Producing More with Less? Community Forestry in Durango, Mexico in an Era of Trade Liberalization*

Peter Leigh Taylor

Department of Sociology, Colorado State University

ABSTRACT Through a qualitative case study of peasant-organized forestry in Durango, Mexico, this paper examines how neoliberal policy reform is reshaping the community forestry sector. Post-1992 agrarian and forestry laws facilitate the emergence of new forms of association in ejidos (collective property communities created by agrarian reform) and agrarian communities, and reorganize the delivery of forestry technical services. These developments indirectly undermine peasants’ capacity to deal with the sector’s long-standing internal problems, putting at risk their ability to provide themselves with the services they need for sustainable community livelihoods and forest exploitation. Nevertheless, this study of a forest peasant federation shows that institutional change is a process peopled by groups of social agents who respond creatively to external structure from local organizational and community contexts. Ethnographic methods can be used fruitfully to study complex interactions between multiple levels of political-economic structure and local action, which both constrain and provide opportunities for the organization of common-pool resource management regimes.

Trade liberalization promotes a model of development in which worldwide markets allocate resources via individual actors making rational decisions about private property. Yet because many important natural resources are still owned collectively rather than privately, the impact of economic liberalism on these resources is a major issue. Community forestry recently has received considerable attention as a regime of common property management that pursues sustainability by linking local people’s social and economic interests with forest conservation. Successful experiences refute the inevitability of Hardin’s (1968) “tragedy of the commons” scenario and show a community forestry capable of governing access to common-pool resources and organizing owners for the sustainable use of forests (Fortmann and Bruce 1988; Peluso 1992). Nevertheless, the social institutions underlying community forestry now face great pressure as neoliberal principles1 promote privatization and elevate individuals as privileged decision makers in markets.

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1 The term neoliberalism is widely used in Latin America to refer to laissez faire-inspired policy reform. In its aim to open markets to global competition and to reduce state regulation, neoliberalism has caused a wide range of economic, political, and social restructuring.
These pressures are particularly strong in Mexico, where the 1910 revolution inspired more than 70 years of land redistribution and significant collectivization of rural property. More than a decade of Mexican economic restructuring, including entry into the GATT (1986) and NAFTA (1994) and profound changes in rural land tenure arrangements, has transformed agrarian production (Harvey 1996).

Drawing on a qualitative case study of peasant-organized forestry in the state of Durango, I examine how neoliberal policy reforms indirectly undermine peasants’ capacity to organize effectively to deal with their forestry sector’s many internal problems, and how these reforms threaten community livelihoods and potentially increase an already serious deforestation rate. Current forestry policies jeopardize peasant producers’ ability to provide the technical, social, and political services they need for their livelihoods and for sustainable forest exploitation. This case suggests that common property resource theory must examine more closely how globalization structures the social institutions underlying such resource management regimes. Yet, as these external pressures are evaluated, issues of social agency also need to be addressed. Local actors already are transforming their social and economic institutions unpredictably, appropriating and acting on new external structures.

Common Property, Globalization, and Agency in Mexico’s Forestry Sector

Mexico’s forestry sector, with its unique land tenure system, is an appropriate site for studying contemporary problems of common-pool resource management. About 80 percent of the nation’s forests are owned collectively by ejidos (collective property communities created by agrarian reform) and agrarian communities (Cabarle, Chapelal, and Madrid 1997). In 1992, organized communities controlled some 40 percent of total timber production and 15 percent of industrial wood products (Bray 1997:4).

With nearly 50 million hectares of closed forest, about 25 percent of the national territory (SEMARNAF 1996), the stakes of forest management in Mexico are high. Though in economic terms the forestry sector accounts for only .4 percent of the GNP (Téllez Kuenzler 1994:24), Mexico’s forests are home and a source of supplementary income to some 17 million mostly indigenous and poor people (Merino Pérez 1997:141). These forests are significant as the world’s fourth most important genetic reserve (Téllez Kuenzler 1994:75–76), mitigating global warming effects through carbon fixing, regulating microclimates, and protecting hydrological watersheds that provide crucial water and electricity (Merino and Alatorre 1997:84). Deforestation is occurring at a rate as high as 700,000,000 hectares per year (Chapela 1997). Though fire is a ma-
jor cause of degradation, the main factor is conversion to agriculture and animal raising, induced by rural poverty (Cabarle et al. 1997:23; Merino and Alatorre 1997:54).

Hardin's 1968 article "The Tragedy of the Commons" set off a lengthy debate on the fate of collectively held natural resources. Hardin argued that only state regulation or privatization could preserve common resources because rational use by individuals led inevitably to environmental degradation. Proponents of privatization (Alchian and Demsetz 1973) drew on the individualistic aspects of Hardin's model to support their claims that common property resources were doomed to destruction because rational individuals cannot cooperate to achieve rational collective outcomes. The only solution to degradation of common-pool resources was external coercion or change to private property regimes (Wade 1987). In Mexico, policies promoting privatization of the rural commons are being justified with just such "tragedy" rationales, in which forest degradation is blamed on collective tenancy (World Bank 1995:xii).

