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## Case report

## Engaging youth in conversations about community and forests: Methodological reflections from Asia, Africa, and the Americas

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### 1. Introduction

As the inheritors of decisions made today (after Zurba and Trimble (2014)), youth living in forest-dependent communities will play a key role in shaping forest futures. Yet scholars, practitioners, and donors have paid limited attention to youth-community-forest connections. Work in community development shows how the engagement of young people can help to challenge problems of social exclusion, redistribute power, and support efforts to build collectives that better meet a diversity of personal, professional, and shared aspirations (Cahill, 2007). Such an approach (re)casts young people as ‘agents of change’ in community development processes (see Ginwright and James (2002) and Checkoway (2012)).

The Future of Forest Work and Communities (FoFW) project sought to connect community forest researchers and practitioners with young people living in forest regions, and consider if and how community forestry is, or could be, a viable option for them in a globalized world. Our main tool for achieving this was through ‘visioning’ workshops, guided by a purposively designed methodology. These workshops were designed to help us to: get to know a community’s young people, and have them get to know us; understand the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of young people in these communities; share and exchange local and global perspectives on the importance of forests, forest work, and forest conservation; generate ideas of/for “meaningful work” that are locally relevant; share examples of work that may be useful or

inspiring from other communities; and, exchange and co-create knowledge that is comparable and transferable. In essence, to provide a barometer of youth culture within a forest community setting.

Workshops adopted a standardized set of activities (Table 1) that enabled common themes to be identified across locations, while allowing concerns and ideas specific to a particular place to be captured.

14 workshops (in 9 countries) were organized; the first taking place in June 2017, the last in July 2018. Host communities (for further details about participating communities, see the other articles in this special issue) were chosen using three main criteria. We worked with communities that saw the workshops as a valuable tool to support their own youth engagement priorities. We selected communities with a profile that fit with some key themes: history of people-forest interdependence, youth migration issues (or alternatively, a strong and vibrant youth presence), employment and education challenges or innovations, or potential for advancement in any of these areas. We worked in places where a relationship existed between the host community and the individuals that formed the workshop facilitation team. Almost 200 youth took part across the 14 workshops. They ranged in age from 11 to 37, with most participants in their late teens or early to mid-twenties. The gender split was 54% male, 46% female. In some cases, workshop coordinators/facilitators selected participants. In other cases, community authorities took the lead, with appropriate guidance from the coordination team. Participation was voluntary.

The focus for this case report are our methodological reflections –

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**Table 1**  
Summary of main workshop activities.

Workshop Activity	Description	Rationale
Good Stories	A time for each participant to tell a short story about their past, present or future.	To understand the identities of the participants, to open a deeper conversation about facts, histories, conflicts, ideas and values and collect key words, ideas and themes.
Show Off Your Territory	Youth-led tour of the community and its territory (incl. forest areas). Participants choose one village and one territorial landmark of importance to them. Co-create map of landmarks with annotations. Group designs route to be taken and sites to be visited. Participants explain their choice <i>in situ</i> .	Give youth a chance to interpret the landscape of their community and territory in real time w/peers. What meanings are embedded in the infrastructures and nature around them? Creates a different kind of forum for dialogue about place, values past, and future visions.
Let's Talk About Forests	Participants create a list of their Top Ten values that they associate with forests. Can be done individually, as a single group, or in gendered groups with parallel lists created. Choices discussed in large group.	To listen, understand and document the vocabulary, values and perspectives that youth associate with forest environments (local and global). Opportunity to share outside (regional and global) perspectives on the value of local forests.
Keep-Toss-Create	Participants list the things that they would like to keep in their communities, the things they would like to get rid of, and the new things they would like to see. Done as large group or in smaller sub-groups.	To understand the pros and cons of village life, and see how these views are shared among the group and across genders.
Show-and-tell	Participants bring in pictures, videos, drawings, gifts, mementos that come from outside the home village or from their travels. Everyone brings "one thing" to show the group to activate discussion.	Enrich the conversation about place and culture (local and global) using tangible things and images.
Push/Pull Matrix	Responding to the question, <i>What are the benefits of village vs. city life?</i> , participants work together to create a 4 quadrant "Push-Pull matrix" for cities and communities.	Understand the forces that push or pull young people to move from one place to another.
What's Your Ideal Job?	Participants work individually and then in groups to list and discuss their ideal jobs, and what drives their work aspirations.	Deep dive into youth perspectives on work and employment, to have frank discussion on what drives job, profession, and life decisions. Opportunity to see levels of interest in land-based / forest-based livelihoods.
Media Headlines	Each participant writes a "newspaper headline" (anonymously) on a piece of paper. The headline is for an imagined "success story" about their village that you would like to see in 10 years time.	A creative outlet for casting a vision for the future. Taking on a "media" voice can help release nuanced ideas and aspirations about the place of forest work and forest communities in the wider world.
Pilot Projects	Group brainstorms work/project ideas that are: 1. Exciting; 2. Forest-oriented; and, 3. Financially Viable. Looking for ideas located in the area where these three values overlap. Small groups (3–5 people) develop a concept/idea into an entrepreneurial "Pilot Project" for the community. Presented to community leaderships where possible.	To elicit exciting and integrative ideas from youth participants about meaningful work in forest communities.

