Understanding recognition: What role can tools and methods play in an arena of power struggles and imbalance?

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This issue of the newsletter focuses on the paths communities and community forestry practitioners have taken to earn recognition of local management regimes. The proceeding overview article and case studies provide some insight into a range of issues arising when facilitating local forest management agreements. The cases offer examples of tools and methods that have been used in specific contexts. But it is evident that tools and methods alone are not the answer. The key question remains: how can tools and methods be integrated into effective negotiation processes which address power imbalances inherent in contexts familiar to many of us?

Why is recognition a key issue for community forestry in the region?

Recognition is a term often glibly used in the community forestry arena by many: ranging from field workers to academic researchers and policy advocats. The term is often used to describe what is perceived as an essential requisite for any form of community forestry to be accepted and practiced in the current political and legal arenas of the region. The breadth and meaning of this requisite is often hidden behind the use of the word "recognition" and those using it often forget that it can exist in many forms, at many different levels and vary according to perspective.

Community Forestry practitioners are working with communities to demonstrate to more powerful actors that local management practices can be sustainable and that in many situations communities are the most qualified managers of forest areas. In this battle for recognition of local management regimes and capacities, specific tools, methods and processes have been developed, or are being used, to demonstrate this. Although understanding recognition as an outcome is important and the use of tools and methods assist in this, it is facilitating dialogue and decision-making with key actors in the negotiation process that is key to achieving such an outcome. Unfortunately, such negotiation processes are as yet not well understood or documented.

This edition of the newsletter aimed to gather experiences and analyze strengths and weaknesses of various tools and processes currently being tested by communities to negotiate local management regimes. As the case studies came in it was apparent that tools and methods ultimately may not be able to solve power imbalances inherent in community-based forest management. Essentially, what practitioners and communities are facing throughout the region is a situation of vast power imbalance which is heavily influencing the recognition process. Hence, the question of whether methods and tools can address this will need to be considered more seriously.

This article focuses on the different perceptions surrounding what recognition means in a variety of contexts and the question and issues regarding how negotiation processes can address these power imbalances[1].

Overview of Case Studies

The case studies are diverse in terms of country experiences and positions and roles in the recognition process. Articles from Cambodia and Thailand describe and analyze processes that have led to recognition of community management at the local level in a wider stakeholder environment, which culminated in some form of management agreement. The case study from a local level pilot project in Laos working in rich forest area illustrates a process which involved an extensive assessment of local resource use, village land use planning, and developing local forest management committees to manage their surrounding forests with community-based logging arrangements. This case involved experimentation with the early phases of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Certification and identifies the strengths and weaknesses of forest certification as a management tool. It also analyzes its potential to facilitate recognition in the future.

The article from India emphasizes the role of the community in managing forest resources but identifies weaknesses in the intervention of the forest department and the lack of recognition of the diversity of interests amongst the community itself. Another factor in the recognition process is illustrated in an article from

Indonesia where decentralization is playing a key role in communities own self-recognition process and altering their bargaining power with outside companies, while creating power imbalance at the local level.

What forms of recognition evolve from local contexts?

What do we mean when we talk of recognition? The case studies illustrate how widely this can be interpreted depending on local conditions and national contexts.

For example, it may be recognized by the forest department that a community has been in an area for a long period and has a demonstrated capacity to manage the forest. This does not necessarily mean that the community is allowed to manage the forest for their own needs based on their own decision-making processes. More often than not, government sponsored community forestry programs usually emphasize peoples' participation in national reforestation policies, which stress the traditional focus on timber and wood production. These programs often are contradictory to the needs of users. Communities are often not just interested in participating in national reforestation schemes but in processes that will make a difference to their lives and bargaining power.

As shown in figure 1, the recognition process could be seen as having the following phases. This is a useful model which helps to identify and distinguish the different phases of recognition and the type of support that communities may need in each phase. Although originally based on an analysis of the Indonesian context it has relevance to other countries in the region. It also illustrates that recognition is a building process which is based on developments in previous phases. The characteristics of each phase and the natural diversity and challenges of each phase could help to explain the different interpretations of the word "recognition" and some of the difficulties encountered in sharing experiences around this.