Critics of the Hardin approach dispute assumptions that resources held in common necessarily involve open access and that local users are incapable of cooperation (Bromley 1998:665; McCay and Jentoft 1998:22). Researchers have found common property regimes whose institutional arrangements identify a community of beneficiaries, exclude or limit access to nonowners, and effectively govern access and use among co-owners (Berkes 1989; Feeny et al. 1990). One theory explains these institutions with individualistic models; social institutions are viewed as aggregate outcomes of individuals' strategies in the face of incentive structures (McCay and Jentoft 1998:22).

Among the most influential of these theories is the institutional choice perspective (McKean 1992; Ostrom 1990, 1998), which has countered the tragedy-of-the-commons approach by showing how individual rationality can be harnessed to public and environmental good. In this model, which is based on rational choice, individuals make cost-benefit analyses as they decide whether to invest in institutions that govern resources held in common. Therefore institutional choice emphasizes design principles of successful common-pool resource management systems and the conditions under which individuals are likely to agree to create them (Klooster 2000).

But to what extent can such individualistic perspectives help us understand how these social institutions actually emerge and change, particularly in societies that are being drawn rapidly into the highly competitive international economy? Some common property scholars recently have argued that the institutional choice approach suffers from a "thin" analytical perspective: generalizing about the rules and incentives necessary for individuals' cooperation leads to the decontextualizing of common property arrange-
ments (McCay and Jentoft 1998:21,24). This perspective downplays history or processes outside the community, underestates the complexity of tenure practices, and overlooks social processes through which people come to understand their commons problems and decide what to do about them (Klooster 2000). By neglecting the fact that common property management institutions are embedded in both external and local structural contexts, the scholar incurs the risk of attributing "failures" exclusively to the community or to flaws in collective action more generally, and thus supports tragedy perspectives indirectly.

Critics of institutional choice propose the use of "thicker" explanations. Their injunction recalls Geertz's (1973) classic "thick description," in which the investigator weaves rich textual tapestries capable of evoking the complexity of cultural phenomena. The call for "thicker analyses" in common property studies, however, comes more directly from economic sociologists' notion of embeddedness (Granovetter and Swedberg 1992; Polanyi 1957). Its advocates call for linking the many dimensions of common-pool resource management more explicitly and for placing property regimes in a historical context of social and political relations (McCay and Jentoft 1998). Thicker explanations, they believe, will illuminate the political economy, which both imposes constraints and offers possibilities for common property arrangements. At the community level, thicker explanations will do more justice to local struggles over norms of resource use and will provide greater insight into "cultural motivations" underlying collective action (Klooster 2000).

In Mexico, common property scholars argue that properly organized community forestry can avoid commons tragedies. Their research, however, goes beyond demonstrating collective alternatives to privatization or excessive state regulation. Many researchers are establishing evidence that the state's turn toward neoliberalism has seriously undermined the social institutions underlying community forestry (Chapela 1997; Merino and Alatorre 1997). In this paper I examine how Mexican community forestry institutions are changing; I ask whether they are being destroyed by larger political economic restructuring, which privileges individual actors, or (alternatively) whether they are being transformed into new forms of collective management. I employ thick analysis to explore the embeddedness of the institutional framework of Mexican community forestry, and I link its larger political economy with agency at the local level.

Globalization, in the form of neoliberal policy reform, is reshaping agrarian production. Neoliberal reform of Mexico's agrarian and forestry laws has reorganized forestry technical services in the open market and has legalized new forms of organization in forestry communities. These changes have the potential to frag-
ment peasants' political and organizational unity and to undermine the possibility of sustainable forest management. Yet although community forestry is embedded in global structures, institutional change is a process, people by groups of social agents who respond to external restructuring from local contexts of organization and community.

In this case study of peasant forestry organization in the state of Durango, I discuss the Emiliano Zapata Union of Ejidos ("the Union"), which is well known in Mexico for facilitating high-quality technical forestry services, promoting peasant-controlled secondary processing, and serving as an influential interlocutor for peasant producers.

**Methodology**

To analyze the relationships between global, national, and local-level restructuring, I move back and forth between discussing the political economy in which Mexican community forestry is embedded and presenting evidence from a case study of its changing social institutional framework. The historical discussion draws on secondary materials; the case study is based on qualitative research conducted on seven visits to Mexico over a three-year period from 1996 to 1999. Field research methods included interviews, field observation, and analysis of archival documents, as well as study of recent unpublished literature on Mexican community forestry. In Mexico City I interviewed researchers and activists involved with two community forestry networks and several rural research and advisory organizations. I also interviewed former and current government officials, including persons who played major roles in developing community forestry.