what we learnt (as facilitators) from running workshops in different parts of the world. We gathered feedback via follow-up questionnaires (by email), group calls following workshops, and a two-day synthesis meeting held in Canada in August 2018. We then participated collectively in co-authoring this piece. We believe that these reflections will be of particular interest to those working with rural, resource-dependent communities, those looking to understand and analyze youth perspectives about community, land and territory, and those who already work (or plan to do so) with youth in such settings.

The report is organised into three areas of reflection and discussion. These are: (i) creating the conditions for effective and respectful youth engagement; (ii) the challenges of engaging youth using a standardized methodology; and (iii) what the engagement process told us about forest youth living in different places. We end by summarizing the key findings and providing final thoughts on the importance of connecting young people to community-making processes.

## 2. Key reflections

### 2.1. Creating the conditions for meaningful youth engagement

We attributed overall success of the FoFW workshops to several factors. One was the use of local facilitation teams. The workshops were run by people who knew the community or region they were working in, and, in several cases, could relate to participants because they had worked with local community youth before and/or were young themselves. This helped facilitators to break the ice with participants and establish a "safe place" for conversation and sharing. Choice of venue was also influential in shaping workshop participation and outcome. In Lac Simon and Poplar River (Canada), the workshop venues were traditional Anishinaabe wigwams (tents), which participants felt were more inviting than a conventional indoor meeting room. In Madre de Dios (Peru), the workshop took place in an open-air ecotourism lodge surrounded by Amazonian rainforest, which served as both a beautiful

setting for the workshop and an inspiring example of a forest enterprise. In Analco (Mexico), the venue was the community's eco-tourism centre, again surrounded by forest and where activities could switch between indoor and outdoor spaces. Such settings connected participants to the topics under discussion, generating more fruitful discussions about forest and forest culture.

We learnt that facilitators needed flexibility when planning and organizing workshop activities. While the workshops followed a standardized methodology, some activities were easily adapted to involve either individual- or group-based work. By using a mix of the two, shy participants were better able to contribute, while more gregarious youth did not dominate too much. Getting youth to work together on a regular basis also meant that workshops became more fun, more interactive, and we believe more productive and efficient. For some activities, in some workshops, mixed gender groups were used (all boys, all girls, mixed), which allowed a fuller range of motivations and concerns to emerge.

Many facilitators reported being aided by the general enthusiasm of workshop participants. We believe that this is tied to the fact that youth are underrepresented in consultations and decision-making processes, and so they appreciated the chance to provide their views on community-related matters. The novelty of participating in something that was all about them, helped to establish a degree of good will that facilitators built upon to maintain momentum over two full days of activities.

