

WORKING WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS



A community's ability to successfully complete the community land protection process is directly related to its leaders' integrity, management abilities, organizing skills and commitment. Communities fortunate enough to have motivated, trusted leaders dedicated to mobilizing community members to complete land protection activities between facilitators' visits tend to progress most efficiently through the community land protection process. When community leaders are committed to protecting community lands, they also legitimize the process in the eyes of both community members and outsiders. For example, when leaders agree to respect a harmonized boundary or commit to enforce agreed by-laws, community members are more likely to respect and abide by the boundaries and rules.

On the other hand, when a community's leaders are particularly ineffective, responsive to the influence of outside elites, and/or covertly opposed to land protection efforts, communities are often unable to successfully protect their lands. When weak, corrupt, or indifferent leaders encourage community members to reject the project or boycott meetings, they can stop the work entirely and increase conflict. This is true even when a community has a strong, united desire to complete the community land protection process – a corrupt leader opposing the process can still devastate efforts.

To make matters more complex, in every community there are multiple leaders with overlapping spheres of power and influence: customary/indigenous leaders, state leaders (elected or appointed), political party leaders, spiritual leaders, etc. **For the community land protection process to function there must be relatively good cooperation between all community**

leaders. If community leaders cannot work together peacefully throughout the community land protection process – if they struggle for dominance, or publicly challenge each other's actions – the community may divide into factions allied with particular leaders and activities may stall.

HOW TO WORK EFFECTIVELY WITH COMMUNITY LEADERS?

Facilitators should establish a good working relationship with all community leaders and then build leaders' capacity to lead community land protection activities, cooperate and coordinate with one another, and mobilize community-wide support for the land protection effort. To support this, facilitators should:

- **Determine how to communicate with all local leaders.** While the Community Land Mobilizers will be the main intermediaries between facilitators and the community, it is important to liaise through one or more leaders as well. To know who best to liaise with, facilitators should convene the community and all leaders and in a large group discussion ask the community and its leaders to identify one primary contact person among the leaders who will have the responsibility of communicating all news and information to the other local leaders and the community.
- **Identify trusted leaders.** Facilitators must be careful to align themselves with leaders who are trusted by community members. Unsuspecting facilitators may inadvertently align themselves with leaders who want to grab community lands or who are seen as corrupt. In such instances, community members might perceive the facilitators as supporters of the

leaders' land grab and threaten them with violence or completely reject the effort. To avoid this, it is best to spend time asking questions about the leadership structures in the community and listen carefully to community members' responses. They may not directly identify untrustworthy leaders, so pay attention to evasive responses, body language, and the nuances of how people interact with each leader. Facilitators should also ask regional leaders or officials about community dynamics and pay attention to their own intuitions about who is honest and trustworthy. It may be useful to undertake a "leadership mapping" exercise during any baseline focus group discussions, during which time facilitators ask focus group discussion participants to "map out" all existing community leaders and discuss their roles in the community.

- **Build the capacity of trusted leaders.** Community leaders may need special training and capacity-building to prepare them to best support community land protection efforts. At these trainings, facilitators might emphasize that:
 - Local leaders have the power to help their communities succeed – or fail;
 - Leaders should lead by example by participating in all land protection activities, respecting all agreed boundaries, and implementing and abiding by all by-laws; and
 - Leaders have an important role to play in helping to resolve land disputes that arise.

Consider training community leaders in land conflict resolution/mediation skills, principles of good governance and equity, mobilization strategies, participatory meeting facilitation (to ensure women and minority groups speak and are heard), by-laws drafting, and transparent financial management. Facilitators should notice which leaders are eager to learn and take time to foster their interest and build their capacity. Stronger, better prepared community leaders will mean that the facilitation team will have to put less energy toward maintaining the community's momentum through the process.

- **Proactively address power struggles between leaders.** Community leaders often have different mandates, objectives, and visions for how their community will best grow and prosper. When these visions conflict – or when leaders strive to claim more influence – there can be power struggles. In such instances, facilitators should consider calling all the leaders together to speak about grievances, conflicting agendas and solutions, with the goal of reaching a consensus about the direction and aims of the community's

land protection process. During such discussions, facilitators should continually remind the leaders of the overall goals of protecting community lands and increasing community wellbeing. Facilitators may need to seek support from higher-level customary/indigenous leaders or government officials to help mediate these discussions.

- In instances of power struggles between leaders, it may be useful to invoke prayer and sacred law. Facilitators should look to local culture and spirituality for influences that will help keep leaders at their moral and ethical center, away from self-interest or desire for power. Depending on the culture, it may be helpful to invoke ancestors, future generations, or relevant deities/spirits to focus the energy away from conflict and toward what is best for the community.
- **Include leaders who may be inadvertently excluded.** Leaders who are excluded from the land protection work may feel threatened and attempt to sabotage the community's progress. Some communities may not immediately involve all leaders, especially spiritual or cultural leaders who may not seem necessary to the community land protection process. However, involving these leaders can make the process more legitimate and thorough: these leaders often have significant traditional knowledge or expertise related to the use and management of natural resources, the preservation of sacred sites, the location of key medicinal plants, and the history of the community's changes and growth over time.
- **Carefully manage leaders' participation in community land protection efforts.** Facilitators may notice that leaders attempt to dominate or control a community's land protection process. If leaders are speaking too much in community discussions or being overbearing, one useful strategy is to assign a dominant leader to be the moderator of a discussion and ask him or her to call on all meeting participants (especially women, youth and members of minority groups) to add their comments.

If leaders argue that community members are not knowledgeable enough to take part in community land protection activities and decisions, facilitators should remind them that if leaders or elites dominate the community land protection process, it will be a weak process and likely fail. Be firm in explaining that community-wide participation and support is necessary to ensure that community rules and boundaries are respected and fair. If leaders refuse to support a fully participatory process, facilitators should be prepared to invoke the Terms of Engagement and withdraw from the community.

