

Community based forest enterprise in Britain

This study provides, for the first time, a body of evidence about the diversity of Community Based Forest Enterprise (CBFE) in Britain. It establishes two typologies of CBFEs; one which is based on enterprise business models and the other on their governance and ethical characteristics. The study recommends that policy acknowledge a broad spectrum of woodland enterprise types rather than social enterprise alone. It urges policy to provide the technical and legal advice communities require and support mechanisms enabling them to find innovative solutions to raising capital.



'In the British context, there are a range of community based enterprise types. Social enterprise are one category among a range'

Background

Contemporary forestry policy emphasises the importance of decentralised approaches to sustainable forest management which are supported by economic incentive and enterprise development. A range of approaches have been developed in response including Community-Based Forest Enterprise (CBFE). This is defined as situations in which communities have some involvement in the decision-making processes or practical management of woodlands and where they actively produce goods and services and generate income, social returns and other assets for those communities.

Objectives

This research aimed to improve understanding of CBFE in Great Britain by characterising different types of enterprises and identifying drivers and challenges to their development. It also explored the policy implications of findings.

Methods

The research used a systematic framework to compare data across a sample of thirty three case studies of diverse community woodland groups in England, Scotland and Wales. Data was gathered using in-depth semi structured interviews and focus groups with group members. Woodland site visits and telephone interviews were also used. Financial information was collected from audited annual accounts and conservative estimates of income by respondents.

Findings

Five different types of CBFM were identified: community woodland trading on the open market or through competitive tender; contracted services on woodland owned by others, to provide benefits for the community and the public; forestry enterprise that is in community ownership but not tied to a particular woodland; collaboration with business where the community owned woodland is used to generate profit for the community through partnerships with local businesses and investors; and subsistence trading to raise funds needed to achieve particular projects and the costs of maintaining the community group.

Four different types of enterprise governance and ethos were found: Social enterprises which invest in the production of social and environmental benefits; Community benefit enterprises which involve specific woodland user/interest groups but are focused on producing public benefits; and Community governed concessions whose aim is profit maximisation for the community, but woodland management is by a third party.

Enabling factors to CBFMs are policies which provide financial and other support for community woodland acquisition; learning about woodland management to enable groups to see the potential for sustainable revenue generation; and reform to legal and governing structures to provide new opportunities to trade, to hold assets and involve communities. It was not possible to find evidence that social and community enterprise produce more and diverse benefits from woods.

Recommendations

Policy should recognise a broad spectrum of woodland enterprise business types. It should support mechanisms enabling communities to find innovative solutions to raising capital, and provide the technical and legal advice they require. It should also support social networks and opportunities for learning between the social economy and the land-based sector.

For further information contact: bianca.ambrose-oji@forestry.gsi.gov.uk and see www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/community/enterprises

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