Introduction

Decentralization has often been confounded with the concept of geographical division. Most people mistakenly consider division of a state into provinces and provinces into districts as decentralization because the area under each of the lower levels is less than that of the next higher. This is one of the reasons why a number of words have been coined to distinguish between different facets of decentralization. These include deconcentration, delegation, devolution and privatization (Hye 1985; Banerjee and Lutz 1996). Basically, deconcentration and devolution can cover the whole spectrum of decentralization types. Deconcentration can be defined to include all cases where larger units have been subdivided into small units without transferring any special authority. Devolution on the other hand refers to deconcentration where some form of authority has been passed from the center to the lower units in the hierarchy.

In this paper, policies of decentralization in forest management are first described, then the impact of the policies are discussed, and finally, some changes in the forest management paradigm are proposed. Prospects for change, methods of implementation and related problems are also examined.

History of Forest Control and Forest Policies

In forest management, the history of deconcentration parallels the deconcentration of the general administration although with some significant differences. For example, in India, around 1927, forest management, for long a central matter, became a provincial responsibility under the revenue department. Soon after, the forest section became independent of the revenue department. The forest organization since then consists of a Chief of Forests located at the provincial headquarters, and his regional deputies called Conservators of Forests. Divisional Forest Officers are usually located at the district headquarters and Forest Rangers and Beat Officers at the block or sub-block levels. This organizational structure is very similar to the general administration. The most striking difference is that deconcentration in forestry never went down to the village level or legislative wings. Another important variation is that the forest department opposed private or communal forest ownership in contrast to agriculture, for example. Thus, in spite of some deconcentration, forest management in India continues to be centralized, which is mainly a result of state coercion.

Pre-colonial times

Until the 16th century, the forestland in the Asia-Pacific region was mostly used by local communities for hunting and gathering, and distinct forms of shifting cultivation (Banerjee 1995a). In addition, forests were felled for sedentary agriculture and home gardens were introduced. Forest areas were usually controlled by a single or group of households, except in the case of hunting and gathering activities where control rested with the community. Land ownership was communal or land belonged in some vague terms to the sovereign. Land and forest management, however, rested with households. The forest administration was deconcentrated to the household, a group of households or the community level but the ownership lay with the community. This devolved form of forest management was neither an introduced nor imposed process, but rather a natural development of society.

Colonial times

With few exceptions, the relationship between households and the community, and natural resources, changed dramatically with the arrival of the colonial powers and consolidation of their foothold in the colonies. Forests came under the sovereignty of the state, which meant a move towards centralization, although the de facto situation was frequently different. Where forest products had a high commercial value and could be easily exploited (e.g., teak in India, Burma or Thailand, or sal and pine in Garhwal Himalayas), the arm of the administration reached the forests quickly. Remote forests and malaria infested areas (e.g., Nepal Terai) as well as products for which there was no market continued to be used by local people. In such cases, the de facto and de jure situations differed, which created tension between the people and the sovereign at a later stage in history. As the countryside opened up, the demand for all types of timber increased in the local and international markets. As the state realized the potential monetary and other values of the forest, stricter rules were enforced to bring all forests under its control.
Post-colonial time

With independence, the noose of state control on forestland was further tightened and traditional users were further excluded. In India, in 1953, the government gained control over the forests that belonged earlier to the zamindars (landlords). Even as late as 1980, the Conservation Act stipulated that central permission was required to change the legal status of any forest, which is a concurrent subject. But overall deforestation rates continued to increase.

Based on the provisions of the Indonesian Constitution (Basic Forestry Law enacted in 1967) the central government is empowered to control all relations between the people, the private sector and forests. Article 5 of this law stipulates that, "All forests within the territory of Indonesia, including the natural resources contained therein, are controlled by the state". Large areas were declared as parks and nature reserves or permanent protection forest (World Bank 1993) in order to exclude people from forests.

In Thailand, the Land Code of 1954 has the most important bearing on the question of land ownership, and by implication, on the process of centralization. Public forestland (Pah san-guan) historically had many users or "squatters". The government promulgated that anyone occupying any forestland as of 30 November 1954 was eligible to receive a land-use certificate provided proof of occupancy could be produced within 180 days. Only a few farmers in the provinces were aware of this stipulation. Most failed to take advantage of the opportunity to gain land rights. Thus, the new law turned them automatically into "encroachers" of their own land. In 1985, the National Forest Policy set the "unattainable" 40 percent target for forestlands. In fact, the Royal Forest Department undertook a tree-planting program in degraded forests, which resulted in even more evictions and subsequently a political crisis (Lynch and Talbott 1995). The result of these developments is that today the debate on the decentralization process for forest management continues in Thailand with only few positive changes on the ground.

