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Rethinking the role of Civil Society Organisations to increase good forest governance practices in Iran

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Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in shaping and strengthening democratic societies. They give voice to marginalized communities, promote inclusivity and equity, and contribute to the overall well-being and development of societies.

In Iran Civil society organizations play a significant role, despite operating under restrictions imposed by the government. In terms of forest governance, **CSOs contribute to various aspects of forest management, conservation, and sustainable development** through their activities, advocacy, and participation. However, they face several challenges that hinder them to develop their activities properly, such as restrictive legal frameworks, inadequate funding and resources, limited collaboration and coordination among CSOs, government agencies, and other stakeholders, political pressure or resistance from powerful interest groups, and a lack of awareness about the importance of forests in the society.

Governmental policies make efforts to address the challenges of deforestation and climate change. However, in many cases, **government actions to protect forests** exclude the poor and people living near the forests. In rural areas the forest plays a key role in poverty alleviation since vulnerable populations often rely heavily on natural resources to support their livelihoods. Aiming at providing economic alternatives to local communities, CSOs are working to facilitate the establishment of businesses based on the use of forest products. For instance, **there are multitude of opportunities under the umbrella of the non-timber forest products (NTFPs) that encompass the production of various products:** such as honey, mushrooms, truffles, nuts, berries, medicinal and aromatic plants, handicrafts, and ecotourism. However, it remains unclear what the relationship between CSOs, local communities and government is to foster participative forest governance, sustainable growth, and rural development.

Efforts needed to address the challenges faced by CSOs involve strengthening the cooperation and trust with the government, promoting collaboration among multisectoral stakeholders, improving legal frameworks and funding mechanisms, and raising public awareness about the importance of forests and their sustainable management.

Challenges and constraints

- **Challenges for creating CSOs and local businesses.**
Different types of barriers hamper the effective development of social and economic organizations that could work towards green jobs and local development based on the use of NTFP.

- **High administrative complexity and uncertainty prevent local entrepreneurship.**
CSOs and local business share many burdens when they initiate the process of creation and obtaining licences to legalize their official status entailing long highly bureaucratic processes and unclear procedures which require the approval of different ministerial departments operating in silos. Licencing normally is disconnected from training.

- **Significant capital required and weak tenure rights are at the roots of conflict.**
Setting up businesses requires significant capital to cover expenses such as a business plan, licensing, and other non-formal economic taxes. Economic investment is seen as desirable in rural areas. However, social and economic inequalities are the main source of social unease and conflict. Moreover, in a context of weak tenure rights, uncertainty can trigger small landholders selling their lands to urban developers. As a result, free land for setting local business is becoming more and more scarce.

- **Current close networks can hinder innovation and open exchange of information.**
Networks are crucial to support new businesses and civil society organizations, as they facilitate cooperation and information sharing. Networks could also improve trust building between CSOs and the government. However, some CSOs prefer not to open their activity to state officials for fear of losing their independence.

- **Lack of participatory and collaborative culture**
The challenge is to build up collaboration in a fragmented administration and society. Traditional top-downs development programs, emigration and dissipation of the local knowledge are factors that have eroded self-confidence in local communities. One of the major challenges for CSOs is how to rebuild this trust.

- **Corruptions, monopolies, negative competition, lack of standards in producing goods and local products.**
Some problems like corruptions, monopolies, fraud, negative competition between local producers, lack of standards in producing goods/local products and so on, cause issues and barriers, avoiding progress in the development plans.

Ways to go: What are the potential roles of CSOs?

- **Increase transparency and advocate for administrative simplification.** In addition to trust building, education/training, capacity building and strengthening social capital, the role of CSOs could be assisting these new initiatives providing legal guidance and support. CSOs can make recommendations and support to the governments to simplify administrative strategies and reduce the regulatory complexity and uncertainty. In addition, CSOs can act as observers in the current land reform policies (Land Cadastre Maps) to increase transparency and accountability of this reform.

- **Increase the primary accumulation of financial, social and knowledge capital.** CSOs can support inclusive business models based on collective entrepreneurship principles whenever possible and avoiding the high risk to reproduce inequality and individualism in bottom-up processes. In case collective entrepreneurship is not possible, at least a fair return needs to be provided to all community members. CSOs can also guide about the opportunities that exist in public organizations to absorb funds and services (job training and marketing) and how they can advocate for their rights.

- **Increase exchange of information and the communication between communities and government and market** CSOs can act as connectors between civil society, government and markets. Enhancing governmental relations, creating spaces for constructive and innovative interactions could be helpful. Moreover, CSOs can support negotiation processes with CSOs or directly advocate for the rights of the local community before the State. For long term changes, CSOs training in soft skills as negotiation and facilitation is desirable.

- **Supporting the transition towards participatory governance at local level** Cultural change is a long-term project which requires endurance and determination. CSOs can be part of this change by preparing the ground and increasing readiness for participation. To regain trust with the communities involved, participation methods must go hand in hand with implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and ensuring a return to the communities involved in the process. An important aspect in these participatory processes is gender and youth. CSOs can provide training and opportunities for increasing the visibility and recognition of women and young people in rural development.

- **An enabling policy and regulatory** The Hyrcanian forests are Iran's main source of commercial timber and make a significant contribution to Iran's economy. In addition, forests provide crucial ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration and water flow regulation, affecting other land uses such as agriculture, livestock and orchards, which are the main sources of income for most people in the region. Sustainable management of these forests is therefore critical for both the livelihoods of the local populations and for Iran's economy as a whole and this importance needs to be reflected in the policies and regulatory frameworks guiding land use practices.

- **Strengthening the institutional and staff capacity for forest management** Strengthening law enforcement capacity will improve the ability of authorities to adopt multi-use approaches, manage biodiversity changes, and control illegal logging and inappropriate land use techniques. Stakeholder awareness on sustainable forest and landscape management, as well as training in techniques such as biodiversity monitoring, zoning, use of the biodiversity reserve, and appropriate cultivation and harvesting methods in forestry practices, will enable stakeholders to better implement their management plans.

- **Community engagement in integrated and multiple-use forest management.** Integrated and multiple-use forest management will give local communities more power over their land, a greater sense of ownership, and, therefore, more reasons to want to protect it. It gives local land users the knowledge and skills to manage the land themselves together with other land users, increasing connectivity and reducing their dependence on external support and services. Establishing functional pilots involving community-engaged management can help determine the best procedures and techniques to use for successful forest management, and lessons can be learned and replicated.

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