

Case Study

Engaging Smallholders to Expand Sustainable Timber Certification

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Summary

Sustainability certification is widely used to promote sustainable practices, improve transparency and gain market access for sustainable products. However, the extensive requirements and paperwork involved can make attaining certification difficult for smallholder farmers.

To help address this, Partnerships for Forests collaborated with the Forest Stewardship Council in East Africa to promote group certification uptake by the Western Tree Planters Association (WETPA) in Western Kenya, and so achieve responsible management of their woodlots for timber and other tree products and services. Technical training and mentorship were provided,

including the sharing of lessons learned by Tanzanian P4F-grantee Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative. A total of 70 WETPA smallholder farmer members, 49% of who were women, participated in the capacity building.

As a result, WETPA is in a position to establish its own group certification scheme – initially for 100 members, and to be expanded to all 8,000 WETPA members over the next four to five years. The initiative shows that group certification and use of tools such as the FSC’s Continuous Improvement Procedure make FSC certification more accessible to smallholder farmers and promote sustainable forest practices, improve livelihoods and strengthen market access.

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The need to make sustainability certification schemes more attainable



Sustainability certification is widely used as a tool to move markets towards greater sustainability, transparency, and responsible business practices. It incentivises greater responsibly in return for premium prices, and offer more transparency to people who are concerned about the environmental and social footprint of the goods they buy. While mandating, monitoring and validating responsible business practices is a requirement in shifting whole markets towards greater sustainability, acquiring certification can be time consuming and costly, which often makes it unattainable to smallholder farmers.

Partnerships for Forests (P4F) collaborated with the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) in East Africa to promote group certification for responsible timber with smallholder farmers through mentoring and capacity building including trainings. The partnership focused on stakeholder engagement of local communities and public institutions, to ensure their interests in forest management are considered. This case study shares learning from these activities on how to improve accessibility of certification schemes to smallholder farmers.

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Expanding group certification for smallholders and community timber producers

FSC is working with P4F-grantee and pioneer of group certification in Africa, Mpingo Conservation and Development Initiative (MCDI) – a non-profit organisation in Tanzania that works on the conservation and sustainable management of African blackwood, also known as mpingo. MCDI focuses on promoting responsible harvest and trade of this valuable timber species while supporting local communities and biodiversity conservation efforts in East Africa. It manages a community-owned natural forest which is the pioneer FSC

group certificate holder in East Africa. However, it was facing challenges in becoming financial viable, generating adequate income from timber sales, and securing investments. P4F supported MCDI to develop a long-term sustainability strategy, identifying international buyers for certified products, facilitating sales contracts, financing internal monitoring and audits, expanding FSC-certified villages, and exploring value-added timber production. The project expanded the FSC-certified area from 186,839 to 247,636 hectares.

Introduction to the Forest Stewardship Council

Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification is a widely recognised standard that promotes responsible forest management globally. It ensures that products originate from forests that are managed in an environmentally sustainable, socially beneficial, and economically viable manner. Acquiring FSC certification enables smallholders to tap into local and international markets for certified forest goods and services, secure price premiums (where viable), gain acknowledgement for sustainable practices, and access financial aid and technical assistance from donors. To obtain the FSC forest management certification, smallholders and communities need to demonstrate how ten FSC principles and criteria for forest stewardship are met.

FSC certification has been operating in Eastern Africa for slightly over a decade,

covering over half a million hectares of certified forests across Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda. Despite the growing local and international demand for forest products, especially timber, the demand for FSC-certified products from East Africa is still in its infancy and needs collaborative effort to market products.

The other major challenges smallholders face in acquiring certification include: the inability to cover the cost of evaluation, audit, and reporting; a lack of information about forest certification; difficulty in interpreting forest management standards; difficulty accessing markets because of irregular quantities and qualities of products; lack of capacity, resources, and technical support; and external constraints, such as political barriers. In response, FSC developed a certification scheme to support smallholders to apply as an organised group, making the process more cost-effective and time-efficient. This group certification approach relies on a group manager to provide technical support and conduct internal audits and monitoring.



Knowledge exchange workshops to promote group FSC certification with the Uganda Timber Growers Association

Following the success of MCDI's FSC group certification, P4F helped to coordinate the transfer of lessons from MCDI to similar initiatives in Uganda and Kenya. Between September 2022 and March 2023, P4F facilitated three workshops in Uganda to improve the inclusion of smallholders in the Ugandan Timber Growers Association's (UTGA) FSC group certification initiative. During the workshops, key stakeholders – including the Ugandan National Forest Authority (NFA), Uganda Wildlife Authority, Tanzania Tree Growers Association, World Agroforestry, and Gatsby Africa – discussed the regulatory framework and land ownership needs for FSC certification in Tanzania and Uganda. These discussions included the role of regulators in enhancing certification accessibility, strategies for integrating more farmers into community forest management (CFM) schemes, and obstacles to smallholder involvement in FSC group initiatives.

