Triggering Community Conservation Through the Trade of Carbon Offsets: The Case of the Ejido Felipe Carrillo Puerto, Mexico.

Over the last decades, global conservation discourses and actions in Mexico have moved from the establishment of protected areas, to the implementation of development projects with orientation towards communities and participatory experiments. Nowadays, this trend has shift towards an increased presence of market-oriented conservation governance. These programs, like payment for environmental services (PES), are based on the idea that direct incentives are more cost-effective than traditional and indirect conservation policy tools in reaching biodiversity or deforestation targets (Ferraro & Kiss, 2002). However, because setting up markets for environmental services usually entail high transaction costs (Muradian, 2013), most cases in which PES operate, do not entail a market relation but are actually projects that are heavily financed by agencies and/or governments. In practice what we see at the local scale is that conservation is usually implemented by communities through a wide variety of instruments and conceptual models; moving away from the logic of the existence of one ideal managerial approach.

In this research we describe how a local conservation initiative grounded on the potential to trade carbon offsets in the voluntary market has triggered a multi-purpose community conservation strategy. Following the initial conservation project, the community has created two community conservation areas, an ecotourism center, two governmental financed PES projects, community-based research, and a proactive mechanism for long-term financial sustainability of their conservation strategy.

Our study refers to the community of Felipe Carrillo Puerto (FCP), in Quintana Roo, Mexico. For the research we used a case study design (Denscombe, 2010) because it helped with building in-depth descriptions and understanding of the different conservation schemes implemented by the community. The FCP General Assembly provided written consent for the study and all individual participants (around 30) provided informed oral consent. We carried out the research within the framework of a research project on community-based conservation that was implemented between 2009 and 2011 (see Reyes-Garcia et al., 2013). We collected data with 1) semi-structured interviews; 2) a timeline focus group; 3) a group interview; and 4) participant observation.

The research reveals that during the last two decades, either by their own initiative or as external participants, FCP has used several management approaches to forest conservation, which have generated dynamics such as receiving multiple funds or payments for services generated on a single area of land. This experimentation has forced a detailed examination of the advantages and disadvantages of each conservation scheme. For instance, FCP experienced with the establishment of the Sian Ka'an Biosphere Reserve (SKBR), a typical top-down exclusionary approach to conservation. Despite the fact that part of their land is inside the SKBR, local people were not consulted nor included in the decision-making process for the establishment and management of the

area (Brenner, 2010). Then, the community experienced the complexities of market-based instruments through their carbon sequestration pilot project (CSPP). This project was established with the aim to generate an alternative method that would finance forest conservation activities by exploring carbon markets. Particularly, this effort sought to avoid deforestation, restore the forests, and identify ways to improve local livelihoods by developing new sources of income and employment. The original goal was to sell carbon bonds from reforestation and other activities in the voluntary markets. However, nowadays the community is attempting to capitalize the project with the tourist sector from the Riviera Maya. According to project managers, they prefer to trade carbon offsets bonds to hotels in the Riviera Maya because this compensation occurs in the same location where the degradation is occurring. Finally, the community has experienced with the establishment and management of two community-conserved areas, one adjacent to the SKBR and Much Kanan K'aax, the first community conserved area officially certified by the National Commission of Natural Protected Area in the Yucatan Peninsula.

To our understanding, this multi-purpose community conservation strategy has been important at least in two respects. First, it has generated a positive synergy with large NGOs and institutions working in the area. The synergy has resulted in project financing, consulting, and training, among others. The second aspect is related to developing and strengthening local capacities for conservation action. Local people from FCP have developed these capacities in many fields, from management of conservation projects to the acquisition of technical skills for carrying out vegetation sampling, techniques for propagating species, geo-referencing, carbon measurements, and many others.

When combining approaches, scales, instruments and tools, risks are diversified and dependencies on specialization are diminished due to the multiple possibilities for conservation. This situation has allowed the community of FCP to create a portfolio of conservation projects for diversifying their sources of income in addition to creating an important number of jobs related to conservation. This case study gives on-ground confirmation that local communities in developing countries can generate and sustain alternative approaches to managing and conserving natural resources while maintaining decision-making processes at the local scale.

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