

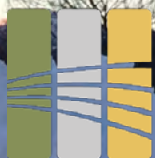
RIABM's Approach to Cross-Landscape Knowledge-Sharing: Ingredients for Success

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**Landscapes for
People, Food and Nature**

SUMMARY

The RIABM (Ibero-American Model Forest Network) links 29 territories and 15 member countries where participatory landscape management initiatives are being conducted. The network is a voluntary partnership between Model Forests backed by government representatives from each member country.

This paper seeks to answer the question, “what makes RIABM a dynamic learning network?” We will quickly review the network’s structure and introduce the types of knowledge we exchange and the levels at which these exchanges are taking place. We will then examine the specific activities employed to conduct these, and describe the basic ingredients of our success. Finally, we will present an outlook of what we consider to be two important components of our current and future strategy: local leadership and forest culture. The very last section gives an overview our main challenges as a network.

This piece aims to provide insights for other similar networks and for “learning landscapes” leaders. It seeks to reflect on our approach as a basis for the creation of strong and effective networking initiatives.

KEYWORDS

Latin America, forest peoples, knowledge-sharing, leadership

CATEGORIES

forests, networks, models

LANDSCAPE LOCATION

29 landscapes in 15 countries in Ibero-America

Cover photo

Araucarias trees in the Alto Malleco Model Forest, Chile. Photo by Abby Hart, EcoAgriculture Partners.

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Knowledge is a sustainable, renewable resource that does not deplete from sharing it. Rather on the contrary: it tends to grow when shared. Knowledge is also one of the main sources of empowerment for local communities. According to our experience, networking might be the most economical and effective way to stimulate the exchange of knowledge between landscapes and communities. Indeed, the Ibero-American Model Forest Network (“RIABM” due to its acronym in Spanish) was created to fulfill this need among its members.

One of the RIABM’s main objectives is, therefore, to share knowledge. By contrast with other networks which have other priorities, the RIABM has specifically highlighted this aspect in its mission and *Strategic Plan* (RIABM, 2013). Over time, the RIABM has implemented an effective range of tools and activities to foster knowledge exchanges and cooperation among its members. Today, our network is considered one of the most, if not the most dynamic of the six regional networks in the International Model Forest Network. But what are the drivers of this dynamism?



Figure 1. Composition of the RIABM as of March 2014

In this paper, we will try to answer this question by reviewing salient aspects of the approach and experience of the RIABM and by highlighting along the way specific examples of success. We will quickly review the network's structure and introduce the types of knowledge we exchange and the levels at which these exchanges are taking place. We will then examine the specific activities employed to conduct these, and describe the basic ingredients of our success. Finally, we will present an outlook of what we consider to be two important components of our current and future strategy: local leadership and forest culture. The very last section gives an overview our main challenges as a network.

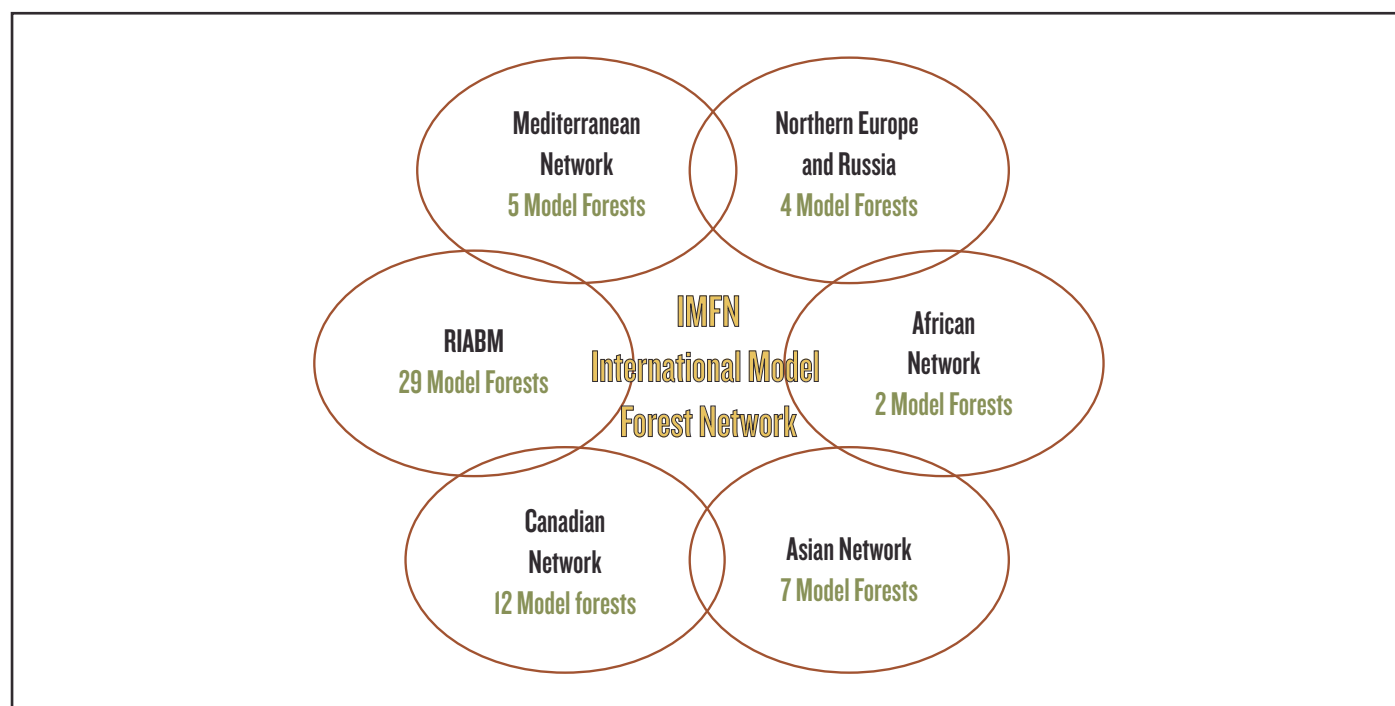
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FROM LOCAL TO GLOBAL, FROM BOTTOM-UP