Figure 1: One way to look at the recognition process
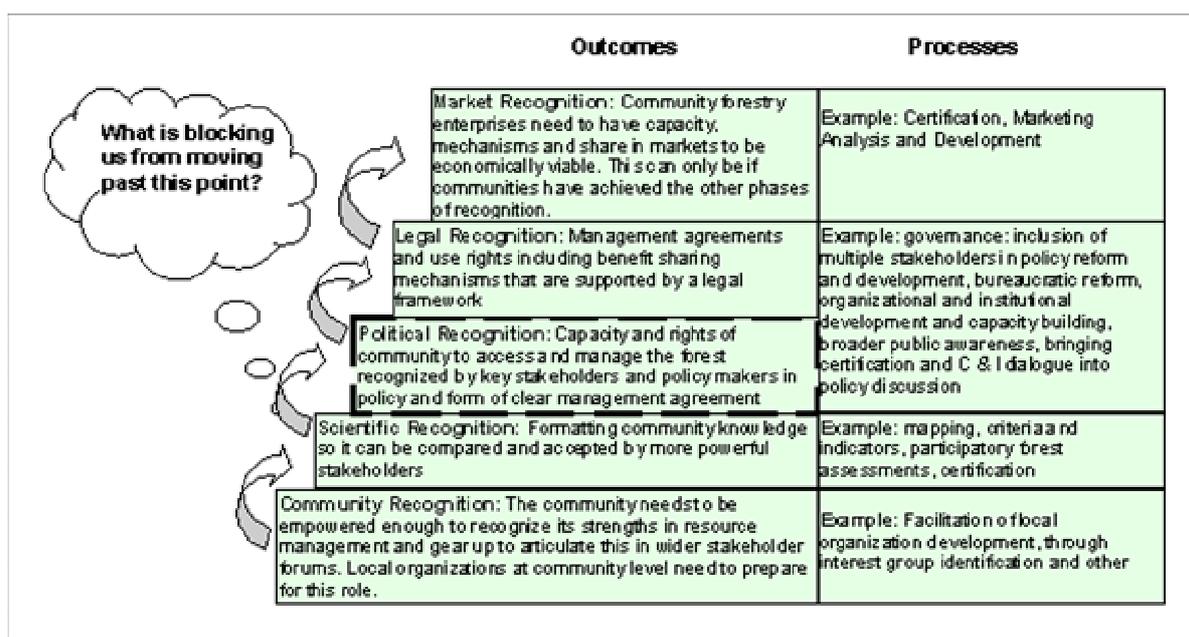
Source: Adapted from Dani Munggoro Pers. Comm April 1999

Linking Case Studies with Phases of Recognition

Several of the case studies presented could be linked with this model. The question arises as to whether the higher phases can be reached without completing the lower phases adequately or can phases occur simultaneously? Whichever the case it is useful to think of them in distinct phases.

Community recognition

For example the Cambodian case study emphasizes that the management agreement with the provincial government could never have been successful unless the Som Thom community themselves were not interested, motivated and undeterred by the challenges ahead. The uniqueness of this community is related to community unity historically, the capacity of local organizations involved, and a local (in this case provincial)

government which was supportive of their efforts. The case study from Orissa, India articulates the key role of the community and their own recognition process in forest management. In this instance, lower caste tribals began forest protection initiatives but were quickly usurped by the more powerful elements in the village. Even when there are higher levels of recognition (as in the JFM Program of India), there is a need for strong local institutions which represent all interest groups of the community and ensure that all groups are recognized in equitable benefit sharing in later stages. The implications for facilitators, in this case the forestry department, are identified clearly.

Scientific recognition

Many NGOs in the Philippines and Indonesia have specifically chosen to support communities in mapping their resources in formats that can be understood by the communities themselves and by outsiders. In some instances, community produced documents are now submitted as legal documents for land right claims and resource compensation claims. This illustrates how well such scientific recognition feeds into legal and policy processes and in some cases individual recognition. It is at this stage of recognition where tools and methods are proving to be useful and have been widely adopted in the region as a means of linking local level agreements to national policies. Mapping is a particularly good example of a widely applied tool. In some projects in Indonesia practitioners and communities are experimenting with sophisticated mapping systems based on GIS which can be used for modeling and improving resource management in the future. This is contributing to the scientific credibility of community management as well as reinforcing local management capacities. But is just scientifically proving that communities can sustainably manage forests enough? In many situations even the scientific recognition process is in the hands of those with vested interests.

Where are the greatest challenges in the recognition model?

Political and Legal Recognition

The case studies indicate that the current struggles and challenges lie between the phases of scientific and political and legal recognition. Tools which document community knowledge and practices in a format acceptable to outsiders have progressed considerably in the last decade. Unfortunately, tools which help decipher what scientific recognition means in practice for future management agreements of the resource are underdeveloped. Interestingly, in each case study except in India, the negotiation processes used, and ensuing agreed upon management plan, are not recognized at the national level. Even in India where there is the JFM Program, the community had to "conform" to the JFM program to gain legal recognition.

Forest certification is an example of a tool which to some extent addresses the issue of power balance. As it is based on principles relating to policy and laws, it unavoidably raises the issue of political and legal recognition. Certification is being experimented with to increase political and legal recognition of community management. It is important to remember that certification was not originally developed for community forestry, but primarily as a means to pressurize large scale industrial timber enterprises into a more responsible form of forest management. However, a key feature is still recognizing existing rights and values of forest dwelling people where relevant.

The case study from Laos illustrates how forest certification could play a role in an intermediary phase of recognition that is between scientific and political/legal recognition. Even if the forest management practices comply with all the standards set, unless there is clear tenure and access to resources by local people then a certificate cannot be awarded. At the very least, this raises the importance of security of rights and tenure in the policy debate as an important aspect in sustainable forest management. This may in turn lead to greater political and legal recognition of community's rights to have control over, and access to, forest resources.