Impact of Forest Policies, Rules and Regulations

Forest policies towards centralization in the countries of the Asia-Pacific region had a number of impacts on their forests. Negative impacts include deforestation, forest degradation and loss of biodiversity. Other impacts such as the rise of environmental and green lobbies and local revolts have forced some governments to initiate first steps towards the devolution in forest management in an attempt to reduce the destruction of their forest resources.

Forestland alienation

Historically, local people used extensive areas of forests for long-fallow shifting cultivation. As more and more land was usurped by central governments, less remained for the people and their agricultural practices. Consequently fallow periods had to be gradually reduced with negative impacts for forest regeneration and agricultural production.

Commercial forest exploitation

Sustainability concerns in forest management were quickly pushed aside when countries reacted to favorable prices and the rapidly growing market demand for their timber. Some governments leased extensive areas of forests to concessionaires for timber harvesting. For example, by 1991 the number of concessionaires in Indonesia reached 580 covering 60 million ha or about 31 percent of the country's land area. In the Philippines, it was 4.67 million ha in 1989 (Gasgonia 1993).

Dependence of the government on technocracy and policing

In response to accelerating forest conversion and the poor control of forest resources, many governments initiated a number of programs and projects in forest management. One thrust was development of forest plantations. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates the annual gross planted area to be in the order of 2.1 million ha in Asia-Pacific region (FAO 1993b).

A second response was increasing forest protection efforts, although this measure was quickly assessed to be ineffective, as supervision was time consuming and led to the neglect of management duties by forestry officers (Subhabrata 1996). Corruption also increased tremendously, which did not help to further the cause of forest protection.

Behavior of forest-dependent people
In spite of the fact that many governments today control most forest areas, millions of rural and urban people depend, at least partially, on some forest resources. Most forest dwellers are extremely poor and in many ways economically disadvantaged. Due to prevailing laws, their forest use is illegal. In some areas, use is allowed as a favor by the government, although it can be withdrawn any time and without prior notice. Forest users are conscious of their vulnerable situation, and the possibility of being hauled up any time by the guardians of law. They therefore use the forest as a transient resource to be turned into cash whenever possible. This behavior fosters rapid forest deterioration.

*Rise of environmentalists and social activists*

Another development is the emergence of a strong environmental lobby - supported by international NGOs and the donor community - in most countries of the Asia-Pacific region. Environmentalists and social activists are concerned about the loss of habitat, wildlife, and biodiversity. Their major argument is that the losses are so rapid that total disappearance is not far off unless it is preempted by segregating sufficient areas of forests as protected areas. Some countries in the Asia-Pacific region have very impressive achievements in this regard. About 14 percent of the total land area has been demarcated as protected areas of various kinds for forest and wildlife conservation purposes (FAO 1993b).

*Local protests for forest use rights and annihilation of forests*

Subterfuge, resistance or - at times violent - protests by local people who have lost their rights to forests were organized in many countries in an attempt to force governments to yield ground. Examples are the Chipko ("hugging of trees") movement of India and the resistance of logging by the Penan people in Borneo. On the other hand, "subterfuge" can also be used to annihilate forests by slow attrition.

In 1970, when a major flood devastated many areas in the mountains of Uttar Pradesh of India, the local villagers of Chamoli blamed the destruction on forest cutting by contractors. Through the Chipko movement they prevented the contractors from further logging. The hugging movement then spread slowly to other villages (Ramchandra 1993). Chipko and other such environmental movements have influenced the government to formulate a logging ban on green (live) trees in the hills and to make appropriate changes in forest policy.

The Penans of Sarawak (East Malaysia), a small remnant of hunter-gatherers, objected to timber harvesting in "their" forests. As the government did not respond to vocal protests, they blocked logging roads to prevent the movement of trucks. In 1989, 71 Penan people were arrested for their activities. While no relief is in sight, the Penans have continued to fight their cause (Millier and Tangley 1991).

In most developing countries of the Asia-Pacific region, local people have responded to land-use pressures by occupying forests. They either completely take over a forested area or chip away - sometimes hardly noticeable - the forest step by step. This form of unplanned forest conversion is very destructive.

