FORGING CONNECTIONS, BUILDING KNOWLEDGE, AND INFLUENCING POLICY

EVALUATING TEN YEARS OF THE FLARE NETWORK

KEOUGH SCHOOL OF GLOBAL AFFAIRS
KELLOGG INSTITUTE
PULTE INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

FLARE
FORESTS & LIVELIHOODS
ASSESSMENT, RESEARCH, AND ENGAGEMENT

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

The Forests and Livelihoods: Assessment, Research, and Engagement (FLARE) Network was established in 2015 to advance research and action on forest livelihoods to support just and sustainable futures for people and forests worldwide. Rooted in high-quality, cross-disciplinary research, FLARE is also a global community of practice where new ideas and evidence are discussed and translated to support forest-reliant communities and relevant policy processes.

This self-evaluation, led by the FLARE Secretariat and the Pulte Institute of Global Development in the Keough School of Global Affairs at the University of Notre Dame, assesses FLARE's achievements during its first 10 years, and provides recommendations on priorities for the next decade. Using **bibliometric, survey,** and **interview** data, this report assesses the scale/reach, uptake, and outcomes/impact of FLARE relating to capacity development, research, and policy.

Scale and reach: FLARE has built a thriving global community of some 1,150 researchers, policymakers, and practitioners from 65 countries (41 low- and middle-income counties) to foster collaboration across regions and disciplines. FLARE has **directly supported 200 individuals** to produce research and participate in the Network, with more than 1,000 scientific papers having been presented across 10 FLARE Annual Meetings.

Uptake: FLARE serves as a well-recognized forum for presentation, discussion, and translation of research at the intersection of forests and livelihoods. A subset of 38 core FLARE researchers directly supported by the Network have **published more than 200 academic papers** and numerous policy briefs, which have been downloaded thousands of times and are widely cited in academic publications and policy documents.

Outcomes and Impact: FLARE's continued existence and growth through funding, leadership, and institutional change is a major achievement. It has allowed the network to increase member capacity for research, engagement, and impact. **Ninety-two percent of surveyed members view FLARE as "an inspiring professional network."** FLARE-supported research has helped shape policy discourse on key topics such as on "forest dependent people." More broadly, FLARE has raised awareness of the importance of forests and community governance for climate, conservation, and human development goals. The influence of FLARE's monitoring and community-empowerment tools has been limited, however.

Paths Forward

FLARE is poised to further grow and deepen its impact in the decade ahead. Key recommendations include:

Research - investigate a more focused set of strategic priorities and increase participation of Indigenous Peoples and local communities in setting the agenda;

Policy - conduct stakeholder mapping, develop an explicit theory of change, and create a strategic plan and monitoring framework to track policy results;

Capacity Development - establish year-round networking and mentoring opportunities for early career professionals, increase support for Global South participation, and strengthen organizational capacity. To follow through on these recommendations and realize FLARE's full potential will require increasing, diversifying, and stabilizing funding support for the Network.

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Glossary

Capacity development. A process through which the abilities of individuals, institutions, and societies to solve problems and set and achieve objectives are strengthened and maintained over time.

Engagement. Building an active relationship with potential users of knowledge and tools.

Impact. In development policy, impact typically refers to the overall effect of an intervention on people's lives, the environment, or other objectives. It often refers to long-term results. In research, impact can be understood as the benefits to individuals, groups, organizations, and society that are causally linked to research. Usage of research outputs in subsequent research or policy is often used as an indicator for research impact.

Influence. Capacity to affect or actual effects on the behavior or decision making of knowledge users.

Outcome. Result or effect of activities and outputs; change in behavior, institutions, or on-the-ground conditions in the near term.

Output. A tangible product resulting from an activity.

Professional development. A subset of capacity development referring to an ongoing process of learning and training that enables individuals improve their skills, knowledge, and competencies for career advancement.

Reach. The extent to which an organization engages with its intended target audience (e.g. by reviewing demographic characteristics to ensure relevant groups are not excluded).

Scale. The relative size or extent of an organization's membership, activities, and outputs.

Uptake. Access to and use of knowledge.

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

CIFOR Center for International Forestry Research
CGIAR Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research
COP Conference of Parties
DFID U.K. Department for International Development
FAO UN Food and Agriculture Organization
FCDO Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office
FLARE Forests and Livelihoods: Assessment, Research and Engagement
ICRAF International Centre for Research in Agroforestry
IFRI International Forest Resources and Institutions Network
IGO Intergovernmental Organization
IP&LC Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities
IPBES Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services
IUCN International Union for Conservation of Nature
IUFRO International Unition of Forestry Research Organizations
M&E Monitoring and Evaluation
NASA National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NGO Nongovernmental Organization
NSF US National Science Foundation
PNAS Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences
RRI Rights and Resources Initiative
ToC Theory of Change
UK United Kingdom
UN United Nations
UNFF United Nations Forum on Forests
WoS Web of Science
WRI World Resources Institute
WWF World Wide Fund for Nature

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Introduction

The Forests and Livelihoods: Assessment, Research, and Engagement (FLARE) Network was established in 2015 to advance knowledge at the intersection of forests and livelihoods across the globe through research and facilitate its application to policy and practice. To realize its vision of more just and sustainable futures for people and forests worldwide, FLARE has sought to create and nurture a vibrant global community of practice related to forest-based livelihoods. FLARE is structured as an open network, supported by a Secretariat and guided by a Steering Committee.

FLARE responded to the need for a global community of practice bringing together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to discuss and advance research and action on contemporary forest livelihoods issues (Watkins et al. 2018). It has now held 10 annual meetings and grown into a network of more than 1,100 stakeholders from around the world drawn from governments at different levels, donors, environmental and social NGOs, and the private sector, as well as universities and other research organizations.

After more than a decade of operation, what difference has the FLARE network made? What are its most important achievements? How could FLARE improve in delivering on its mission?

This report provides answers to these questions. It summarizes the results of a self-evaluation carried out by the FLARE Secretariat in collaboration with evaluation experts at the Pulte Institute for Global Development during 2024-2025 (see Supplementary Information). The goal of the evaluation was to better understand the impact of the FLARE Network and to inform FLARE priorities over the next decade. The evaluation used a multi-method approach, including interviews with FLARE members, a survey, and bibliometric analysis.

The evaluation focused on assessing the **scale/reach**, **uptake**, and **outcomes/impact** of the FLARE Network in three areas:

1. **Capacity development**
2. **Research**
3. **Policy**

The evaluation also summarized member views on what FLARE should do to realize its mission moving forward. It covered the period from FLARE's founding in October 2015 to May 2025.

The remainder of this report provides background on the purpose and history of the FLARE Network before presenting the results. The final section summarizes lessons learned and provides specific recommendations for FLARE moving into its second decade.

