

Decision-making in Local Forest Management: Pluralism Equity and Consensus

Jon Anderson¹

This paper first addresses property regimes and multiple interests and attempts to demonstrate that multiple interests in forest management are not the exception but the rule. It then discusses simple decision-making criteria for forest management and identifies two major (but not necessarily exclusive) scenarios of decision-making-hierarchical and consensual. These are summarised briefly and some of the problem are discussed, including the informal tools used by those excluded from these decision-making methods. The consensual approach has recently been subject to analysis that throws doubt on the practicality and usefulness of consensus and of techniques, particularly participatory ones, which promote it. The paper suggests that pluralistic understandings and approaches may be able to provide a set of characteristics or criteria upon which other approaches might be evaluated, built or refined. Finally, the paper addresses some of the critiques that have been focused on the use of pluralism, especially concerns about equity.

INTRODUCTION

Decision-making in forestry is becoming more complex due to the increasing range and power of groups demanding a role. While traditional 'expert authority' approaches are increasingly untenable, widely recommended consensual approaches are also fraught with difficulties. These approaches tend to overestimate existing or potential consensus on matters of substance, such as the objectives and means of forest management. They promote participatory methods which can be politically naive and impractical. Pluralism may offer a better understanding of the local situation and may point the way to approaches that are more realistic and effective. Pluralistic approaches are not without drawbacks and have been Questioned on equity grounds. However, the simple recognition of the existence of divergent and irreconcilable groups may be a step forward for less powerful groups. Approaches that are more pluralistic tend to be inherently explicit, critical, and transparent. They can also incorporate processes and structures for promoting checks and balances, learning, and self-correction.

"TREES, GRASS, SNAKES AND NAM THINGS... "2

Different groups have different perceptions of forests and forest management. During a study of traditional classifications of forest lands in villages surrounding a national forest outside of Bamako, Mali different groups of women, men, and youths were asked to draw the "forest" with a black felt tip pen on a large flip chart (see Sow and Anderson 1996). Figures 1, 2, and 3 (see over page) show the results. These might be compared to Figure 4 which represents a more traditional forester's perspective. Differing perspectives, even within a village, reflect the pluralistic nature of communities and the complexities of forest management

CHALLENGES TO FOREST MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Many global trends seem to render forest management institutionally more complex. These trends include several important '-isations' such as decentralisation, democratisation, liberalisation, and globalisation. There are increasingly more groups, such as advocacy non-governmental organisations (NGOs), development NGOs, private companies, local community advocacy groups, user groups, consumer groups, foundations, levels and mandates of governments, all demanding a role in decision-making about forests. As these groups have become more vocal the potential and actual level of conflict has risen. From the direct challenges of lawsuits in the USA to the more indirect but sometimes just as effective use of the weapons of the weak,³ conventional forest management is being contested (Anderson et al. 1999).

There are also movements to internationalise some aspects of management, adding yet another layer to the institutional

scene. Some international agreements, such as the conventions on biological diversity, desertification, and climate change affect how forests are managed locally as witnessed at a recent conference titled *International Institutions: Global Processes - Domestic Consequences*. Governments and non-governmental entities will be held accountable, to some extent, to international forums and standards. Although private owners may not like it, it is possible that international agreements will reach down to their level.

In addition to becoming more complex, many see forest management becoming more urgent as part of a global 'eco-challenge' (Roling 1998). The eco-challenge includes global warming, deforestation, loss of biological diversity, water shortages, pollution, and other consequences of environmental impacts. While the eco-challenge is broader than forestry it is clear that forestry and natural resource management play a key part in addressing these wider issues. The eco-challenge also implies time limits. There are some decisions that have to be made and acted upon before certain thresholds can be reached.

With these new trends and challenges comes a spate of new ideas in management, of which the decision-making process seems key. Many new terms are floating about: joint forest management, ecosystem management, collaborative management, community-based natural resource management, community forestry, adaptive management, co-management, adaptive co-management, etc. While this type of diversity can be productive, the urgency of the eco-challenge implies an imperative to find effective management schemes quickly. Yet, the complexity of the situation works against the need for expeditious identification and the implementation of sound approaches.

