Participatory Processes and Conflict Management in Community Forestry

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Community forestry is in the process of transforming itself. Its supporters and practitioners are reviewing its basic assumptions and goals in order to develop a strategy for the future. This paper focuses on the changes that are occurring in community forestry and the important role that participatory process and conflict management are playing in its transformation. During the last twenty years there has been a shift in community forestry initiatives from tree planting and woodlots to natural resource management within the context of wider benefit sharing and greater participation. Conflicts have and will continue to arise over what decisions should be made by whom over management, access, rights and benefits. The challenge will be to develop effective mechanism that recognise disparities of power and support a pluralistic equitable approach in forest management.

INTRODUCTION

Communities have been effectively managing forest resources for centuries. Local/indigenous management of forest resources, especially in anthropology and human ecology, has been and continues to be a rigorous, stimulating field of study.

However, community forestry is a relatively new area of specialisation within forestry. It emerged in the 1970s during a critical review of both forestry and development objectives. During this period it was increasingly recognised that resource management and development strategies were not succeeding in either conserving resources or supporting rural development (IUCN/UNEP/WWF, 1980). Forestry then (and admittedly in many countries now) was focused on the harvesting of primarily wood from the forest on a not always sustainable basis. Development strategies of the 1950s and 1960s often focused on industrial development and overlooked rural development especially the needs of the rural poor. Supporting the rethinking of what should be the primary objective of natural resource management was a shift in forest policy from one that focused on products to one that was more concerned with managing the forest as a "complex, valuable natural resource system" (Gilmour 1995)

By the end of the 1970s, international meetings, especially the 1978 World Forestry congress with its theme of Forests for People, saw the World Bank shift from industrially oriented forestry to environmental protection and meeting community needs. Influential books and reports on imminent fuelwood shortages and deforestation (Eckholm 1975) led to the development of the concept of community forestry and the first programmes and projects designated as community forestry (see Arnold 1992, 1999; Fisher 1995).

PARTICIPATION

Community forestry was initially not very participatory. The objective of community forestry was often to halt deforestation rather than serving as a strategy for not only reaching conservation objectives but also providing direct and indirect benefits for communities that would support rural development. It was not that there was a lack of concern for the well-being of rural communities, but that the primary focus was on environmental concerns (especially in relation to destruction of agricultural areas).

Since the demand for fuelwood was linked to the deforestation and deterioration of agricultural areas and forests in Africa and Asia, community forestry during this era was primarily defined as a strategy to provide fuel for the wood energy crisis. We have the wisdom of hindsight to see that the diagnosis of the problem (i.e., a shortage of fuelwood or wood energy) was often based on making long-term inferences from short observations of the communities, inadequate consultation with communities, and a naiveté concerning tenure, rights and obligations. Since the problem was defined externally as a lack of fuelwood, these early community forestry initiatives were primarily afforestation projects focusing on planting trees specifically for fuel often on village/common property areas (therefore community forestry) to increase fuelwood supplies. This focus on fuelwood overlooked the local needs for trees and tree products, which were not necessarily fuelwood (Arnold 1992). Both the problem and the solution were defined not by the community, but elsewhere.
Among the many lessons learnt from these early community forestry initiatives was that households and external planners did not share a common vision of needs and priorities. There was an externally derived imposition of objectives, priorities and definition of needs that often did not reflect the needs of communities and the local realities. One of the lessons learnt was that while households might not be interested in planting trees only for fuelwood (single purpose), or planting trees in village/common property areas (where tenure/benefits questions arose), there was in fact a general interest in the planting and protection of trees. Households were planting trees to provide a wide range of benefits (including fodder and fruit) in locations they defined as suitable (Arnold 1992).

It should be noted that during this initial phase, community forestry was not being defined as community involvement in forest management, the focus was on planting trees rather than protecting/utilising forest resources.

PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES AND COMMUNITY FORESTRY

There was disappointment in the lack of achievement of these early community forestry initiatives. Trees were not planted (at least where the project designated), or if trees were planted the survival rates were often low (especially in communal areas), and if the trees did survive they were not being used as originary planned (i.e., for wood energy) (Skutsch 1983).

In response to the results (or lack of results) of these early community forestry initiatives (and other development initiatives facing similar problems), there was growing awareness that there was a need for a more in-depth understanding of local needs. And who would know better the problems and constraints (and potential opportunities) encountered than the community and its members?