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Background

The FLARE Network was launched just prior to the landmark meeting of the Conference of Parties (COP) on Climate Change in Paris in 2015. Founded and led by Arun Agrawal with initial support from the Government of the United Kingdom (Department for International Development, now FCDO), the FLARE Secretariat was based at the University of Michigan's School for Environment and Sustainability until 2021. That year, the Secretariat moved to the Keough School of Global Affairs and its Pulte Institute for Global Development at the University of Notre Dame under the leadership of Daniel Miller.

FLARE responded to the need for a global community of practice that brought together researchers, practitioners, and policymakers interested in contemporary forests and livelihoods issues (Watkins et al. 2018). In doing so, the Network built from more than two decades of work conducted by the International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) Research Network (Wollenberg et al. 2007; Fischer et al. 2023). IFRI was founded by Elinor Ostrom, the first woman to win the Nobel Prize in Economics (Ostrom Workshop, 2025; Tucker et al. 2010), and was subsequently led by FLARE founder Arun Agrawal and then Ashwini Chhatre, a long-time FLARE member based at the Indian School of Business. Since 2021, IFRI has been folded into the FLARE Network.

Research is the foundation of the FLARE Network. From the beginning FLARE has carried out and supported lead-edge research related to forest livelihoods. But FLARE is distinctive in that it takes the additional step of making research accessible to policymakers and practitioners by fostering conversations, creating usable data and tools, and translating findings to easy-to-digest formats like policy briefs and videos. As it has grown, the Network has placed increasing emphasis on informing policy and developing the capacity of students and early career professionals interested in forest livelihoods issues. The FLARE network seeks to realize five goals:

1. **Knowledge**: Produce and share new knowledge at the intersection of forests and livelihoods;
2. **Policy**: Inform decision-making through interdisciplinary conversations and engagement across research, policy, and practice;
3. **Resources**: Develop and promote the use of low-cost tools and methods to enhance monitoring efforts and the efficacy of initiatives focusing on forest-related livelihoods;
4. **Capacity Development**: Catalyze and support the development of the next generation of leaders working on forest-related livelihoods issues;
5. **Network support**: Increase the capacity of FLARE to achieve its mission.

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Activities

To advance these goals, the FLARE Network has undertaken a range of activities including:

- impact assessments, horizon-scanning exercises, case studies, and other research efforts related to a set of core questions (see next page);
- established and supported working groups on key themes to produce tools, reports, papers, policy briefs, and other relevant outputs;
- organized annual meetings and other events around key forests and livelihoods themes;
- developed partnerships with key stakeholder organizations, including representatives of Indigenous Peoples and local communities (IP&LCs);
- provided scholarship and other forms of support to cohorts of students and scholars, especially from countries in the Global South.

FLARE's focus has been on forest livelihoods issues facing countries of the Global South, particularly in East, Central, and West Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and South America where forests are especially salient in national and global policy.

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CORE QUESTIONS
THE FLARE NETWORK ADDRESSES

THEORY

What are the most pressing conceptual, political, and practical issues concerning forests and livelihoods?

1. **How do forests contribute to livelihoods, and how does governance shape forests and livelihoods?**
2. **What theories of change explain forest use, livelihoods, and governance outcomes?**

IMPLEMENTATION

How are initiatives aimed at improving forest and forest-related livelihoods outcomes being designed and implemented?

1. **What are the key mechanisms through which more effective forest governance can be achieved? When are the specific mechanisms being used, and where are they most effective?**
2. **What assumptions underlie, or are being perpetuated by, these initiatives?**
3. **How do power, inequality, representation, accountability, and framing affect the governance of forests and livelihoods?**

IMPACTS

What are the social-ecological impacts of forest livelihood-related policies, programs, and projects and how can these best be assessed?

1. **What are the best approaches to assess effectiveness and to improve knowledge of forest and livelihoods-related initiatives?**
2. **How can existing datasets and studies be leveraged to estimate impacts?**
3. **Who benefits from and who bears the costs of such initiatives in forest and agroforestry landscapes from local to global scales?**
4. **How effective have such initiatives been and what lessons can be learned to inform future research, policy and practice?**

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Theory of Change

FLARE's theory of change (ToC) entails producing, facilitating, and sharing research on key priorities, developing low-cost yet rigorous data collection tools, and generating high-quality evidence to equip decisionmakers to support the mutual flourishing of forests, people, and climate. The ToC distinguishes between the ultimate desired on-the-ground impact of FLARE's work and what can be attributed to FLARE's direct efforts. It underscores the importance of FLARE-supported research, tailored outputs (e.g., journal articles, datasets, tools, impact assessments, comparable evidence, policy briefs, etc.) and events (e.g. workshops and annual meetings) to relevant policy and practitioner audiences so that they are better able to act to support positive forests, climate, and livelihoods outcomes. Ultimately, FLARE seeks to shape thinking, discussion, and collaboration around forest livelihoods issues to enable tangible improvements in the sustainability of forest ecosystems and those who rely on them.

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ACHIEVEMENTS
1. SCALE AND REACH

Capacity Development

From the start, FLARE has been a "big tent" organization; anyone interested in issues at the intersection of forests and livelihoods can join. Members engage with the Network to conduct research, enhance their capacity, and inform policy and practice aimed at supporting the livelihoods of forest-reliant communities through forest conservation, sustainable forest management, and forest landscape restoration. FLARE Network members include representatives from universities and other research organizations, governments at different levels, donors, environmental and social NGOs, and the private sector.

As of April 2025, the network had grown to include 1,149 members from 65 countries (Figure 1).

FLARE is led by a Secretariat and Steering Committee. In total, 16 people have served as Steering Committee members during FLARE's first 10 years (Appendix A). These individuals have represented leadership in key partner organizations (e.g. RRI, IUCN), funders (e.g. UK Aid, Ford Foundation), and research organizations (e.g. CIFOR-ICRAF, Cornell University). The Secretariat currently consists of the FLARE Coordinator, an Associate Director, a Program Manager, and students in research, communication, and community engagement roles. FLARE has also directly supported the research and training of 18 Postdocs, 7 PhD students, 5 Master's students, and 4 Undergraduate students through bases at the University of Michigan and the University of Notre Dame. In addition, FLARE has supported four thematic Working Groups and their leaders. Together, these individuals comprise a set of 38 "core" FLARE researchers.