A Model Forest can be defined as a landscape-level approach focused on people working together voluntarily in partnership towards a common vision of the sustainable human development of a large landscape in which forest ecosystems play an important role. What distinguishes Model Forests from other Sustainable Land Management approaches is that they are socially-based, participatory and inclusive platforms which operate locally, at the landscape-level, from the bottom-up. The huge diversity of landscapes and actors involved does not prevent them from finding a common language, as every Model Forest shares a core set of [six principles](#). These have been broken down into 23 criteria and 68 indicators (Dumet et al., 2012, download). The sixth principle clearly states the RIABM's commitment to “knowledge sharing, capacity-building and networking”. In the next sections, we will see how this principle is being applied.

The RIABM was founded in 2002, 10 years after the Model Forest concept was officially presented to the world at the UNCED (Earth Summit) in Rio, with the purpose of connecting and supporting the Model Forests of Central America, South America, the Caribbean and Spain. As a voluntary partnership among Model Forests that is endorsed by government entities of each member country, it currently brings together 15 countries and 29 landscapes to share knowledge and exchange experiences. The geographical extent of the RIABM is presented in Figure 1 above.

Figure 2. The RIABM is one of the 6 Model Forest regional networks



At the global level, the *International Model Forest Network* (IMFN) attempts to integrate the huge diversity of Model Forests around the world. The IMFN plays a key role in supporting the RIABM through partial funding and specific projects, as well as connecting the RIABM with the other five regional networks presented in Figure 2.

The RIABM is the largest and most dynamic regional network in the IMFN. Since its inception, the RIABM has been growing at a fast pace. The most significant growth was experienced between 2004 and 2010 when the number of Model Forests more than tripled, from 7 to 25.

THE SIXTH PRINCIPLE

The 6th Principle of the Network is “Commitment to Knowledge Sharing, Capacity Building and Networking”. In Dumet et. al (2012), four criteria and ten indicators have been proposed to operationalize this principle. The network goes well beyond connecting Model Forests to also support their efforts in attaining their own sustainable development goals in their respective landscapes by providing training and other knowledge-sharing and capacity-building activities.

Types of knowledge include the sharing of best practices, experiences and lessons learned. In some cases scientific or technical knowledge may also be shared. At the local Model Forest level, the transfer of knowledge might include environmental education or cultural aspects of forestry. Table 1 illustrates the range of activities being pursued by Model Forests in their respective territories of action. It shows that Model Forests have a lot to exchange about and can learn from each other on a wide range of topics.