In Durango I interviewed nearly 40 persons, including past and present ejido Union leaders, forestry technical staff members, and peasants. I attended internal meetings, including general assemblies of Union delegates. I observed and interviewed persons involved in the various economic and service activities affiliated with the Union. Union and forestry technical staff members helped me to identify communities representing the considerable diversity in the organization. Accompanied by technical staff and occasionally by Union leaders, I visited and interviewed in nine member communities. Three of these communities derive most of their income from

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2 In this part of the Sierra Madre Occidental, unless they are vouched for by trusted insiders, unaccompanied first-time visitors to remote communities are at best unlikely to obtain accurate data. My ability to obtain valid data was also enhanced by an agreement with Union leaders and technical staff to reciprocate with a feedback meeting and a preliminary written report in Spanish. I informed each interviewee of this arrangement, adding that the report could be requested from Union leaders.
from the forest; three combine forestry with agriculture and animal raising; three possess scant forest resources and have few other viable economic activities.

Ethnography is commonly thought to require a year or more in the field. It is not considered feasible for academics who cannot be absent from the university for long periods. This study is not an ethnography in the strictest sense, which strives for a textual reconstruction of the complex cultural world in which community members create meaning and perform action. The depth of insight made possible by long-term ethnographic research is unequaled; nevertheless, much can be accomplished by using ethnographic methods such as interviews and observation in more diverse settings.

Organizational ethnography, according to Schwartzman (1993: 3–4), "problematicizes the ways that individuals and groups constitute and interpret organizations and societies on a daily interactional basis." Organizational ethnographers try to understand how everyday routines constitute and reconstitute organizational and societal structures, and seek to link micro-level interactional processes with macro-level structures. Dorothy Smith (1990) applies a more critical version of this "institutional ethnography" approach to reveal how everyday micro experiences are interconnected with the macro processes that reproduce power inequalities.

This study of community forestry in Durango is part of a larger project that includes fieldwork in the southeastern tropical area of Quintana Roo. A combination of research strategies, including ethnographic methods, makes it possible to map complex interactions among multiple levels of political-economic structure and action that limit and provide opportunities for community forestry organizations. Here I build on this work to illuminate the contested arena of organizational agency and culture: specifically, how peasants in forest communities adapt to, resist, or appropriate external structural changes, and how, as they do so, they also remake the values and assumptions that underlie "community" in a rapidly globalizing system.

One potential pitfall of qualitative research is that researchers may impose their own preconceptions on the social realities under study: this is the problem of authorial voice. Recently the "crisis of representation" has placed "realist" researchers, who seek to make definitive statements about field realities, in opposition to more "postmodern" researchers, who reject the very notion of epistemological authority (Taylor 1999a). The debate has brought to the forefront issues regarding how to determine the validity of diverse versions of field "truths."

One resolution is "triangulation" with multiple methods. Another is soliciting subjects' feedback on the analysis. Indeed, some sociologists argue that researchers should rely on subjects to determine
whether a study's conclusions are valid (Maseide 1990). Others maintain that valid field knowledge emerges from a process of negotiation between subjects and researchers (Schwandt 1994), which may involve disagreement as well as consensus (Jarvie 1982). In Durango, before leaving the field, I relayed my preliminary findings and obtained feedback at a meeting with Union leaders and technical staff. The issue of forestry work groups, for example, generated an animated discussion. Some participants doubted that the groups were important; others argued that they bore watching because they required a quite different treatment from the Union. I later provided the participants with the preliminary report, and asked for comments and corrections. Although I sought feedback from the field and modified my analysis in response, I also hold and practice the view that authors ultimately must take responsibility for their analyses (Taylor 1999a).

Community Forestry in Durango: The Emiliano Zapata Union of Ejidos

The Union of Forestry and Agrarian Ejidos and Communities “General Emiliano Zapata” today faces two sets of difficult challenges. Internally, it struggles to remain profitable in a rapidly changing environment without losing legitimacy with its social base of support. Externally, it grapples with new problems posed by reforms in Mexico’s Constitution and in related forestry laws, which introduce new forms of local economic association and complicate the Union’s involvement with forestry technical services. The Union responds to these pressures with a risky dual strategy of expansion and diversification, both to fill the vacuum left by a downsizing state and to remain relevant to its members.

Established in northwestern Durango in 1976, the Union is widely viewed as one of the most successful community forestry organizations in Mexico (Chapela 1994:4). In 1999 the Union represented nearly 10,000 titled ejidatarios and comuneros in 58 ejidos and agrarian communities, distributed over nearly 1 million hectares. Its membership produces about 60 percent of the forestry products in the area (UNECOFAEZ 1992b). Today the Union is at the center of a decentralized organizational matrix that includes a plywood factory, a machine tool shop, five forestry technical service societies, a plant nursery, a credit union, an agrarian production input store, seven road improvement committees, and a training center. The Union also performs an important lobbying role for its members.

Although peasants legally own most of Mexico’s forests, they have struggled for genuine control because forests are subject to federal regulation as a national heritage. From the 1940s to the early 1980s, Mexico granted concessions to private companies and huge parastatal timber companies (Bray 1997). Concessionaires were re-
quired to construct roads, build schools and clinics, create wage-paying jobs, and train peasants in forestry. Critics observe, however, that these companies obtained high-quality timber at low cost by paying minimal stumpage fees to *ejidatarios* and that they largely avoided their broader obligations (Merino Pérez 1997: 142). Moreover, internal inefficiency, corruption, and poor silvicultural practices led to the mining of forests, frequently over the objections of the parastatals’ own technical staff (Argüelles Suárez and Armijo Canto 1995:3).