Figure 1. FLARE Membership, 2015-2024

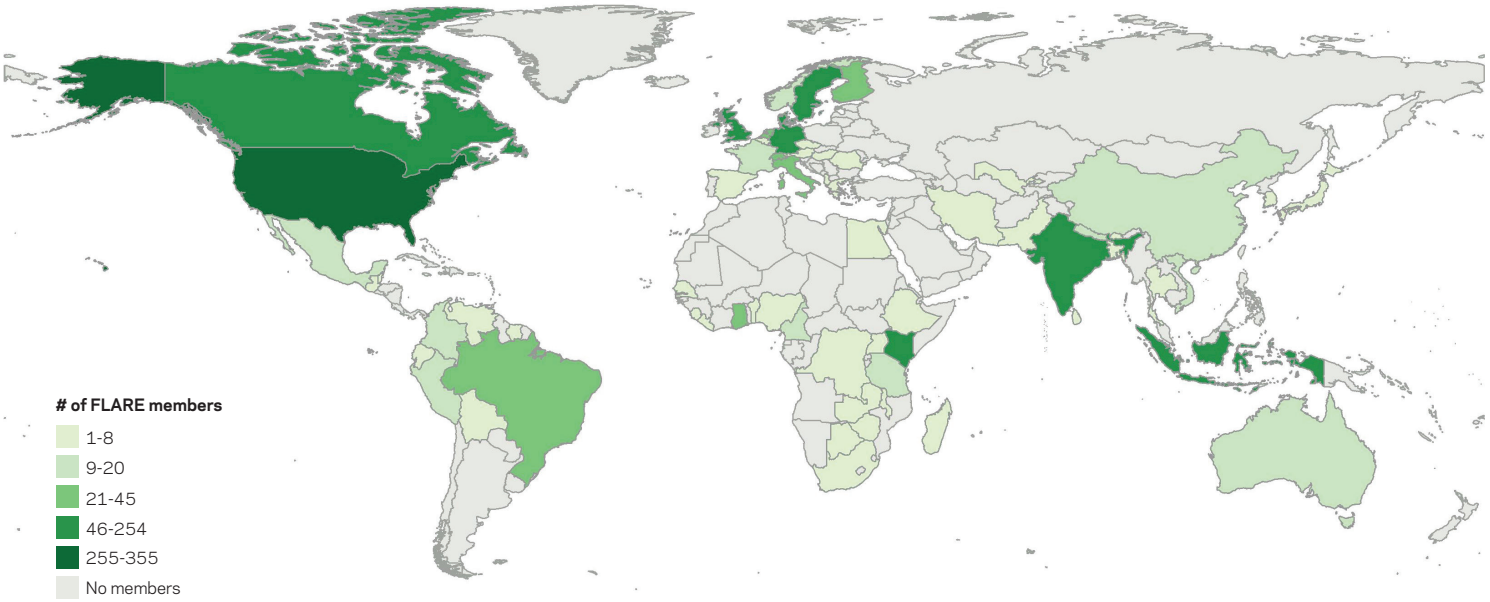

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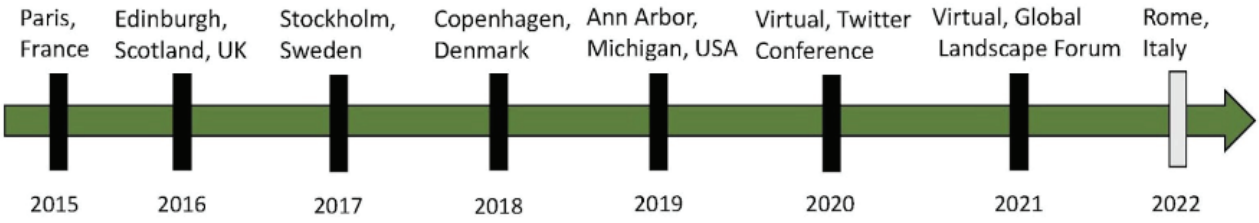
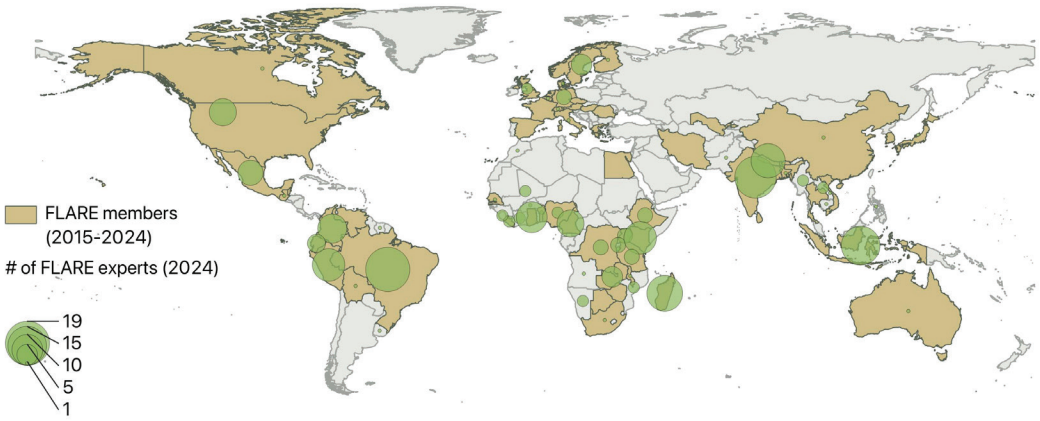
Figure 2. FLARE Annual Meeting locations



FLARE's signature event is its Annual Meeting, which provides a forum to share and discuss the latest forest livelihoods-related research, learn about key emerging issues in the field, nurture and strengthen collaborations, and develop capacity through mentoring, training, and networking opportunities. The FLARE Network has organized 10 annual meetings (Figure 2), in partnership with local host organizations. FLARE Annual Meetings were held virtually in 2020 and 2021 due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. In-person meetings have averaged 180 participants per meeting. Each FLARE member has attended at least one FLARE Annual Meeting, with upwards of 300 having attended more than one meeting and a handful having attended all 10.

Figure 3. FLARE member geographic expertise



Meeting participants have come from 65 countries, including 41 low- and-middle income countries. The FLARE Secretariat has sought to ensure participation from under-resourced communities in the meetings. Financing from a range of funders (Appendix B) has enabled FLARE to support the research of some 200 people, including core FLARE researchers as well as scholarship support for 161 others to share their research at FLARE Annual Meetings. Scholarship recipients come from 33 countries, primarily in the Global South. FLARE support for scholarships and meeting participation has exceeded more than $200,000.

FLARE member expertise encompasses most world regions where forests are prevalent, with a particular strength in countries of the Global South where forest-related livelihoods issues are particularly salient (Figure 3). Such countries have been the central focus of the FLARE Network from the start.

FLARE has communicated with its membership through a mailing list and more generally through social media. As of April 2025, FLARE's mailing list had grown to 3,325 people and FLARE's LinkedIn page had nearly 3,000 followers.