MCDI shared the model it has established for assisting smallholder farmers and communities in obtaining FSC certification. They emphasised the concept of gathering multiple forest owners under a single entity, which then holds the FSC certificate for the group. The FSC presented information on successful approaches to forest certification, drawing from key achievements highlighted by MCDI.

As a result of this work, UTGA set out steps for expanding FSC certification, including establishing a dedicated technical team, advocating for responsible forest sourcing in policy reviews, and identifying income-generating opportunities such as Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES). UTGA later expanded the scope of its group certification to encompass a natural forest, in addition to the three existing forest plantations covered by the scheme. UTGA formalised an agreement with NFA to restore, manage, and conserve 1000 hectares of natural forest. The management objectives include enhancing forest ecosystem conservation, establishing tree seedling nurseries, increasing forest cover, and mobilising resources through partnerships.



“The workshops in general provided a lot of insights on how the UTGA group scheme could extend its scope to include communities and smallholders. UTGA has expanded the scope of its group certificate to include a natural forest, working with communities through community tree planting programmes is key. The lessons from MCDI through the support of P4F in working with community tree planting programmes was very useful.”

Peter Mulondo, UTGA



Mentorship and training for smallholder timber farmers to improve accessibility of certification with the Western Tree Planters Association in Kenya

In Kenya, P4F collaborated with the FSC in Eastern Africa and the Western Tree Planters Association (WETPA), from August to January 2024. WETPA is an 8,000-member strong organisation that works to improve farmers' livelihoods through sustainable environmental conservation, tree commercialisation, capacity building, and financial services while integrating value chains.

The project activities focused directly on smallholder timber growers. The first activity was a three-day workshop for members of WETPA and the Malava Community Forest Association – a community forest association managing a natural forest in Western Kenya which joined WETPA's group. The primary goal of the training was for the WETPA secretariat and selected farmer members to understand the benefits and value of FSC certification and to enhance their capacity

to implement forest management certification using the FSC's Continuous Improvement Procedure (CIP)¹. The session was also attended by representatives from the government (Kenya Forest Service and Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock), MCDI, P4F, and FSC. Almost half of the 70 participants (49%) were women.

The sessions featured introductory presentations by representatives from WETPA and the county's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, outlining their respective roles and mandates in forest management. A representative from MCDI shared insights into the benefits of FSC certification in attracting investment, as well as the steps needed, from recruiting farmers to achieving and maintaining certification. Participants gained knowledge of FSC principles using examples from MCDI and UTGA, who already have an FSC group certificate.



WETPA members and key stakeholders during the workshop on September 2023

1. An FSC certification procedure that allows small forest owners and communities to be initially certified based only on a subset of forest management requirements and offers flexible steps towards conformity with the remaining requirements within a defined timeframe.



WETPA member farmers in a group discussion

WETPA members also actively participated in group and panel discussions. One area of focus was gauging the extent to which participants had understood the information shared. During a plenary session, farmers explained the FSC principles and criteria, identifying examples of indigenous peoples in Kenya who rely on wild fruits, honey, and herbal medicines or their livelihoods. The participants also emphasised learning from FSC and MCDI about forest use, developing and monitoring forest management plans in coordination with stakeholders, and implementing forest regenerative practices. WETPA members emphasised the importance of identifying sites and species with special cultural, ecological, economic, religious, or spiritual significance for indigenous peoples for conservation. They had also gained knowledge on identifying high conservation value species that provide essential ecosystem services. The workshop was concluded with a field visit to the Malava tree nursery and forest to see some of the environmental and conversation benefits forests provide.

Following the training, a WETPA representative went on a five-day exchange and mentorship programme at MCDI, to gain the knowledge and skills needed to establish the FSC group certification scheme in their area. The overarching objective of the mentorship programme was for the trainee to get insights into MCDI's group certification scheme and to build expertise in the process of attaining and implementing Sustainable Forest Management and Forest Certification.

During the visit to the MCDI office in Kilwa, the WETPA representative, alongside MCDI's internal auditor, gained insights into how MCDI manages their scheme's stakeholder records. The WETPA trainee had the opportunity to observe the internal audit process for three villages in MCDI's group scheme, including a review of key documents – such as the Group Administration Manual, Management Plan, Monitoring documents/system, Previous Internal Audit Report, and filing system – and conducting field assessments of harvesting procedures.