*New Initiatives - Successes and Failures*

The adverse impacts of central forest management are deforestation and its environmental and social consequences. Between 1981 and 1990, the annual deforestation rate was estimated to be about 3.9 million ha (FAO 1993b). While the damage to the forest is real, deforestation has also stimulated a debate on the effectiveness of centrally managed forest regimes, and triggered initiatives congenial to decentralization and local forest conservation. The initiatives differ among countries, but all are directed towards devolving forest management to local people.

*India*

The National Forest Policy of 1988 introduced certain changes oriented towards local and indigenous (tribal) people. Providing fuelwood, fodder, non-wood forest products and construction timber to local people has been recognized as a very crucial function of forests. In June 1990, the Government of India proposed the rehabilitation of degraded forests by local people in association with the forest department in and around the forests (referred to as joint Forest Management or JFM). Under JFM agreements, forest protection becomes the responsibility of local people. Forest ownership is not affected by JFM, and remains with the government. Local people, through a village committee, are entitled to a number of forest products. By 1992, 17 Indian states had initiated JFM and about 2 million ha of forests were managed by 20,000 protection committees.
The environmental effects of JFM are positive. In most locations where JFM is in place, the forests have recovered dramatically. For example, in Hunsur, a village in the Western Ghats, people had managed a forest where the number of trees larger than 10 cm in diameter at breast height increased from zero in an unprotected plot to 1,477 in protected plots after 14 years of protection (Rabindranath et al. 1996). In Hoshangabad district of Madhya Pradesh, the production of fuelwood increased fourfold (SPWD 1998). However, although JFM offers great potentials, currently its impact is still minor. In 1998, only 2 percent of the forests of India were covered by JFM agreements and only degraded forests were offered to local communities.

**The Philippines**

In Southeast Asia, the Philippines has the best record of policy changes in favor of the people, in particular upland dwellers. Since 1989, a government order has supported upland dwellers in acquiring legal rights to forest products within the areas of their traditional domain (Viyouth 1993). In addition, the Philippine government has funded several community forestry programs, including the Integrated Social Forestry Program (ISFP) (World Bank 1989), the National Forestry Program (NFP), its subsequent Forest Lease Management Program (FLMP), and the Ancestral Land Delineation Task Force (TFAD). With some variations, these programs provide incentives to local people living on public forestlands, and in the uplands to sustainably manage local forest resources. However, extensive areas are excluded from the programs. In addition, some programs only cover denuded areas with less than 10 percent tree cover. Besides these two problems, bureaucratic procedures are also very cumbersome for claiming rights to forests and their products.

**Thailand**

In 1975, the Thai Cabinet granted amnesty to the residents of public forests so that they in turn could improve the degraded forests. The villagers were also provided with forest village development (FVP) funds. A similar program called Sit Thi Thamkin (Right to Harvest: STK) was introduced in 1979, although in this case no funds for village development was made available (Viyouth 1993). As of 1990, under FVP, 119 villages covering 55,344 ha have been involved. The STK program of 1979 has benefited 709,395 families on 1.15 million ha of land (Attanotho 1993). Under the Thai constitution local governments at the sub-district level, Tambon Councils and Tambon Administrative Organizations (TAO), have an important role in natural resource administration within their jurisdiction. The Royal Forest Department has recently prepared for the implementation of devolution of forest management (see also Komon Pragtong in this volume).

**Lessons Learned**

There is no doubt that the traditional central forest management systems are partially to blame for the high deforestation rates of the past. The various new initiatives have also not been very successful in reversing past trends. However, it is now being gradually realized that wherever management has been at least partially decentralized to resource users, forests have shown definite signs of improvement. Yet, the process of decentralization is very slow and implemented reluctantly. Also, success is not universal. The reasons for the differences in performance and impacts can be grouped in two categories, i.e. macro- and micro-level issues.

**Macro-level issues**

**Lack of political will**

The forest policy of the Government of India has been to increase forest cover to a minimum of 33 percent of the total land area. Yet, in the name of development, about 4 million ha of forests have been converted for infrastructure purposes such as dams, roads, townships, and refugee rehabilitation between 1956 and 1980. The government of the Philippines has made tiers and tiers of decentralized units, but no financial resources have been devolved. Most funds have to come from the central government, which means that the deconcentrated units are totally dependent on the center's largess. Although it is well known that the concessionaire system of timber harvesting is not conducive to good forest management, it continues uninterrupted in Indonesia.

