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# FROM SUPERVISING 'SUBJECTS' TO SUPPORTING 'CITIZENS': RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN ASIA AND AFRICA

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*Major investments have been made in recent decades in the development of community forestry. Drawing on two contrasting cases – Nepal (multiple purpose, relatively low value upland forests) and Cameroon (humid lowland forests of high commercial value) – this paper argues that policy development has involved many unknowns, necessitating a learning process orientation and considerable flexibility. This involves substantial cost, but the benefits may be significant, as regards both rural livelihoods and the proper husbandry of hitherto under-managed resources.*

**Policy conclusions**

- There is growing evidence that participation in forest management can contribute significantly to rural livelihoods.
- The levels and types of benefit vary according to the context, as do the risks associated with them; in general, the higher the marketed benefits, the more hostile the policy environment is likely to be.
- Necessary legislative frameworks will have to be built up as experience is gained.
- Different phases of establishing community forests require different forms of support – flexibility is required by donors if they are to respond to these varying needs.
- Community forestry is a very knowledge-intensive process; this can make heavy demands on civil society.
- Despite the policy emphasis on shifting control over forests from government forest departments to local communities, forest officials often deploy a number of tactics to retain control.
- Ambiguities in the notion of 'community' are common and need to be resolved at an early stage.
- Significant investments in local institutional development may be needed to prevent capture of benefits by elites.
- Despite community involvement, public controls over forest exploitation may still be needed, but with some shift in balance, away from authoritarian policing and towards support for local monitoring.
- The process of policy innovation in such a contentious sector requires external support, not least for 'progressive' constituencies within recipient countries; this may be problematic in the current development assistance environment, with its emphasis on rapid delivery and short-term impact.

## Why community forestry?

Forest management by rural communities is as old as history, but community forestry as a sponsored process is recent. While definitions abound, in this paper we use community forestry to mean a process whereby specific community forest users protect and manage state forests in some form of partnership with the government (Hobley 1996).

**Box 1 The Rationale of Community Forestry**

Community involvement in forest management has been justified on grounds such as the following:

1. *Proximity to the resource*: those in closest contact with the forest are best-placed to ensure its effective husbandry.
2. *Impact*: those whose livelihoods impact most on the forest should be involved in its management.
3. *Equity*: forests should be managed so as to ensure adequate resource flows to rural populations.
4. *Livelihoods*: single-purpose industrial management may be incompatible with the livelihood needs of rural populations.
5. *Capacity*: forest-dwelling communities may be better forest managers than governments.
6. *Biodiversity*:multiple purpose management of forests by communities is likely to lead to better conservation of biodiversity than industrial management.
7. *Cost-effectiveness*: local involvement in management may be an important way of cutting costs to the state.
8. *Governance*: community involvement introduces important checks and balances in relation to state services, which tend to be mismanaged.
9. *Development philosophy*: local participation, decentralisation and subsidiarity may all, in themselves, be considered as important ends of development.

*Source*: Brown (1999)

The need to increase community participation in forest management has been a near-universal conclusion of international policy initiatives in tropical forestry over the last 30 years. The justifications for this range from considerations of practicality and cost-effectiveness to philosophical concerns relating to equity and social justice (see Box 1).

## Time to take stock

The last decade has seen an explosion of interest in community-based forest management around the world. While developing countries have led the way, the concept has been equally useful in countries such as the US, Canada and the UK (though not always with the same objectives). This paper attempts to assess progress in implementation to date, and to examine the options and challenges for the future. It draws heavily on two countries at opposite ends of the community forestry spectrum, which form the subject matter of the two most recent mailings of ODI's *Rural Development Forestry Network*: Cameroon [Mailing 25, 2001] and Nepal [Mailing 26, in preparation].

The Middle Hills of Nepal are often perceived as the classic case of 'community forestry' because of the willingness and speed with which the government was ready to devolve management authority over its upland forests to communities (Box 2). In Cameroon, community forestry is more recent and, to date, has focused largely on high-value tropical forest. The country's importance as a producer of tropical timbers, repository of biodiversity and store of environmental values has aroused a high level of international interest as has the fact that forest-dependent communities have long been excluded from its management (Box 3).