For most of the problems of the eco-challenge (and the livelihood challenge) some sort of collective action is needed. No single entity can resolve the issue of global warming, deforestation, or habitat loss. However, the plurality of actors seems to mitigate against either expeditious or collective action, let alone both. There is growing urgency along with growing complexity and these two trends do not seem to be easily reconciled.

PROPERTY REGIMES AND MULTIPLE INTERESTS

The type of forest ownership influences forest management (Clement 1999). Four types of ownership are commonly mentioned (McKeon and Ostrom 1995) although the divisions and distinctions between them can be somewhat artificial

- Public forests (e.g., forest reserves, national forests, forest classées).
- Private forests (e.g., small forest owners, large forest companies).
- Common (shared private property) property forests (e.g., communal/village forest lands); and
- Free or open access forest.

In many places it is felt that the existence of multiple interests and the need to accommodate them mostly applies to common property regimes, to a lesser extent to public or government owned lands, and not at all to privately held lands. However, although the degree of intensity may vary, multiple interests come into play in all types of ownership. On public lands, a range of actors are demanding roles in decision-making and finding it unacceptable that governments decide without consultation. In common property or shared private property, the various co-owners must come to agreements about the management of the area, but are also subject to rules and regulations from outside (external government interests) and from pressure from other groups. Even private individual owners are subject to government regulations on things such as harvesting techniques and the safeguarding of protected species (such as *Faidherbia albida* in many countries of the Sahel). They are open to social and consumer pressure from NGOs and neighbours about management. Sometimes even the implicit or explicit threat of government regulations promotes self-regulation among property owners. In Australia, for example, watershed groups have become more actively involved in self regulation, partly in response to what they perceive as potential moves by government to impose regulations, especially concerning water quality. Mechanisms for joint decision-making and negotiation are necessary for all these property regimes.

No property rights are absolute. Property rights are a bundle that can be larger or smaller, but never total (Lynch 1998). Most property owners must take account of other interests either legally as a result of government rules and regulations or

illegally (due to social or economic pressure from NGOs, consumers, neighbours, and other actors).

The response to the existence of multiple interests is not to carve up forestlands so that every different group or institution has its own piece. This is clearly self-defeating. Many groups do not want ownership rights, but do have influence over the management of large areas of forest ecosystems. Decision-making mechanisms that are somehow responsive to multiple interests are needed.

For example, if one assumes that free or open access is an undesirable and unsustainable state of affairs (and there is empirical evidence to this effect), then a key to the sustainability of the other property regimes may reside in the ability to exclude and the reality of exclusion. Exclusion may be of uses and/or users and can vary in time. For example, in Mali, some villages regulate the timing of the collection of certain fruits. Without regulations the tendency of collectors is to try and harvest before other collectors. This makes the harvest time earlier and earlier until unripe fruits are harvested. The decision on when to harvest is based on some variable biophysical criteria and is not a set schedule. The purpose of the rules is to avoid free access problems and com- promising the harvest.

Exclusion should, therefore, not be construed as a failure or an undesirable state (as some advocates of participatory, consensual approaches might say), but a necessary part of most sustainable management practices. (Exclusion of apparently legitimate interests might even be necessary in some cases. To be equitable, the process of exclusion should be as inclusive as possible and there may have to be compensation and consistent controls.) Controversy arises not about exclusion in theory, but exclusion in practice - who gets excluded? One of the main challenges seems to be how to undertake collective action for exclusion.