The Union emerged as an instrument of peasant struggle with the parastatal firm PROFORMEX (Productores Forestales Mexicanos), which in 1967 received the concession to 2.5 million hectares of forest. The Durango state government, powerful timber industry interests, and federal agencies such as the Ministry of Agriculture supported PROFORMEX. Yet, as elsewhere in Mexico (Bray 1991; Merino and Alatorre 1997), some *ejidos* refused to allow PROFORMEX to enter their forests. In 1976, supported by the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, 20 *ejidos* and agrarian communities established the Union and obtained permission to conduct their own harvesting and milling operations.

The Union’s leaders proved adept at exploiting divisions within government agencies and building coalitions with sympathizers, even within PROFORMEX itself. The peasants were strongly supported by federal government allies, including a subsecretary of forestry who promoted community forestry over the opposition of his superiors in the Agricultural Ministry. The Union also drew on new spaces created by a “change in terrain” in the peasant movement, from its historic demand for land to the appropriation of the production process (Bartra 1991). By the early 1980s, in various sectors including forestry, organized peasants had obtained capital and equipment, formed their own technical teams, and arranged to take control of many stages of production, processing, and commercialization (Bray 1997).

Besieged by an increasingly effective peasant organization and facing policy makers who now promoted liberal economic reform, PROFORMEX weakened. In 1986 a new forestry law formally ended the concession system, removed the region’s forestry technical services from the parastatal’s direct control, and allowed communities to arrange for their own services (Bray 1997).

Many of the PROFORMEX foresters had actually supported the peasants. According to an *ejidatario* from Tepehuanes,

In the early years there was a forestry engineer in PROFORMEX who sided with the *ejidatarios* who wanted more direct benefit and participation in exploitation. He even went with them to Mexico [City] to meet with the head of
PROFORMEX. The director asked him why he was siding with the people and threw him out of the office. Then he told the *ejidatarios* that they couldn’t participate because they didn’t have any knowledge or experience with forestry.

A former PROFORMEX forestry engineer explained: “We realized that there was a contradiction between PROFORMEX’ economic objectives and ours. (The company) wanted more volume. We looked for good management, environmental protection.” Four legally independent nonprofit forestry administration units (UAFs)³ accordingly were granted concessions to provide services in the region. Today these technical service bureaus are key members of the Union organizational matrix, although (as discussed below) the relevant legal framework has changed.

Despite these advances, the parastatal held the paperwork for each *ejido’s* forest until 1987; in that year, the Union organized a roadblock to demand that peasants control their own documentation. One *ejidatario* explained that his community had not been harvesting its timber because of internal conflicts. “But the Union had helped us with some of the legal problems we were having. When the big roadblock happened, we went down to help.” A tense standoff ensued between protesters and police. With the support of the Union’s allies in Mexico City, the standoff ended with minimal violence when the Agricultural Secretary reluctantly handed over the documentation. The parastatal was soon paralyzed.

In 1990, over the strong opposition of the state governor and local timber industrialists, the Union won the right to lease and then purchase PROFORMEX’s plywood factory. Unfortunately the factory was in such disrepair that it could not operate. During a presidential campaign visit to the region, the Union arranged for a federal loan to repair the factory. In 1999 the factory had 40 *ejidos* and agrarian communities as shareholders; the manager and many of the employees were recruited from member communities.

The Union’s victory over PROFORMEX created space for its members to extract and process timber, and (perhaps most important) established a material base on which to build. This victory, however, created new organizational problems. The Union embarked on a transition from a grassroots political movement defending its members’ resource rights to an industrial producer. This process led to internal contradictions between technical and social imperatives, which Bartra (1991) warns are inherent in the new generation of peasant production organizations. Such organi-

³ A fifth technical service society was formed in 1989 to serve one Union-affiliated community with over 40,000 cubic meters of annual timber production.
izations must manage their production activities profitably without alienating the members far removed from everyday decision making. In recent years, members' willingness to cooperate in managing their common forest resources has been impaired by the emerging internal problems of governance, diverse material interests, and legitimacy.

**Internal Organizational Problems**

Fox and Gordillo (1991:69–70) argue that the peasant movement's change in terrain has engendered a shift from centralized, "vertical" federations to more democratic, "horizontal" organizations. Nevertheless, Bartra (1991) maintains that broad-based participation actually may be discouraged by requiring production organizations to satisfy both economic imperatives to compete in markets and social imperatives to distribute material benefits sufficient to maintain members' support.