A critical element of this learning process was the participation of community members in the collection of information. To aid the collection of information, methods and tools such as Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA) and Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) were developed and used. These methods and tools increased the understanding of community needs as well as local resource management activities and assisted in providing a means for dialogue regarding existing constraints and potential opportunities between communities and the external agencies.

It should be noted that information gathered during RRAs and PRAs did not necessarily have any impact on project or programme activities. There was a tendency (that continues) for a PM for example, to be conducted, but for the results and findings not to be effectively used by the agency or project that sponsored it. A common result of a PRA was a report that was placed on a shelf and the activity ‘conduct PRA’ duly checked off on the workplan.

Why were the lessons learned during the PRAs not effectively integrated into the initiatives? Common limitations included (and this still occurs) the lack of a mechanism or process (or accountability) for incorporating the findings, the lack of trained staff committed to the participatory approach, and the over-design and inflexibility of projects or initiatives so that few changes could be made, especially in the overall objectives. PRAs were primarily used to ‘fine tune’ previously determined project activities or to make the project more appealing to community members. Major changes and reorientation based on PRAs rarely occurred. While community-based knowledge increased, the use of it was still limited to servicing the projects' needs.

WHO MAKES THE DECISIONS?

Moving closer to the present, it can be convincingly argue that a knowledge gap of community priorities and needs still exists - that decision-makers are designing policy, implementing activities, etc, without the basic information needed. But let us explore this knowledge gap from a different angle or perspective - perhaps the problem is not so much the knowledge needed, but that the wrong people (e.g., too few with a narrow set of objectives) are making the important decisions. Rather than provide the community-based information to the decision-makers, why not have communities involved in the decisions?

From this perspective, the gap is not in knowledge, but in who gets to sit round the table where decisions are made. Meaningful participation during policy formulation (which sets the objectives), implementation (where accountability and process are determined), and activity design (who does what) is still uncommon. Community-based organisations are not sitting at the table as one of the decision-makers that determine &
problems, priorities, objectives, and activities.

Changes in management responsibility for forestry resources are, however, occurring. While the state continues to remain the ultimate caretaker of forest resources, the responsibility for the actual management is shifting from central to local governments. This change is the result of major trends in public administration that go far beyond the forestry sector. While it varies from country to country, the administrative changes include:

- Structural adjustment programmes that require cuts to central government spending.
- Efforts to make government more responsive to specific local or regional conditions.
- A stronger role for civil society and various public organisations in influencing the public policy agenda; and
- More vocal policy commentary by a public with increasing access to information (Tyler 1995, 1999).

Yet the shift of responsibility to local government does not mean a concomitant shift in resources for implementation, nor that local government has the capacity (or interest) to assume the tasks and responsibilities. The early optimism that decentralisation would be a positive step in the local management of resources is fading, as the realities of implementation become more apparent.

COMMUNITY FORESTRY: NEW DIRECTIONS

The nature and our understanding of community forestry has been evolving over the years. While afforestation (and the relative roles implicit in afforestation activities) is still a component of some projects and activities, the emphasis is shifting from planting to management of forests by local resource users. Community forestry is, however, still carrying the ‘baggage’ of its previous stage and the term ‘community forestry’ continues to be used to describe initiatives in which trees (now providing a broader range of benefits than those of the past) are planted by communities, often on areas designated as state, communal or village property.

There have been initiatives to improve degraded state forests, for example, in India. Under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme, the forests that communities are given to manage are usually degraded, with the more productive forests remaining under the control of the state. The benefits of this arrangement to the state are apparent. Degraded areas are improved with the community providing labour and protection that enables the forest to regenerate and the state to receive a revitalised forest and a large share of the potential income from the timber and other resources. For the communities the benefits are also apparent: Access to areas that were officially off limits for gathering of non-wood forest products, and a portion of the income generated from the sale of timber. However, the benefits to the community would be far greater if it received more productive mature forest, rather than severely degraded wastelands, to manage. The state strategy is little trees for little people with the state retaining the management and benefits of the productive forests (see Banejee 1996). The paradigm that the state should be the decision-maker for forest resources has not shifted, especially for resources that can provide major real income and benefits.

But what was the impact of JFM? In states where JFM has been formally implemented for over 10 years, remote sensing showed an improvement in the quality and area under forest in southwestern Bengal. In Gujarat, Hayana, Madhya Pradesh, and West Bengal studies have indicated improvements... "in the productivity and diversity of vegetation and increased return of income." from non-wood forest products (NWFPs) to members of community institutions (Sarin 1995).