DECISION-MAKING SCENARIOS FOR FOREST MANAGEMENT

Beckley (1998) helpfully breaks down forestry decision-making into three elements:

1. Locus, which refers to the location of decision-making and whether it is near the resource or further afield at the national or even international level.
2. Structure, which refers to how decisions are made - either through rigid vertical structures where decisions are made by relatively few people or through more horizontal structures where decision-making involves larger numbers of actors and consensus is sought
3. Scope, which refers to the breadth of issues or objectives that decisions are addressing. This ranges from fairly limited straightforward objectives, such as conservation, to a broader range of multi-purpose management objectives involving timber harvests, non-wood forest product harvests, environmental services, recreation, and other goods and services.

Beckley considers the case of Canada and compares four forest management systems: Industrial Forestry; Co-management; Community Forestry; and Non-industrial Private Forestry according to the two broad decision-making criteria.

Table 1 demonstrates the two broad types of decision-making (at least for these important management systems). One is hierarchical in structure and narrow in scope (industrial and to some extent governmental), and the other is con-sensual in structure and broad in scope (co-management, community forestry, and non-industrial private forestry). it should be pointed out that some management systems can combine the two scenarios under one structure. The categories are not comprehensive or exclusive.

Table 1: Decision-making dimensions of four forest management systems (based on Beckley 1998).

	Industrial Forest	Co-managed Forest	Community Forest	Non-industrial Private Forest
Locus of decision-	International or	Provincial or local	Local	Individual or

making control	national			household
Structure of decision-making power	Hierarchical	Consensual	Consensual	Individual or consensual
Scope of management objectives	Narrow	Broad	Broad	Broad

NARROW HIERARCHICAL SCENARIO/APPROACHES

The first scenario that Beckley presents might be called the Expert Authority Model or Scientific Rational Model. It stems from the belief that a few people have superior knowledge (or rights) and can therefore impose their management plans on forests and other forest stakeholders. This model is fairly common. Not only do most large industrial firms use it, but most governments (forest departments) use it as well. Most public forests are run by forest services, sometimes with clear paramilitary approaches, under a strict hierarchy. A fairly typical manifestation of this rigid structure is DAD - Decide, Announce, Defend. Based upon the sometimes questionable perceptions of their superior knowledge and skills, technical authorities decide amongst themselves the management objectives and techniques, announce these to the world, and, once the outcry of stakeholders who have not been consulted is heard, defend these decisions.

Problems of the Hierarchical Approach

The problems that beset this approach are fairly well known and well described. Some include the inability to take into consideration local knowledge and perceptions, and distance of the hierarchy from the realities of the field. There have been questions about the effectiveness of the approach, the motives of the managers, the superiority of their knowledge and management skills, etc. However, the expert authority decision-making scenario continues to play a role and may be important under certain circumstances, such as when quick action is needed on a sudden well defined environmental crisis such as a forest fire.

This approach has also been critiqued on equity grounds because it does not take into consideration in any meaningful way the values, perceptions, knowledge, and skills of local groups. It has also been criticised because local legitimate stakeholders are excluded from the decision-making process and often, in the end, do not reap benefits. This is somewhat ironic in the case of government hierarchical approaches. While some observers indicate that in many cases governments cynically nationalised forests in order to extract wealth (the rent-seeking state) (see Malla 1999), others point out that governments sometimes have acted to ensure the public interest in the western United States, for example, some of the impetus for the national park and national forest system was the perceived over-logging and over-exploitation by private interests and the need for more long-term, sustainable management - with a view to manage for the under-represented future generations. In some of the Sahelian states it appears that government forests are a continuation of a policy that combined a self-serving element with one that was meant to assure more equity, not less.

In the Expert Authority Model it appears that there are sometimes legitimate interests that are not represented in the decision-making process. However, this is not to say that those who are not represented are without power or recourse. Even in situations where a free press, access to a legal system, right to assembly, and other rights are not available, options exist. The less powerful and the excluded are not without weapons for trying to level the playing field. James Scott in his 1985 book *Weapons of the Weak - Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* describes a range of these weapons:

- Foot dragging
- Dissimulation (pretend not to have or to feel, hide true feelings and motives)
- False compliance
- Pilfering
- Feigned ignorance

- Slander
- Arson; and
- Sabotage.

