

Devolution of Natural Resource Management



From fishers in the Philippines to pastoralists in Morocco and rubber tappers in the Amazon, local communities have been actively participating in the management of natural resources.

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing recognition of the benefits that can be derived from transferring control over natural resources from central governments to local bodies. At the international level, this trend is seen in agreements such as the Convention to Combat Desertification and the Convention on Biological Diversity that commit signatories to principles of decentralization, subsidiarity, and local participation. At the national level, many countries in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Europe have devolved management responsibilities over rangelands, forests, fisheries, and irrigation to local government authorities, resource users, or both.

Devolution, defined as the transfer of rights and responsibilities to user groups at the local level, has made its way to national policy agendas for the following reasons:

1. Recognition of the limited effectiveness of the state in managing natural resources, especially at the local level.

SOURCE:

Katon, B., A. Knox and R. Meinzen-Dick. 2001. *Collective Action, Property Rights, and Devolution of Natural Resources Management*. CAPRI Policy Brief No. 2. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

Local users often have intimate knowledge of the resource, which is especially important where resources vary greatly over space and time. Users who live and work in the area also may have an advantage over government agents in monitoring use of the resource and compliance with rules. Because their livelihoods depend on the resource, local users often are assumed to have the greatest incentives to maintain the resource base, particularly if they make the decisions, devise the rules, and take part in them.

2. Few developing countries have the financial capacity to adequately monitor the use of large areas of forests, fisheries, range lands, or irrigation schemes. As a result, these resources have not been properly managed, and deforestation, overfishing, overgrazing, and deterioration of irrigation facilities have become major problems.
3. Devolution shifts greater authority and decision-making to rural people, giving them greater control over their assets and livelihood and making it an effective tool for poverty alleviation.

Devolution in Action

- In San Salvador village in Zambales, Philippines, collective action by village fishers, the Haribon Foundation, and local government units (LGUs) at the municipal and village levels led to the establishment of a 127-hectare marine sanctuary and marine reserve. Co-management arrangements have redefined access to resources, encouraged fishers to shift to non-destructive practices, and formally instituted measures to guard the coastal waters from poachers and illegal fishers. Coral reef conditions have improved remarkably, and catch per fishing trip has increased. Fishers, moreover, have perceived positive socio-economic changes over time.

- In Andhra Pradesh, India, more than 10,000 water-user associations have been organized to take a more active role in managing irrigation systems, which cover 4.8 million hectares. Farmers who repair facilities receive part of the irrigation fees. "We were able to finish maintenance work that has not been done for 30 years," reported one farmer. In pilot projects, the irrigated area increased from 30 to 60 percent of the possible command area with simple repairs, such as removing accumulated silt, and by negotiating with farmers at the head end of the canals.

- In Niger, the 1993 legal reforms embodied in the *Principes d'Orientation du Code Rural* recognize traditional resource management systems, particularly of pastoralists, and involve customary rule makers and decision makers in promoting better natural resource management and conservation practices on pastures as well as agricultural land. The *Code Pastorale*, passed in Mauritania in 2000, has gone even further in defending the rights of transhumant pastoralists to rangeland resources.

- Research on community forests in Nepal has shown that many user groups can devise rules that are well matched to their ecological problems. Local institutions have enabled these groups to sustain and, in some cases, improve the condition of their forest.

- In Peten, Guatemala, more than 100,000 ha of tropical rainforest were granted to local people under community forest concessions in the early 1990s. Since then, user groups have earned and maintained "good forest management" certification by the Forest Stewardship Council and acquired logging machinery and timber mills. Community forestry contributes to local employment and development while preserving the rain forest areas more efficiently than the neighboring biosphere reserve.