But is community forestry only concerned with forests on public state land or areas designated as communal/village common lands? There is a strong dynamic between access to forest resources and the planting and protection of trees outside the forests. This interrelationship between forests, trees and fields is well recognised, although difficult to assess - and effectively administer. Government/public administration is commonly compartmentalised by sectors - even if there is an overarching department or ministry (e.g., Department or Minister of Interior with separate departments for forestry and agriculture). While there is a trend to have more integrated administration (e.g., natural resource departments that include not only forestry, but also all other resources designated as natural), inter- or multi-sectoral approaches are lagging. With little interaction, parallel initiatives in forestry/natural resources and agriculture may be planned and implemented. The on-the-ground results are overlapping agency roles, contradictory regulations, and competing initiatives.

While this sectoral approach with its overlaps, contradictions and competition provides a good livelihood for lawyers in some societies, it prevents the development of an integrated multi-sectoral approach that strives for conservation of resources and development. And not all sectors are equal. Priorities are established and altered based on national strategies and in response to international markets and conventions.

Unlike government/public agencies, households usually are multi-sectoral in their planning and resource
mobilisation. A household member considers all his/her resources and makes decisions on how best to utilise them given the need for food, income, availability of labour etc. Disparities exist between, and often within, households. The poor have fewer options, fewer resources, and therefore are the most vulnerable to changes that affect their livelihood strategy.

PARTICIPATION AND DECISION-MAKING

But with decentralisation, has there not been a shift in decision-making? The process of (and decisions concerning) decentralisation has often been top-down in design and implementation, rather than the result of a participatory process. Central government has given responsibility to local peoples and communities, but often the recipients have not received the training or resources to effectively assume the responsibilities — and final authority (approval, signatures obtained) rests not at the local level, but at the central/national office.

But who makes the decisions and establishes the rules? In past and current initiatives in community forestry with the emphasis on state forests, the shift in decision-making from state to local community-based management has not widely occurred in most initiatives, communities (or user groups as in Nepal) agree to management plans based on rules and regulations that are established by others who are often professional foresters elsewhere. The underlying assumption is that foresters have the knowledge and mandate to determine use, and communities must comply in order to have access to the forest resources.

The shift of authority, especially the authority to set the agenda and the goals, as opposed to responsibility for specified tasks (e.g., planting, thinning, harvesting) continues to lag. This is understandable - enthusiasm for transferring power and authority is rare as are the tangible and intangible benefits that result from having the authority if communities are hesitant about assuming responsibilities, and providing resources without some guarantee of benefits, it is not surprising that there is even greater reluctance from forestry staff to relinquish authority - for what do they have to gain?

In a recent article (Ramirez 1999, citing Kant and Cooke 1999) it was noted that in India forestry officials emphasised the future shortages of forest products in their discussions with the communities and did not inform them that they would also receive a share in the final timber harvest. No memorandum of understanding was drafted to specify the details of the agreement between the forest department and the forest committees — so the forestry staff were unaccountable. This resulted in communities uninformed of potential benefits and the responsibilities and obligations of forestry officials.

The sharing of information is a key issue, especially in relation to building trust and hindering exploitation. But as noted earlier, information has had a tendency to flow out of communities, not in to them. Participatory methods and tools created a new body of community-based information, but similar methods and tools were not implemented for gathering information from forestry agencies, donor agencies, and the private sector and sharing that information with communities.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

it has been said that natural resource management is conflict management-conflicts arise when there are resources for which decisions have to be made regarding management, access, rights and benefits. Natural resource conflict is "not going to go away" (Tyler 1999). There are no more 'resource frontiers'. All forest resources are 'owned', and it is to be expected that if there is a change in a forest management system, especially access and benefits, there will be conflict between those who stand to gain and those who stand to lose as a result of the changes (Tyler 1999).

Conflict management refers to a variety of collaborative approaches that seek to reach a mutually acceptable resolution of issues in a conflict through a voluntary process (Pendzich et al., 1994). As with participation, conflict management has developed into a recognised field with its own methodology and tools. Buckles and Rusnak (1999) note that the field of conflict management draws many of its principles from North American experiences with alternative dispute resolution (ADR), which focus on collaborative approaches and the strategies of negotiation, conciliation and mediation (see Pendzich et al., 1994). However, Buckles and Rusnak (1999) go on to note that what is considered 'alternative' in a Western context is not new and cites Castro and Ettenger's (1996) argument that "...all legal orders... " whether based on customary or state institutions, "... rely to varying extent, on the same basic procedural modes to handle disputes... avoidance, coercion, negotiation, mediation, arbitration, and adjudication. "

What can be considered new, however, is the interest in building on the traditional practices or dispute resolution mechanisms, when traditional institutions exist and which can be modified to include the parties and context of contemporary problems (Lindsay 1998). This is possible where there is interest to link the
traditional/local mechanisms to the external systems.