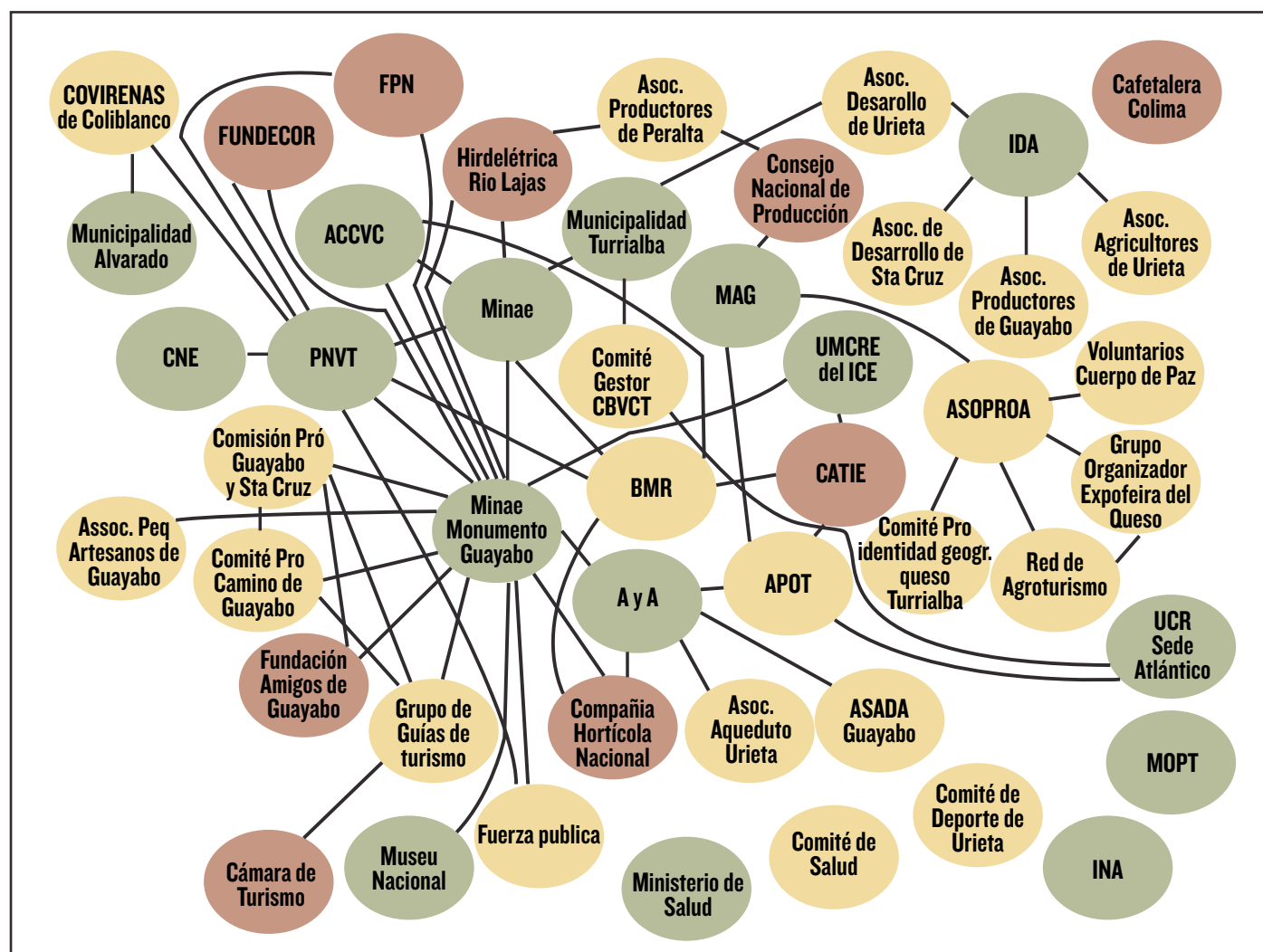


Figure 3. The Model Forests have their own complex network of organizations at the landscape-level, where a lot of knowledge is also being exchanged. The example of Alianza Bosque Modelo Reventazón (BMR), Costa Rica (2011)

Table 1. Activities conducted by Model Forests in their respective landscapes

Country	Model Forest	Private sector relationships	Payment for environmental services	Environmental education	Strategic planning and M&E	Environmental restoration	Tourism	Integrated watershed mgmt	Fire prevention, disease control, mmgt of risks	Agricultural and Agroforestry activities	Commercial groups to promote forest products	Non-timber forest products	Wood products and production	Micro-credits	Work with biological corridors and reserves	Working with protected areas	Land planning
Argentina	Formoseño																
	Futaleufú																
	Jujuy																
	Norte del Neuquén																
	San Pedro																
	Tucumán																
Bolivia	Chiquitano																
Brazil	Mosaico Sertão V-P																
	Caçador																
Chile	Alto Malleco																
	Cachapoal																
	Panguipulli																
Colombia	Risaralda																
Costa Rica	Reventazón																
	Chorotega																
Cuba	Sabanas de Manacas																
Spain	Urbión																
Guatemala	Lachuá																
	Los Altos																
Honduras	Atlántida																
	Yoro																
	Sico-Paulaya																
	Noroeste de Olancho																
Puerto Rico	Tierras Adjuntas																
Dominican Republic	Sabana Yegua																
	Yaque del Norte																

BOX 1. LEVELS OF EXCHANGE

The Secretariat canalizes the exchange of knowledge within the network at six different levels: Local, National, Transnational, Regional, Interregional, International.

Local

This is the individual Model Forest level. This is where things are happening within the landscapes, where activities shown in Chart 1 above are being conducted. There is little involvement of the RIABM at this level even though it maintains a regular relationship with the individual Model Forests and local landscape leaders for coordination and monitoring purposes. Model Forests possess their own web of local and national organizations. As such, the RIABM may be defined as a “network of networks”. Figure 3 above illustrates the complexity of the map of actors which cooperate at the landscape level, as well as the importance of partnerships (Principle 1) within Model Forests and the network.

National

This level usually involves exchanges between Model Forests and the national government of the member country or the national authority which is committed to the Model Forest process. The RIABM also ensures a constant dialogue with the national authority or program. This is also the level where exchanges across Model Forests within the same country take place, but the RIABM do not generally participate in those exchanges. In three instances, Model Forests have even organized themselves within a national program or network to facilitate in-country exchanges (i.e. in Argentina, Chile and Honduras). Figure 4 illustrates the national exchanges and the role of national level networks in some countries.

Transnational (across landscapes in different countries)

Some exchanges are promoted through external projects managed or supported by the RIABM, for example, the [*Eco-Adapt*](#) project (involving three Model Forests in Argentina, Chile and Costa Rica), or [*Climiforad*](#) which research is based in three Model Forests (Colombia, Chile and Costa Rica). The typical procedure is that an external entity gets in touch with the RIABM to receive guidance as to which Model Forests could be appropriate for a given research, training activity or project. Figure 5 illustrates how an external project may relate to Model Forest landscapes in multiple countries.

Interregional

Horizontal exchanges or projects pursued in conjunction with other regional networks. An example of this is RIABM's participation in the 2013 African Model Forest Network's Conference that was held in Yaoundé, Cameroon. The RIABM also hosted the Model Forest Global Forum in 2005 and participated in its organization. Another illustration of interregional dynamics is the genesis of the Mediterranean Model Forest Network which has been partly inspired by us through Urbión Model Forest's (Spain) participation in our network. Figure 6 illustrates the interregional horizontal exchange relationship. At the international level, we should also underline that the RIABM belongs to the INC (International Networking Committee) that meets every now and then to discuss worldwide and regional issues.

RIABM'S APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE-SHARING AND LEARNING ABOUT SUSTAINABLE LAND MANAGEMENT

As a network of landscapes, one of RIABM's main activities is to stimulate exchanges and learning amongst its membership. Our approach is strong in terms of regional capacity-building activities. The format employed is quite conventional, with PowerPoint presentations, group exercises or discussions, and generally includes a field trip. To keep records, an exhaustive electronic document containing all the