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## No off-the-shelf solution

Community forestry does not imply a uniform process. In some contexts it involves helping communities to do better what they are doing already. In some of Africa's dryland forests (The Gambia, for example), 'rural communities' tend to be relatively homogeneous, and the forest industry – such as it is – fairly well integrated into the rural economy; here, the main challenges are to increase the security of community tenurial rights, the quantity and quality of forest biomass, the sustainability of extractive processes, and the proportion of value captured at the local level. Elsewhere, rural populations will have to take on different challenges, which lead them into uncharted waters, both technically and politically. On the Indian sub-continent, tensions within the 'community' have raised fundamental concerns, and the emphasis has been as much on the politics of institution building for equitable resource access and benefit distribution as on future sustainability. In Nepal, the Forest User Group (FUG) model was used to achieve rapid decentralisation of management responsibility to the local level. A particular challenge in Nepal's community forestry has arisen because multiple objectives have required very different silvicultural techniques compared with conventional (timber extraction and processing) forestry. In the high forest areas of Central Africa, community forestry has involved helping communities to become involved in very technical activities of this latter sort, in which they have little prior experience, as well as in securing rights to forest products, in both cases against the resistance of a powerful logging industry.

The Nepal and Cameroon cases allow identification of a number of factors that determine the nature of the community forestry process (Table 1). An understanding of how and why these factors vary is essential if community forestry is to be adapted to the local context.

### Box 2 Nepal Middle Hills: Community forestry for forest restoration

The trigger for the introduction of community forestry in Nepal came in the late 1970s when serious flooding in Bangladesh focused the world's attention on the rapid depletion and degradation of the forest resources in upstream Nepal. At the same time, the government recognised the Forest Department's limited capacity to handle the problem alone and, in 1978, introduced a community forestry policy.

The 1980s were a period of unprecedented donor activity, each experimenting with different approaches to community forestry, from which emerged a form of community forestry suited to the mid-hills. The 20-year Master Plan for the Forestry Sector in 1987 allocated 47% of proposed forest sector investment to community forestry programmes, and authority for handing over forests was subsequently devolved to District Forest Offices. While the state maintained ownership of the land, communities were given control over the biotic resources and the benefits flowing from them, providing that a percentage was used to improve the resource.

Today there are over 10,000 Forest User Groups in Nepal, mainly in the mid-hills, each consisting of an average of around 100 households and managing an average of 50ha of forest. However, many have yet to function as independent managers of their resources. Nationally, the mainly donor-funded Federation of Community Forest Users (FECOFUN) is pressuring the government for policy and personnel changes.

The key issue today is how to support FUGs in moving from protection and limited utilisation to active management of their forest resources, with the dual purpose of improving the forest condition and increasing the flow of benefits to the community. A second concern is how the resulting benefits are shared both within communities, and increasingly – as the creation of community forests in the more valuable forests of the Terai is considered – between communities and government.

## Challenges for the future

### Community identities

Translating the notion of 'community' into a workable entity has been a crucial challenge.

The key factor allowing community forestry in Nepal to flourish was the introduction of the user group concept in policy in the late 1980s. This meant that the 'community' could be organised on a legal basis separately from the Village Development Committees (previously *Panchayats*), the lowest rung of local government. It also allowed the FUGs to include the actual users, rather than be restricted by administrative boundaries. Nevertheless, intra-community issues have been problematic and recent research (Box 4) casts doubt on whether community forestry actually benefits the poorest members of society. FUG committees often reproduce pervasive patterns of local dominance and this has been one of the most important barriers to empowering the local poor and women.

In Cameroon, there was no established legal entity which could be equated with the community. This was overcome by requiring that all members of 'the community' should be consulted before any community forest could be approved, without specifying what precisely was implied. This approach had the major advantage of leaving open the possibility for any aggrieved individual or group to petition the authorities. Nevertheless, problems have arisen around the significant disjunctures which exist between the resident geographical community and those who see themselves as having claims of ownership upon the forest in question. The issue of whether

### Box 3 Humid lowlands of Cameroon: Community forestry for timber production

The trigger for community forestry in Cameroon was concern by the international community that corruption and mismanagement in the forest sector was resulting in a loss of state revenue coupled with degradation of one of the world's richest remaining tropical forest resources. The focus was largely on the lowland tropical forests in the South.

With the 1994 Forest Act, Cameroon opted for the politically high-risk strategy of radically overhauling its legislative framework as a means of increasing the efficiency of the industry and promoting community participation. This made specific provision for any community in the non-permanent forest estate (NPFE) to apply for attribution of their lands as a 'community forest' of up to 5,000 ha, following which they would be required to exploit it in association with a licensed operator. Cameroon officials and legislators saw these provisions as largely imposed by the World Bank and IMF, so that there was little national ownership. This fact, together with the structural antipathy of the state and its agents, meant that implementing the community forestry regulations suffered from considerable resistance, both from within the logging industry and the main state institution, the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MINEF).