WHAT TO DO WHEN CORRUPT LEADERS TRY TO OBSTRUCT OR UNDERMINE THE PROCESS?

Corrupt leaders may secretly or overtly try to sabotage community land protection efforts in an effort to maintain or claim control over land and natural resources. Often, such leaders have authority in the community and can use their influence to reject facilitators. In one community in Uganda, 95% of the community welcomed the facilitation team and urgently requested their help in completing the land protection process, because they were aware that their leader was trying to claim the community's grazing lands as his own private lands. Yet when the facilitation team arrived for their third community meeting, this leader was waiting with a group of men armed with knives, and told them that they were not welcomed in the community and should never come back. The facilitation team had no choice but to leave. To proactively address such challenges before violence is threatened, facilitators should:

- **Avoid communities with powerful, corrupt leaders:** Undertake a careful community vetting process and work only with communities in which all leaders are clearly in support of the community land protection process.
- **Do research and be prepared:** After holding focus group discussions in a community (that include questions that collect information about leaders), complete a power-mapping exercise that identifies all the community leaders, their spheres of influence and authority, and their known or suspected personal interests.
- **If already engaged in the community:** Allow the community to impeach the leader (if possible) or seek support and intervention from higher authorities with the power to control corrupt leaders or remove them from leadership.
- **Leverage the support of the regional leaders that community leaders report to. Strong, unified support from regional leadership will increase a community's confidence in the land protection process.** Facilitating organizations should work to ensure that regional leaders are aware and supportive of community land protection efforts. Facilitators can encourage communities to invite regional customary and state leaders to attend community land protection meetings as appropriate. Regional-level leaders may also be helpful for resolving power struggles between local leaders, intractable boundary conflicts in which local leaders remain inflexible, and situations in which community leaders act corruptly or seek to undermine the community land protection process.

COMMUNITY-LED ACTION TO REMOVE CORRUPT LEADERS

In Liberia, one community removed a leader from power after discovering that he had been quietly working to impede the community's progress in order to protect his own land holdings and misappropriating funds collected for food at community meetings. In another community, women and youth raised concerns that their Interim Committee members had privileged local elites' interests during community boundary harmonization. In both instances, facilitators observed that when communities took action to remove and replace corrupt or poorly-performing leaders, the change immediately improved the communities' ability to progress through the remaining land protection activities.

OTHER TIPS FOR WORKING WITH LEADERS

In some contexts, it may be most effective for a trusted, high-capacity community leader to serve as one of the Community Land Mobilizers. (See the chapter on *Selection and Training of Community Land Mobilizers and Interim Coordinating Committees.*)

Monitor for and manage leaders who are opposed to what may seem like reductions in their authority. Leaders may oppose the by-laws drafting process, as it serves to make them more accountable and inherently diminishes their power. Specifically, the by-laws drafting process provides community members the opportunity to publicly voice their dissatisfaction with their leader(s), challenge their leaders' conduct, and institute term limits, periodic elections for their leaders, and criteria for impeachment. Leaders may oppose such efforts and seek to influence or sabotage a participatory, inclusive by-laws drafting process. (See the chapter on *Community By-Laws and Legal Education.*)

When creating the Land Governance Council, ensure that existing leaders are included and maintain (some of) their authority. If existing leaders are excluded from these new governance structures, they may undermine the authority of the Council or create a split in the community. (See the chapter on *Creating Land Governance Councils.*)

STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS AND POWER MAPPING ACTIVITY
 (COURTESY OF THE COMMUNITY SELF RELIANCE CENTRE, NEPAL)

The goal of this “stakeholder analysis” is to catalogue and understand the positions of all allies and opponents to a community’s land protection effort.

In this activity, facilitators support either a group of Community Land Mobilizers (at a training and supervision session) or each community (in a community meeting) to undertake a regional stakeholder analysis.

To facilitate the activity, facilitators draw the following chart on a large piece of white paper. The community then brainstorms every key “actor” in the community or region (including customary leaders, government officials, elites, companies, neighboring communities, ancestors, future generations, etc.) who would be: involved in community land protection efforts; support the efforts; oppose the efforts; have a strong opinion about their results and impacts; or be ambivalent about the efforts.

As each “actor” is mentioned, facilitators write the actors’ names on a sticky note, and ask the group where to place each “actor” on the chart. (As the group debates, the facilitator can move the sticky note around the chart.) Facilitators should continue to prompt participants to continue naming all actors they can think of – and to be creative!

Significant/ High Influence					
Some Influence					
Minimal/ Low Influence					
	Strongly Supportive	Supportive	Neutral	Opposed	Strongly Opposed

By the end of the activity, all the various stakeholder groups and actors should be located in the most appropriate place on the board. Facilitators should allow time for participants to get a good look at the position of each actor. Facilitators should then lead a group discussion of how to best navigate and address the various dynamics that will likely arise during the community land protection efforts.

During this discussion, facilitators might ask such questions as:

1. How can we most effectively use the time and energy of people who are supportive?
2. What are good strategies to move an actor from “neutral” to “supportive”?
3. What are good strategies to move an actor from “opposed” to “neutral” – or “supportive”?
4. How can we communicate and work with actors that may be opposed or strongly opposed?
5. Notice how some government actors are opposed and other government actors are supportive – how can we use the supportive government actors to help us work with the unsupportive government actors?

Facilitators can then conclude the activity by asking participants to share the most important “take-aways” from the discussion. Later, facilitators can remind the community and its Community Land Mobilizers to use the ideas that they brainstormed during interactions with the various actors/stakeholders considered in this activity.