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<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Conflict over the control of timber in a municipality in Chiquitania, Bolivia</th>
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<td><strong>Key Words</strong></td>
<td>VIP (Values, Interests and Positions), Conflict Management, Development Projects, Forestry, Municipalities, Chiquitania, Bolivia</td>
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| **Context** | Timber in the Chiquitania region of Bolivia includes many precious woods of great value. Currently, timber buyers acquire timber from people and communities at a very low price. They do so by advancing money for basic needs in exchange for commitments to deliver timber at a fixed price. Since many local people have very low incomes and benefit from this method, much of the better wood is captured in this way. Trees are cut in a random way and most timber leaves the area unprocessed.

The Municipal Government has a legal responsibility to help communities develop forest management plans and to ensure that timber is cut legally and according to these plans. It monitors and controls the process by approving timber cutting agreements between buyers and sellers. With help from the Spanish... |
Government, a Municipal Government in the region has set up a project to purchase and partly process timber locally so that communities can realize more of the potential value of the forests. It has opened a small mill, a drying facility and a carpentry shop open for community use. Making sure that the mill has enough high value timber has been difficult because timber buyers are buying timber that was promised to the Municipal Forestry Project by communities. The system of loans and debt forces many people in forest communities to ignore the Project’s agreements.

The Forestry Officer employed by the Municipal Government to monitor and authorize all forestry agreements with communities is married to one of the timber buyers in the region. This puts her in a potential conflict of interest. Struggles over the control of high value timber have emerged in at least 4 communities where her husband is active. The Municipal Government decided that a meeting was needed to develop a strategy to reduce the impact of all timber buyers on the activities of the municipal mill. It invited the lead author, a PhD student undertaking research in the region, to facilitate the discussion.

**Purpose**

While initially the event purpose was to develop a strategy for dealing with all timber buyers, it shifted during the meeting to a focus on the emerging conflict between the Municipal Forestry Project, the Forestry Officer and a particular timber buyer.

**Process Summary**

The Mayor of the Municipal Government convened a meeting of elected officials, representatives of the four forest communities, the Director of the Municipal Development Office, the Forestry Officer, the Municipal Legal Counsel, the timber buyer active in the four communities, the Director of the Municipal Forestry Project, and a facilitator (the lead author of this report).

After the Mayor stated the purpose of the meeting, the facilitator began a profile of forestry stakeholders using the SAS$^2$ technique *Social Analysis CLIP*. The assessment was interrupted when several people accused the Forestry Officer of ignoring what her husband had been doing, namely buying timber that had been
committed to the Municipal Forestry Project. They called on the Municipal Government to immediately fire the Forestry Officer. The discussion began to falter. The timber buyer left the group and did not return. The facilitator then asked the group to shift its focus to a discussion of the moral values and interests at stake. This led to an assessment of possible ways to resolve the conflict concerning the Forestry Officer and the timber buyer (her husband) while at the same time meeting the broader goals of the Municipal Forest Project and forest communities.

The assessment continued with participants who represented the four forest communities and the Municipal Forest Project. The Forestry Officer remained to defend herself, but did not participate in the rating exercise. Four possible actions in response to the conflict were discussed and the position of the group on each of these actions assessed in terms of their moral acceptability and the gains and losses (interests) associated with them. A scale of -10 to +10 was used to rate the positions of the group on each action. The meeting ended with the group describing in detail a proposed agreement it felt could be the basis for negotiation with the Forestry Officer and the timber buyer. The participants in the exercise understood that the results would be part of the PhD. study by the facilitator, and agreed to share their information so long as the communities and individuals remained anonymous.

Analysis

The group began the exercise by assessing the current situation where the timber buyer pays forest communities very low prices for high-value timber and diverts timber away from the Municipal Forest Project, with the unspoken approval of the Forestry Officer. People argued that allowing the Forestry Officer to ignore the actions of her husband was morally unacceptable to them and would bring very few benefits to the forest communities (due to low sale prices). They gave a value of –5 to the moral acceptability of the current situation and a value of +1 to gains they now have from the sale of timber. This resulted in Position 1 in Figure 1.

Firing the Forestry Officer was an action proposed by a number of participants. The group assessed this as the right thing to do
because government officials should not be allowed to favour their own family members when they hold public office. This action received a value of +5 in terms of its moral acceptability. They were aware, however, that doing so would throw the Municipal Forestry Project and all forest communities into an even deeper crisis since the many agreements set up by the Forestry Officer might not go ahead at all. This would affect more than the 4 communities where the Forestry Officer’s husband is active. They also noted that this action would have a political cost for the Municipal Government. It would be embarrassed because the harvesting agreements had failed and because it had fired one of its officials. On balance, the action would result in losses, rated by the group as -8. This assessment resulted in Position 2 in Figure 1.