By contrast with Nepal, there was little experimentation prior to legal reform. A few initiatives began immediately after the passing of the 1994 Forest Act, often with disastrous effects. Interest only became widespread with the publication, after an exemplary consultative process, of the *Manual of Norms and Procedures for the Attribution of Community Forests* in 1997. As in Nepal, a group of donors was instrumental in promoting different approaches to community forestry. Only in 2000 was the first community forest legally created. After this frustratingly slow start, the pace of change has begun to accelerate, and the principle of community forestry looks to be well-established. As of November 2001, 138 applications had been made, 64 community forests reserved and 39 management plans signed or approved. Critical issues today concern questions of community identity and dynamics, how to make sustainable forest management pay and how best to organise MINEF to manage effectively both regulation and provision of support for communities.

urban elites of local origin are true members of 'the community' is especially contentious. On the one hand, elites may perform positive services for their rural relatives, subsidising their income, providing links with the centres of political power, and reducing the transaction costs of dealing with central bureaucracies. On the other, admitting such persons to the benefits of community forestry might be an invitation to elite capture.

### Increasing the flow of benefits from the forest

Communities will only manage their forests if it is in their interests to do so. Generally this means that they must recoup their costs and be able to protect those values they consider important. In Nepal, Springate-Baginski et al. (2001) found that conservative closure and regulated product extraction have led to reversal of degradation. Yet the focus on protection rather than production means a significant loss of potential income for FUGs. 'Active' forest management could increase forest product supplies and take-off levels of fuelwood, for example, by 100% (FFMP 2000).

In Cameroon, forest-dwelling communities are among the most marginalised groups in society, and massive timber exploitation has brought them few benefits. 66% of Cameroon's population in the forest areas lives below the poverty line. One option for communities to gain more benefit is for them to subcontract commercial timber operators to exploit the forest but this exposes the enterprise to hijacking by elites, and may have negative environmental consequences (as logging operators may try to recoup their investments by rapidly creaming off all the trees with marketable value). Isolated case studies (Box 5) suggest that communities could earn a substantial income from the forest if they took control of harvesting and processing themselves. This, however, requires organisational and technical skills far beyond the usual capacity of local communities, and might also require governments to provide safety nets for communities which get into difficulties.

**Box 4 Nepal: Are the poor disadvantaged by community forestry?**

While efforts at forest rehabilitation were anticipated to have negative effects on the livelihoods of the poor in the initial period (due to new restrictions placed on their access to forests and their products), the long-term effects were expected to be more beneficial. But Malla et al. (2001) found that wealthier households appear to benefit more, in terms of forest product distribution and community forest management, than the poor. This is because most FUGs distribute products equally between households even though richer households may never previously have collected items such as fuelwood from communal land, and poorer households are forced to make up their requirements from other, more distant forests. On the other hand, those who depend most on the forest for subsistence (such as fuelwood sellers, NTFP collectors) may benefit from having these practices legitimated by FUGs. Improved supply of forest resources can reduce collection time, which tends to benefit women.

### The process of policy development

Policy development in such an innovative area is a sequential and dynamic phenomenon, and different skills may be required at different stages.

In Cameroon, a willingness to amend policy in two ways has been essential in resolving initial blockages. The first was the delegation of the Minister's rights to forest exploitation ('*en régie*') directly to forest-dwelling communities, obviating the need to involve licensed timber operators. The second was the granting of first user rights (*droits de préemption*) to communities, for a two year period, over areas with potential as community forest.

In the early days of community forestry in Nepal, the focus was more on the resource than on users, and the challenges of greater local ownership were seen as largely technical: how to delimit the traditional boundaries of a community forest; how to assist local populations in carrying

**Table 1 Underlying factors affecting the process of community forestry**

| Factor | Nepal Middle Hills region | Cameroon humid lowlands |
|---|---|---|
| Forest resource type and condition | Upland forests, source of multiple subsistence products. Highly degraded in the late 1970s, owing to earlier nationalisation (resulting in lack of local incentive to manage the resource) and population pressure. | Humid lowland tropical forest, high biodiversity and source of commercially valuable tropical timbers. Located predominantly in areas of low population density. |
| National political context and government support | Community forestry a government-led process which took place within a context of more general decentralisation to local level. Recent instability and concern about changes to Forest Law relating to implementation of community forestry in Terai. | Initially reluctant (donor-imposed) government support for community forestry. |
| The character of the forest industry and the nature of its linkages to the national economy | Forest industry in this region is very limited; some trade in medicinals. | Very powerful export-based industry inextricably linked into higher echelons of the government. Forest industry operates as an enclave with few linkages into the rural economy, but contributes significantly to export earnings (20%) and state revenue as well as to other benefits enjoyed by state representatives. |
| Social structure and dynamics of rural communities | Very heterogeneous with caste system, but relative inaccessibility of government institutions led to largely self-sufficient communities with a basis for local management. | Rural communities tend to be small, heterogeneous, relatively unstable and atomized, lacking complex hierarchies of authority. Baka 'pygmy' populations marginal to Bantu society. |
| Capacity of forestry extension agencies and civil society | Good coverage by increasingly well-trained forest extension agents. Strong civil society including FECOFUN, powerful network of Forest Users. | Forestry 'extension' agents few and far between, focus on policing rather than work with communities. Civil society weak and externally dependent. |
| International donor support | Interest in reversing forest degradation. Long history of support from a range of international donors who have played an important mediation role, providing pace-setting radicalism in projects. | Conservation of biodiversity and anti-corruption high priorities. Tendency to adversarial relationship between donors and government. |