Anyone who has worked in forest management at the field level must recognise these tactics and can perhaps identify more. Over time these weapons create a formidable arsenal and, according to Scott, may be less visible, but more important than peasant uprisings and revolts. Characteristics of these weapons include:

- Little co-ordination or planning
- Use of implicit understandings and informal networks
- Forms of individual self-help; and
- Avoiding direct symbolic confrontation with authority (Scott 1985:xvi)

'Weapons of the weak' are important in several ways. They are not unique to the expert authority approach and can affect consensual approaches that leave groups out. These weapons may be important to recognise since they may signal inadequate attempts to accommodate pluralism, hide conflict and inequity, and compromise efforts over the long run.

THE BROAD CONSENSUAL SCENARIO APPROACHES

The second general scenario that is defined by Beckley is characterised by the consensual structure of decision-making and the broad scope of management objectives. Consensus based decision-making is often linked to participatory methods and mechanisms. Participation is seen as essential for consensus and consensus is seen as essential for progress on sustainable forest management. Beckley's article, entitled: *Moving Toward Consensus Based Forest Management: A Comparison of Industrial, Co-managed, Community, and Small Private Forestry in Canada* states that at least for co-management and community forestry, "maintaining the commitment to consensual decision-making is a key ingredient for success" (Beckley 1998). In the article Beckley stresses the need for participation. This is a sentiment that is often echoed in forestry circles these days. However, it is perhaps useful to question both the idea and practice of participation and of consensus as a goal.

Problems of the Broad Consensual Scenario

Participation and consensus are two possible general problems that need to be understood.

It is not the point to criticise participation as a whole. Certainly participation has resulted in tremendous benefit for some people on the ground and has served to highlight a whole range of issues such as equity and conflict. Participation exists in many forms. There are attempts to establish categories and scales of participation. It is therefore not an easy concept to pin down and deal with. Justice cannot be done here as to the benefit or constraint of participation. Several of the problems that have been identified with participation relate to its political, and for some, populist nature and its susceptibility to manipulation.

Participation, which slides into populism, tends to idealise the local community and the capabilities of local people. Brown points out the:

"difficulties of applying principles of participatory development in situations where the notion of 'community' is a contested one, where elites are likely to capture any increases in value of the resources and where participation takes place," in a context of fundamental imbalance" (Brown 1998).

He also points out that "the underlying difficulty is that the political language of Collaborative Forest management (CFM) is the language of consensus (even if dressed up as 'conflict resolution') and of participation in its softest sense" (Brown

1998). A populist agenda can also make strange bedfellows of the power to the people advocates and the anti-government conservative movements which see in this approach less power for governments and, therefore, more liberty and opportunity for the profit seeking private sector Brown (1994) summarises the major weaknesses of the populist participation trend as:

- Ambiguity of terminology
- Depoliticisation
- Anti-professionalism
- Universalisation; and
- Stereotyping.

Participation, at least in some of its forms, may be insufficient to deal with the complexity and urgency of the eco-challenge.

Consensus has been seen by some as a way out of the dilemma of the expert authority basing its power on some absolute answers that science is supposed to provide. It is defined as general agreement amongst a group of people about a subject or about how something should be done. Intuitively it sounds extremely satisfactory - that if we can't call on absolute findings of science, then general agreement should give us a decent decision-making process or procedure.

There are, of course, situations where consensus is good when it is achieved for the right reasons. Rescher (1993) defines the requirements of good consensus as being:

- Freely given: No one is coerced (explicitly or implicitly) or forced into a consensus (this echoes the idea of conflict resolution as 'coercive harmony').
- Adequately informed: The consensus is based on adequate knowledge of the matter at hand, and that people have information that they need and are not agreeing without knowing the alternatives or the ramifications of their agreement.