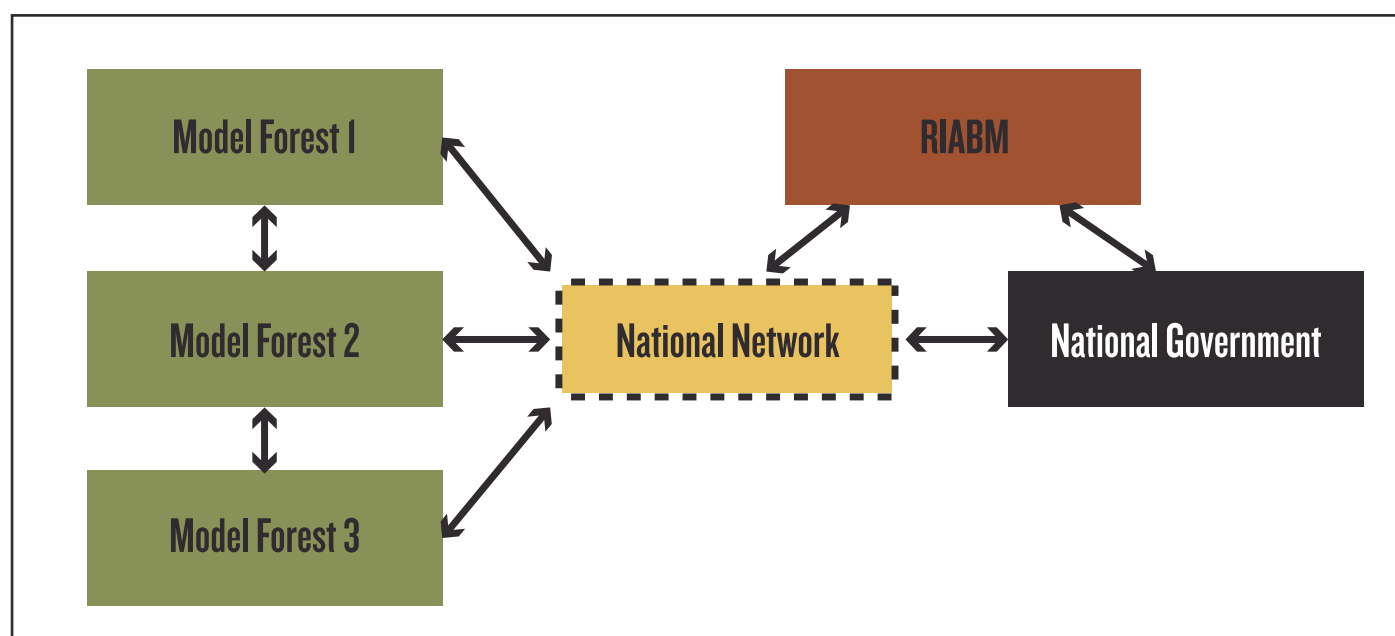


Figure 4. National-level exchanges

presentations and knowledge exchanged during the workshop, as well as a contact list of participants, is shared publicly. As an example, see the full report of our last event on [Sustainability and Climate Change](#).

Our approach is usually not standardized, and rather is flexible. According to the circumstances (amount of funding available, partnerships, activities programmed, timeframe, strategic priorities, topics of interests for the Model Forests, etc.), a workshop can be quickly designed in a period of two to four months, which leaves room for improvisation and quick turnarounds in case unexpected opportunities or needs emerge. RIABM's management team has become expert in organizing and coordinating such events in limited timeframes with equally limited funds, although there is always support from excellent local experts from the different Model Forests (community issues, technical knowledge, intercultural affairs, etc.).

Table 2. Seed Funds donated to Model Forests by the RIABM, 2008-2012

Year	Beneficiaries	Projects or types of activities	Total Amount (USD)
2008	8 Model Forests, 5 countries	Development of innovative production alternatives, strengthening of Model Forests, strengthening of Model Forests Board of Directors, improvement of community health and sanitation, training of human resources through internships, strengthening of work processes in local networks, implementation of information and communication technologies, development of a strategic plan	67.780
2009	6 Model Forests, 3 countries	Exchanges between two or several Model Forests, strategic plan development	25.800
2010	11 Model Forests, 9 countries	Exchanges between two or several Model Forests, strategic plan development	91.117
2011	14 Model Forests, 9 countries	Advocacy, workshops, communication plan development and course, exchanges between two or several Model Forests	75.650
2012	7 Model Forests, 5 countries	Exchanges between two or several Model Forests, participation in a workshop	26.500
TOTAL			294.847

The only recurrent activity is the Board Meeting scheduled every year. In conjunction with this meeting, a knowledge-exchange activity is organized to take advantage of the fact that many Model Forest

representatives from different countries travel to the same location. For example, this year's workshop was held in Ecuador in connection with the Board Meeting. Next year's Board meeting will be held in Cuba in March 2015 with a workshop organized to take place immediately following the event. With representation of a high number of countries and landscapes, with different horizons, point of views and backgrounds, these activities are always very fruitful in terms of learnings and exchanges, and contribute to developing strong ties between the Model Forest leaders who participate.