During the discussion, the Forestry Officer defended herself by saying that if the Municipal Government tried to fire her she would organize a petition among all forest communities to oppose the action. She argued that many forest communities are satisfied with the harvest agreements they have with timber buyers, and that she has done nothing wrong. The group assessed this proposed action by the Forestry Officer. It decided that even if most of the forest communities supported her petition, this would still not fully satisfy their concerns about the moral acceptability of the timber buyer’s actions and the Forestry Officer (-3 on the scale of moral acceptability). Many of the current agreements in communities might go ahead but the Municipal Forest Project would not be able to meet its needs and the Municipal Government would still be embarrassed (-2 on the scale of gains and losses). The group decided that this action would result in fewer losses than firing the Forestry Officer but that it remained morally unacceptable to them (Position 3, Figure 1).

After a lively discussion of these actions and the positions of the group in relation to these actions, the facilitator asked whether or not they could imagine a compromise that would satisfy their interests and the moral values they hold. The group developed a series of conditions it would be willing to negotiate with the timber buyer and the Forestry Officer. First, the Forestry Officer would
need to commit to active monitoring of all harvest agreements made by timber buyers, including her husband, to ensure that high value timber was not diverted from the community and Municipal Forestry Project agreements. Second, the Forestry Officer would need to cooperate with a representative of the Municipal Government who would monitor her work. Third, the timber buyer would need to direct to the Municipal Forestry Project all of the timber it could handle this season. Fourth, the Municipal Government would promptly approve harvest agreements made by the timber buyer as long as the forest communities agreed and had no other options.

The group assessed this proposed agreement and concluded that it would satisfy their current interests (+6 on the scale of gains and losses) and be morally acceptable to them (+6 on the scale of moral acceptability). Their position, shown by the number 4 in Figure 1, reflected the group’s view that while the other actions failed to satisfy their interests and their moral values, the proposed agreement could satisfy both.

Figure 1: Positions of the representatives of forest communities and the Municipal Forestry Project on proposed actions.
Interpretation

The group was aware that it needed to shift to a position that could satisfy both its interests and moral values while at the same time allowing for compromise. People were willing to negotiate an agreement that would also benefit the timber buyer because the Municipal Forestry Project’s capacity to purchase and process timber was limited and the season’s harvest would end soon, with the start of the rainy season. Any further delays or complications would reduce the short-term success of the Municipal Forestry Project. This would in turn affect the way forest communities saw its long-term potential and their level of commitment to the project. The group was also aware that some concrete benefits were currently coming to local people, thanks in part to the work of the Forestry Officer. Her conflict of interest could be managed by making it clear to all that favouritism and diverting of wood by timber buyers would not be tolerated by the leaders in the municipality and other stakeholders in the forest sector.

Action

The Forestry Officer made a verbal commitment to the conditions set out in the proposed agreement. The Municipal Government decided to meet the timber broker in question the next day. The Municipal lawyer, Forestry Project Manager and the Forestry Officer were invited to attend. The goal of the meeting was to negotiate the details of an agreement that would meet the conditions that the group had developed.

Observations on the Process

The exercise was very tense and difficult for everyone. A lot time was dedicated to discussion. The timber buyer and the Forestry Officer entered and left the meeting several times. Sometimes the Mayor had to use his authority to keep the discussion going, despite the disagreements.

The exercise with Social Analysis CLIP helped raise relevant issues in the group and provided some of the information and concepts needed to discuss the interests and moral values of stakeholders. This made it possible to continue the discussion, and to turn shift from blame and criticism to exploring the values and interests the group was willing to negotiate. Using a flip chart to graph the
current situation and proposed actions helped to depersonalize the
discussion while staying focused on common understandings of the
interests and values at stake. The process worked. Tension was
reduced over time and the discussion continued until a resolution
was reached. Participants said that the result was satisfactory and
much more useful than they had initially thought was possible
given the controversial nature of the problem.

Post-script: The agreement held until the end of the harvest season.
Although the Municipal Forestry Project did not get all of the wood
it needed, it got enough to show the Project’s potential to the
forestry communities. The Forestry Officer was eventually fired
and a new person was hired under much clearer working
arrangements.