An assessment of harvesting procedures at Nanjirinji village by MCDI's internal auditor, WETPA trainee and the group scheme members



“One valuable lesson I learned from MCDI’s mentorship, which I’ve begun implementing at WETPA, is the importance of record-keeping. Another significant insight is MCDI’s engagement with the Tanzanian national government, contrasting with our previous lack of involvement at WETPA. Leveraging our existing relationship with the national government, we’ve started engaging with the chief in charge of township location for Malava subcounty and Muchi location in Webuye East, to endorse allotment letters for proof of farmers’ landownership as a requirement to facilitate our certification process. Additionally, I’ve observed MCDI’s systematic approach, characterised by a comprehensive forest management plan, internal monitoring system and fire management system, which WETPA is now replicating. Recognising the critical role of documentation in achieving certification, we are diligently establishing our own system.”

Peter Elusa, board secretary at WETPA



Expected long-term impact of including smallholders in forest management certification schemes

WETPA has identified FSC certification as an essential mechanism for enhancing farmer livelihoods by improving market access. Drawing from lessons learned, they are now beginning to implement a group certification scheme that includes 100 farmers in 2024, and is planned to be expanded to all members in the future. The key implementation steps supported by P4F following the training and mentorship include:

- Twenty suggestion boxes were distributed to establish a feedback mechanism from WETPA farmers as a way to incorporate and engage their views and opinions about the impact of management activities on the environment;
- Farmer assessments were conducted in Malava, Lugari and Webuye East, where new members of the group scheme have been recruited. The assessments aimed to identify and document areas of high conservation value, e.g. places of cultural significance to the community, as well as confirming the farmers land ownership status;
- Certification-readiness assessments were conducted in two regions, followed by refresher training on FSC principles for 84 farmers.



“Including smallholder growers in FSC certification can counteract challenges posed by price-cutting brokers and enable farmers to receive adequate prices for their produce. Supporting knowledge exchange among smallholder organisations, such as WETPA, also improves organisational capacity and knowledge of international recognition of FSC-certified products, the certification processes (audits, record keeping), fundraising strategies, and technical agricultural advice, including chemical usage and spacing, as well as securing government support.”

Mr. Stanley Chiveti (Chairman WETPA)

Suggestion boxes ready for distribution to various locations to collect farmer feedback.



WETPA's group scheme is the third of its kind in East Africa, following MCDI and UTGA, and gained valuable insights into development initiatives, stakeholder collaboration, and equitable benefit-sharing practices – previously absent within the organisation – from the lessons learnt at MCDI. WETPA now collaborates with the Kenya Forest Service and national government, recognising their pivotal role in resolving complex land issues and providing clear directives. WETPA has also embraced cooperative models, learning from their experience in working with individual farmers.

FSC promotes the group certification scheme as way for forest managers and farmers with small plots to reduce certification costs and streamline processes. For instance, the FSC training for 70 WETPA members is likely to reach 8,000 WETPA members in the future.

The expected long-term impact of this collaboration includes an increase in the income of smallholder farmers, through the production and marketing of high-quality FSC certified timber, and the exploration of export markets for certified products. This will deliver environmental benefits by incentivising forest protection and the safeguarding of endangered species. Lessons learned from the initial 100 members who are certified will be disseminated and replicated among other interested WETPA members.

“Before our collaboration with P4F, we had already started supporting WETPA on the journey towards the FSC certification. However, the collaboration with P4F has made us achieve a great milestone towards WETPA’s certification, which is bringing onboard key stakeholders – the Malava CFA and the Kenya Forest Service. This collaboration addresses a crucial requirement of the FSC standard, which mandates setting aside at least 10% of natural forests for conservation e.g. preservation of biodiversity. With P4F’s assistance, WETPA has successfully addressed this aspect and is now preparing for certification audits.

Furthermore, sending a WETPA representative to MCDI has provided them with practical knowledge rather than mere theory, offering additional perspectives and motivation for implementation. With a membership of 8000, our goal is to certify all members, starting with a pilot expansion by 100. Additionally, collaboration efforts have led to the development of promotion brochures and information packs for East Africa, facilitating increased awareness and enabling FSC to onboard more smallholders.”

Annah Agasha, FSC East Africa Coordinator



Lessons learned for engaging smallholder farmers in certification schemes to improve accessibility

Training programmes, workshops, and mentorship opportunities can be effective tools in building capacity and engaging smallholder farmers, which is necessary for group certification schemes and which, in turn, improves the accessibility of certification for smallholder farmers more generally. Key lessons learned from this collaboration include:

- Involving communities and smallholders through workshops and feedback mechanisms ensures their understanding of certification amplifies their voices as forest users, managers and owners.
- Central and local government involvement is crucial for transparency, technical support and alignment with existing forestry regulations.
- Facilitating learning and mentorship for smallholders and communities by collaborating

