

Collective Action and Collaborative Management of Forests



Governments around the world increasingly seek to manage their forests with the collaboration of the people living nearby. Forestry Ministries or their equivalents usually do this by offering local people access to selected forest products or forest land, income from forest resources, or opportunities for communicating with government forestry officials. In return, the agency obliges local people to cooperate in managing the forests around them by protecting existing forest or by planting trees.

SOURCE:

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Governments claim that the programs devolve control over forests to local people and provide more secure livelihoods, as well as help maintain and regenerate forests. By sharing rights among local groups and the state, the programs also help to reconcile the resource claims of local people with those of the national government. Everybody supposedly wins.

Millions of the rural poor now participate in collaborative forest management schemes under a variety of tenurial and organizational arrangements. These arrangements were examined to find out whether local people have indeed gained more access to benefits from and control over forests. Some of the findings suggest the following:

- Most co-management projects actually maintain and even extend central government control. Where communities had already managed forests in Orissa and Uttarakhand in India, for example, the government required that they share their incomes with the state forest department.
- Governments in many countries typically predetermine which species can be planted in reforestation or agroforestry schemes and what types of organizations can be given rights to manage forests.
- Whereas local people have gained greater legal access to forests and some might have increased their incomes, many have also lost out. For example, game areas and plantations have been frequently established on land used by poorer members of communities for grazing or cultivation.
- Local people have also not shown a consistent interest in forest management.

The Collaborative Management Model

Collaborative management, or “co-management”, forest programs have had a huge impact. These programs have generally helped to protect forests and improve access rights of the rural poor to forest resources, but have often fallen short of their potential to improve significantly the livelihoods of the poor.

Collective action has been a key feature of organizational arrangements for co-management. These arrangements have included the following:

- corporate, legal organizations of rights holders such as rubber tappers’ organizations in Brazil, ejidos in Mexico, or trusts in Botswana;
- village committees facilitated by government departments such as Forest Protection Committees in India;
- local government organizations such as Rural District Councils in Zimbabwe; and
- multi-stakeholder district structures aligned to line departments such as the Wildlife Management Authorities in Zambia.

Impact of Collaborative Management
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In India, more than 63,000 groups have enrolled in joint forest management programs to regenerate 14 million hectares. • In Nepal, 9,000 forest user groups are trying to regenerate 700,000 hectares of forest. • In Brazil, farmers help to manage 2.2 million hectares as extractive reserves. • Half the districts in Zimbabwe participate in CAMP-FIRE schemes, in which local communities can share revenues gained from tourist use of wildlife areas.

Collective action assists in co-management by reducing the number of people that forest agencies must deal with and by bringing together different groups to play complementary roles in forest management. Even when governments contract directly with households or individuals, community organizations usually help with the programs, as in the case of Integrated Social Forestry in the Philippines.

State Control

The organizational arrangements for co-management strongly influence how much government agencies can control forest management and outcomes for local people. Forestry agencies exert more control over decisions about species selection, harvesting practices, sales, consumption, and the distribution of benefits where they have devolved management to local governments or larger-scale organizations. In such cases, the agency's interests in timber production, revenue generation, and environmental conservation have often overridden villagers' interests in livelihoods.

Forestry agencies exercise control over individuals and village groups by making local organizations accountable to the agencies rather than to local stakeholders. The agencies use standardized contractual agreements and regulations that limit local people's self-determination. Local people who organize collectively are better able to mobilize resources and negotiate for desired benefits. They are able to exert more influence when they have the direct support of non-government organizations (NGOs), donors, federations, and other external actors. Collective action, both within communities and together with outside groups, thus helps local people become more influential stakeholders in co-management arrangements. Where local groups have managed their own forests without state intervention, however, they have not necessarily been better off. Without government support, they often have had difficulty implementing or enforcing their decisions.