However, Rescher (1993) raises many issues about consensus in his book subtitled *Against the Demand for Consensus*. First, as is clear from the above conditions, consensus may be rare, temporary, and difficult to reach. Consensus can also be critiqued on the grounds of its practicality. In the real world, how likely is general consensus about a complex substantive problem? What would be the time necessary to secure it? In addition, the description of property types and collective action seems to show that exclusion is necessary for sustainable forest management. Is the search for consensus compatible with the need for exclusion?

Even when consensus is reached, Rescher (1993) claims that it is:

- An impediment to creativity and innovation
- An invitation to mediocrity; and
- A disincentive to productive effort.

These are serious charges, especially if we think that continuous learning is needed for adaptive management. While many people feel that innovation and learning come from the interaction of different ideas and knowledge systems, consensus seems to dull and render us complacent about this interaction.

Finally, consensus may not mean equity or assure that the public good is obtained:

"Even if a wide range of interests do come together to practice consensus forest management, does that guarantee that the general public interests are better represented than existing management models?" (Beckley 1998).

PLURAL SOCIETIES, PLURAL REALITIES, AND DIFFERENTIATED FORESTS?

Leach et al. (1997) and others (see also Enters and Anderson 1999) in a critique of the idea of consensual communities talk about communities as:

"... not, of course bounded, homogeneous entities, but socially differentiated and diverse Gender, caste, wealth, age, origins, and other aspects of social identity divide and cross-cut so-called community boundaries. Rather than shared beliefs and interests, diverse and often conflicting values and resource priorities pervade social life and are struggled are and bargained over... social and environmental differentiation suggests that there may be many different, possible problem for different people. " (Leach et al 1997).

This description coincides closely with the notion of pluralism as recently applied to sustainable forestry and rural development (FAO 1999). Not only is there pluralism at the level of communities but pluralism is generally pervasive and exists through the levels of society and government. Pluralism has at least two elements - it is a practical description of the world (empirical reality), as well as part of political and development discourse. For some ideas of a pluralistic perspective on forestry and rural development see Box 1 below.

Participatory forestry and co-management of forests is sometimes interpreted as implying two partners - the local community and the forest department. For example, Vira (1997) states:

"Understanding the dynamics of participatory forest management requires field-based research to concentrate on the two partners to such regimes, the forest department and the edge community."

Without even considering the other types of organisations likely to be present - other villages, NGOs, private interests, other government departments, etc. we have already seen that communities themselves (and forest departments to be sure) are bundles of separate interests and groups. Rarely, if ever, are the interests of only two groups at stake. The reality is more likely plural than dual.

Box 1. Summary of Some Key Concepts for Pluralism in Sustainable Forestry and Rural Development (From Anderson et al. 1999).

- Different groups have, and always will have, different experiences, positions, opinions, and objectives on sustainable forest management and rural development.
- Groups are autonomous and independent.
- There is no single, absolute, universal, and permanent solution to any substantive natural resource management problem - for any given land unit there is no single, absolute, sustainable management land use scenario (there are numerous sustainable scenarios).
- No group/organisation can claim a superior or absolute scenario; sustainable forestry and rural development decision-making is no longer the sole mandate of expert authorities.
- A system of organisational checks and balances is central to avoiding the errors of a narrow, single-entity management system - this is the positive aspect of bounded conflict
- Conflicts are inevitable and cannot be resolved, but can be managed
- Equity in decision-making is a distant but worthy ideal.
- Platforms, mediators, and facilitators are often needed to provide the conditions for negotiation and co-operation needed for sustainable forest management

- Communication is essential and helps participants understand their differences better
- Consensus is unlikely, but progress can be achieved without it.
- Approaches to SFM (sustainable forest management) that aim at consensus are often misguided and unsustainable.
- Proactive approaches and new processes of sustainable forest management decision-making in pluralistic environments are emerging - more experience is needed.

There have been a number of approaches and methodologies developed that have tried to deal with the reality of a pluralistic world, although they are not classified together as pluralistic methods. In addition, no one has rigorously compared them to a pluralistic understanding of the world with a body of methods and tools or has developed specific tools for these situations. At this stage, what we can do is look at existing tools and see which may be more effective under pluralistic conditions.