**Lack of clear policies and legislation concerning devolution in forestry**

With the exception of Nepal and the Philippines, no other country in the Asia-Pacific region has clearly enunciated a national policy or legislation directed at decentralizing forest management to the local level. While JFM has made significant progress in a number of Indian states, current arrangements are based on an
administrative order that may be easily contested in the court. The most important requirement, i.e. an enabling enactment, has not been passed yet.

**Lack of clear tenure**

With the exception of the Pacific Island States where communal ownership of forests is common, there is a lot of confusion on the issue of tenure and customary rights of local people. For example, in Indonesia, the Basic Agrarian Law of 1960 recognizes customary law as the basis of national land law. The Basic Forestry Law of 1967, on the other hand, has been invoked to disenfranchise local people of their rights in favor of commercial timber operations or conservation (Lynch and Talbot 1995). In India, the customary rights concerning various forest products are revoked as and when any national park, sanctuary, biosphere reserve or national heritage parks are established. Even in Papua New Guinea, the recent law dictates that forest owners can dispose of their products only through parastatal organizations.

**Lack of technology**

The technologies adopted in the decentralization initiatives follow the pattern suitable for timber management. No matter what the needs of the people are, the forest management of decentralized units is aimed at producing timber and poles to satisfy urban and industrial demands. There is a severe lack of research on or the promotion of management methods to accelerate the regeneration of shrubs and bushes that are most used by the people as fuel (Banerjee 1989).

**Lack of institutional restructuring**

"Forest Departments" still stand for forest policing. Where the decentralization and devolution processes are implemented, the forest department structures frequently remain unaltered. It is mistakenly assumed that staff training without any change of the main structural edifice of the department is sufficient to deal with decentralized and participatory forest activities.

**Bureaucratic apathy**

Policies supporting the devolution of authority to the forest users in Nepal are very clear. However, forests are transferred to the users only very slowly. Similarly, in Thailand, only 119 villages have benefited from the forest village program. The reasons for this lack of zeal are not difficult to detect. First, foresters are very apprehensive and fearful of losing their power. Secondly, only few foresters have faith in the capacities of people to manage forests sustainably. After all, the myth that the poor local people are responsible for deforestation has been indoctrinated into their minds for decades.

**Micro-level issues**

**Usurpation by local elites and power brokers**

In places where decentralization and devolution policies have been drafted and passed, local elites and power brokers have frequently formed management committees and usurped the powers and benefits that should have been equitably distributed. Unless supported by outsiders and a sound system for ensuring equity is established, the poor and uneducated people often fall victim to the more prosperous, educated and vocal section within a village. The nature of forming management committees therefore has to be modified.

**Failure of weaning the people from forest dependency**

An alternative paradigm is being introduced for conservation of forests termed "eco-development" (see also Badola in this volume). It aims at reducing or eliminating the forest dependency of people living inside or on the periphery of conservation forests by promoting economic development of their village. The assumption is that when these people have an alternative source of income, they will not use the forests. The number of forest-dependent people is enormous. An estimate of people dependent directly on forests is about 420 million in India, Indonesia, Nepal, the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Thailand alone (Lynch and Talbot 1995). Economic development for so many people is beyond the scope of forestry projects. The amount being invested per village is paltry and can just touch the fringe of poverty. At best, most villagers view this development as an additional, but not alternative, income and the effects of the level on forest dependency are very limited. Eco-development cannot be a substitute for transferring rights to forests.

**Lack of local participation**
The sustainability of decentralization and devolution in forest management depends on the participation of the forest users in planning, execution, supervision and monitoring. In spite of the rhetoric, the fact is that participation is dismal. Except for the participation of the people in forest protection under JFM, there is hardly any input in planning (micro-planning), execution and supervision. The forestry officials generally are reluctant to accept the advice of others, especially of uneducated local people, on forestry management and related problems.

Proposal for Change - Prospects and Potentials

In the context of the discussion above, it is obvious that no half-baked or incremental measures can eliminate the problems that the past mistakes created. The fact is that all forests have to be returned to the people who should be given the authority to manage their resources. This complete and radical devolution has to be to the people who are the users, who reside in or near the forests, and who have the biggest stake in its survival for their own survival. This drastic change can be referred to as "Forest Reform".

Proposals

Development of Political will

The first and most important change required to bring about reforms in forestry is to develop the appropriate political will of the government. This cannot happen overnight and seldom happens on its own without some external inputs.

