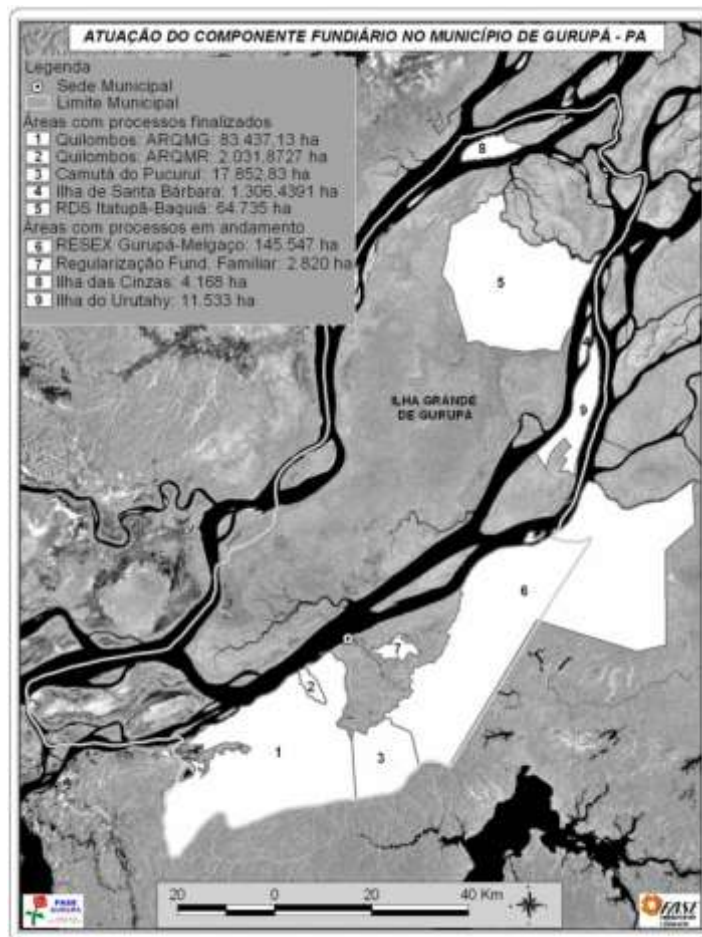
² Throughout this text I use the term "community" to refer to both *ejidos* and *comunidades agrarias*, and the term "*comunidad agraria*" or "agrarian community" to refer to that type of land tenure.

³ Classic examples of public goods are security, peace, and street lighting.

subject to different forms of ownership. Based on this schema, one can ask about the governance arrangements suitable for the sustained use and conservation of natural resources without reducing the response to an ideological decision to go for one or another type of ownership. The schema makes it possible, however, to question the arrangements in terms of ownership and rights that will give rise to the conditions that allow the relevant social actors to respond to the pressures on a specific resource and resolve the dilemmas of collective action particular to each case.

Nearly 80 percent of the forest area of Mexico is the property of *ejidos* and *comunidades agrarias*. In addition, as indicated, the forests are defined by law and often by the communities themselves as “common resources,”⁴ which in the context of agrarian Mexico means lands of common access and use, regulated by the assemblies of the communities or *ejidos*.

From the perspective of the theory of institutional analysis, the forests are common resources whose conservation faces ever greater pressures. At present, these pressures stem not only from population density (declining in many of Mexico’s forest areas) but from the impacts of the process of global climate change and the presence of illicit activities such as illegal logging and illegal crops. Forest conservation requires restrictions on use and investments in protection, surveillance, and sanctions, in addition to having economic and technical requirements. These activities call for coordination and cooperation. They require strong participation and the hammering out of local agreements and coordination between actors and processes that are interlinked locally, nationally, regionally, and globally. It would be difficult for the state or private owners in



isolation to have the resources and conditions for fully addressing these requirements. The participation of the local communities and the incentives that lead to the possession of (collective) property rights over the forests, by way of contrast, potentially offer major advantages for confronting such pressures and requirements. Nonetheless, not all the communities have these capacities; where trust is scarce and the inequalities and conflicts are insurmountable it is difficult for the communities to take on projects that demand close

⁴ The regulation of the Agrarian Law prohibits the parceling of forest areas, although in practice it is common for such areas to be parceled.

Leticia Merino: The forestry communities of Mexico

cooperation. In these conditions, collective ownership is effectively associated with conditions of “open access” and the destruction of resources.

The loss of forest in Mexico has been a constant process going back decades. In different assessments, and for the vast majority of public opinion, collective land tenure is associated indiscriminately with illegal logging and subsistence agriculture. It is deemed responsible for the loss of our forest wealth. Nonetheless, its degradation results from a complex process in which various types of factors and different scales come together that finally result in the lack of incentives for the local actors to opt to conserve the forest cover. Public policies have been determinant in the evolution of these conditions. During a large part of the 20th century, despite the distribution of agrarian lands, the State constantly limited or eliminated the rights of *ejidos* and communities to the forests by establishing restrictions and concessions for third persons on more than half of the country’s forest lands. In the forest areas then considered marginal (mesophyllic forests and jungles) the State actively promoted the change in forest use by subsidizing crop farming, coffee farming, and stock-raising. During the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, deforestation rates ranged from 4 percent to 6 percent annually. To date, different government programs subsidize stock-raising at the expense of the forest areas. Pasturing is the most common use of these areas.

During the 1980s, and particularly as of 1994, forestry policy has gradually incorporated the issues of community control and management of the forests, ending the policy of concessions and giving impetus to community forest management and production, as well as social organization around forest management. Though this has been a relatively marginal policy, different communities have taken advantage of the opportunities created, furthering experiences in forestry production and forest management and conservation. These experiences have taken place in indigenous and mestizo regions, in areas of temperate forest and jungle areas. In every case they have been based on the institutions and organizations that have created collective ownership of the land.

At present, more than 50 percent of the country’s forest production comes from community enterprises. In the south, Zapotec, Chinantec, and Maya communities; Purépechas and mestizo *ejidos* in the central region; and the Tepehuanos and mestizos in northern Mexico generate employment and income in some of the areas beset by the most marginal conditions in Mexico. The conditions of greatest conservation and stability of the forest frontier are associated with these experiences, whose efficiency is similar to or greater than that of many of the country’s Protected Natural Areas.

Centralized state management of the forests has been far from ideal. Forest management under concessions, while having maintained the forest cover in many cases, modified the composition of the tree species of commercial value, for example conifers. Illegal logging proliferated in the regions subject to restrictions, and the national system of Protected Natural Areas, proposed as a *sine qua non* for conservation, has never undergone a systematic evaluation.

The history of forest policy in Mexico and of the community forestry experience of the last 20 years shows that with adequate incentives, collective management is suitable for the conservation of forest resources. The forest communities have proven their potential for serving as a safeguard to conserve environmental goods of global importance. Nonetheless, the transaction costs and dilemmas of collective action pose real challenges that require the understanding and support of the State and society as a whole.