Until the bargaining and decision making position of the communities we work with is significantly politically we will politically altered, always struggle to reach the end phase in the recognition process on a larger scale.

In South America, it has been recognized that the publicity generated from certification of community forestry enterprises reaches a very wide range of stakeholders from communities to timber enterprises nationally and locally. In Quintana Roo, Mexico it has been reported that the international attention has helped to sway criticism of the ecological impacts of community forestry that had been previously voiced by urban environmentalists (Kruedener 2000). Despite the promises which certification holds, it must be remembered that it is principally a market-based tool and will only be sustainable in the long-term for communities which have access and the capacity to meet those markets.

Aside from certification no other specific tools arose from the case studies which may help in the negotiation process to facilitate political/legal recognition. Recently, CIFOR has been researching the development of criteria and indicators templates for sustainable forest management. The potential for using criteria and indicators as a platform discussion tool between multi-stakeholders has been promising, but few working examples exist (Edwards 1999).

Processes such as those described in the Thailand and Cambodia case studies, which involved negotiation between communities and other stakeholders by third party facilitators, are increasingly well documented and are being adapted to local situations. The concept of multi-stake-holder forums such as the watershed network described in the Mae Chaem case study are increasingly important in the political recognition phase especially at local level, in this process, the focal point is the facilitating organization and their relationship with other stakeholders.

Are we missing the point: how are we addressing power imbalance?

Perhaps we should ask ourselves where that leaves us? A dominant theme throughout all the case studies is the issue of power or more appropriately power imbalances. It is apparent from the analysis that the tools currently used in the region only address the challenges behind recognition in a limited sense.

Power imbalances still need to be addressed within negotiation processes. Most of the cases illustrate that tools will only be effective when they are used as part of a wider negotiation process. A process where even those who might yield more negotiating power participate, and perhaps more importantly, when it is clear who needs to be included in such negotiations. The challenge of designing effective processes with these powerful stakeholders still remains. Perhaps the focus on tools and methods in this analysis has detracted from such processes. Tools such as criteria and indicators or Certification can be used in this way if seen as an integral part of the negotiation process and the standards are agreed upon by all those involved.

In reality, until the bargaining and decision making position of the communities we work with is significantly altered, we will always struggle politically to reach the end phase in the recognition process on a larger scale.

The case study from Indonesia nicely illustrates the role of decentralization in changing the bar- gaining position of the local communities in the eyes of themselves and other stakeholders such as the private sector. Although decentralization has not been formally implemented in Indonesia, communities are ready to move with their newly acquired defacto power. This has changed the balance of power significantly. The power of such political factors will be significant and cannot be discounted. The challenge of facilitating local recognition processes may become easier if we build on the positive trends of decentralization as was the case in the case study of Cambodia. Of course, it would be naive to assume that decentralization, if not properly understood and thought through, will not bring its own new set of problems. However, its role in addressing the balance of power should be considered in gaining recognition for local forest management regimes in the future.

Another striking point, is the importance of key personalities in the political recognition process. This is strongly emphasized in the Cambodia case study and is closely linked with the issue of power imbalance. Many examples exist where recognition processes have been successful. These are of- ten attributed to key personalities who see it in their favor to publicly support community forestry. Whether this is linked to personal values or wider political strategies is unclear. However, it is these people who can make or break a process regardless of tools and methods used or available.

What Next?

From the range of case studies presented, it is evident that a better understanding of recognition processes is emerging. A key lesson learned is that those involved in facilitating successful processes are fully involving the communities themselves in their own recognition processes. Tools to facilitate scientific recognition of community knowledge are well practiced and documented. However, the challenges of drawing in other more powerful stakeholders into the process has yet to be addressed. It also remains to be seen if scientific tools alone can remedy old biases and vested interests. Even when communities are proven to be sustainably managing forest area through agreed upon standards, it will not necessarily lead to political and legal recognition.

The successes and challenges described in the five case studies of this edition can provide some ideas and

hope to those currently engaged in negotiation processes. Such experiences at the local scale need intensive input and facilitation. The challenge of the future will be to build on appropriate political processes and take advantage of socio-political change at a wider level. Political factors such as decentralization, increasing participation of civil society in governance and more openness within the forestry sector can assist within the negotiation process, but will also bring with it their own issues.

In sum, the primary challenge presented in all the case studies is developing tools and processes to involve those who have a higher degree of power. Concepts and understanding of power imbalance and strategies to address them are still underdeveloped or not shared.

Significant challenges lie ahead in designing effective negotiation processes. Of course the question still remains as to whether even negotiation processes can address the issue of vested interests that we are all so familiar with?

Literature Cited

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[1]Throughout this article recognition is meant as the outcome emanating from negotiation processes.