COMMUNITY DEFINITION

During the first step of the community land protection process, the facilitating organization should consult regional leaders, relevant government officials, and community members about how best to define the "community" that will undertake land protection activities. A community's decision about how to define itself will depend upon the cultural, political and geo-spatial realities on the ground and the preferences of local leadership and community members. **When possible, it is best to support communities to define themselves based on *existing* customary or cultural groupings or governance structures that are associated with a specific area of land.** These existing structures have often evolved over many generations to fit with a local social and environmental context. At times, existing definitions of community are exclusionary or discriminatory; however, rather than disregarding or replacing them, facilitators should encourage discussion of how they could be made more inclusive. If existing structures and "communities" are overlooked, the process risks operating on potentially artificial definitions of "community" that are not locally legitimate or sustainable.

Defining "community" is a very complex endeavor with political, financial, and logistical impacts. The community definition process must be sensitive to dynamics of geography, identity, history and culture. As such, community definition should not be left to bureaucrats or external "experts" who might impose an inappropriate definition and deprive communities of an opportunity for collective action and cohesion-building. Instead, skilled facilitators should help communities navigate a self-identification process to define their territories and membership. To ensure inclusivity, the definition process must involve leaders and members of neighboring populations; otherwise, one group of people may exclude other user groups who share claims over an area of land.

Community self-definition is challenging because of overlapping definitions of authority, territory and identity. The process is often complicated by:

- The nested quality of rural social organization, in which small spatial or social units[1] of organization are contained within larger units, which themselves may make up components of even larger units (see diagram);

- The structure of decentralized government, which may not always align with traditional or locally recognized social structures;

- Differences between locally recognized or customary boundaries and the boundaries recognized by the state or government administration;

- Historical fracturing and division of social units, often based upon intra- and inter-family conflict or scarcity of resources;

- The existence of common areas shared between populations that identify as separate communities;

- Historical migration patterns, ecological changes, and infrastructure development; and

- Competition over valuable or scarce natural resources.

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1. Smaller spatial or social "units" or sub-sections within a larger community may be called village, town, zone, ward, etc.

"Community" can be defined at various points along a spectrum, ranging from the smallest or most local level of accepted "community," to the largest or most encompassing level of accepted "community." Each level has advantages and disadvantages for community land protection efforts that facilitators should explain to communities and their leaders:

If it exists, an intermediate level of "community" is often a good compromise, as it may strike a balance between these advantages and disadvantages.

	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
Highest/largest level	• Protects the most amount of land • Protects common forests, grazing lands, and water bodies contained within the geographic area. • Fewer boundaries to harmonize, which may result in less land conflict. • Fewer "communities" will have to undertake the community land protection process to protect a given area of land, which may reduce costs.	• Population may not think of itself as one "community" — allegiances and identities may be allied with smaller units. • The larger the area, the bigger the population: participation may not reflect the entire population and decisions may not be representative. • Necessary to have many meetings at the "sub-unit" level to ensure participation. • Information dissemination and mobilization will be more challenging. • National governments may be averse to documenting such large areas of land. • May require higher costs and more time and resources per community.
Lowest/ smallest level	• Clear sense of common identity. • Smaller population means that it will be easier to ensure full community participation in all activities. • Mobilization and information dissemination will be easier. • Process may go faster, as a small community may be more coherent, unified and collaborative. • Potentially requires fewer resources and less time per community.	• Protects the least amount of land. • Common areas may have to be divided, with the land registered as "shared" or documented with reciprocal shared use agreements between communities with claims to it. • Greater number of boundaries to harmonize, which may result in more land conflicts. • Many more "communities" will have to undertake the community land protection process to protect a given area of land, which may increase costs.

Experience has led to two additional lessons concerning community self-identification:

1. **Existing units provide a useful starting point:** It may be useful to begin discussions of self-identification by examining existing state, customary, or indigenous units of "community"; however, ultimately the members of a potential community must agree on a level of land-holding that makes sense to them based on their current context, history, socio-political dynamics, and the practicalities of governance.

2. **Community cohesion is critical:** Community cohesion – the sense of togetherness and shared values between members of a population – is essential for inclusive, peaceful, and effective participatory decision-making around issues of land and natural resource management. Without cohesion, reaching agreement about community self-identification will be very challenging and the process may be vulnerable to disagreement and manipulation by elites and other interest groups. Most importantly, when the community feels itself to be a coherent group all aspects of the community land protection process are likely to progress more efficiently and successfully.

HOW TO DETERMINE WHICH LEVEL OF "COMMUNITY" TO WORK WITH?

Because this decision must be made before work begins in any "community," it is often a decision made by the facilitating organization and local leaders. Before meeting with leaders, facilitating organizations should first do their own cost-benefit analysis to arrive at a general understanding of what would be most effective, participatory and efficient.

Once the facilitating organization has undertaken its own analysis, facilitators should meet with both state and customary local leaders to discuss options, debate the benefits and drawbacks of each option, and arrive at consensus. Facilitators may want to ask local leaders prepare for this meeting by convening groups of community members to discuss the issue. Higher-level leaders may also want to convene meetings of local-level leaders to discuss the decision together before the meeting with facilitators.

At the meeting, facilitators should support leaders to explore and consider local dynamics such as:

- **Community members' sense of identity.** What "level" of administrative or social organization do people most readily identify as belonging to? How difficult would it be for them to begin to identify themselves as part of a different community "unit?" What is the ethnic make-up (homogeneous or highly diverse) of the community? If the "community" is highly diverse, would the various groups be willing to identify as one unit, and work together to protect – and then manage – their lands?