Since its early incarnation as a political movement, the Union's day-to-day decision making has been relatively centralized. Chapela (1994:10) reports that because the organization covers a vast area, some distant ejidos delegate their vote to the president; this helps to ensure a legal assembly quorum but reinforces centralizing tendencies. Despite centralization, however, interviewees in both Mexico City and Durango characterized Union leaders over the last 15 years as exceptionally honest and capable. Moreover, they observed, the Union restricts leaders to two consecutive terms of office, gives new leaders experience in various productive activities, and seeks administrative spaces for past leaders.

Nevertheless, the Union's internal governance has faced challenges in recent years. In the words of one interviewee, "After they won the battle with PROFORMEX, the conflicts began. People wanted to seize control of the Union for their own personal benefit." Dissenters demanded that the Union's higher leadership be opened to members from more communities. In 1992 they organized to prevent the incumbent president from being reelected. This movement was spearheaded by one of the Union's most timber-rich communities, whose members felt that their community had been unfairly excluded from leadership. In a 1992 general assembly, these dissident members attempted unsuccessfully to overturn the policy permitting an office holder two consecutive terms in office. They argued that votes should be allocated according to timber volumes rather than under the existing system of four delegates per community. One member spoke at length:

> We all want to participate. All the municipalities, the dissatisfied people, we all sent representatives to defend our interests. We are dissatisfied and we pay a lot of money. But
we only have four delegates. We’ve got lots of volume in [our community], so we should participate according to our volume. If we are treated equally, we want to pay equally. Those of us who pay should be the ones who make the decisions . . . . They can’t have it in their hands all their lives.

Other members responded that the reelection policy had already been approved: “Some people traveled all the way here to consider and approve [those] statutes. To ignore them now would be disrespectful.” In the voting that followed, the incumbent won 80 percent of the votes (UNECOFAEZ 1992a).

Such disagreements over how organizational resources are to be managed, and by whom, highlight emerging tensions between the Union’s economic and social imperatives. Chapela (1994:22) observed that the Union crossed an important strategic line when it became a timber buyer for its plywood factory. The Union’s interests as a buyer now potentially conflicted with members’ interests as sellers. Some insiders, nevertheless, downplay any such contradiction, pointing out that the plywood factory provides a service crucial in maintaining the Union’s social base. One technical staff member argued that “the people in charge have a social commitment at the same time as they have a focus on business. If (they did) not (have such a commitment), the whole thing could collapse.”

My interviews in the ejidos and communities, however, suggested that some members perceive an increasing distance between the Union and its members. Though they appreciate the Union’s role in defeating PROFORMEX, they wonder what the Union is doing for them now. One commissary said curtly, “[The Union] doesn’t do anything for us . . . except we do have the radio [a Union-sponsored network].” When I asked one senior leader about some members’ concern regarding the Union’s plywood factory, he replied, “Those who are too far away don’t understand the business. They’re not willing to take the risk [of participating].” Although the plywood factory is legally owned by 40 of the Union’s member communities, some interviewees in shareholding communities still perceive it entirely as the Union’s terrain. For example, one peasant producer involved with his community’s sawmill remarked that the Union “concerns itself mainly with the plywood factory. They’ve closed themselves off.” Another producer stated matter-of-factly that the Union has become “a timber buyer like any other.”

When the Union was primarily a political movement, its task was simpler: the communities united around gaining control over forestry production. Today, now that the Union is embarking on its own change in terrain, member communities’ material interests in
its activities are far more diverse. A few have substantial forest resources and experience. Most, however, either rely heavily on agriculture and animal raising or are quite impoverished; thus their forestry activity is slight, and consequently their ties to the Union are weak. One Union leader described frankly the organization’s relation with these poor communities: “People remember PRO- FORMEX and the old abuses. Their forests today are what’s left from before, so there’s an awareness of the need for the Union. But there is little participation.” Moreover, very few individual members, regardless of community, have appreciable contact with the Union’s most visible activity, the plywood factory. The Union’s other services, including lobbying, supporting road committees, a radio network in more than 100 communities, and influencing timber prices, are invisible to most people in the widely dispersed member communities. The Union leadership is now seeking new ways to generate internal solidarity and to preserve its legitimacy as a community-based organization.

The External Context: Neoliberal Structural Reform

As part of broader efforts to promote integration into the global economy, Article 27 of Mexico’s Constitution was modified in late 1991 to end land redistribution. This constitutional and related legal reform has changed how collectively owned resources in Mexico’s ejidos and agrarian communities can be used. The community assemblies now can vote to divide communal property into individual parcels, which can be purchased, sold, rented, or used as collateral. The reform also authorizes new forms of joint ventures and other entrepreneurial associations between ejidatarios and outside investors (Harvey 1996).

The Union faces new challenges from a new legal framework that undermines its capacity to intervene directly in community-level forestry. Post-1992 forestry laws have reorganized technical services and have turned them over to the market. The new agrarian law facilitates new forms of organization within the ejidos and agrarian communities, which pose organizational and governance problems for the Union.

