

# Catalyzing Collective Action in Natural Resources Management



Working with communities or groups within communities and helping them to reach their goals is a challenge. This paper provides guidelines in catalyzing collective action, especially in natural resources management, based on: the global literature on community-based management of forests and other natural resources; experience in catalyzing collective action within communities in more than 30 communities in 11 countries, using the approach called Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM); and through experience trying to catalyze collective action in two communities in Sumatra, Indonesia.

## SOURCE:

Colfer, C.J. P. 2007. *Simple Rules for Catalyzing Collective Action in Natural Resources Management Contexts*. Indonesia: Center for International Forestry Research.

## Understanding the Socio-Cultural Conditions

It is important to be aware of local socio-cultural conditions in order to learn to expect and accept the unpleasant and unexpected events that may emerge during interactions.

- **Learn about the people and their conditions before bringing about any kind of change.** Do not assume that local people have the same motivations as you do and that they behave in the same way. Understand their personal motivations and values, how they think people ought to treat each other, and what differentiations they make within their own group and in relation to outsiders.
- **Things are interconnected.** External changes, over which no one in the community may have any control, can also result in changes in the local system. The use of holistic, anthropological methods can help anticipate *some* of the effects of change — whether initiated by you, by the local people, or coming from outside — but it will not be possible to anticipate all of the effects of such changes.
- **“Emergence” exists.** Effects of actions cannot be predicted. Things happen (emergence), from the interactions among parts of systems, and it is not always understandable how they have come about. However, accept that surprise exists and be prepared to deal with the results when things come together unpredictably to produce an unexpected result.

## Facilitating Collective Action

Once the local situation is understood, it is time to start the action. Observe the following in bringing about collective action:

- **Respect and work with existing local institutions.** Every society has existing institutions based on kinship, common interests, occupation, or any number of other organizing principles. These groups can serve as a basis from which to build collective action. Work with an existing group and there is no need for new communication patterns (at least initially). People attend fewer meetings and the value of their existing way of life is acknowledged. Such acknowledgement can be very important for developing or strengthening people’s self-confidence and is also important for bringing about effective collective action.



- **Respect and build on local knowledge.** Local knowledge is not always obvious but it exists everywhere. Usually a marriage of local and outsider, knowledge is needed, bringing in local people’s key knowledge about their environment, its uses, their hopes for the future, and their patterns of human behavior that can contribute to or detract from future uses of the environment.
- **Identify and work toward shared goals.** Once the groups have been identified, facilitate a process whereby the group members themselves determine what their goals are. Only if the goals are truly theirs will they be willing to go to the significant trouble of acting collectively to achieve them.
- **Start with easy goals.** “Start simple” to allow the group to gain experience and build confidence. Approaching a comparatively short-term goal with a high probability of success first will give them skills and confidence to pursue something more difficult.

- **Build in mechanisms for assessing progress.** For any goal, develop indicators of progress that can be monitored to make sure progress is being made. The absence of such monitoring is often a prime constraint in efforts to improve conditions. Routine monitoring can enhance sustainability. If a mechanism has been learned for ongoing assessment, communities have a better chance of continuing to work toward their goals after the project and facilitator are gone.
- **Focus on opportunities.** Instead of identifying problems, begin by looking for opportunities. Such opportunities can relate to the small goals suggested as first steps, or they can be part of any step in the process of working with communities and other groups. Problems cannot be ignored forever, but the search for opportunities can be the key to some quick and meaningful successes.