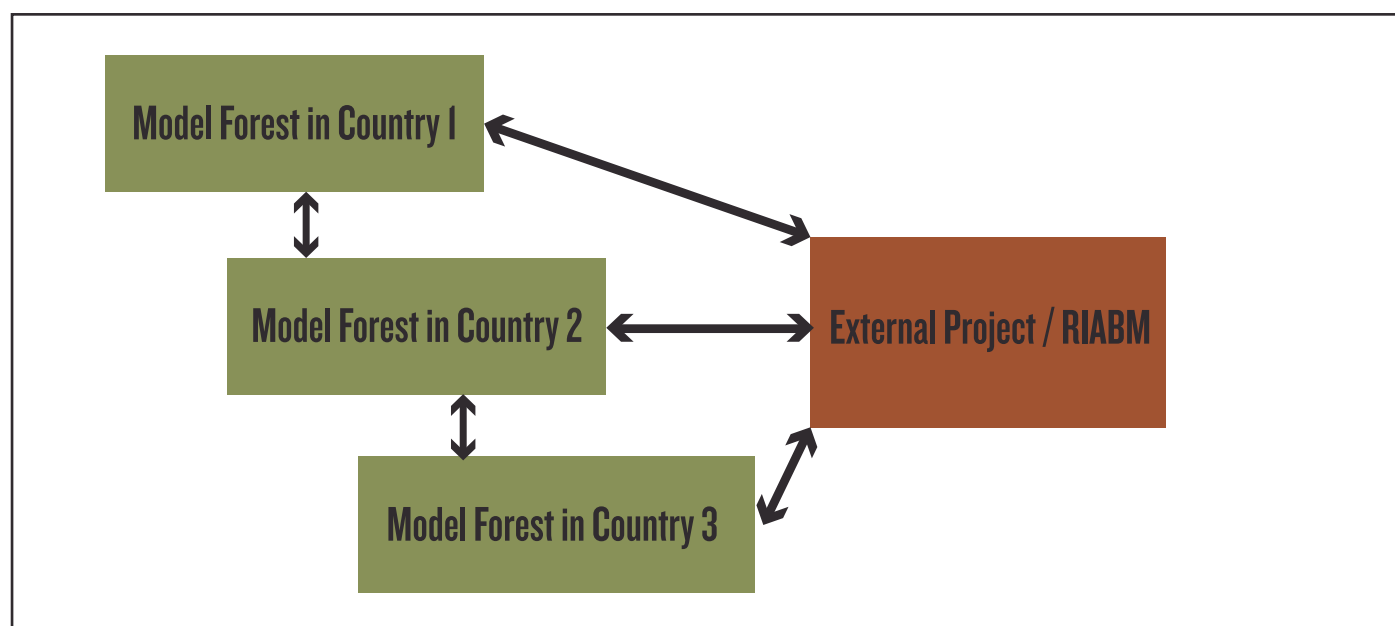


Figure 5. Transnational exchanges

Some capacity-building activities are also offered in conjunction with our partners, such as trainings that were organized in 2013 in conjunction with FAO (course on Natural Resources Conflict Management), CATIE ([Regional Dialogue on Local Leadership](#)) and Cuso International ([PhotoVoice training](#) in Cameroon).

In an attempt to systematize our approach to knowledge-sharing and learning across landscapes, we can classify most of our activities in the following categories.

- **Coordination and Internal Communications.** The RIABM supports the implementation of communication plans or strategies in individual Model Forests. It recently performed a diagnostic of the communications in individual Model Forests through a survey conducted in January-February 2014. This survey helped to determine in which areas (websites, publications, press and media, promotional material, etc.) and in which Model Forests RIABM's support would be the most necessary. For example, about half of the Model Forests have a website, while most of the Model Forests have some form of promotional material. The diagnostic also revealed that the majority of Model Forests maintain fluid communication with the government authorities of their countries. On the other hand, only 11 Model Forests produce a newsletter, and most Model Forests are also weaker at social media or keeping contact with local journalists or their national media. The vast majority of Model Forests do not produce scientific or technical publications either.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation.** One of the main obligations of RIABM's members is to report on their activities at least once a year. The annual board meeting is an excellent opportunity for follow-up and sharing recent information. For each board meeting, the directors present a country-level report.

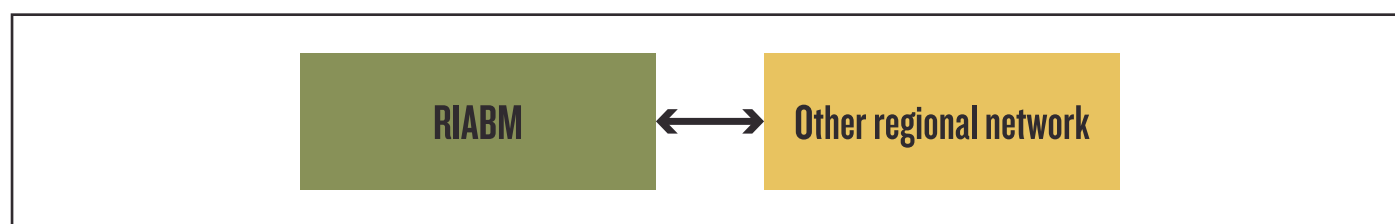


Figure 6. Interregional level

Additionally, an [annual report](#) is published every year profiling the most important activities of the individual Model Forests. Members of the RIABM also travel to countries and individual Model Forests as part of our monitoring activities and to support the implementation of a number of projects.

- **Research and Knowledge Production.** We support the implementation of several research projects in Model Forests, such as the previously mentioned Eco-Adapt project and the [USAID Regional Climate Change Program](#) taking place in a Honduran Model Forest (which has been selected as a pilot and priority site by USAID). A high number of Master students from CATIE have performed their research in Model Forests, and the first PhD research proposal related to Model Forests has been recently presented at a Spanish University. There is growing interest from the international scientific and academic communities towards this concept, and the RIABM leadership provides constant orientation and support to students in this regard.
- **Training and Capacity-Building.** This is how we offer major support to our Model Forests. The RIABM through CATIE has facilitated the implementation of regional projects on a range of topics, including analog forestry, climate change (notably REDD+), knowledge management, sustainable forest management, conflict resolution, etc. It is estimated that the RIABM has trained and promoted these types of exchanges among over 1,000 Model Forest members in recent years. Most recently, the network has focused on sharing knowledge on two topics it considers extremely relevant to achieving Sustainable Land Management: local leadership and forest culture. In a later section, we will review these two components further.
- **Knowledge Dissemination and Outreach/Advocacy.** This is another crucial part of our activities. We consider it vital to disseminate the results and lessons learned outside of our network to increase our visibility and potential for scaling out. We participate a few times per year in international events, such as forestry congresses, in order to share knowledge with the external public and promote the Model Forest approach as a powerful forest governance model and the RIABM as a key player in the process. A prominent example is the Third IUFRO Latin American Congress, or IUFROLAT 2013, which was organized by the RIABM in conjunction with CATIE and other partners, and where over 30 presentations related to Model Forests were given. This Congress was very successful and allowed the exchange of a lot of knowledge in the field of forest sciences, while enhancing the image and potential impact of the network.
- **Financial Support.** The RIABM offers support to certain Model Forests by financing their participation in workshops, for example. Financial support has also been offered in the form of the [Seeds Funds program](#), which ran from 2008 to 2012 and consisted of financing specific projects in Model Forests, such as the development of a communication plan or an exchange between two or several Model Forests, by granting small amounts (from USD 4,000 up to USD 10,000). As soon as new sources of funding can be identified, the RIABM hopes to reactivate this type of support to increase the number of exchanges among landscapes.