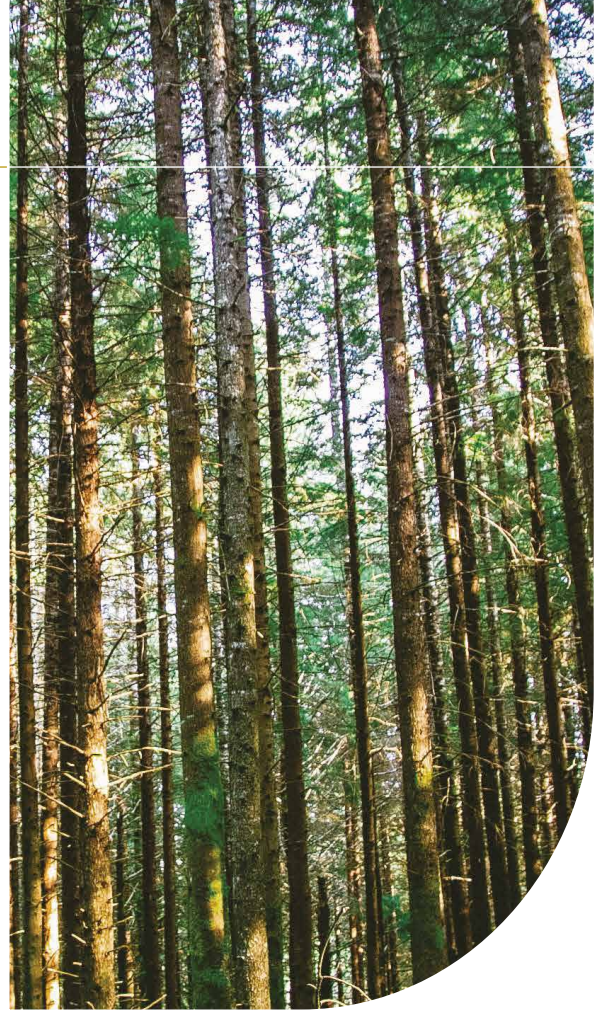
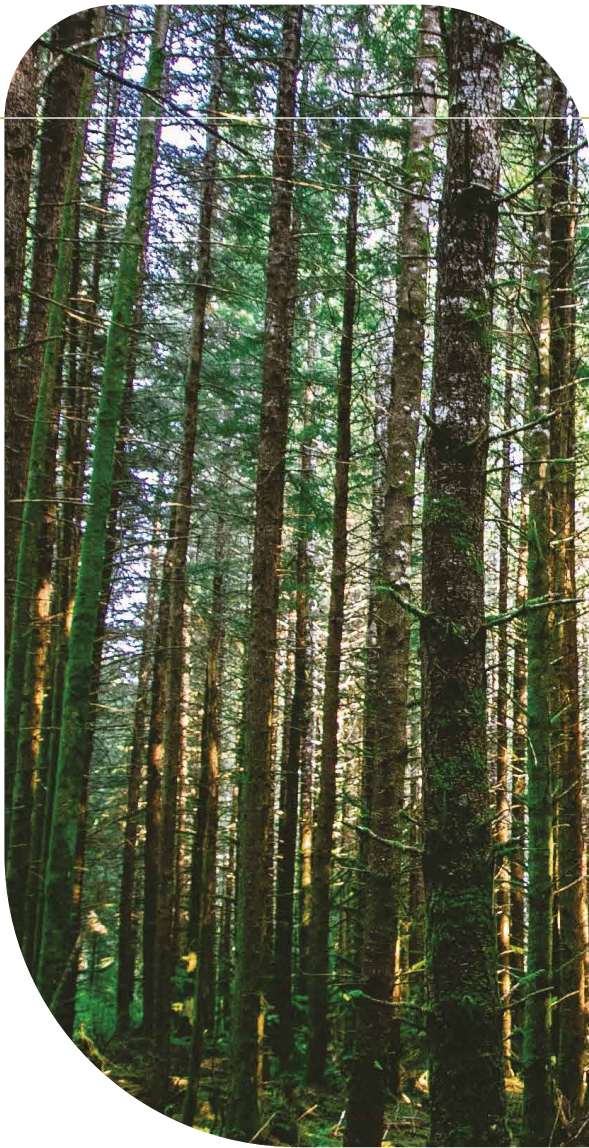
with companies that are already FSC certified accelerates the expansion of the certification scheme.

- Community- and smallholder-based organisations like WETPA and MCDI serve as effective tools for long-term impact, bringing communities and smallholders together for forest protection while supporting livelihoods through certification premiums.

Organisations like MCDI can expand their FSC group certification to more communities and provide other organisations, such as WETPA, with learning around how to address documentation challenges and engage with local communities and government. The group certification approach aims to enhance market access and livelihoods for smallholder farmers involved in sustainable forest management.



Refresher training on FSC principles delivered by the WETPA chairman



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