The New Forestry Laws and Reorganization of Technical Services

The 1986 Forestry Law was the zenith of state-supported community forestry. After the mid-1980s, private-sector opponents pressured the state to roll back peasants’ control over forestry (Wexler and Bray 1996). By the early 1990s, neoliberal-leaning federal policy makers began to “modernize” the forestry sector via deregulation, and to promote domestic and international investment. According to an influential study of the Mexican agrarian sector, “[O]ne of the principal objectives of the new forestry policy is to es-
tablish conditions so that the economic agents involved in the activity will be the principal custodians of the forest resources" (Téllez Kuentzler 1994:268). Wexler and Bray (1996:238) believe that this position represents indirect advocacy of individual "private stewardship of forests." Current reforms signify the ascendance of a new actor in forestry, the outside private investor, and call into question the peasants' role in maintaining forests.

The Forestry Law of 1992 was a watershed for community forestry (Chapela 1997): it aimed at eliminating "excessive" state intervention in the forestry sector, promoting private investment, and creating free markets for products and services (Wexler and Bray 1996:243). The new law reduced the extensive paperwork required by the 1986 law to a harvest permit and a hammer mark on authorized trees. It eliminated the system of regional forestry technical service providers and turned services over to the market, where communities were free to hire any certified forestry engineer (Cabarle et al. 1997:28). The open market for technical services promotes a decline in quality when competition for contracts reduces forest management to the provision of harvest permits (Merino and Alatorre 1997). New procedures for tracking timber have since been introduced, but communities are still responsible for procuring their own services.

These changes have complicated the Union's technical mission and have weakened its direct relevance to members. Elsewhere in Mexico, community forestry organizations provide technical services through directly employed foresters. Control of services by peasant organizations helps to prevent abuses of power, and employee foresters usually provide organizational and political support to these organizations (Merino and Alatorre 1997:98). The Emiliano Zapata Union, however, does not directly provide forestry technical services; rather, the five independent UAFs provide complete management for sustainable forestry. Nevertheless, the Union works in close coordination with two of the five UAFs. This close relationship dates back to the days when several of the PROFORMEX foresters sided with the peasants. Staff members in these two UAFs view the peasants and their Union as their clients. As one young technician put it, "Although we collect technical fees from the industrialists, the money comes from the ejidos. The producers pay my salary, so I'm working for them." In addition to technical work, these two UAFs assist the Union with project planning and outside contacts.

Post-1992 forestry laws have placed the UAFs in continual financial crisis because the UAFs now compete with technicians who offer only permit paperwork. The Union provides these UAFs with institutional support: it helps to persuade members not to opt for lower-quality technical services, and assists in obtaining outside re-
sources to support the technical work. In 1997 the Union received $45,000 U.S. from the Ministry of the Environment to support the UAFs' technical programs. As one forestry staff member explained, "If we fought with the Union, we'd lose. The Union has the ability to request outside funds. We need good relations with the Union. The government wouldn't give it directly to us. They want to deal with peasants." With the Union's support, the UAFs have kept most of their clients; they have cut costs drastically, however, halving their staffs and curtailing fieldwork expenditures. The UAFs' competitiveness is further undermined as declines in volumes of large-diameter timber obligate staff members to impose unpopular reductions in authorized harvests.

The threat to the UAFs' financial survival also threatens the Union's influence in the communities. Several interviewees remarked that these two UAFs are "the eyes and ears of the Union in the ejidos." While the Union's leadership lacks resources to visit widely dispersed communities frequently, UAF staff members travel regularly to the most isolated villages. The UAFs help to generate solidarity and connections between the Union and its communities by explaining Union activities to members, announcing meetings, and answering questions. Thus the UAFs represent organizing instruments that the Union can ill afford to lose.

Significantly, numerous interviewees reported that since the 1992 deregulation, Union ties with the other three UAFs have become less close, and ejidatarios in those areas participate less in the Union. According to one technician, "[Those ejidatarios] think the Union isn't necessary anymore and so don't come to meetings and don't pay their quotas. But they have more social and forestry problems there, with lots of conflicts among the ejidos and more illegal harvesting." One peasant interviewee remarked, "When the Union becomes distanced, the power of the [timber] industrialists increases." Several Union leaders and forestry technical staff members agreed that, under such conditions, timber industrialists enjoy greater power to impose economic terms of their own choosing.

The New Agrarian Law and New Forms of Local Organization

While constitutional reforms aim to keep Mexico's communally owned forests intact, new agrarian laws stimulate new forms of community organization as they allow ejidatarios and comuneros to form separate economic associations to use collective resources (López Nogales and López Nogales 1999). In Durango, forestry work groups have appeared in at least five of the Union's associated ejidos and agrarian communities. Space does not permit an extended discussion of these work groups (see Taylor 1999b). However, they represent a broader, potentially important trend in local forestry orga-
nization; as a model, they pose a serious challenge to a Union designed to organize and represent entire communities.