LARE
and Livelihoods:
Research, and Engagement
Sharachchandra
Lele
ATREE

Research

FLARE Network members have conducted a wide array of studies at the intersection of forests and livelihoods. In all, more than 1,000 scientific papers have been presented at FLARE Annual Meetings over the past decade, leading to hundreds of peer-reviewed journal articles as well as contributing to numerous PhD dissertations, master's and undergraduate theses, and other research outputs. In addition, FLARE meetings have included nearly 40 keynotes and other plenary events. Key topics discussed include community-based conservation, forest landscape restoration, land tenure, climate adaptation, food security, agroforestry, and forest governance, among others. This work draws from and contributes to many theoretical and methodological traditions. Research presented at FLARE has used methods ranging from quantitative impact evaluation and policy analysis to qualitative case studies and geospatial approaches. FLARE has also provided an important forum for incubating and sharing results from systematic reviews and other evidence syntheses.

FLARE core researchers (38 individuals as described above) have been central to FLARE's research reach and impact. Collectively, this group has produced 203 scholarly publications from 2015 through May 2025 (see: https://www.forestlivelihoods.org/publications/). These include 195 journal articles, a book, and several other publications (e.g. book chapters, reports, etc). In addition, FLARE has organized 8 journal special issues, with an additional 4 in progress in early 2025 (Appendix C).

Collectively, these research outputs are notable not only for their quantity but also quality. FLARE-supported research has been published in Nature, Science, PNAS, One Earth, and other highly ranked publications, with 77% published in high-impact (Q1) journals. Most publications were in the fields of Environmental Sciences and Economics. As of May 19, 2025, core FLARE research outputs have been cited some 7,052 times according to the Web of Science. Table 1 highlights 10 of the most notable publications.

Importantly, substantial research investment, first by DFID (now FCDO) at the start and subsequently on the part of other funders like NASA, NSF, the Ford Foundation, and the University of Notre Dame, has made this research output possible.

Table 1. Ten illustrative FLARE-supported publications, 2015-2024

REFERENCE	DESCRIPTION	FLARE CONNECTION	CITATIONS WOS | OVERTON
Oldekop, et al, 2016.	Analyzed social and conservation outcomes of protected areas globally, advancing understanding of trade-offs between conservation objectives and social well-being.	Johan Oldekop was a postdoctoral researcher with FLARE. The most well cited FLARE-supported publication in research and policy documents.	**588 69**
Chazdon et al 2016	Provided conceptual clarity on what "counts" a forest, particularly in the context of forest landscape restoration, and a framework to analyze how management objectives drive the relative importance of different aspects of forest state, dynamics, and landscape context.	Author Sarah Wilson was FLARE Postdoc and leads the FLARE working group on "The Future of Forest Work and Communities."	**311 44**
Newton et al. 2016	Highlighted divergent meanings of "forest dependence" in the literature and developed a taxonomy to identify forest-dependent people and inform land use decision-making.	Peter Newton was a postdoctoral researcher with FLARE. This work laid the foundation for subsequent empirical work and policy impact (see Box 3)	**115 23**
Hicks et al. 2016	Identified seven key social concepts and related indicators to inform sustainability science and policy.	Arun Agrawal, FLARE founder, co-authored the study. The study drew from FLARE work to develop its LivWell and CommFor tools, which distilled previous research on human well being and community forest governance respectively into key indicators.	**218 16**
Reed et al. 2017	Global evidence synthesis on the contribution of forest and trees to agricultural production and livelihoods in the tropics. Landmark paper that helped spotlight the role forests can play in supporting agriculture.	Terry Sunderland leads the FLARE Working Group on Forests Supporting Agriculture.	**165 35**

Table 1. Ten illustrative FLARE-supported publications, 2015-2024

REFERENCE	DESCRIPTION	FLARE CONNECTION	CITATIONS WOS | OVERTON
Rasmussen et al. 2017	Research helped develop solutions to the practitioner-researcher divide, proposing indicators to track the sustainability of agricultural commodity production.	FLARE postdocs Laura Rasmussen and Johan Oldekop co-authored the paper along with FLARE Founder Agrawal.	77 2
Erbaugh et al 2020	This study underscored the importance of prioritizing local communities in global forest restoration efforts.	J.T. Erbaugh was a PhD student supported by FLARE. Several other authors also FLARE-supported.	187 15
Hajjar et al. 2021	Comprehensive global review of the social and environmental outcomes of community forests globally, shedding light on their effectiveness in achieving conservation and livelihood goals.	Reeem Hajjar was a postdoctoral researcher with FLARE as were Newton and Oldekop.	118 12
Miller et al. 2021.	Identified key policy implications from a global assessment of the role forests and trees can play in poverty alleviation.	Lead author Daniel Miller is FLARE coordinator and several other core FLARE researchers contributed. Work drew from a large corpus of research, including many studies done by FLARE members.	23 3
Fischer et al. 2023.	This paper explored the trade-offs and synergies among carbon storage, biodiversity, and livelihood improvement due to community forest governance and provided policy recommendations to minimize risks and maximize positive outcomes.	Several core FLARE researchers involved and research used panel dataset developed by IFRI and hosted by FLARE as a publicly-accessible resource on community forest governance.	16 0

Note: Citation data as of May 19, 2025

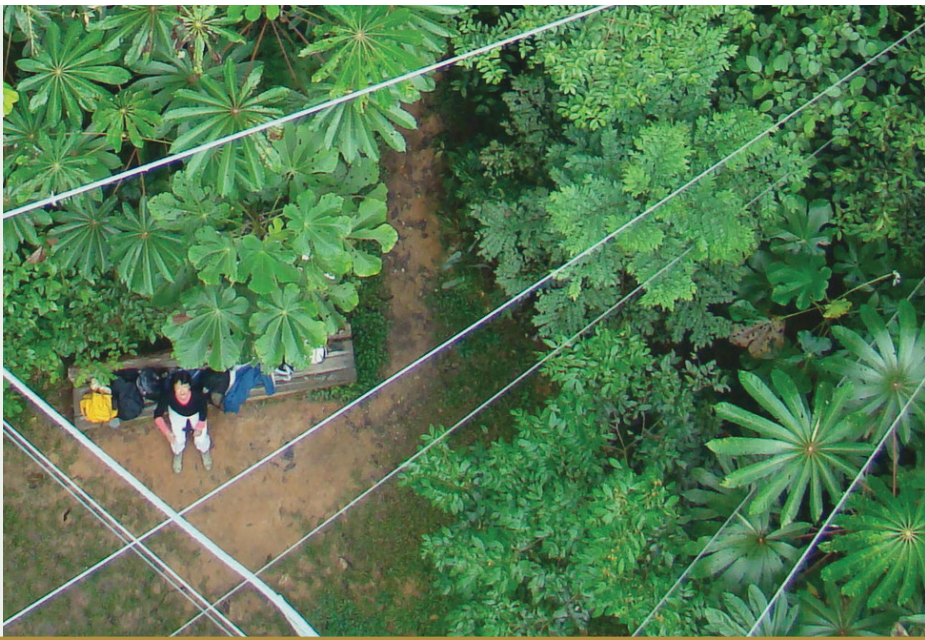
Perceptions of FLARE

These publications illustrate FLARE's role in advancing interdisciplinary research and influencing academic debates and policy dialogues on a set of key contemporary topics. As a FLARE member put it:

"FLARE is bringing some clarity on the meaning and utility of forests to the global community. Forests as a pathway to food security, forests as pathway out of poverty, as income and livelihoods. (...) Understanding that forests are useful across contexts. I think FLARE has really brought that to the fore."