Pluralistic tools should share characteristics that may make them more suitable for accommodating multiple interests. For Daniels and Walker (1999), characteristics include:

- Multi-stage processes.
- Constructive, open civil communication.
- A focus on the future and acknowledgement of the past.
- Emphasis on learning; and
- Power sharing 'levelling of the playing field'.

For Rescher (1993), pluralistic approaches require:

- Legitimate diversity.
- Restrained dissonance or bounded conflict (Lee 1993).
- Acquiescence in difference; and
- Respect for the autonomy of others.

Other characteristics may include:

- An acceptance of conflict.
- Explicit recognition of differences and diversity; and
- Critical reflection.

Tools and methods which may integrate some of these characteristics include: Appreciative inquiry, transactive planning, search conferences, constructive confrontation, collaborative learning, civic science, patrimonial mediation, and subsidiarity (FAO 1999). Appreciative inquiry has been used in large private companies and by NGOs working in Mauritania (Eliot 1999). Collaborative learning has been used to help plan and implement forest fire recovery activities on a national forest in the western United States and in land management planning processes (Daniels and Walker 1996). Patrimonial mediation and subsidiarity was developed in Madagascar on programmes designed to decentralise and assure rights in local land management (Babin *et al.* 1999).

LEARNING

Leach et al. (1997) state that forest management policies and programmes "... *must be responsive, adaptive, open to the unexpected, continuously testing, examining and monitor the unknown implication of different trajectories of environmental change.*" This is a very demanding challenge of continuous teaming and adaptive management, especially since, as Hirst (1997) says, "*we have proven that we are not very good at constant learning*". It may be relevant to ask which of the decision-making scenarios promotes the most learning and adaptation.

Some recent work seems to indicate that teaming increases with interactions - from the contacts between different perspectives and knowledge systems (Engel 1995). One of the largest private companies in Norway states that in order to compete globally, its managers must seek out different perspectives and make use of those perspectives. They must understand that the measure of an organisation's creativity is directly related to its diversity. "*A company can't be creative when it employs a group of homogeneous people,... creativity and innovation come from putting unlike people together*" (Fishman 1999). Approaches that can deal with and integrate pluralistic situations may help promote levels of learning useful for adaptive management.

To a certain extent, these interactions and low-level conflicts have to be promoted and encouraged, at the same time ensuring they do not get out of hand. Some of the conflict management literature advises against coming to agreement or consensus too soon, partly because it can short circuit the process of finding new and innovative solutions (McCarthy et al 1984; Shell 1999). Recognition of a pluralistic reality and the consequent promotion of approaches that encourage organisation and group interaction in bounded conflict may be part of the response to the need for learning. Organisational arrangements that encourage checks and balances may help to promote learning.

The hierarchical and consensus decision-making scenarios may limit the possibilities of such interaction. Rescher (1993) points to the negative impact of consensus on creativity, innovation, and, thus, learning. Hierarchical approaches also limit interaction and may confine learning to a small group within one learning and knowledge framework.

OBJECTIONS TO PLURALISTIC APPROACHES AND INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS

The concept of pluralism can be applied in many areas. It can be a descriptive framework for empirical reality. It can serve as a vision, tool, or strategy. It can also serve as an analytical or normative framework (of how things should be) which transcends into a more political discourse. The first use, as a way of describing the world, because of the recent criticisms of participation and consensus, seems to be gaining acceptance. Its use as a tool in political discourse is somewhat more controversial.

Carter (1999) has identified a series of possible types of constraints or possible problems for a more pluralistic approach. These include:

- Resistance of forest departments.
- Complex approaches used as an excuse for stalling.
- Mediation - the government, which often plays the role of mediator, is not, in fact, neutral.
- Collaborative mechanisms may be extremely difficult to establish in newly settled areas at the forest frontier where social capital may be low.
- Pluralistic approaches where NGOs may have particularly important roles and yet their accountability to others can be questioned; and
- Networks of organisations and their importance.