out inventories and drawing up management plans; selection of species and nursery establishment. Many of these issues remain problematic but, on the whole, solutions have been found which are within the expertise of conventional forest assistance. Today, many communities have become confident resource managers and are moving into planning wider community development. District Forest Officers are unable to keep up with demands for support, and FUGs are looking to other agencies to fulfill these needs. Nepal's experience has been very different from that in India where deeply entrenched Forest Department bureaucracies have been more resistant to trusting local communities to run their own affairs, despite many long-term successes with such community forest management models in the Western Himalaya.

### Operational issues: scaling up, monitoring, providing support, and transparency

Any expectation that community forestry would prove a cheap way of obtaining benefits has not been realised. Community forestry is a knowledge-intensive process, and as communities move from the allocation to the exploitation stage, the technical demands increase. Under the existing law in Cameroon, communities have none of the financial incentives available to industrial enterprises (for example, pre-financing of management plans from the profits of an initial tree harvest). To date, most of the successful projects have had heavy external support. This raises the issue of the global trend towards reduced government involvement in forestry at the very time when communities require additional support to enable them to operate in increasingly complex and hazardous environments.

In Nepal, substantial (and mainly donor) funds have underpinned the Community Forestry initiative, so that there is now a need to plan how to fund FUG formation, post-formation support, and monitoring on a sustainable basis. The government tends to emphasise its top-down monitoring role, and it has been argued that FUGs must accept taxation of their revenues, which would pay for monitoring as well as support. But activists believe that FUGs could purchase the support they need for their forests at the point of service, thus providing the right incentive structure for support staff to perform. The eventual solution may be a combination of these two.

In all cases, local communities' awareness of their legal rights has to be raised. This is particularly true where, as in Cameroon, the process of allocating a community forest is long and complex. Apex user group unions have been instrumental in making information available both in Nepal and parts of India. In parallel, an independent judiciary is needed to enforce these rights vis-à-vis pressures from more powerful stakeholders such as government departments, the timber industry and conservation-minded NGOs.

**Box 5 Cameroon: Making community forests pay**

Initial attempts at forest exploitation (primarily for timber) under the community forest regime have indicated the size of the challenge to poor rural communities presented by such a complex enterprise, but also, the massive benefits available to them should they succeed. For example, Auzel et al. (2001) have estimated that the total income from a community forest could be CFA 270–1080 million (on a 30 year rotation, this means c. £9,000–£36,000 annually).

Two production and marketing strategies have been attempted:

a) Relatively hi-technology, high value-added; the Dutch agency, SNV, for example, has supplied and trained 'pygmy' and Bantu communities in the use of a portable bench saw, and has then assisted them (financially and technically) to reach the European markets with a view to exploiting the high potential for added value on 'green products'.
b) Low technology, low value-added; working with a project of Gembloux University in Belgium, the Cameroonian NGO, PAPEL, has assisted other communities to produce rough planks using a simple chain saw, and has then encouraged them to market their production locally.

Each of these has strengths and weaknesses. The former strategy offers the prospect of much greater financial benefits, but at risk of excessive external dependence; the latter looks to be more sustainable, though the local market is less lucrative and the poverty alleviation potential is arguably much less. It remains to be seen which of these two strategies proves the more viable in the longer-term.

## Conclusion

Community forestry is undoubtedly a risky venture both for forest-dependent communities and the agencies which seek to support them. Significant support is needed not only at the point of attribution, but also in subsequent phases. Any thought that community forestry is a low-cost means for donors to hand over contentious problems of forest management to rural communities should be very quickly dispelled. On the other hand, the benefits may well be considerable. Though it is as yet early days, evidence is growing that the approach stands to have a major impact on the livelihoods of the poor, on the character of forest governance and on citizenship more generally. As the evidence presented here demonstrates, off-the-shelf approaches are unlikely to work, and considerable flexibility will be needed to convert policy into practice.

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