International collaboration has been a hallmark of FLARE research. For example, 126 of the FLARE-supported publications involved co-authors from more than one country. Most of these collaborations (81) involved organizations based in both high-income and low- and middle-income countries, reflecting FLARE's commitment to fostering cross-regional research, particularly related to the Global South.

Finally, the journal Forest Policy and Economics (a Q1 journal in Economics and Forestry) has emerged as an important partner for FLARE, publishing half of FLARE-supported special issues. Further, FLARE has established an agreement for the journal to publish an annual special issue on "Trends in Forest Livelihoods Research," featuring papers presented at FLARE meetings as well as other relevant contributions.



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ACHIEVEMENTS
2. UPTAKE

FLARE-supported research has been used by a range of organizations and individuals. To understand this uptake, we use indicators common in assessing programs that seek to influence not only scholarship but also policy and practice (e.g., World Bank, 2020). We focus on outputs produced by core FLARE researchers. Thus, findings should be understood as representing the lower bound of actual uptake of research conducted by members of the FLARE Network.

FLARE members have prioritized open-access publication, where possible, to enhance the visibility and uptake in research and policy. Such access is particularly crucial in the lower-income countries of the Global South, where much of FLARE's research takes place. The 203 published outputs produced by core FLARE researchers appeared in more than 80 different journals, 60% of which provided some form of open access. Historically, the most visited part of the FLARE website has been the page with summary information about the 203 publications and links to them (https://www.forestlivelihoods.org/publications/). This metric provides a measure of interest, but further work is needed to ensure that at least a preprint version of each study is available.

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Research metrics

FLARE publications have been accessed 6,851 times over the past decade and 749 times in the last six months (November 20, 2024 - May 19, 2025), based on views or clicks on metadata in WoS (Supplementary Information). The 186 FLARE journal articles indexed in WoS have been cited 7,052 times, averaging 38 citations per publication, far exceeding average citations per scholarly publication in WoS of less than 10 for natural sciences and 5 for agricultural sciences and social sciences (Marx & Bornmann, 2015). Citation counts varied widely, ranging from 0 to 588 citations per paper in WoS. More than 90% of the publications were cited at least once, with 43% (78 articles) cited more than 25 times and about a quarter cited more than 50 times. Table 1 presents citation and other information on 10 of the more influential FLARE papers.

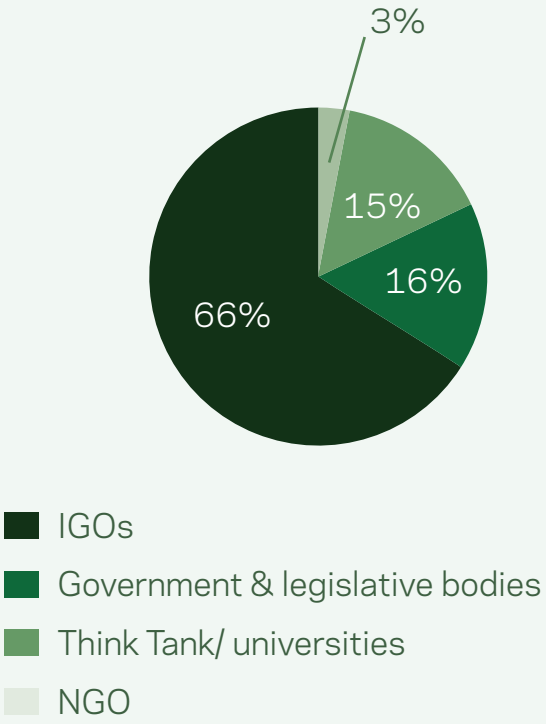
Citation counts are even higher in Google Scholar, which includes grey literature. For example, Oldekop et al. (2016) in Table 1 was cited nearly 1,000 times in Google Scholar compared to 588 in WoS. However, we were not able to include Google Scholar citation counts consistently across FLARE publications and years due to lack of data availability.

Policy metrics

Of the 203 FLARE academic publications, 104 (51%) were cited in policy documents recorded in the Overton database. The most frequently cited academic articles also tended to receive the highest number of policy citations, demonstrating widespread interest in top-ranked publications. FLARE-supported publications have an average of 7 policy citations (ranging from 1 to 71). Policy citations for FLARE publications mostly come from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), which have no specific country affiliation (Figure 4). Regionally, citations were highest among organizations based in Europe (38%), then the US (6%), with Africa, Asia, and Latin America—regions where much of FLARE's research is conducted—collectively contributing only about 6% of policy citations.

Among organizations citing FLARE publications in policy documents, intergovernmental organizations, including FAO, UN agencies, IPBES, the World Bank, and CGIAR, are the most prominent. Government and legislative bodies also reference FLARE's work, though citations primarily originate from European institutions rather than those in the Global South.

Figure 4. Proportion of Policy Citations of FLARE-supported publications, by organization type



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ACHIEVEMENTS
3. OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

Capacity Development

FLARE has largely succeeded in its goal of building a vibrant international community of practice on forests and livelihoods, according to member surveys and interviews. In this accomplishment, FLARE has shown considerable resourcefulness and resilience given funding shifts, a global pandemic, and the Secretariat's move to a new University home.

The survey of FLARE members revealed what they find most beneficial about being a part of the Network. Large majorities indicated that their membership in the FLARE Network led to new collaborative partnerships (71%), facilitated career advancement (69%) and provided them with access to innovative methods (61%). An overwhelming 92% of participants described FLARE as an inspiring professional network and expressed enthusiasm for future engagement with FLARE initiatives. "People feel that they belong to a community," a FLARE member concluded. "I think that it's actually very difficult to create this sense of community and somehow FLARE has really managed to do that."

Another FLARE member highlighted the value of FLARE Annual Meetings: "The annual meetings have been really key in keeping me up to date and inspired with research on forests and livelihoods. I continually – whenever I come back from a FLARE meeting – think about how amazing it is that we have a conference that I can actually go to every single presentation and learn something, or you know, really be engaged with every single presentation and that just doesn't happen in every other any other conference I go to."