At a number of workshops, we saw how engagement activities became more meaningful to youth when opportunities arose to use the workshop as a platform to raise concerns and suggest ways to affect positive change in their communities. In Mexico, Guatemala, and Bolivia, youth were particularly keen to present their ideas about forest-related work and initiatives to local community leaders. In Guatemala, Peru, and the Philippines, the workshops became a catalyst for youth to self-organise for subsequent action. In Uaxactún (Guatemala), youth-community interactions following the workshop led to the establishment of a nascent youth council, supported by the wider community

(see Castillo, Zetina, & McNab, in press). In Madre de Dios (Peru), participants fed ideas from the workshop into the Indigenous student organization they belonged to; specifically, to support efforts to revitalize cultural habits and identity among Indigenous youth in the region (see Quaedvlieg et al., in press). In General Nakar (Philippines), youth participants self-organized to present their observations and ideas to the municipal mayor.

These experiences suggest the importance of connecting youth to the broader community membership as part of workshop design, where that is possible. While it is our belief that the main workshop activities worked best when youth participated in the absence of older community members (giving them the confidence to freely express views and opinions), we saw how the workshop experience was valued by participants when their voices were heard by local decision-makers. This reflects the challenge that communities face to “create space in the [local] culture where people will listen to youth” (Fermin Sosa Perez, workshop facilitator and community member from Analco, Oaxaca). It should be noted that such outcomes were not evident across all sites. While levels of nascent entrepreneurship were high among youth in the Ugandan and Tanzanian workshops, facilitators noted that most were reticent to present their ideas to community leaderships since this was “not done” locally and could be negatively received. This was an important reminder that the process of engaging young people must always be shaped by local contexts and realities.

## 2.2. The challenges of engaging youth using a standardized methodology

We were unsure whether the workshop methodology would translate well across such diverse sites. However, facilitators were generally positive about workshop design, with most activities making sense to youth in most places. Feedback suggested that the standardized methodology was not, in and of itself, problematic. Rather, sufficient training in the methodology was important to properly understand and communicate the aim of each activity, and to understand when and how activities might be modified to fit the setting or cultural context. In this regard, we found the staggering of workshops helpful – allowing those who ran later workshops to benefit from lessons learned during earlier engagements. It is not a coincidence that one of the more challenging workshops (in terms of recruitment, getting activities completed in time, and redundancy across activities) was the first to be conducted.

Arguably the biggest issue faced was trying to fit all of the planned activities into a two-day timeframe. Facilitators in several places (Peru, Guatemala, Mexico, Philippines) suggested cutting the number of activities, and prioritizing those that youth responded to the most. For example, the ‘pilot projects’ activity, where youth came up with their own ideas for meaningful land-based work and initiatives, was popular across a majority of workshops. Another was the ‘Show off your territory’ activity, in which participants designed and ran a tour of the community and territorial landmarks that meant the most to them. These were the workshop activities where youth took more of a lead. Facilitators in Nepal and the Philippines went as far as proposing a three-day workshop so that the ‘pilot project’ activity, in particular, could be run as intended – an idea that gained subsequent support from facilitators in Bolivia and Mexico.

These lessons speak to the importance of viewing workshop design as an iterative process, where what works is separated from what does not and expectations (and timings) are adjusted accordingly. This forms part of the challenge in developing a standardized set of activities and associated database that can allow meaningful synthesis and comparison across cases, as these workshops aimed to do.

## 2.3. What the engagement process told us about forest youth from different parts of the world?

By considering how workshop activities performed in distinct

contexts, differences in youth identity and cultural norms across sites became more evident.

The two Canadian workshops, held with Indigenous communities, were the most challenging to run. This began with recruitment, where only 6 and 10 youth attended the workshops in Lac Simon and Poplar River, respectively, with a fall-off in numbers returning for Day 2. At other workshops, participant numbers were consistently higher (ranging from 13 to 19 participants, with an average of 16 participants), and maintained across two days of activities. Several factors may help to explain this. One is age. In Lac Simon, participants had an average age of 30 – well above the average age of 19 at the other workshops. Another was the reticence of youth at the Lac Simon workshop to talk about their communities; participants were more comfortable talking about themselves and their families. Also, most participants at the Poplar River and Lac Simon workshops said that because they rarely venture onto the land, they had little to say about local forests.