- **Bring together local and outsider knowledge.** Local knowledge is important in any attempt to catalyze collective action, but it is also usually important to link this knowledge to the kinds of knowledge that outsiders have. Such linkage works best when there is explicit recognition of the value of local knowledge. When local people's knowledge is recognized as a valuable and useful contribution, this strengthens their self-confidence — again, leading to more effective collective action.
- **Make links among actors.** Almost all communities are linked to the outside world, from where resources can be valuable to local people. The facilitator should at least identify relevant links to the outside world (government agencies, NGOs, academics, other communities, networks, etc.), help local people develop the self-confidence and negotiation skills they will need to deal with such outsiders, and serve as a facilitator in the early stages of their interactions. It may also involve helping local people learn to write letters, proposals, complaints, newsletters, and other documents in language that is understandable and acceptable to the outsiders.
- **Leadership can emerge anywhere.** Look beyond formal leadership roles particularly when dealing with marginalized groups. Discuss leadership ideas with people, since different groups can have different ideas about who can be a leader, what behavior is acceptable in a leader, what constrains people from becoming leaders, etc. Sometimes an outsider (like a facilitator)

who exposes people to different ideas about leadership can open doors for those who have not had such roles in the past — thereby liberating a whole range of skills and knowledge that have not been used adequately.

However, the facilitator should be analytical of his/her own role. Friendships and attention may affect how the community members feel about many different things, including their assessment of the leadership potential of individuals.

- **Seek justice, via understanding.** If people are treated fairly, they are more likely to act responsibly and cooperatively. Facilitators must be alert to injustice in the conduct of work. The better the understanding of the context in which the work is done, the more likely that the facilitator will note the inequities and do something about them. Obviously, not all issues can be addressed, but exacerbating existing inequities can be avoided and the facilitator may be able to make progress in correcting some long-standing wrongs (through improved collective action).
- **Balance power.** Balancing power is not entirely within the hands of the facilitator. On the one hand, the facilitator's role is to serve as a relatively neutral outsider, facilitating a process. On the other hand, facilitators need to act to strengthen the voice of those in need. It is a delicate balancing act. If too much effort trying to protect those in need is expended, the power as a neutral actor to bring about better communication and cooperation among the parties is lost.
- **Facilitation is an invaluable skill.** Make sure that everyone has a genuine opportunity to provide input. Use facilitation skills so that the ideas of the poor, women, and lower castes, can also be heard throughout the process. However, do not disenfranchise the wealthy and the powerful. Avoid what some call “*facipulation*” – facilitation in such a way that it manipulates people to serve one's own ends.
- **Build coalitions.** Building coalitions can be extremely useful in the process of balancing power as it may be helpful in achieving goals and it bumps the stakes up a notch, catalyzing collective action on a broader scale.
- **Diversity leads to more creative solutions.** When working in communities involving marginalized groups, a problem solving process will strengthen collective ability to come up with innovative ideas and answers. This same principle applies in collaborative efforts between communities and other groups such as government, NGOs, academics, and project personnel.
- **Dealing with diversity involves significant transaction costs.** As groups become more diverse, communication among participants becomes harder and social capital is lower (initially); there are likely to be fewer collective actions that “come naturally” to the participants. Be prepared for miscommunications, suspicions, and slow-downs deriving from these inherent difficulties.



## Working with Communities on Collective Action Issues

Finally, note these specific guidelines in working with communities on collective action issues:

- **Practice what you preach.** Actions speak louder than words. Do not underestimate the power of example.
- **Listening can be more important than talking.** Encourage people to take action. If we are constantly telling them what to do, they will not develop the skills they need to continue the process after we are gone.
- **Be patient.** Any attempt at collective action involves various barriers and constraints that must be overcome. The processes of collective action all take time — even when things go smoothly.
- **Give up the love of control.** Try to adjust and respond to an uncertain world in creative and persistent ways, moving iteratively and slowly toward the set goals. Encourage community members, government officials, project personnel, NGO workers, and others to do the same.
- **Try to find long-term funding.** Catalyzing collective action is a long-term commitment and takes an uncertain amount of time. If you truly respond to the needs and wishes of community members, then you cannot pre-determine even what the project will entail, let alone the amount of time it will take. This kind of uncertainty is very uncomfortable for donors (and others), making securing funding a difficult task. Your task must be to educate donors to the need for both flexibility and long-term commitments and carry on until they are convinced!