Although Mexican peasants have long organized in small groups for some nontimber forest production, such as chicle (gum) extraction, timber work groups are new in Durango. I interviewed members of four groups in Santa Marta. ¹ Santa Marta’s groups are not entirely the product of neoliberal reform, but rather emerged from peasants’ frustration with long-standing problems of inefficiency and corruption in collectively organized forestry. In Santa Marta, comuneros now form smaller groups; each arranges to harvest and sell its share of timber. Profits accrue only to group participants. According to interviews, work groups encourage more efficient and more transparent operations when the village commissary does not handle forestry funds. Disadvantages, however, include reproduction of old problems of mixing business with local politics, increases in costs as economies of scale are lost, difficulty in covering communal social costs as profits are distributed by group, and greater pressure on the forest. Some interviewees, mainly technical people, expressed fear that such work groups eventually could lead to the division of the forest communities and the parcelization of forests as collective resource management is undermined. ⁵

The groups also complicate technical services. “It’s more work for us,” stated one forester. “We’re dealing with multiple groups instead of one (group), and each one has to be given separate service.” Collecting technical fees becomes more cumbersome, for example. Although no work group in the region has yet hired its own technical services, one UAF staff member acknowledged that this would be possible; such a development, he said, would undermine coherent forest management. Nevertheless, the UAF technical director for Santa Marta stated that his technicians work willingly with any groups authorized by the community’s assembly.

The long-term ramifications of forestry work groups are not yet clear, but they are likely to affect the Union significantly if they become more common. As work groups market their timber and pay their Union fees separately, the Union’s collection problems probably will increase. Perhaps more important is the work groups’ po-

¹ Village names are pseudonyms.

⁵ Observers of Santa Marta’s groups are keenly aware of nearby Canelas, which has reorganized into 11 groups called annexes. These groups are informally mapping the forest and even, in some cases, fencing it into individual plots. According to internal agreement, each of these plots “belongs” to individual families, who keep most of the timber profits. There are numerous families—but profits are appropriated privately rather than collectively.
political effect. Despite inefficiencies, the ejido system's strength has been its ability to represent the community politically. Work groups require the Union to deal with several leaders rather than with one set of elected authorities. The structure of governance in the Union is already being challenged: one community is demanding additional delegates. (According to interviews in that region, internal tensions over this issue contribute greatly to many members' growing sense of estrangement from the Union.) Nevertheless, the forestry groups show that peasants are not waiting for external solutions to their common-pool resource problems, even from their Union, but are creating and institutionalizing new solutions of their own. The Union's challenge is to adapt itself to remain relevant to its members, supporting and advising them in solving their problems.

The Union Strategy: Diversification or Distance?

To deal with both its internal problems and external structural change, the Union pursues an ambitious but risky expansion and diversification strategy, financed with its own funds and supported by Mexican government agencies, nongovernment organizations, and member communities. For example, the Union has established a tree nursery and opened an agricultural inputs store to support members' nonforestry production. In 1993 it helped set up a credit union. In 1997 the Union created a new marketing firm to supply its plywood factory with timber, and established another new firm to manufacture wood products. The organization also has established a center to train Union and community leaders and sawmill administrators.

The Union has involved itself more broadly in regional development. Most recently it has created a new department of project management. Financed by government funds, the department hired seven extension agents to support agriculture, cattle raising, and other local development projects. As its coordinator remarked in an interview,

People here have always been farmers and done a little cattle raising as well as forestry. For subsistence. They never stopped being one for the other. The Union is trying to see how we can produce more with less. To have greater production in less space.

The Union has developed a loosely coordinated matrix in which each entity keeps its own books and has its own administrative council. Each council includes representatives of other matrix organizations. As one interviewee described the matrix model, "The Union is like a game board with pieces. They seem independent, but they're going in a single direction. In a crisis, they come together."
Union leaders explain that the organization is “taking problems off the backs of the government, relieving the pressure on them.” Yet diversification also expresses an organizational imperative to remain relevant to a highly diverse and largely inactive membership. The strategy includes the implicit recognition that forestry is economically irrelevant for many poorer communities. It also responds to an ecological imperative. As large-diameter timber volumes decline and low profitability plagues the forestry sector, the Union views itself as reducing pressure on the forest; thus its slogan, “Produce More with Less.” Its leaders understand that poverty underlies Durango’s problems with deforestation, narcotic cropping, and out-migration. By increasing the viability of agriculture and animal raising, the Union hopes to reduce change in land use and to help people remain in their communities.

The Union’s diversification strategy, nevertheless, carries organizational and environmental risks. In a competitive global market, successful firms are often assumed to be those which grow and diversify. The case of Durango, however, suggests that peasant forestry organizations which do so face particular risks because of their economic, social, and environmental imperatives. First, diversification introduces new organizational stresses. Rapid growth is likely to be handled adequately by the Union’s decentralized matrix, but emerging multiple organizational logics have the potential to introduce new competition and conflicts. For example, the Union’s plywood factory and its new timber supply firm will be pressed to pursue conflicting pricing policies. Moreover, it is easy to imagine a tight supply market in which a Union-affiliated firm offers a price for standing timber that convinces a member ejido not to operate its own sawmill; this occurred last year in at least one community. More generally, the Union’s growth into a major player in the regional timber industry implies a logic of development that is likely to be incompatible with service to producer members. Because delivering benefits to members is essential to its legitimacy, a decrease in services will weaken the Union’s social base.