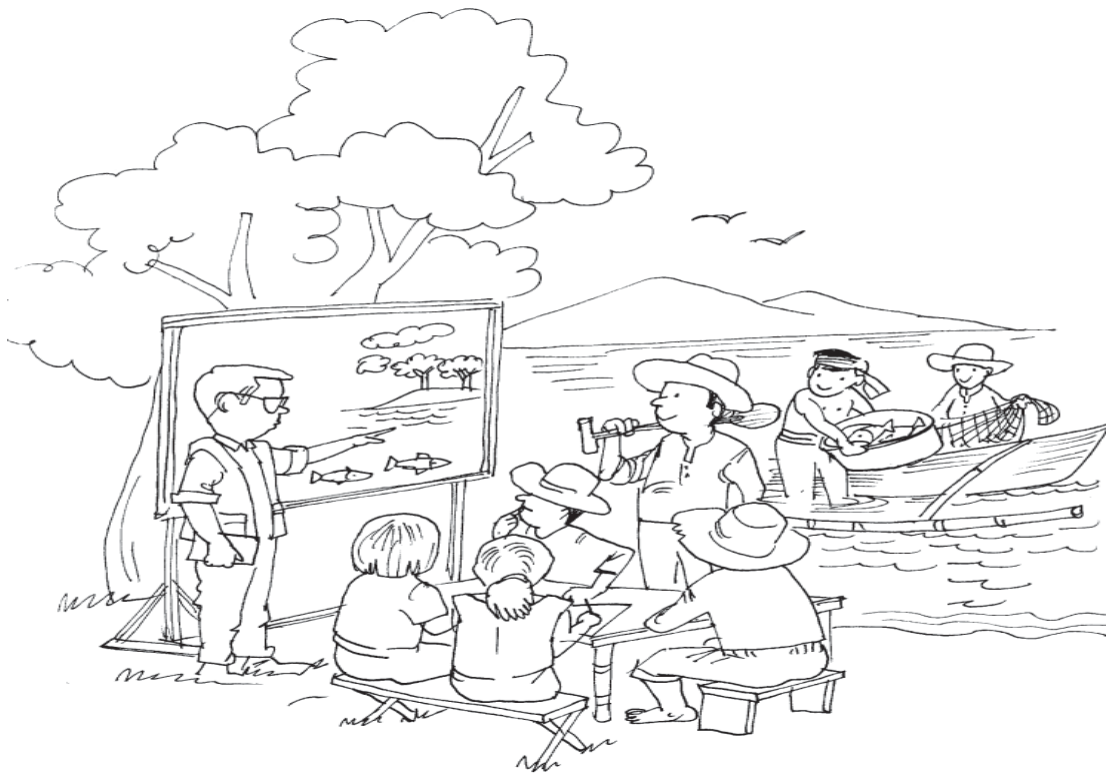
The result of the above has been a range of co-management arrangements involving government agencies and local users. Although obvious social and economic benefits can be gained from devolution, countries that have done this have experienced mixed outcomes due to issues of power inequality and incomplete devolution policies.

Collective

For resource users to effectively manage natural resources, there is a need for collective action. Studies show that certain prerequisites can sustain such collective action. These are:

- the resource being managed is important to local livelihood;
- the cost of collective action is low and benefits are tangible;
- local leaders endorse social justice and resource management objectives;
- an atmosphere of cohesion and trust exists among users; and
- social structures and values support cooperation.

However, even when such prerequisites are in place, a number of factors can still weaken the legitimacy of local resource management institutions and therefore the potential for collective action. Population pressures, mounting competition for natural resources, incentives created by expanding markets, and policies and laws contradict local rules for resource use and protection that also undermine local authorities.



In Zambales, Philippines, efforts of the people, NGOs and government units led to the establishment of a marine sanctuary.

The Role of External Organizers in Collective Action

Where local cooperation is weak, external organizers can be catalysts for collective action by strengthening awareness of the benefits of cooperative resource management. Staff of non-government organizations (NGOs), or government extension staff trained in community development and organizing, can also facilitate the building of organizational capacity and leadership. These capabilities not only are critical to developing rules for and carrying out resource management activities, but also are necessary for creating legitimate local institutions for resolving disputes. Social processes like this take time, however, and must adapt to their unique socio-economic, political, and physical contexts while developing local legitimacy. Donors and policymakers looking for quick solutions by imposing organization on resource users may even harm existing local forms of organizations.

Property Rights

Devolution programs that transfer responsibilities for resource management to local users often fail to transfer commensurate rights. Nonetheless, property rights that assure users the ability to derive benefits from resources over the long term are necessary to induce them to bear the management costs.

The strength of management incentives depends on how the collection of various rights is distributed. For example, if forest users are allowed to gather non-timber products but are prohibited by the state from cutting trees, and live with the threat of being evicted if forest areas are converted to logging or mining concessions or to restricted areas, sustainable management is unlikely.