BOX 2. TOP ACHIEVEMENTS

- A high number of people trained in regional events, with skills improved in key areas such as: leadership, REDD+, communications, etc.,
- An important number of meaningful exchange and cooperation projects among Model Forests, for example through the Seed Funds Program,
- A wealth of information produced in the form of publications, articles and reports containing useful knowledge and shared by efficient means,
- A significant reach through dissemination and advocacy at the international level, for example by organizing the most important congress in the field of forest sciences in Latin America (IUFROLAT).

Table 4. Non-exhaustive list of prominent knowledge-exchange activities of the RIABM for the period 2008-2014

Knowledge-exchange	Example of activities between 2008-2014
Coordination and Internal Communications	Regular contacts and follow-up with Model Forests, by email or other Web page: news and publications updated regularly Monthly newsletter published since 2011
Monitoring & Evaluation	Annual Reports collected and compiled since 2008 Board Meetings 2008: Hinton, Alberta, Canadá and Soria, Spain; 2009: Santiago, Chile and Buenos Aires, Argentina; 2010: San Lorenzo, Minas Gerais, Brasil and Pereira, Colombia; 2011: Burgos, Spain and Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia; 2012: Juticalpa, Honduras; 2013: CATIE, Turrialba, Costa Rica; 2014: Reserva Mashpi, Ecuador At least one visit to each site for initial evaluation and other punctual visits Evaluation of the individual Model Forests communications processes (survey February 2014)
Research and Knowledge Production	Support and orientation of CATIE Master students for conducting research in connection with Model Forests (over 20 thesis supported to date) Research and publication of articles and papers Elaboration of databases of projects and organizations to support Model Forests in their fundraising activities Support given to specific projects: Eco-Adapt, Climiforad, USAID
Training, Capacity-Building and Other Exchanges	Regional Workshops held in conjunction with Board Meetings 2008: Global Model Forests Forum (Canada) and Ibero-American Model Forest Congress (Spain) / 2009: Workshop on systematization (Chile) and World Forestry Congress (Argentina) / 2010: Workshop on Leadership (Brazil) and on landscape management (Colombia) / 2011: Model Forests Global Forum (Spain) and workshop on REDD+ (Bolivia) / 2012: Work group sessions for the elaboration of RIABM's Strategic Plan (Honduras) / 2013: Regional Dialogue on Local Leadership (Costa Rica) / 2014: Workshop on Sustainability and Climate Change (Ecuador) 4 workshops on Forest Culture – 2012 in Petén, Guatemala, in Bavaria, Germany and in Tarapoto, Peru, and in 2013 in Oaxaca, México 4 courses on Tropical Forests Management (one per year) Other capacity-building activities on the following topics: REDD+, Conflict Resolution, Analog Forestry, Leadership, etc. – In total, over 1,000 beneficiaries in more than 40 training events on a range of topics
Knowledge Dissemination and Outreach/Advocacy	News and publications (webpage, newsletter, mailing lists, online articles, social media, etc.) Participation in international forums. Ex.: Spanish Forestry Congress, Course at the Melendez y Pelayo University, FAO's Conference on Forests for Food Security and Nutrition, IUFROLAT, Central American Forestry Congress, SDSN (Sustainable Development Solutions Network), etc. Visits to national government authorities by the President of the Board.
Financial support	Seed Funds (see Table 1)

BASIC INGREDIENTS FOR SUCCESS

In analyzing our experience we have pinpointed a series of basic aspects, or ingredients, that have been essential throughout the years to ensure the effectiveness of our approach. Our network's approach is rooted in the participation of the Model Forest leadership or management; therefore, ensuring their participation is key.

Credibility, visibility and impact. We provide an added value to our members in terms of credibility and impact. Model Forest leadership see important benefits in becoming part of a network which provides them with useful tools and information and is backed by an international organization; therefore they are most willing to invest time and effort in our knowledge-exchange activities. Without their participation, these would probably not even take place.

Delivering diversity. Respect for diversity is at the basis of the network's approach. Even the Model Forest concept is sometimes defined differently from one place to another. Model Forests leave space for and integrate diversity at several levels.

- Diversity of landscapes – Model Forests include all types of ecosystems and land tenure. The landscapes vary in terms of size, population and ecological setting. The impact area of a Model Forest goes beyond only forests by encompassing urban centers, protected areas, agricultural and pastoral areas, natural forests, biological corridors and forest plantations, among others.
- Diversity of stakeholders – Model Forests are multi-sectorial, multi-disciplinary, multi-organizational (including government bodies, NGOs, private sector, indigenous peoples, migrant communities, etc.). Similarly, all kinds of people participate voluntarily in the process, be they forestry workers, scholars, activists, scientists, technicians, mayors, policy-makers, indigenous groups, industry representatives, community leaders, etc.
- Diversity of activities, priorities and needs – Model Forests define their own strategic plan, program of activities, projects, etc. For example, several Model Forests have fought successfully against mining companies that were responsible of strong environmental impacts, while others have decided to initiate a dialogue and establish a partnership with the extractive industry. Sharing these opposed experiences has been extremely interesting and fruitful. All actions and solutions are considered valid within the Model Forest process, as long as the basic principles and goals are being respected and as long as the process is conducted in a participatory manner.