The general process used in conflict management is to some extent parallel to that used in the participatory approach: An assessment or appraisal (conflict management assessment [CMA] (Warner and Jones 1998), stakeholder analysis (see Ramirez 1999), and if the process is successful, the development and implementation of a plan of action.

For our purposes, when exploring the role of conflict management in the changes occurring in community-based natural resource management, a distinction can be made between three major types of conflicts: Among or within the community, between communities, and community/community groups and outside organisations (Pendzich et al., 1994; see also Warner and Jones 1998, for another classification system).

Among communities, conflicts can be further categorised as occurring among those directly involved in a particular resource (e.g., a forest user group) or between those directly and indirectly involved (e.g., a forest user group and non-group members entering the forest to collect fuelwood) (Warner and Jones 1998, citing Conroy et al., 1998). Local community conflicts can be latent and result from basic inequities (e.g., access to resources, caste, class, gender) and will require long-term commitment for change to occur where these changes are needed (i.e., in the national policy and legal system which will then serve to support the changes that are needed at the local level).

Expectations are changing and redefining the once accepted roles of the members of the household, families and communities. A number of areas are important here:

- The growing access to information especially from organisations and agencies seeking to redress past inequities based on gender, caste, ethnicity, etc.
- Exposure to different values such as Western media, urban/rural interaction.
- Development initiatives, which often require participation of women, minorities, the disadvantaged, etc; and
- The rise in the level of access to education (for women, minorities, the disadvantaged), the result of which is greater awareness of the world and the rise of new expectations.

While the pace may be quickening, conflicts within communities occurred in the past as well. In most communities there were mechanisms to deal with these conflicts. However, these mechanisms for managing conflicts reflected the societies of which they were a part, including their inequities.

Resource access, control, and benefits often mirrored the power of the elite, with the poor and disadvantaged, especially women, not able to effectively participate in the decisions concerning the conflicts. While inequities still continue, expectations are rising, support for participation and democratisation is expanding, and rights and procedures are becoming better understood.

Participation in decision-making is of central importance in natural resource management. Within the community, the dependence on forest products was and remains related to the other resources of the household members. it is common to find that it is the poorest households, with less agricultural land, livestock, labour etc., that are the predominant collectors of forest products (see Falconer 1990; Hegde and Daniel 1992; Lecup 1994; Malhotra et at., 1992; Warner 1995). For these poorest of the poor households, while the actual amount of income earned from forest products may be small it may provide a large portion of household income. These are the households that are the most vulnerable to competition both within and between communities.

If an increase in internal conflicts occurs, it should not be assumed that it is an indicator of failure (i.e., social collapse), but perhaps of success. The lid is off. Roles (and rules) are being redrawn, and the changes may result in a more equitable situation for many.

**CONFLICTS WITH EXTERNAL AGENCIES**

When disputes or conflicts arise between the community and government agencies, powerful private enterprises, or other resource users, traditional community-based mechanisms may not be effective (Buckles and Rusnak 1999). Communities and their members are at a disadvantage in conflicts with external agencies. The local/traditional mechanisms to regulate access to natural resources and the gathering of forest products are frequently not recognised by the state or state agencies. Among the mechanisms not recognised by the state are often the **rights of exclusion** whereby other communities or users can be excluded or their access regulated. Local resource management, even if supported by decentralisation, can be untenable if rights to exclusion are not granted.
The challenge will be in the development of mechanisms that build on the traditional, but are also effective in conflicts where there are disparities of power. For example, in the case of Joint Forest Management (JFM) mentioned above, the forestry officials were not accountable, but the communities were. If, for example, the state agencies do not keep to the agreement or if the community is accused of not following the agreement, what is the mechanism for managing the conflict? A similar problem has emerged in Nepal. Recent studies have noted that complaints and disagreements between the forest user group and the forest department are resolved by officials, usually at headquarters, of the forest department (see Malla, 1995). The reliance on senior forest officials to solve conflicts creates a situation where communities are vulnerable to biases by the very agencies with which they are in disagreement.

With the recognition that the state is not the only stakeholder that the perspective of other stakeholders must be included, there is a need to understand the cause of natural resource conflicts in their complexity, and to identify strategies for promoting change (Buckles and Rusnak 1999).

