

Brazilian community produces the goods

Capacity in processing and marketing of forest products is improved under an ITTO project

by Erika del Rocío López Rojas

ITTO consultant
lopezrojas.erika@gmail.com



Positive sign: The general perception in Puerto Dias was that FSC certification could secure access to new markets.
Photo: Erika López Rojas

The Porto Dias Extractive Reserve is located in the municipality of Acrelandia about 140 km from Rio Branco, the capital of the state of Acre in Brazil's western Amazon. The reserve lies between the Abuña River (the border with Bolivia) to the south and BR 364 (a road), with its ranches and small farms along it, to the north.

Formerly a rubber estate, in 1987 the Federal Institute for Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) decided that 22 145 hectares of tropical forest in the area would become an agro-extractive reserve. Accordingly, the property rights of this forest are now governed by a contract between the local association of rubber-tappers and INCRA, with ownership vested in the state. About 90 local families in the reserve are able to pursue traditional lifestyles that involve rubber-tapping, the harvesting and marketing of brazil nuts, and other forest-based activities.

The project contributed to a longer-term vision in which Porto Dias serves as a community-forest-management model for the development of public policies in the Amazon

In November 2001 the International Tropical Timber Council approved Project PD 46/97 Rev. 3 (I): *Community forest-product processing in the Porto Dias Extractive Reserve*. Its development objective was to demonstrate the economic, social and environmental viability of forest use and its significance as part of a sustainable development model for the Amazon region. Specifically, the project was to train families living in the reserve in the processing of forest products with the aims of:

- developing an industrial unit for the processing of forest products on the basis of a multiple-use management plan
- promoting the incorporation of sustainable forest management in municipal policies.

The project was implemented in the period 2002–07 by the Center of Amazonian Workers (CTA). This article describes some of the findings of an ex-post evaluation carried out in 2009 to assess the project's effectiveness.

Project results

The CTA understood that the project would be unviable in the longer term if not built in union with the community. It therefore avoided an interventionist approach, focusing instead on strengthening the construction and administration of participative processes and building capacity in the community to manage forest operations. The project successfully encouraged community participation in decision-making regarding the execution of project activities. In this way it followed the community rhythm of absorbing innovations, resisting the temptation to move to a new step before the previous step had been consolidated, and supporting the process through agreement and collective commitments.

The capacity acquired through the project has matured and the community has now assumed greater responsibility for its resource management. When the project concluded in mid 2007:

- 20 families had become involved in forest management and in processing

- 16 forest agents had become qualified in forest operations
- the forest management system was being implemented by the community
- the community was managing and administering harvesting
- FSC certification had been achieved and the community had assumed responsibility for maintaining certification
- a timber and small-artifact production and commercialization system was in place
- participating families had experienced a 100% increase in income through the adoption of multiple-use forest management practices
- 16 full-time employment positions had been created and five new families had been included in the forest management project.

The small-artifact production and commercialization system, however, did not endure beyond the project duration. Members of the community decided instead to rent the machines used for such processing to a larger cooperative, Cooperfloresta, of which the Porto Dias Rubber Tappers Association and four other extractive communities are members. This decision was based on a desire to reduce operational costs to the Porto Dias community, increase market access, and extend the benefits of the project to a larger community.

Overall, the community accepted responsibility for the project. The trained producers now have autonomy in the production processes: they work against specific standards, undertake quality control, pay their workers, maintain equipment, deal with requests, and plan production. Improvements in administrative control are still needed, although significant advances have already been made. Progress was also made by the project in promoting stakeholder involvement, mainly through participatory decision-making, raising the prospects of achieving SFM at a larger scale through Cooperfloresta.

Wider implications

Given its success, the project contributed to a longer-term vision in which Porto Dias serves as a community-forest-management model for the development of public policies in the Amazon. In the wake of the experience gained through the project, the Porto Dias Project Association participated in a Focus Group on Local Development. This group, which involved local and national governments, led to the amendment of Normative Act 005, which (among other things) regulates community forest management in Brazil.

The greatest weakness of the project was its sustainability in terms of production costs. When undertaking a for-profit project it is essential to carry out a feasibility study during the design stage. Baseline information is crucial for effective project design and an important tool for the evaluation of results. When designing future projects, cost-benefit and feasibility studies should be conducted as pre-conditions for sustainability.

The overall conclusion of the ex-post evaluation was that the project assisted the community to add value to its forest products. It helped to strengthen local capacity, not only in the basic skills of production and forest and business management, but also in decision-making. This is shown clearly in the way in which the community dealt with an unsustainable component of the project, the small-artifact production and commercialization system. The community's solution not only helped to disseminate the results of the project, it also benefited a greater number of stakeholders through the creation of a partnership with Cooperfloresta.

The complete report of the ex-post evaluation is available at www.itto.int or on request from the ITTO Secretariat (fi@itto.int).