- **Ease of participation.** What "level" of community will ensure the highest rates of participation by all community members? How easily will people be able to attend community meetings? How comfortable will people feel speaking publicly in community meetings?

- **Overlapping use claims shared by various separately identified groups.** Do multiple groups share use rights over an area of land? If so, would these groups be interested in joining together as a "community" to protect their lands? If the groups that share the resource are unwilling to register their lands as one "community," how will the land be divided or shared – and what kinds of agreements will be necessary to ensure that all overlapping use rights are preserved and protected?

- **Power dynamics within and between the highest and lowest statutory and customary administrative unit.** What governance structures and institutions exist and function well at each possible level of "community"? What governance structures are functioning poorly? If smaller units combine into one larger "community," would leaders be able to cooperate, or would there be a high degree of conflict between leaders?

- **Degree of tenure security and potential threats to community land claims.** What level of "community" would be the most effective in terms of guarding against land grabbing by outsiders? At what level would local people be best able to negotiate with outsiders, then approve or reject potential investments?

- **Community cohesion.** What is the largest level of "community" at which there is significant cohesion between members, and ability to work together effectively to plan for and actualize shared goals? What is the rate of rural to urban migration? Is there a highly transient population living temporarily within the community?

- **Feasibility of working with the population/logistical factors.** What logistical or resource-related challenges may arise when working at each possible level of "community"? What factors might make working at each possible level of "community" easier and more efficient?

After extensive discussion concerning these questions and other considerations appropriate to the local context, the facilitating organization should support leaders to arrive at consensus concerning the definition of "community" that should be used in the community land protection process.

Following the leaders' meeting, facilitators should verify the leaders' decisions in large meetings with participation from all populations and sub-units included within the "communities" as identified by the leaders. If the local people do not agree with their leaders, the facilitating organization should convene further meetings with leaders and local populations until there is agreement on the political/geospatial unit that should be used for community land documentation. Next, facilitators can begin the process of selecting which communities to work with, as described in the chapter on *Community Selection*.

COMMUNITY SELF-IDENTIFICATION STRATEGIES IN LIBERIA

In Liberia, rural areas are governed by three main levels of administrative unit: "chiefdoms" are made up of two to three "clans," while each clan may include anywhere from five to thirty "towns." (Large towns may also divide into even smaller "sections" or "quarters.") To support community self-definition, the Sustainable Development Institute (SDI) undertakes four core activities:

1. **Scoping Research.** Before entering a community, SDI completes initial background research on the community to ensure that staff have a basic understanding of the area and region. Staff investigate the history of the area and the settlement location(s), population demographics, statutory and customary governance structures, and land use patterns. Staff consult national and international sources, including local informants and experts familiar with the location or region. The goal is a preliminary understanding of the administrative and governance structures as well as a general grasp of dynamics relating to community cohesion, population, culture, land use and management, and livelihoods. These factors are important for identifying community leaders and influential community members such as:

   - Statutory leaders/local-level government officials;
   - Customary leaders;
   - Elders (older individuals who hold no other official title but are well respected);
   - Spiritual leaders;
   - Community leaders (leaders of community-based organizations such as women's groups, farmers' groups or youth groups); and
   - Individuals with large private land holdings.

2. **Community Leadership Consultations.** Understanding community dynamics takes time and requires patience. Facilitators visit the location to build relationships with community leaders (including women, youth, and elders). Staff meet with statutory and customary leaders in order to introduce the project and begin to sketch out potential socio-political and geographic boundaries of each community. These meetings should include one-on-one discussions and larger focus group discussions. Questions explored during these meetings include:

   - What is the level of community cohesion?
   - What local governance structures and institutions exist?
   - Who are the local leaders?
   - Does the community see itself as a land-owning unit?
   - Is the local population urbanizing? Is the population transient (moving in and out)?
   - How cohesive and effective is the community in identifying and addressing common community problems around land and natural resource claims, use and management?
   - What natural resources exist in the area and how are they used?
   - What natural resources are shared between populations? How are they shared?
   - How are decisions about land and natural resources made?

- What local institutions exist and how do they operate?
- Are there any companies or investors active in the area?
- Are there many private land ownership claims in the area?
- What are the major land-related disputes in the area?
- What are the land rights and status of women in the region?
- Are there any current major threats to community common lands?

These meetings usually result in leaders' coming to an agreement on how they will define local communities, according to what is most feasible, practical, and effective for their needs and interests. The leaders' joint decision provides direction for all resulting community land protection work. If leaders cannot come to agreement at this time, the meetings are still helpful for facilitators to gain a preliminary sense of how communities in the region are likely to self-identify in the future.

3. **Community-wide Consultations.** Facilitators verify the information received from leaders by convening focus groups and wider consultative meetings open to everyone living within the target area. Participants at these meetings are encouraged to consider the same questions as those discussed by their leaders. After completing several rounds of community-wide consultations, facilitators have a clear understanding of how people in the region identify "communities."

4. **Final Decision-Making Process.** After the community-wide meetings, facilitators bring together local leaders and the broader community to reconcile differences and collectively confirm whether and how each community should self-identify. If an agreement is reached, the meeting should conclude with a celebration where each sub-population and their leadership publicly consent to the agreed level of community identification and commit to undertaking the process of community land protection at this level. SDI has found that such a celebration can help to build trust and consensus across the entire self-identified community, and is helpful to generating momentum and excitement for the upcoming community land protection process.

Illustration of the multiple, nested levels of social organization in rural Liberia

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