Diversity is essential to the dynamism of the network because it enriches its learnings and exchanges. If the network was homogenous, there would not be that much to exchange about.

Academic representation. The Secretariat is hosted by CATIE (Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Centre), an institution which strongly supports the network in terms of funding, knowledge management, but also knowledge production. Having this prime location for the network is strategic, as it facilitates research through commonly identified needs and interests and provides training and capacity-building opportunities to Model Forest actors through the RIABM . Another advantage is that CATIE is a permanent organization (with more than 72 years of existence) and its programs do not depend on a political contingency (such as elections every 4 years).

Fluid and constant internal communications. We are not the type of network that members never hear from. At least once every month Model Forests receive information about us. Through personal emails, newsletters and other means, we aim at keeping a regular communication with our “landscapes”. Similarly, the Model Forests who belong to the network know that they can easily get in touch with any member of the Secretariat – and always get a reply. Model Forests typically keep in touch with the secretariat by sending information they consider relevant.

No impositions from above, no hierarchy. We have established clear responsibilities and obligations, along with a lot of autonomy for Model Forests to define and model the concept according to their context. The local stakeholders are free to set their own agenda and strategic plan, there is no imposition from above, i.e. from the Secretariat or Management Team. Everything is done on a voluntarily basis, which increases motivation and sense of ownership. This situation is reinforced by the fact that several initiatives which are currently part of the RIABM have existed long before their incorporation into the network.

A personable approach. This aspect is often underestimated even though it is of crucial importance. The Ibero-American Model Forest Network is often referred to as a big “family”, and it is this sense of belonging,

these bonds created among stakeholders and actors of the different landscapes and countries within the RIABM that help the network grow stronger and achieve better results. In the age of electronic communications, we may employ modern tools, but we cannot replace personal knowledge, contact and friendship for communications exclusively through cyberspace. A network should never be a “community of strangers”. As human beings, we feel more engaged to collaborate with people we know than with perfect strangers. Therefore, a large proportion of people within the network should have the chance to interact with each other at some point or another, ideally in more than one occasion. For us, maintaining, reinforcing and contributing to the formation of these links might be one of the most important tasks. This is what we do best, because despite our name, our real focus is not on forests, it is on people.



Figure 7. The network’s “family” portrait during our last event in Yunguilla, Ecuador, March 2014. Photo credit: Hermes Justiniano, Chiquitano Model Forest, Bolivia

Which brings us to the importance of holding **face-to-face meetings** and events a few times a year. Such events help to create links and foster a real sense of community. It may be costly financially speaking, but the returns do compensate. For example, our last event in Ecuador in March 2014 gathered over 50 stakeholders from more than 15 countries and generated enormous enthusiasm as well as new commitments to work together, whether these commitments were formal or informal. Figure 7 depicts people who attended this memorable event.

Last but not least, **local leadership** has been essential to the growth and survival of the network. If we could make a continuum of Model Forests from the strongest to the weakest, we would probably discover that strong leadership is involved in the most consolidated and active Model Forests, while the weakest clearly show a lack of it. The reason is that a leadership figure is fundamental to stimulate participation, guide local stakeholders, inspire them and have them sit at the table together to collaborate.

This brings us to our next section where we will briefly introduce two major transversal topics on which our network has been focusing most recently: Local Leadership and Forest Culture.

TWO CENTRAL COMPONENTS: LOCAL LEADERSHIP AND FOREST CULTURE

We have already mentioned local leadership as an essential ingredient for success in our network and we would like to discuss this point further. The Model Forest is a process that is usually led by a person or organization. Some NGO’s have been instrumental in that regard, as is the case of Madera Verde in Honduras, Casa Pueblo in Puerto Rico, Enda Dominicana in Dominican Republic, to name only a few. In other instances, private initiatives have been strongly involved and have acted as leaders. In Ecuador the most recent member country to join the RIABM, the process of creation of a first Model Forest is currently being

led by a network of privately owned forests (Corporación Nacional de Bosques Privados del Ecuador). In other cases, a team of people has guided the process in their territories, like in the Chorotega Model Forest of Costa Rica.

In a few isolated cases individuals have been able to hold things together, but in the vast majority of cases the leadership is a collective and shared quality among several actors. At the RIABM, we prefer to focus on collective, or “team” leadership, due to its more sustainable character over time. Philosophically we prefer to use the term “leadership” instead of “leader”.

Roles and Responsibilities of Model Forest Leadership

The role of the landscape leadership is to support the Model Forest process and bring people together. The team leading the process has to believe strongly in the Model Forest concept and have the time and will to fully commit to it. Leaders at the landscape-level have responsibilities, as members of the network, such as providing an annual report on time for their Model Forests. One of the challenges is to involve individuals from all sectors of society in the leadership teams. During the last Board Meeting in Ecuador, for example, very few female leaders were represented.

Towards Building a Regional Leadership Program

The RIABM has been advocating for a regional program on leadership since 2010 and has already delivered training sessions and organized other events on the topic, most notably a workshop in São Lourenço (Brazil) and a *Regional Dialogue* held in 2013 in CATIE, Costa Rica. The purpose of creating a regional Leadership program in collaboration with CATIE is to strengthen specific leadership skills across Latin America related to local development initiatives and sustainable management processes in rural landscapes. This program is titled “Empowering responsible Leadership Teams Across Latin America”. A training curriculum would be designed and based on carefully developed materials and high quality tools to strengthen collective and individual leadership capacities. Among the expected results of the proposed program are the training of 545 teams of local leaders, comprising of around 6,000 individuals, and 29 teams of leadership trainers in 16 countries. Again, individual leaders stand out, but we prefer to focus on a “team work” spirit where leadership is shared by team members.