The Role of the State in Enforcing Property Rights

Even with the most complete transfer of rights and responsibilities to users, the state retains a critical role in enforcing regulations, punishing violators, and settling disputes between local groups and outsiders.

Devolution as a Means of Achieving Local Control

Legal frameworks and government enforcement mechanisms need to support the rights of local users, respect their management institutions, and provide responsive backup. The actual nature and extent of co-management arrangements are likely to depend on local capacity to undertake certain roles and functions. Devolution can be an evolving process of greater local control as

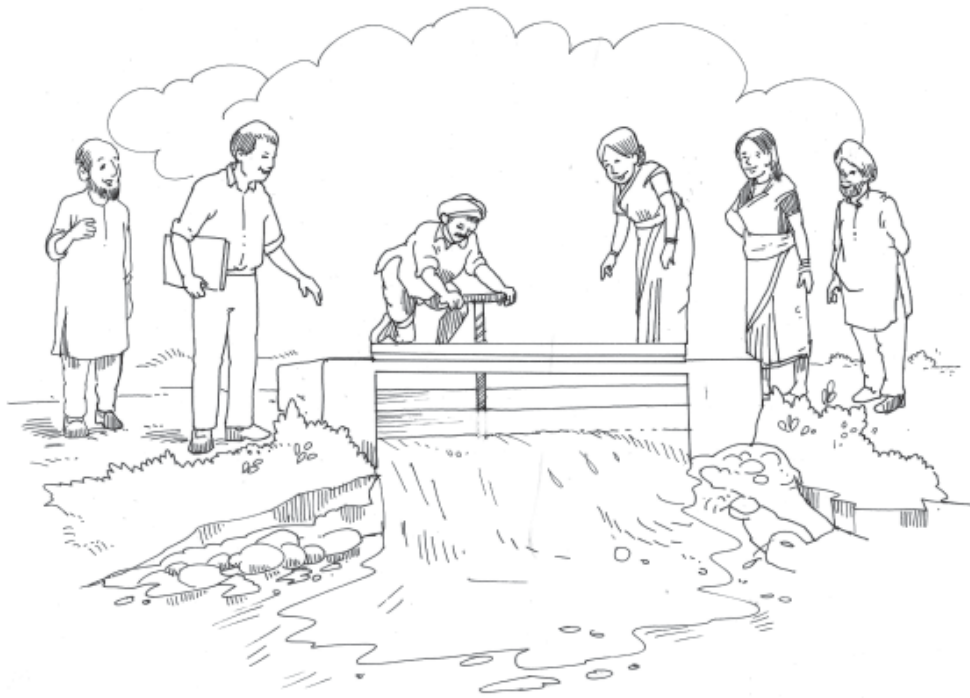
investments are made in building the organizational, administrative, and technical capacity of communities, local and regional organizations, and local and regional governments.

Equity

Aside from resource access rights, equity issues also need to be considered. Protecting the interest of less powerful groups, for example, calls for representative and robust conflict resolution mechanisms that all stakeholders consider legitimate.

Addressing Poverty to Help Conserve Natural Resources

In spite of its potential, devolution will not entirely resolve the problem of degradation of natural resources. There is a strong need to address poverty, particularly in remote areas, where resource users may have few subsistence and income-generating alternatives beyond exploiting their natural resource base.



In Andhra Pradesh, India, more than 10,000 water-user associations have been organized to take a more active role in managing irrigation systems.

This calls for greater attention to policies and investments that will enhance opportunities for livelihood diversification. Such measures include investments in rural infrastructure and enhancing access to markets, credit, and insurance to reduce the high costs of setting up and operating industries, markets, and finance facilities in rural areas. Combining such measures with policies and legislation that enable the poor to have access to and control over natural resources, policymakers will make substantial gains in empowering citizens and reducing poverty.

Suggested Reading

Meinzen-Dick, R. S. and A. Knox. 2001. *Collective Action, Property Rights, and Devolution of Natural Resource Management: A Conceptual Framework*. In: Meinzen-Dick, R. S., A. Knox and M. Di Gregorio (eds). 2001. *Collective Action, Property Rights and Devolution of Natural Resource Management: Exchange of Knowledge and Implications for Policy*. Feldafing, Germany: DSE/ZEL.