Fortunately, the political environment with respect to forest conservation has improved in recent years for a number of reasons. These include the dissemination of periodic data on deforestation rates (FAO 1993a; 1993b), and a surge in activities of international organizations in response to deforestation (Kenton and Tangley 1991) such as the Man and Biosphere Program of 1972, the World Heritage Convention of 1972, the Tropical Forest Action Plan of 1985, establishment of International Tropical Timber Organization in 1983, Biodiversity Conservation Strategy Programme since 1989, the Biodiversity Convention of 1992, and the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly known as the Rio Earth Summit, of 1992 and its subsequent support activities. The media has helped in publicizing the problem of increasing tropical deforestation. International and local green NGOs and social activists have mushroomed, and local forest users demand a fair share in natural resource management. However, what needs to be done in concrete terms is frequently not spelled out. People's participation and devolution of authority are always mentioned in the recommendations but drown in the multitude of similar suggestions and proposals for action.

More pressure than what is exerted at present is required to build in the above processes to influence concerned governments to bring about reforms in forestry. Global conventions have to first place the subject of Forest Reform at the top of the agenda and then try to ensure its implementation by the signature countries of any convention.

Change in Policy and legislation

A change in political will should be accompanied with appropriate forest policies and legislation (see also Lindsay in this volume). Amongst others, new regulations need to cover the deadline for completing the transfer of tenure to the people. In addition, the rules should envisage the preparation of plans for sustainable forest management. The rules should clearly define the benefits, rights and responsibilities of the managing group, which should be incorporated in the management plan. The villagers' managing group has to be small in size, not more than about fifty households, in order to ensure equity, as large groups do not function for the common good (Olson 1971).

Special attention should be paid to the needs of the underprivileged - poor households, the landless, marginal farmers, indigenous people and women - to ensure their participation. Officials should be excluded from management groups, although they may fulfill a useful advisory and monitoring role in the early stages of the Forest Reform.

Structural change of the forest department

Under the Forest Reform, the functions of forest departments have to change substantially. One challenge that governments face is the inherent difficulty in restructuring government departments. The main new functions of the restructured departments would comprise:
- technical extension;
- training of the forest management groups in management skills;
- assistance in preparing forest management plans and research;
- advice on investments in agroforestry and farm forestry;
- dissemination of market information; and
- monitoring of contractual agreements between the government and local people. Departments would be divested totally of protection and revenue-gathering functions with few exceptions such as the management of legally defined protection forests. The new structure would be two tiered; the upper tier consisting of specialists and the lower tier of small units, each responsible to a number of village management groups. The link between the two tiers would be non-hierarchical, with the upper tier responsible for extension, training and advisory services. The smaller units would be more or less independent and responsible for all other functions of the department.

**Problems of the proposed paradigm**

The paradigm suggested above faces some genuine problems. One problem often cited by the protagonists arises from a misunderstanding. Management of the commons has been described as tragic (Hardin 1968), and there are examples all over Europe and Asia supporting this theory. There is a common apprehension that devolution of forest management will lead to a second "Tragedy of the Commons". However, the present proposal is exactly opposite to what is described as common property in the literature as it limits the forest area for a small number of families for its management. This is synonymous with "communalization", a form of privatization where the property is owned by a group of people instead of an individual or the firm.

The second problem surrounds the issue of population growth, which is a reality in many Asian countries. It is assumed that forests allocated to one particular village will eventually be too small to satisfy subsistence needs. This may be the case in some countries that have already lost much of their forests, such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan, or in cases of uneven distribution of forest resources such as in Indonesia and Indo-Gangetic alluvial plains of India. The only answer to this problem is that governments and the people have to resort to alternative sources of energy and economic dependence. For example, in Nepal, in some parts of the border regions with India, the forests have receded miles away from the villages. The villagers are relying more on agricultural residues and farm trees for fuel.

Another tremendous problem is the possibility of migration as soon as forests are allocated to particular village households. There will be claims and counterclaims to property, some from indigenous people as part of their ancient domains (e.g., Thailand and the Philippines), and others from the old and recent migrants. One basic problem of the recent devolution initiatives is the emphasis on investigating the rights of the local and indigenous people to forests. This approach, which appears to right a wrong, has resulted in bureaucratic tangles and reduced the pace of transfers to a trickle. This distracts from making the important decision on which forest areas should be linked with which community as well as on the roles of the local inhabitants and the government. Disputes are unavoidable, but can be resolved between the claimants with governments as a mediator. Such conflicts have arisen between the Amerindians, the rubber tappers and other forest dwellers in Brazil. They have now formed a coalition of "peoples of the forest" to fight for a common cause (Miller and Tangley 1991). Similar solutions are possible in the Asia-Pacific region.