Figure 8. The RIABM’s Regional Dialogue on Local Leadership, June 2013

Creating a New Forest Culture

Forest Culture is a second strategic topic that the RIABM has been promoting in the recent years within its knowledge-exchange program, based on the network’s values. In order to achieve sustainable land management, the notion that such management is necessary first needs to be understood, disseminated, and integrated well into the culture of a large part of the population. The RIABM believes in creating a new forest culture, a culture based on fundamental values to achieve real sustainable development. For instance, this would imply abandoning the myth that forest “conservation” means leaving our forests untouched; that

cutting trees is always a bad thing. We believe in the importance of changing this paradigm, because forests, and the products and services that they can provide, have a vital role to play in livelihoods. They should not be overly protected, but sustainably managed.

It is also our goal to bring the idea to a more general public that the only way to protect our forests is to involve local communities at the landscape-level in order to reach the four pillars of sustainability: social, cultural, economic and environmental. Community involvement will lead to a more balanced and humane view of forest conservation and management, one that can also support livelihoods. Four workshops on Forest Culture have already been organized (see Table 3).

The RIABM was founded only 12 years ago, but it has more or less consolidated itself. We will keep working, and networking, in order to consolidate leadership and create a new forest culture in our landscapes. This process might take time, but we will continue to work in that direction.

CHALLENGES AND MOVING FORWARD

As any other network, we face challenges and while these might not always affect our day-to-day activities, they could represent a barrier in the long term that would prevent us from growing stronger, and as such should be addressed in the most efficient ways.

Lack of funding

Funding is a common struggle for many networks. However, as demonstrated by the RIABM, a lot can be accomplished with very little. The real value lies in the network's human resources, and the voluntary commitment to the Model Forest process and approach. Indeed, the network relies heavily on the support of volunteers provided by Cuso International, a Canadian organization. However, to ensure sustainability in the long term, the network will eventually need a stable source of funding, at least to cover operational expenses. The RIABM has been addressing this issue recently by finding new means of financial support and has integrated the "financial sustainability" objective to its [new strategic plan](#) adopted in 2013.

Technological gaps

Model Forests stakeholders, especially in local communities, still lack reliable access to the Internet or are lagging behind usage of technological tools, which complicates ongoing communications and monitoring and even the implementation of certain projects. For example, a [Twitter](#) account has been created recently for the network, and while its primary purpose is to reach external audiences and organizations, it does little to ensure communication within the network as the vast majority of the Model Forest actors in Latin America do not use it. The weakness of certain web-based projects (for example the [KEDLAP collaborative platform](#) for knowledge management) could be associated with the rather sophisticated technological skills required, which highlights the fact that the knowledge-sharing tools must be tailored carefully to the capabilities of the people who will be using them.

Dependency on politics

Political stability is especially crucial in terms of achieving a relevant, long-lasting impact, and the network's activities can sometimes be at stake in times of political change. Here there is an important role of the secretariat, by having proximity with the national authorities of the countries in order to guarantee official support or the inclusion of the MF territories in cooperation projects

Inactive Model Forests

Elements of the network which do not function anymore or are inactive do not bring anything to the network and might project an inconsistent image about Model Forests in general, making the process less credible. It is RIABM's intention to use the criteria and indicators developed by Dumet et al. (2012) in the near future

to evaluate all the Model Forests and further concentrate efforts on strengthening further the weaker elements of the network.

Lack of leadership/management capacity

This is typically linked to the previous element. Leadership is essential to enable Model Forests to move forward, keep them active, and make the best use of any knowledge exchanged. Without a legitimate team of leaders or managers or if they disappear half way, the chances that the process will be successful are thin. It is therefore crucial that a group of committed and motivated individuals take responsibility and action at the local level.

Mundane difficulties of the operation of a large regional network

Since the network has been growing and now includes 15 countries and 29 landscapes across the region, the logistical and financial aspects of any meeting, workshop or event which aims to include actors from across the whole region are getting increasingly complex. However, in spite of these difficulties, the RIABM has always been able to identify projects or institutions with similar objectives which have made it possible to hold Board Meetings twice every year since its inception until 2012, when it switched to one per year.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

We have seen how the RIABM shares different types of knowledge, at different levels, through a wide range of activities, and we have seen the challenges of our approach. We have also described some of the ingredients that help our network to be successful in its cross-landscape knowledge-exchange activities. The most basic ingredients, however, might be hard work, commitment and patience. Indeed, effective bonds, networks, links, relationships cannot be created overnight. Networks do not just become operational on Day One; they begin to exist when people really start identifying themselves with them. We can affirm that after over a decade of experience, most Model Forests in Central America, South America, the Caribbean and Spain have come to identify themselves strongly with the RIABM. The fact that they value our network is important as it motivates them to participate in our exchanges and events, which is essential for maintaining our regional dynamism.

In the Ibero-American region, we like to present the Model Forest as a “process”, rather than as a “project”. The construction of a process takes time, is never fully completed, has no expiration date; it adapts itself to the lessons learned and to evolution of the context, while keeping its original core values. One of our network’s goals is to create a stronger community of people, at the regional level, who share the same principles and dreams – the most ambitious one being to achieve the sustainable human development of our landscapes – and that Model Forests represent a real democratic process, however lengthy, to attain these.

We hope this piece has provided at least a few useful insights for other network or landscape leaders. We would be happy to invite other networks to one of RIABM’s events to help them understand our particular dynamics – we can promise you will be inspired.

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