

# ITTO Tropical Forest

## UPDATE

A newsletter from the International Tropical Timber Organization to promote the conservation and sustainable development of tropical forests



## Tapping the potential of communities

**F**OR A WEEK IN JULY 2007, the Brazilian city of Rio Branco, in the heart of the Amazon, became the community forestry capital of the world. Participants from 40 countries came together to explore the emerging phenomenon of community-based forest enterprises (CFEs)—dynamic, small-scale businesses that are starting to tap the huge wealth of entrepreneurial talent that exists in forest-dwelling Indigenous and local communities.

The International Conference on Community Forest Management and Enterprises was unusual in many ways. It brought together, for the first time,

about 300 leaders and supporters of CFEs, as well as government policy-makers, from across the three tropical regions. Much of its work was done in small working groups with informal, simultaneous interpretation in four languages. And it produced the Rio Branco Declaration (see back page), delivering a message to policy-makers, international organizations and communities worldwide. This special edition of the *TFU* reports in detail on the conference and constitutes its proceedings.

The conference was organized by the International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO),



**SPECIAL EDITION: Proceedings of the International Conference on Community Forest Management and Enterprises — convened in Rio Branco, Brazil, 15–20 July 2007**





**No basket case:** Non-timber forest products play an integral part in Amazon life. Here, a community member in the Brazilian Amazon makes a basket for carrying brazil nuts. *Photo: IBENS*

the Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) and the Global Alliance of Community Forestry (GACE) in cooperation with the World Conservation Union (IUCN). It was hosted by the Government of Acre and the Government of Brazil through the newly created Brazilian Forest Service.

For five days, participants debated the problems confronted by inhabitants of tropical forests on three continents as they attempt to establish viable, sustainable businesses. Obstacles include a lack of legal access to land and financial support, excessive red tape, high taxes, and markets that are out of reach because of distance and bureaucratic barriers.

Many of the views expressed by participants were confirmed and complemented by the results of a background study produced in support of the conference. According to *Community-based forest enterprises: their status and potential in tropical forest countries*, informal forestry micro-enterprises, many of which are CFES, employ more than 140 million people worldwide, among them Indigenous peoples and other forest dwellers. Such enterprises harvest wood and collect bamboo, rattan, fibres, nuts, resins, medicinal herbs, honey, wood for charcoal and other natural products to increase local wealth. They are also starting to tap into emerging markets for forest-based environmental services.

The study reports that forest communities are responsible for the management of around 370 million hectares of natural forests. But such communities must fight a daily battle against bureaucratic and other barriers.

“Inflexible regulations, high taxes and exceedingly slow approval rates are preventing our survival,” said Ghan Shyam Pandey, leader of the Federation of Forest Communities of Nepal (FECOFUN). His thoughts were echoed by Franklin Mezúa Chaqui, a representative of the Tupiza Forest Community Enterprise in Panama, who was also at the conference.

“Our communities are isolated and the governments need to have policies that are effective and designed for us,” he said. “If they don’t support our work, the forests will fall into the hands of others, who lack the commitment we offer as traditional inhabitants of the forest.”

The conference in Rio Branco has become part of the history of a new movement in forestry, according to participants. “This meeting demonstrated the great power and potential of local communities to save the forests and avoid terrible human tragedy,” said RRI’s Augusta Molnar.

The conference made many recommendations, which can be found towards the back of this report. Participants also agreed to:

- work together to ensure that legal access to land and natural resources be included in the laws and/or constitutions of individual nations;
- lobby governments to provide lines of credit dedicated exclusively to community enterprises;
- adopt measures to combat poverty and encourage social justice and policies of inclusion within communities;
- call for the immediate suspension of high taxes imposed by governments on CFES;
- seek economic and administrative help to reach consumer markets for sustainable products; and
- create, through ITTO, a special fund for financing CFES.

“Only with support and access to land and markets can forest communities continue to conserve the world’s remaining tropical forests while helping to fulfill the world’s commitment to bring an end to poverty,” said Alberto Chinchilla, a representative of GACE.



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**Front cover image** A rubber-tapper in the Antimary State Forest, Acre, Brazil.  
*Photo: R. Guevara/ITTO*

**Back cover image** Conference participants. *Photo: A. Sarre*

