More than a quarter of the world’s forests are managed by Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities (IPLCs) and smallholder forest users, yet their efforts often go unnoticed. Better recognizing these “unseen forest managers” could help strengthen their forest management systems, multiplying local and global benefits and stemming the progress of forest loss.

WWF’s publication “Unseen Foresters”: an assessment of approaches for wider recognition and spread of sustainable forest management by local communities, looks at the world from the point of view of the forest managers amongst indigenous peoples and local communities, and calls to recognize the crucial role of IPLC’s in forest management. It highlights that local models of governance can help protect forests better than many other forms of forest stewardship, and makes the case for tested, innovative approaches and means of verification that could help recognise, strengthen and spread sustainable forest management, in particular in tropical countries within the huge collective or individual smaller-scale forest users. The study assesses how approaches are implemented and how successful they can be in creating livelihoods while halting deforestation, degradation and biodiversity loss and restoring global tropical forests.
WHY THIS RESEARCH?

After many years of working on different types of locally controlled forestry and in different types of forest, WWF wants to look for possible breakthroughs, new or better ways of using existing forest management approaches, or wholly novel yet credible means of verifying sustainable forest management (SFM), and the potential of new technologies and monitoring tools. Ways that bring about wider uptake and efforts to protect, manage and restore forests for now and for the future. The overall aim of the study is to help build the case for greater engagement and action in support of improved forest management and spread of sustainability practices in locally controlled forests.

KEY OBJECTIVES

- Appraise approaches from within forestry and other sectors, that could alleviate accessibility barriers and administrative and/or financial burdens of verifying sustainable forest management and strengthen ways to recognise and reward the work of IPLCs.

- Propose how these approaches can be used at different scales and in different contexts, with a focus on tropical timber cost-effectively managed by local communities that show proven benefits for local people, biodiversity and ecosystem services.

- Describe the necessary links with, and likely effects on existing approaches, most notably forest certification to ensure that new approaches do not undermine existing initiatives.

- Recommend next steps for additional research, dialogue and pilots, for WWF.

THE CONSIDERABLE POTENTIAL OF UNSEEN FORESTERS FOR GLOBAL FOREST FUTURES

IPLC forest management and business groups span the forest core and edge, through farmland forest mosaics to urban forest-linked processing centres. Approaches to recognise and spread their SFM are likely to have both considerable value at stake and require tailoring to fit the context. Because the collective, cooperative and democratic nature of many IPLC business groups often motivate innovations in other dimensions of prosperity – such as those captured in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – approaches which support those more democratic business models may meet agendas broader than SFM alone.

One of the main tools for SFM with considerable success in the world has been third-party forest certification for sustainable timber production. But certification is a market mechanism and can be at odds with the worldviews of many IPLCs. Moreover, the small unit scale of many community forests increases the per-unit audit costs of third-party certification and puts community groups at a comparative disadvantage with industrial-scale forestry operations. In addition, the markets where communities sell their products do not necessarily demand certified supply (e.g. domestic timber markets for construction or furniture), and this is even more the case for NTFPs. For these reasons, this assessment focuses on approaches that are beyond, but complementary to, third-party certification in trying to achieve wider recognition and spread of SFM by IPLCs.

FROM A TOTAL RURAL POPULATION OF 3.4 BILLION, 1.3 BILLION PEOPLE LIVE IN FORESTS AS INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OR LOCAL COMMUNITIES (IPLCS)

Evidence indicates that when granted local control, IPLCs generally protect forests better than industrial scale companies do, and even better than many protected areas have.

IPLCs engage in community forestry in varied countries and contexts. Collectively, even conservative estimates of the gross annual value of smallholder crop, fuelwood and charcoal, timber, and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) lie between US$869 billion and US$1.29 trillion.

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The research focuses on two broad areas of intervention: changes to land governance and resources that can help improve IPLCs’ rights, responsibilities and rewards, and improvements in supply chains that drive sustainable forest management community investments.

## REPORT FINDINGS

The report highlights recommendations for the most promising approaches that can help recognise and spread SFM by IPLCs. For most of these approaches, perhaps with the exception of a certification system for portfolio investment, there are already good functional pilots. So, the need is perhaps not so much for major new innovations, but for attention to be given to learning the lessons from specific contexts where innovations have been piloted, adapting them to different new contexts and scaling up these more promising options.

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CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Indigenous peoples and local communities are critical to the future of forests. Co-ordinated action among multiple agencies is needed through approaches such as these so that they can deliver the transformative change necessary to protect both forests and people.

For almost all of the approaches the report examines, there is a need for ‘enabling investment’ before they might attract ‘asset investment’. Given their potential, there is a need for considerable further investment in them, especially in the refinement, adaptation to further contexts, and upscaling of each approach.

With this analysis, WWF wants to stimulate reaction – on how we can make progress – and welcomes feedback on the report. To that purpose, a number of webinar sessions will be organised throughout the year to discuss the report findings and opportunities ahead.

Looking forward, WWF seeks to raise broader awareness and scale the most promising and successful approaches to advance sustainable forest management undertaken by IPLCs, recognize their role and help to establish access to equitable benefits. A series of pilot projects, using various combinations of the approaches will be tested to find context specific solutions that help increase sustainable forest management practices by those ‘unseen foresters’.

The full report can be downloaded [here](#).