Addressing Poverty

Collaborative management has improved formal access to forests for rural people. Harvesting forest resources helps them meet subsistence needs and offers a safety net in times of shortage. Nonetheless, local people's rights to valuable commercial products such as timber or game remain restricted. Where forests yield financial benefits, governments often fail to deliver local people's promised share of incomes, or instead deliver them primarily to local elites. For the poor to benefit substantially from forest access, they need more secure property rights over valuable resources. Only rarely have poor communities received substantial financial benefits, such as in Botswana, where 45 families shared about US\$125,000 annually from the Chobe Trust.



Local knowledge and capacities are ideal enablers in co-management, given the strong internal harmony and leadership.

Focusing too narrowly on organizing collective action around managing a single resource such as a forest may divert potentially productive efforts. Converting forests to agriculture or other uses or initiating land reform, may bring local people greater economic benefits in many areas. Forest co-management programs alone are not sufficient to address poverty.

Organizing Collective Action: Challenges for the Future

Co-management has revealed the difficulty of dividing roles, rights, and responsibilities, especially where the groups involved have highly divergent interests. Forest agencies have had varying experiences in organizing collective action. Romantic ideals about harmonious communities and the local knowledge and capacities of “traditional peoples” have been counterbalanced by internal conflict and lack of leadership in many communities and the difficulty of organizing collective action where local social capital is weak.

Increasing competition and fragmentation of forests have led to more *de facto* privatization of land, making it difficult for communities to organize together around a common resource.

Many co-management efforts rely on outside agents to facilitate collective action, but sustaining that action has proved difficult. Other stakeholders, such as local governments or NGOs, often create their own sets of incentives or pressures for local people that work against co-management initiatives.

Forest co-management has created a useful institutional entry point. It now seems time to build more actively on the lessons learned. State officials and local people have had different expectations about the process and goals of co-management. Forest departments have controlled the terms of co-management and been reluctant to share their benefits. People in forest areas now must achieve the rights and power to bring about a fair division of control, responsibility, and benefits between themselves and the government.

Checks and balances need to be in place to ensure that local elites or other groups do not monopolize benefits and decision-making. The process should acknowledge the multiple interests found among different groups and give special attention to the livelihood needs of the poor. Initiatives need to build better on existing management practices and enhance local livelihood options.

Addressing the Interests of the Poor

In the past, it has been difficult for large centralized forestry agencies to accommodate local interests, and local groups have had little voice in agency decision-making. This is changing as governments decentralize and as the role of NGOs increases. Choosing the right facilitators and settings for these negotiations is critical for ensuring that the interests of the poor are met.

The current bureaucratic approaches to co-management do not address the complexity of these different needs. Frameworks for natural resource management that are developed locally by stakeholders and then linked to national objectives are more flexible and responsive to local interests.

Local responsiveness will be higher when institutional arrangements facilitate good communication and learning among stakeholders. The learning process should include both local interest groups and national policymakers to reflect different interests.

Where forestry incomes are limited and less attractive than incomes from other sustainable land uses and other activities, the rural poor should be encouraged to pursue economic options other than forestry, to better meet their needs.

Triggered by past experiences and by the increasing complexity of demands from different interest groups, the co-management paradigm is shifting. Management increasingly involves not just a local group and the government, but a range of stakeholders, and acknowledges overlapping systems of management and diverse interests. The actors involved have recognized that more emphasis is needed on the institutional and political aspects of management design.

Thus, forest management efforts are focusing on negotiation and on frameworks that emphasize local people's right to self-determination and allow for effective representation of rural poor people in negotiations. The rural poor and their federations and advocates are bringing a new sophistication to negotiations and demanding that their voices be heard.

Suggested Readings

Baland, J.M. and J.P. Platteau. 1996. *Halting Degradation of Natural Resources: Is There a Role for Rural Communities?* Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Ribot, J. 2002. *Democratic Decentralization of Natural Resources*. Washington, D.C.: World Resources Institute.

Shackleton, S., B. Campbell, E.Wollenberg and D. Edmunds. 2002. *Devolution and Community-Based Natural Resource Management: Creating Space for Local People to Participate and Benefit*. Natural Resource Perspective. Overseas Development Institute.