Community forestry

TEN YEARS IN REVIEW

Revised edition

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PREFACE

In the recent past community forestry has witnessed greater development and has influenced the nature of forestry activities more profoundly than any other field in the forestry profession. This alone justifies a review of the wealth of experience gained in community forestry during the last decade and an examination of its current orientations.

Community forestry stems from the profession’s efforts to setup a new partnership with local people and to respond to the subsistence needs of growing rural populations. This new perspective was largely influenced by the rural development strategy advocated by the 1979 Programme of Action of the World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development. But it was soon apparent that the involvement of rural communities in forestry required a new understanding of the many important links between trees and people. Of particular significance are the links between forestry and basic needs such as nutrition, food security, off-farm employment, energy and the integration of trees in resources management by rural people.

This new understanding, and the perception that the resulting approaches actually worked, greatly influenced areas beyond the activities and programmes which carried the community forestry label. They are central to the perceived needs for major revisions of traditional forestry policies and strategies and for re-ordering of conventional forestry development.

Yet the need for a review of community forestry development goes even beyond these impacts, however significant they may be. The world is becoming more aware that the crucial issues of resource conservation and sustainable development can only be addressed if people enjoy a secure livelihood. Current development patterns and inequities increasingly force the rural poor to migrate in ecologically fragile and low productive areas where forests and trees play a critical role. A major challenge for forestry is to contribute significantly to solving the problems of environmental degradation and rural poverty. This requires that people are made full agents and beneficiaries of forestry activities and that foresters participate in their efforts.

In this context it is imperative that community forestry be interpreted as more than a separate branch of forestry in which socio-economic aspects are particularly visible. The future development of community forestry must focus on generalizing participatory approaches in all forestry activities in a systematic effort to ensure that rural as well as industrial and local as well as national needs are adequately met.

In addition to providing an historical perspective of the development of new kinds of forestry activities, this review contributes a forward-looking assessment of constraints and opportunities for strengthening participation in all forestry activities.

This review was funded by the FAO/SIDA Forests, Trees and People Programme (FTPP) which is managed by the Community Forestry Unit of FAO’s Forestry Planning and Institutions Service. FAO and SIDA have been cooperating in developing community forestry since the late 1970's.
We wish to express our appreciation to Mr. J.E.M. Arnold who has invested considerable talent and experience in undertaking this review. It constitutes a useful reference for all those concerned with the new forestry orientations and with the contribution that community forestry will make to future development.

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N.B. The high demand for the first edition of this Community Forestry Note resulted in the need for a new printing. The author has incorporated in this Revised Edition a few changes and analyses from three more recent studies in common property resource management and community forestry.

INTRODUCTION

In the mid 1970s, a number of events combined to draw attention to the importance of forests and trees to rural people and rural development --and to the neglect of many of these links and activities in existing programmes and policies. By the end of the decade, new programmes and projects were being put in place to redress this neglect, and to provide support to tree growing and management at the farm and community level. These initiatives have been gathering pace ever since and now constitute a significant part of total forestry aid.

The purpose of this document is to bring together and synthesize the results of what has been learned about ‘community forestry’ over the ten years since it first took shape. As a synthesis, it focuses on the main theses and findings that have been advanced. It does not attempt to reproduce the underlying project, case and observational evidence which is abundantly documented in the material from which it draws.

The document is presented in four parts. The first part reviews the reasons why the concern with community forestry arose when it did, the original formulation of the problems and of what was perceived to be needed at that time. It also outlines the main issues that emerged as projects and programmes took shape. The second part summarises what is now known about the ways rural people actually use and depend upon trees. It discusses the consequences of a diminution or degradation of the tree resource on them, and the implications of this enhanced understanding for intervention and support strategies. The third part similarly reviews the state of knowledge about how local women and men can best organise, manage and use trees and tree products. The final part pulls together the main lessons that emerge, and focuses on the implications for further improving the support that governments and aid agencies seek to provide to community forestry.