FLARE members shared specific insights into their professional growth since joining. They reported appreciating FLARE as a networking platform that fosters relationships, interdisciplinary collaboration, and exposure to people with diverse skills that may complement their own. The Network has enabled them to present their work, gain feedback to improve it, and connect with new and established colleagues, mentors, and students worldwide. They report that FLARE has held special value for early-career members as it offers exposure to academic presentations that inspire future researchers, with some participants finding job and grant opportunities through these connections.

A member connected with FLARE from the very beginning credits the FLARE Network for helping her to focus her research specifically on forests and livelihoods: "[Through FLARE] I was able to be exposed to a broader set of work focused on forest and livelihoods. You know, kind of giving a name to the face of the people in the literature who I would say were really leading a lot of, especially the quantitative work on forests and livelihoods."

Other people see FLARE as an opportunity for building their professional networks, leading to new lines of research, job prospects, and other professionally rewarding opportunities. "One of the benefits of being a part of FLARE was getting to meet people with complementary skill sets so that I could assemble a team and write papers that were really high impact," a FLARE member noted. Another reported that the "connection with FLARE was exceptional. It's helped me to land this position as an assistant professor."

Other members find inspiration and new ideas (see Box 2):

"I submitted a paper that was born out of a conversation I was having with people at FLARE. Yeah, I just feel like every time I go there's, you know, sparks happen."

As another long-time FLARE member put it: "FLARE provided a space for those collaborations and friendships to essentially kind of carry over time. (...) The FLARE conference always provided that focal point of being able to see people again and meet people again. And so many of the tangential networks that I established came out of many of these conferences and meetings and informal discussions that I had. We're starting to work in Mexico as part of a new project, and we met somebody last year at the FLARE conference, and now we're in discussions with them about perhaps working together. And then they pinpoint you to somebody else, right? So, in that sense, the network has been transformational."

These examples demonstrate FLARE's ability to unite individuals with shared interests but different skills and backgrounds, foster an expanding community of practice, and facilitate research activities that have meaningfully advanced members' professional careers.

Box 2. Cross-regional collaboration to understand the impacts of forest plantations

By Cat Bolten, University of Notre Dame, and Lila Nath sSharma, ForestAction Nepal

Increasing interest in forests as part of a green transition has sparked concern about the inclusion of monoculture tree plantations in the United Nations' definition of "forest." (UN 2025; Jones, 2017). FLARE members Cat Bolten and Lila Nath Sharma learned they shared this concern when they met at FLARE's 2023 Annual Meeting in Nairobi. They began a conversation after learning about the problem of exotic species in Kenya from a keynote speaker. The site of Bolten's long-term research in Sierra Leone borders a eucalyptus plantation that is profiting from carbon credits in addition to plywood and pulp, and the plantation was established through a legally-problematic contract with local landowners. Half a world away, Sharma was aware that Nepal has one of the world's oldest government-led eucalyptus plantations and that its establishment displaced landless peasants from their ancestral forests but his work had not previously focused on it. Their meeting at FLARE sparked a new shared interest in understanding the dynamics and impacts of such plantations on local people and biodiversity.

Bolten and Sharma agreed to follow up and they connected again in Nepal in April 2024. They visited the eucalyptus plantation site where they interacted with communities and toured the now four decade-old plantation. After this visit, Sharma and his organization, Forest Action Nepal, started investigating eucalyptus and other exotic species plantations around the country. They conducted a national survey and found six species of eucalyptus in plantations across Nepal and are starting a program of research on the socio-ecological outcomes of such exotic species plantations in private as well as national forests in Nepal.

The Nepal experience gave Bolten new ideas for her research in Sierra Leone, which she is pursuing through a new collaborative, cross-country project, which includes ForestAction. This research draws from multi-disciplinary expertise to investigate the impacts of monoculture tree plantations on biodiversity, human rights, and forest access around the world in light of "tree planting" as an objective of the green transition.

Research-Based Policy Impact

One of the reasons development policy in so many countries has failed to prioritize conservation, sustainable management, and restoration of forests is the relative paucity of evidence on the role of forests in supporting human development goals. Forests and tree-based systems have often been overlooked in economic development and land use policy discussions, especially at regional and national scales, which hold particular relevance for policy (Agrawal et al. 2013; Miller et al. 2022). FLARE researchers have sought to address this gap through new conceptual work, empirical study, and evidence synthesis. For example, FLARE-led research has helped bring conceptual clarity to the term "forest-dependent people" (Box 3) and studies from Nepal, India, and Liberia have used large-scale household-survey data combined with forest cover data to shed new light on the nature and scope of forest contributions to household income and consumption (Oldekop et al., 2019; Damania et al. 2020; Amadu and Miller, 2024).

In producing and disseminating high-quality research, FLARE has helped shape larger policy discourses and, more generally, helped raise awareness of the importance of forests for human development and well-being goals and of the significance of community rights and governance for forest-related environmental goals. These contributions, rights, and practices are at risk in global policy debates that view forests and trees narrowly in terms of climate mitigation and biodiversity conservation goals. Through its research, outreach, and other activities, the FLARE Network continues to seek ways to lessen this risk.

Box 3. Understanding "Forest dependence" for improved policy and research

By Peter Newton, University of Colorado Boulder, USA

The term "forest dependence" has been widely used in research, policy and practice but it has generally been poorly and inconsistently defined. Reliable empirical evidence on how many people around the world depend on forests has also been missing. This conceptual uncertainty and dearth of evidence has challenged effective policymaking relating to forests and livelihoods and evaluation of the social and economic impacts of these policies.

FLARE researchers have addressed these needs through a series of studies. First, we undertook a literature review to map different concepts and meanings of forest dependence (Newton et al. 2016). Forest proximity emerged as one factor often used to characterize such people. Second, we used spatial data to map human populations living near forests globally, coining the term "forest-proximate people" (Newton et al. 2020). We then improved the methodology for this mapping approach to use only annually-updated, publicly-available data, and used this method to generate updated global estimates with case studies of countries with high levels of forests and people (Newton et al. 2022). This research was supported by the UK's Department of International Development and by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and contributed to the efforts of these two agencies to measure and monitor the number of forest dependent people.

Current research extends this work. First, we are overlaying poverty data to map the number of forest proximate people living in poverty (Castle et al. 2025) and who are vulnerable to climate change (Bailey et al., 2025). In addressing poverty and climate change, this research relates directly to several of the Sustainable Development Goals. Second, scholars have developed new indicators (e.g., the "human-forest nexus") for mapping forest-people relationships over time, building on our conceptual and methodological characterization of forest-proximate people (Massaro et al. 2025). Finally, other researchers have adapted our methodology to conceptualize and map "forest citizenship", defined as forest people living within formally-recognized territories (Parry et al. 2025).

As discussed in box 3, citation of research in policy documents such as reports, strategic documents, technical assessments, and frameworks is one tangible measure of its contribution to policy. Survey respondents and interviewees also shed light on FLARE impacts on policy. Generally, both sources highlighted that FLARE has created opportunities for policy dialogue and learning, but that attributing changes in policies to specific research outputs remains challenging.