Peasant forestry organizations are “eco-production” rather than primarily ecological groups. Though they may genuinely adopt environmental discourse, they pursue sustainable resource management strategies because such strategies can bring economic benefits (Bray 1997:8). The material benefits from common resources strongly motivate people to maintain cooperative institutions for sustainable management. When forestry activities do not deliver those benefits, whether because of external structural pressures or problems internal to a community, both the organization and the forest are likely to suffer.

The Union’s second environmental risk is two-dimensional. First, if agriculture or animal raising becomes more profitable, forests
may not compete economically; the result would be more, not less, incentive for change in land use. Second, if the Union cannot manage organizational tensions, maintaining member communities’ support will be difficult. Also, by extension, the Union will not easily maintain its positive influence for sustainable forestry in the region. The work groups are a manifestation of the Union’s legitimacy issue; these groups are evidence that the Union’s peasant members are not waiting for external responses to their forestry problems.

**Conclusion**

Thick analyses that explore multiple levels of embeddedness of common-pool resource management regimes can contribute to theory by illuminating social institutions as historical processes of conflict and cooperation rather than as static complexes of rules and incentives for individual action. These analyses can illuminate the interconnectedness of macro- and micro-level influences on resource management. Thick analyses allow a sharper focus on agency in changing institutions; they explicate more clearly why organizational actors in different contexts react differently to external pressures. By viewing organizational development historically and multidimensionally, a thick analysis allows us to go beyond refutation of Hardinian tragedy scenarios to ask “Where are these transforming organizations likely to go?”

Neoliberal restructuring is changing the rules in Mexico’s agrarian sector, propelling change in the social institutional framework that underlies community forestry. The neoliberalist privileging of individual over collective actors has resulted in a “legal framework for a redeployment of institutional power that seeks to bypass existing rural organizations by dealing directly with the individual (usually male) ejidatario” (Harvey 1996:152). Policy reform has operated indirectly, but effectively, to marginalize intermediate peasant organizations such as the Emiliano Zapata Union in local forestry activities. The commoditizing of forestry technical services and the legalization of new internal associations to work independently with communal resources undermine the peasant producer organizations’ capacity to organize and deliver concrete benefits to members.

In Durango, producers have responded by creatively transforming the way in which they organize themselves for forestry. They work, however, in the context of their own internal issues; this suggests that peasants’ responses to external restructuring merit attention. The Union has grown and diversified, assuming new economic and political roles while striving to remain relevant to its members’ interests. The forestry work groups have emerged as peasants take advantage of new structural openings created by neoliberal reform to address long-standing inefficiencies and perceived injustices of ejido-organized forestry.
A central insight of community forestry is that in conserving a resource, those who are closest to it must become stakeholders and effective participants in sustainable management. Do the policy and institutional changes discussed above enhance the ability of the forestry peasantry to participate effectively in resource management? Or do these changes suggest triage by policy makers, a selecting of beneficiaries in pursuit of more “efficient,” more “competitive” forestry? In other words, are institutional changes in community forestry steps toward new, possibly more viable forms of collective management or toward privatization of forest resources?

The Union’s existence is not seriously threatened by neoliberal restructuring. On the contrary, it can meet international competition: its plywood factory is a revenue generator for the Union, and the organization significantly influences regional policy. The Union, however, risks ceasing in future to be a peasant organization effectively controlled by its social base. Its very success in managing a growing range of businesses is a source of pressure to move away from its service orientation. Moreover, its ability to serve its members directly is constrained by legal reforms. This distancing is significant, because loss of the social base would make the Union vulnerable to outside threats ranging from traditional enemies to changes in policy conditions.

Has the historical moment of intermediate-level, peasant-based forestry organizations passed? I do not argue that peasant federations should be maintained at all costs. Yet the Emiliano Zapata Union has capably promoted effective forest management, has facilitated a real transfer of skills and knowledge to peasants, has supported local development, and has helped to form several generations of community leaders and technical staff. The Union still supports Durango’s forest peasantry despite growing “distance” from its original constituency. It remains committed to collective management of forest resources as it works to create and consolidate conditions in which community forestry can flourish. And, crucially, the Union still is genuinely owned and managed by peasants. Whether it survives in this form will depend largely on its members and on the Mexican state.

The purpose of neoliberal reform in Mexico’s forestry sector is ostensibly to improve its competitiveness. Yet reform will be counterproductive economically, socially, and environmentally if it undermines peasants’ capacity to organize effectively for sustainable management of their resources. Experience throughout the world suggests that neither top-down, repressive state enforcement nor privatization has proved effective in promoting forest conservation where trees and large numbers of poor people exist side by side. If peasant foresters are eliminated as effective actors in the forestry sector, sustainability is likely to suffer. In Mexico, peasant-based or-
organizations are the arena where the economic, social, and environmental problems of forestry are most visible. Such organizations may well be the source of solutions that deal most effectively with the complex, multifaceted issue of sustainability.

References