These constraints also seem to apply to other approaches involving the participation of different actors - they do not appear to be specific to pluralist approaches.

Carter does, however, raise several important issues that seem to relate specifically to more pluralistic approaches. One is that pluralistic approaches take every position, value, or interest at face value and as being equally legitimate. The objection implies that pluralism allows for a laissez-faire state that is both passive and relative. This might lead to more powerful but less legitimate interests staking equal claims and using its power to dominate more legitimate claims. For instance, if all claims had to be considered equally, then a claim from a recently formed private sector fuelwood transporting company might have equal footing with the claim of a local user group who had been managing the forest for centuries. This does not seem fair or equitable.

However, pluralism does not claim that all views and values are equally legitimate in action; although, it does claim that a groups' autonomy should be respected. This is different than saying that each claim has equal validity. We can disagree with people while respecting their right to have and promote their own perspective.

On participation, Christoplos (1999) states *"there is no special technique that we can apply to vaccinate ourselves against the manipulation of participation to immoral ends. The only way is to be explicit and critical, to ourselves and to others."* This is perhaps a strength of more pluralistic approaches which emphasise explicit recognition of differences.

Because of the need for exclusion, the purpose of negotiation in pluralistic situations where differences are deep-rooted is not to obtain consensus or total agreement, but to obtain acquiescence. To be explicit and transparent, the process of negotiation should be as inclusive as possible, even if the outcome leads to exclusion. This process has the same constraints as other attempts to build platforms, such as deciding who is a legitimate stakeholder who convenes, who participates, and what procedures are used. It should also be noted that pluralism is not an argument against collective action. Instead, it is an argument for realistic, collective action that leads to decisions that are practical and realistic.

Approaches for accommodating multiple interests in forestry are not perfectly equitable, but at least start from a recognition of different viewpoints and groups and may integrate processes (checks and balances) that lead them to be more equitable than other approaches. Hierarchical and consensual approaches, once a decision is made, may have fewer mechanisms for revisiting the decision or control through checks and balances. They may ignore or 'assume away' initial differences: Hierarchical by assuming others do not have the knowledge or skill to contribute, and consensual by assuming that consensus is possible and, therefore, rushing to agreement. Recognition of differences, and being explicit and critical about them, may lead to transparency and accountability, which in turn may be useful for approaching equity.

While being critical of the idea of consensual communities, Leach et al. (1997) see its usefulness in political discourse (particularly with governments) as a possible tool for gaining more authority and responsibility for communities. Arguing that communities are capable of coming to consensus or are naturally consensual might facilitate delegation and devolution of authorizes and responsibilities to them. On the other hand, it might be possible to argue that what demonstrates a local community's theoretical potential to manage resources well is the fact that they are pluralistic and display systems of checks and balances. Thomson (1994), for example, develops the idea of legal recognition of community capacity for self-governance where local communities understand and apply the adage that *"no man is a fit judge of his own cause,"* an example of a pluralistic check and balance. For instance, communities in Mali that have traditional rules and regulations concerning forest use often have separated the functions of identifying infractions and the application of sanctions (at least upon appeal) (Thomson, pers. comm. 1994).

CONCLUSION

This paper has focused on the challenge of forest management in an increasingly complex world. Traditional approaches of either hierarchical or consensual management seem intuitively attractive, but also have problems and may be limited in applicability and scope. A more pluralistic understanding of society and communities (and perhaps also forests and sustainability) may help move towards more realistic approaches. Some tools and methods (from participation, conflict management, as well as other fields) appear to exist, but are yet to be systematically evaluated and tested from this angle. Pluralism as political discourse presents risks, and like participation, is open to manipulation. However, it tends to be inherently fairly explicit, critical, and transparent and promotes processes that a flow for checks and balances.

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³*Weapons of the weak refers to the activities and behaviours adopted by peasants to level out the decision-making playing field discussed in James & Scott's 1985 book Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance.*