More than half of survey respondents (52%) reported that FLARE helped them have greater impact into policy or practice. Explanation of this impact focused on presenting their work at FLARE (35% of respondents) or disseminating their work through FLARE-supported venues, such as special issues (16%). Deeper, more direct engagement with policy such as through FLARE-facilitated connections with policy-relevant partners (15%) or FLARE-provided training on policy engagement (7%), was much less common. Interviews further revealed that members were unaware of specific policy impact. Those interviewed highlighted the need for the FLARE Network to develop more measurable indicators of policy impact, and to seek to reach a wider audience, not only different kinds of policymakers, but also IP&LCs and private sector actors.

While noting these needs, interviewees emphasized challenges to capturing FLARE policy impact. They emphasized the complexity of defining policy impact, in which research generates evidence that can be used to inform decision-making, whether directly through researchers sharing their findings or more indirectly through media reports on research or use of research by advocacy organizations. As one interviewee, who connected with FLARE since 2019, explained: "I'm sure that things like the IUFRO reports have been picked up by governments and agencies… but I don't actually have any statistics on whether these have been used or had any impact."

Others highlighted the need for stronger connections with policymakers and more accessible language for non-experts, ensuring that FLARE research can be more effectively used.

One of the ways FLARE has sought to engage with practitioners and policymakers is by developing accessible, easy-to-use tools based on rigorous research to generate relevant evidence. For example, the CommFor and LivWell tools have been refined at FLARE workshops and promoted through FLARE plenaries and communications. However, uptake has been less than expected. Only 35% of survey respondents were aware of CommFor and 18% of LivWell, with only 4% reporting they have used CommFor and 1% LivWell. A few notable exceptions include the use of the LivWell tool by Eden Restoration Project for monitoring and evaluation of their tree planting and community engagement efforts in east and southern Africa or CommFor by communities in parts of southern India. But evaluation results suggest there is substantial room for improvement in promoting these tools.

This evaluation reveals an apparent disconnect between bibliometric analysis and member assessment of FLARE policy impact. Most core members of FLARE expressed the importance of engaging practitioners and policymakers to ensure that research can make a positive difference in the world but were often unable to point to specific FLARE policy impacts. By contrast, bibliometric results showed that FLARE research was cited in a wide range of policy documents. One reason for this disconnect may be that FLARE members viewed citation in policy documents as a narrow proxy for actual impact and so did not point to this outcome, instead looking for more tangible, direct evidence of impact. It may also be that FLARE researchers are unaware of the citation of their work in policy documents– and therefore potentially in related policy processes. Indeed, the Overton policy database began only in 2024 and is not widely known. More generally, measuring the policy influence of research is well-known as being challenging given the complexity and unpredictability of policy processes, the often gradual, cumulative nature of policy influence, and disjuncts between the timing of research and policy cycles (Siar, 2023).

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Lessons Learned and Paths Forward

The FLARE Network has successfully built a thriving international community of practice on forests and livelihoods. That FLARE continues to exist at all–on a modest budget, and through the vicissitudes of funding cycles, leadership and institutional turnover, and a global pandemic– let alone thrive is perhaps its greatest achievement. FLARE's existence owes to the value that its membership and leaders place on it and, in turn, their dedication to grow and nurture the Network. This evaluation has provided new evidence and insights on the extent to which FLARE has reached its goals. We conclude this report by summarizing lessons learned and providing recommendations for how FLARE might better serve its existing membership while growing the network and deepening its impact. These recommendations are based on the additional information from the member survey and interviews.

Research

Research is the foundation of FLARE. It is the basis for all else that the Network does. Available metrics suggest FLARE has excelled in the production and sharing of new knowledge. This work is distinguished not only for its quantity (more than 1,000 scientific papers presented at FLARE meetings, more than 200 of which were produced by a set of core researchers directly supported by FLARE) but also its quality (FLARE research has appeared in a range of highly ranked journals and is exceptionally well cited in both scholarship and policy). This research has helped advance scholarly and policy debates on specific topics like "forest dependence" as well as shape thinking and help define an interdisciplinary field at the intersection of forests and livelihoods.

Recommendations:

- Concentrate on a few key research priorities where greater investment and more in-depth investigation can advance or even change the field while continuing to provide a "big tent" for discussion of any research related to forests and livelihoods.
- Increase the involvement of IP&LCs and other actors in focal countries of the Global South in setting and implementing this research agenda. Revisit FLARE core research questions (Box 1) and update as needed based on input from FLARE members and these and other stakeholder groups.
- Ensure FLARE-supported research is available for anyone to use by publishing open access when possible and otherwise providing pre-prints. Agreements between publishers and the University of Notre Dame and other libraries increasingly make this option much more viable.

Policy

FLARE has had some success in influencing policy relevant to forests and livelihoods. By producing and providing a forum for the discussion of high-quality research among not only researchers, but also practitioners and policymakers from different perspectives, FLARE has helped raise awareness about the significance of forests for livelihoods around the world. FLARE research has featured in a diverse range of policy documents. However, this evaluation revealed that there is much more FLARE can do to facilitate the application of research to policy and practice. For example, FLARE has developed relevant tools (CommFor and LivWell), but these have seen little uptake. Greater emphasis on the "E" in FLARE – engagement – should be a priority for the Network moving forward.

Recommendations:

- Conduct stakeholder mapping to identify key audiences for FLARE and refine a theory of change (TOC) for FLARE impact on policy and practice. These exercises should draw on the expertise within the FLARE Network, its host institution (the Keough School of Global Affairs), and best practice in the domain of research impact, such as the UK's Research Excellence Framework (Tilley et al., 2018) and others (Reed et al. 2021).
- Devise and implement an explicit monitoring, evaluation and learning framework aligned with FLARE's TOC, including to track and assess policy impact.
- Create opportunities and materials for FLARE members to engage with policy processes, including through connections with policymakers and advocates, co-production of research, media and other trainings, and convening policy discussions.
- Promote FLARE tools CommFor and LivWell through demonstrations at FLARE convenings, webinars, videos and other materials so that they can be more widely used to enhance monitoring efforts, empower communities, and assess the effectiveness of initiatives focusing on forest-related livelihoods.
- Present and disseminate key research findings in ways that resonate with policymakers, advocates, and practitioners, especially in FLARE focal regions. Engage more purposefully with media to achieve this objective.