Problems with recruitment and retention were less apparent in the Latin American, Asian, and African workshops, where facilitators reported participants generally open to talking about both themselves and their communities (with the exception of two of the Bolivian workshops). We found that the overall theme of the workshop, as well as specific community- and forest-related activities, resonated for most participants in most of these other workshops, especially where youth often spend time on the land or have a significant livelihood dependency on territorial resources. It was notable that while facilitators in Canada suggested moving to a one-day workshop format in the future, this was not proposed in other places.

We found that the outdoor-oriented ‘Show off your territory’ activity was critical for highlighting differences in how youth perceive of and interact with place and territory. While youth across sites exhibited strong ties to community, their relationships to local lands and forests varied more markedly. In Analco (Mexico), youth used this activity as an opportunity to showcase their passion for and knowledge of plants, animals, and landscapes, and the strength of their connection to place (see Robson, Sosa Pérez, & Sanchez Luja, in press). In Bolivia, youth focused their attention on places of high priority for conservation (a river) and livelihood (a remarkable agroforestry system). In the Ugandan workshops, youth focused on the crops (including trees) grown locally for subsistence agriculture or for business, learning a lot from each other in the process. In Jalapa (Mexico) and Madre de Dios (Peru), youth enjoyed the tour activity because it was an opportunity to visit and experience places they had not been to before. We learnt that youths’ land-based experiences and associated knowledge were often tied to the type and location of places that their families used (for farming, hunting etc.) – thus determining their level of familiarity (or unfamiliarity) with the community’s territory as a whole.

Of the aspects that did connect youth across sites, two stood out. One was the degree to which youth shared educational and professional (work) aspirations, and how these would take many away from their communities (at least for a time). Another was how little they knew about pressing community issues, or current territorial-related projects and initiatives. This was significant, methodologically, because only a minority of youth in most workshops could speak with authority on issues related to community or territorial governance. It meant that workshop facilitators often needed to provide youth with information (about their community) so they understood the context in which they were being asked to work or participate. For example, as part of preparing to work on their ‘pilot project’ ideas, youth in Uuxactún (Guatemala) needed to know more about the forest concession that their community held, while youth in Jalapa del Valle (Mexico) were brought up to speed with regards to their community’s recent shift into developing commercial forestry operations.

## 3. Summary and final thoughts

We learnt that a standardized methodology can translate well across

different cultural contexts and provide comparable yet place-specific data. To achieve this, however, requires local facilitators with in-depth knowledge of local culture and communities and a level of control over how workshop activities are delivered. To properly understand youth perspectives on community and forests, as well as the way by which youth access and participate (or not) in decision-making arenas, requires a nuanced understanding of context (socio-economic, cultural, political, environmental etc.). We also learnt that it is important not to rush activities for the sake of fitting them all in to an allotted time-frame. Rather, it is best to focus on fewer activities that youth have the time to work through properly. Interactive activities – where youth co-lead, are invited to showcase their own ideas, and begin to realise their potential as change-makers – should be prioritized. The activities to potentially drop or shorten are place-specific.

The activities generally performed the way that we had hoped. They allowed us to view if and how youth exhibit similarities in the views and values that they hold, irrespective of geographic location or cultural background, or conversely where views and values are shaped by context-specific connections, identities, and influences. The workshops also proved the value of strategies that give young people the opportunity to share in their opinions, perspectives, and aspirations (see Brennan and Barnett (2009)). We learnt that youth not only want but often need to be better informed about, and involved in, community-making processes. Many are keen to deepen their civic commitment, to create more meaningful relationships with older community members, and take a lead in collective action to maintain their cultures and community linkages. Individually and collectively, we are looking to find ways to support them in such endeavours.

#### Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wdp.2019.100141>.

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