Considerable conflicts between concessionaires and the new forest managers can be anticipated. In such cases, the government has to support the people based on its decision to devolve authorities. That means that in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Papua New Guinea, the concession system needs to be dismantled just as has happened in Thailand and the Philippines.

Revenue from the forest is the second largest source of earnings for the government of Indonesia. It is equally important in many other countries of the Asia-Pacific region. In Indonesia, total output from the forest sector is around US$ 8 million (1998), which amounts to 7 percent of gross domestic product. A termination of all concession agreements would obviously result in a serious monetary loss. But in the long run, the country would not only recoup short-term losses but also enhance its income from the forests. The forest managing communities would be required to pay taxes on the income derived from their forests.

Another problem is that many forest managing groups are small and do not have the funds to invest in new technologies required for silvicultural and harvesting operations. As a result, at least in the early years of devolution, a sharp drop in production with the reintroduction of labor intensive technologies can be expected. Over time, productivity will increase as groups gain experience and have appropriate technologies at hand.

Last but not least, are social problems that will emerge when valuable resources are transferred to local communities that are far more heterogeneous than described in the general literature. The potential for abuse of power by local elites, increase in inequity and impoverishment of underprivileged village strata have been
Implementation of the proposals

The implementation of the "Forest Reform" is complex and cannot be handled by forest departments for a number of reasons. The departments are engaged in multifarious activities and cannot provide the financial and human resources required. Further, the forest department staff, as discussed earlier, is probably reluctant to accelerate the process, and lacks the expertise that the "Forest Reform" requires. A separate agency, such as the Forest Reform Department, has to be established temporarily for the transitional period. This agency should be staffed with people experienced in surveying and mapping, land reforms and social issues and be made up of representatives of government departments and civil society. Its mandate would be to oversee the transfer of forest resources as provided by law within the specified period. The target date will naturally vary from country to country depending on the present state of decentralization. The major tasks of the agency would be to:

- publicize nationally, regionally and locally, the implications of the "Forest Reform";
- explain the new system and the caveats in village meetings; and
- divide the forests into community forests - production and conservation - and protection forests.

An important task of the agency would be to link communities with their production community forest blocks. The demarcation between forest blocks would follow geographical features and agreed upon boundaries would be included in approximate sketch maps. This process is not without difficulties but with the help of the agency's social activists, conflicts would be resolved to the satisfaction of all people involved. In the case of conservation community forests, protected areas (e.g., a biosphere reserve or a wildlife sanctuary) have to be linked with all the villages that are contiguous to it and which have a stake in the area. That means that such areas will be linked to a group of villages rather than one village as in the case of production community forests, which necessitates the development of collaborative arrangements.

Once the above tasks have been completed and forest management committees formed in the villages, the agency can be disbanded and foresters can directly provide support services to the committees and oversee the demarcation of the various forest types on the ground.

Conclusions

The only option to conserve and sustain all categories of forests of the Asia-Pacific region is to devolve management responsibility and authority to the village and forest user levels through the "Forest Reform". Its objective is the establishment of a new paradigm based on the premise that the forest benefits should rightfully go to the people who live in the forest or on its margins, irregardless of when they moved to where they live today. To successfully implement the reform requires policy changes, innovative legislation and a sincere political will. Working together with international organizations and local activists, governments can bring about the reform.

Devolution has to be implemented by linking villages to specific forest blocks that the villagers depend on economically. Thus, the present day large forest blocks need to be divided into smaller units with each being managed by a village committee. The reform process needs to be actively supported by a temporary agency composed of representatives of civil society and government departments. The role of the forest department in the future will be to support the preparation of management plans, to demarcate the forest of different village units and to provide technical assistance and advice on other matters.

Once the devolution process is completed, people will properly supervise and manage the forests of the Asia-Pacific region, corruption by outsiders will be resisted, more local employment will be generated and equity will prevail among the villagers. The government will also gain by imposing taxes on those villages managing their forests for economic gains.

To kick-start the devolution process requires a "Forest Reform Convention" sponsored by FAO and donor agencies and involving all the countries in the Asia-Pacific region. To support the convention theme it is imperative that FAO, UNDP and other organizations disseminate authentic (and not anecdotal) data about the superiority of people’s management over the so-called scientific forest management and clarify the positive role that devolution can play in conserving our global forest resource.
References