Capacity Development

The FLARE Network's roughly 1,150 members hail from 65 different countries and cover a wide range of disciplines and professional backgrounds and encompass senior leaders in the field as well as up and coming scholars and practitioners. Results of this evaluation suggest that FLARE has indeed addressed researcher, practitioner, and policymaker needs for a space to interact and collaborate on forests and livelihoods (Watkins et al., 2018). Members report that FLARE is an inspiring network and find being a part of it exciting. They also provide suggestions to further enhance their experience, build their capacity, and, overall, strengthen the network. Capacity development recommendations are grouped under those related to FLARE members (and potential members) and those related to FLARE as an organization.

Recommendations - FLARE membership

- Establish year-round networking opportunities and mentoring platforms for early career researchers to promote sustained collaboration among academics, practitioners, and policymakers.
- Increase support for participation in FLARE from priority regions in the Global South, including through scholarships, networking, training, and other opportunities.
- Strengthen communication and outreach to FLARE members and others interested in FLARE's work by increasing awareness of available FLARE resources and other collaborative, publishing, and job opportunities.
- Organize regular online knowledge-sharing events on timely, important topics to engage members and other interested audiences and build momentum in between annual meetings

Recommendations - FLARE as an organization

- Develop and implement a strategic plan for FLARE for the next five years and beyond.
- Increase the FLARE Secretariat's capacity in communications and community and policy engagement, including through the hiring of additional staff.
- Strengthen FLARE thematic working groups to amplify and deepen FLARE impact.
- Grow FLARE's membership, especially within priority geographies in the Global South and among non-academic actors.
- Diversify funding and seek more funding stability through core operational support, such as through endowment funding. Much larger and more consistent funding resources are required for FLARE to build from its achievements and deliver on its considerable potential to help address climate change, biodiversity, and human development goals in forests and tree-based systems across the globe.

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Appendix A. List of past and current FLARE Steering Committee Members

NAME	PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATION	STEERING COMMITTEE STATUS
Arun Agrawal	University of Notre Dame	Current
Gaia Allison	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	Former
Guillermo Castenellos	Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation	Former
Iain Davidson-Hunt	University of Manitoba, Canada	Former
Penny Davies	Ford Foundation	Former
Reem Hajjar	Oregon State University	Current
Chetan Kumar	International Union for Conservation of Nature	Current
Anders Krog	Rainforest Foundation Norway	Current
Anne Larson	CIFOR-ICRAF	Current
Stefanie Lier	Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office	Current
Lars Løvold	Rainforest Foundation Norway	Former
Robert Nasi	CIFOR-ICRAF	Former
Margareta Nilsson	The Tenure Facility	Current
Bryson Ogden	Rights and Resources Initiative	Current
Andy White	Rights and Resources Initiative	Former

Appendix B. FLARE Network Support, 2015-2024

SUPPORT	ORGANIZATION NAME
External donors	U.K. Department for International Development
	Ford Foundation
	MacArthur Foundation
	U.S. National Science Foundation (NSF)
	U.S. National Aeronautics and Space
	World Bank, Program on Forests (PROFOR)
Secretariat host	**University of Michigan (2015-2021)** School for Environment and Sustainability
	University of Notre Dame (2021-present) Keough School of Global Affairs Kellogg Institute for International Studies Klau Institute for Civil and Human Rights Pulte Institute for Global Development Nanovic Institute for European Studies Environmental Change Initiative Notre Dame Research
Annual Meeting host	Musée de l'homme, Paris (2015)
	University of Edinburgh (2016)
	Stockholm University (2017)
	University of Copenhagen (2018)
	University of East Anglia (2018)
	University of Michigan (2019)
	Pontifical University of St. Anthony (Antonianum) (2022, 2024)
	University of Notre Dame (Rome Global Gateway) (2022, 2024)
	CIFOR-ICRAF (2023)
Other support	Rights and Resources Initiative
	Wyss Academy for Nature
	FOCALI
	IUFRO
	Stockholm Environment Institute
	Swedish International Agricultural Network Initiative (SIANI)

Appendix C. FLARE-Supported Journal Special Issues

This list tracks all Special Issues, Special Features or Thematic Sections published in peer-reviewed journals led by core FLARE affiliates (i.e. PIs, postdocs, students, working group leads) or otherwise supported through FLARE related to the topic of forest livelihoods.

Published by 2024

1. "Forests, Food, and Livelihoods." Laura Vang Rasmussen, Cristy Watkins, and Arun Agrawal, eds. 2017. Forest Policy and Economics. https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/forest-policy-and-economics/vol/84/suppl/C

2. "Forest governance interventions for sustainability." Arun Agrawal, Chuan Liao, Cristy Watkins, Laura Vang Rasmussen, and Reem Hajjar, eds. 2018. Current Opinion in Environment and Sustainability. https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/current-opinion-in-environmental-sustainability/vol/32/suppl/C

3. "Forests in Flux." 2019. Thematic section published over two issues of Environmental Conservation. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/environmental-conservation/issue/F843108CEE3E81A847FC3BCC705FEC21

4. "Responsibilization in Natural Resources Governance." Irmeli Mustalahti and Arun Agrawal, eds. 2020. Forest Policy and Economics. https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/10DTN890MG0

5. "Forests as Pathways to Prosperity." Daniel C. Miller and Reem Hajjar, eds. 2020. World Development. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0305750X19302955?via%3Dihub

6. "Sustaining the Commons." Paul Ferraro and Arun Agrawal, Eds. 2021. PNAS. https://www.pnas.org/toc/pnas/118/29

7. "Forests, Trees, and the Eradication of Poverty: Potential and Limitations." Daniel C. Miller, Jennifer Zavaleta Cheek, Stephanie Mansourian, and Christoph Wildburger. eds 2022. Forest Policy and Economics. https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/108M6M1C9XS

8. "Current trends in forest livelihoods research." Daniel C. Miller, Ida Djenontin, and Anne Larson, eds. 2024. Forest Policy and Economics https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/108QDN44WLN.

In progress by 2024

1. "Taking stock of work and employment research in the forest sector." Rattiya Lippe, Tatiana Ojeda Luna, Doris Mutta, and Jörg Schweinle, eds. 2025 (forthcoming). Forest Policy and Economics. https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/298826/taking-stock-of-work-and-employment-research-in-the-forest-sector.

2. "Strengthening Sustainability Science for Sustainable Development in Land and Coastal Systems." Johan A. Oldekop, Daniel C. Miller, and Arun Agrawal, eds. 2025 (Forthcoming). Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

3. "Forests Sustaining Agriculture." Terence Sunderland, Sandra Luque, Sima Fakheran Esfahani, James Reed, and Amy Ickowitz, eds. 2025 (forthcoming). Landscape Ecology. https://link.springer.com/journal/10980/updates/26249286

4. "Current trends in forest livelihoods research." Katia Nakamura Lam, Rachel Carmenta, Santiago Izquierdo-Tort, and Daniel C. Miller, eds., Forest Policy and Economics. https://www.sciencedirect.com/special-issue/104HJ1XJKFP

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