**PARTICIPATORY FORESTRY: FROM FIELD TO POLICY AND BACK**

Community forestry has shifted from tree planting to natural resource management, but the expectations as to the role of community forestry continue to evolve and expand. There has been growing frustration over the slow rate of change that is occurring in transferring forest management to local government and from local government to those who are dependent on forest resources. There is concern that if forest management is transferred to a district or municipal level, the local elite or special interests will be able to gain control. For those dependent on the resource to have a voice in the decision-making process, there must be mechanisms that link the village to the municipality or district. One of the challenges is that municipal or local governments may not have the knowledge, guidelines, personnel or other resources to support a system that enables input from local communities.

There is also a danger that initiatives will focus on the community, forest users or community groups, when decisions and planning continue to occur elsewhere. A generation of PRAs has provided a wealth of information on what is happening at the local level. Successful pilot projects have been conducted in many countries. Community forestry programmes have been implemented in a growing number of countries. Now is the time to take what was learned in the field and work to change policy.

There is a lingering problem with the term community forestry. It still carries connotations of tree planting, village woodlots, and a community, a forest. Yet community forestry is much more than this.

**COLLABORATIVE MANAGEMENT**

Collaborative Management is a term that is widely used and in its usage community forestry activities are often included. However, the focus of collaborative resource management on conservation and development is different from ‘early’ and current (see below) community forestry. Collaborative resource management has three elements (Fisher 1995):

1. Recognition of the legitimacy of values of development and conservation.
2. A view that development and conservation goals are not necessarily antagonistic; and
3. A commitment to some level of participation or collaboration in environmental management by local people.

As defined, collaborative management focuses on the externally defined goals, grants ‘some level’ of participation, but does not call into question who should be making the decisions. Collaborative management is too tightly linked to conservation and protected arm to be applicable on a wider scale.

A better term that is already being used by some agencies is participatory forestry - for it shifts attention to a continuing process that goes beyond a specific site (the community’s forest) to participating in forestry decisions from policy to field and back (ODA 1996). Fisher (1995) cautions that ‘the term participatory resource management is not a useful term because there are many levels of participation, from a very token notion to a full role in decision-making.’ However, rather than creating yet another term, I would suggest that participatory forestry be defined and used not for token but for ‘full role in decision-making.’

Participatory forest management and development if implemented as defined above would result in policy and activities that are designed, implemented, monitored, evaluated according to criteria in which the community was a partner in establishing, and revised through collaboration of the stakeholders. It is a shift from being a ‘victim’ of decisions made elsewhere to being a partner in forest resource management decisions (see Fisher...
Success in participation does not mean coercion. Communities will differ in levels of participation in forestry activities. Sharing of forest management may not be a priority for a wide range of reasons, including the distance from the forest, degraded status of the forest, alternative source of tree and forest products e.g., from a farm, or other opportunities to generate income or labour availability. Why, for example, should a community and its members assume responsibility for managing a forest area, providing policing services, if the benefits flow elsewhere, or if time spent on other activities provides more income?

CONCLUSION

While this paper has been primarily focused on communities, participatory forest management is not just about local communities, it is about a coalition of interested parties (ODA 1996; see also Anderson et al., 1998). There are other stakeholders who should be involved in management of the forest resources. The concept of pluralism in forestry and rural development in which a "number of autonomous and independent group with fundamentally different values, perceptions, and objectives demand a role in decision-making about natural resource management outcomes" is gaining attention as the approach of the future (Anderson et al., 1998).

But is a pluralistic, participatory approach achievable? As Buckles and Rusnak (1999) note, as a result of the:

"Reduced power of governments, natural resource management decisions are increasingly influenced by resource users, who include smallholders and indigenous people as well as ranchers, large landholders, private corporations, and (hydropower) companies."

But do we have the mechanisms to do it? This is an area of major concern. The systems and mechanisms that supported the top-down central decision-maker did not work effectively if we use as the basis for evaluation forest maintenance and improvement in rural livelihoods. If the relatively simple top-down, state centered model did not work, how can the more participatory, pluralistic approach work? The participatory, pluralistic approach requires a paradigm shift on decision-making, roles, tasks and objectives. We do not have "well evolved systems to foster and support (multi-interest) stakeholders in decisions to design solutions collaboratively" (Tyler 1999).

But do we have a choice? Given the old failures and the new expectations, this should be a major focus of our efforts - to support the development of a partnership of communities, forestry agencies, the private sector and other stakeholders that will together explore and learn how to sustainably, and equitably, manage natural resources. This is the challenge.