Part 3

COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN TRANSITION

ABOUT 25 YEARS AGO, the concept of community forestry, in one form or another, emerged as a focus for addressing the linkages between forestry and rural people. Some countries are still at an early stage in the process of applying this concept, but in others it has become central to the way forest resources are managed. Not surprisingly, the considerable but varied experience that has accrued, both of interventions to support applications of the concept in practice, and of research and evaluation studies to better understand the linkages between forests and people, has shown that there is often need to rethink or modify some earlier hypotheses and approaches. In a number of important respects, community forestry is presently in a state of transition. At one level, this reflects growing recognition that the potentials for intervention are much more complex than was previously assumed, and that many past attempts at intervention have not been sufficiently realistic. In particular, it has proved much more difficult than expected to bring about effective and equitable transfer of authority and power. In addition, it has proved necessary to expand the concept of community forestry to recognize that it will often embrace individual and corporate, as well as collective, forms of management and activity.

Experience is also showing that the different objectives that underlie the support for community forestry are not necessarily as congruent with one another as had been previously tacitly assumed. Thus, different interest groups engaging in community forestry do so because they see it as being important for one or another of the following reasons:

- as a component of strategies to enhance rural livelihoods, in particular the livelihoods of the poor and, within the poor, of women and other disadvantaged groups;

- as a means to manage forest resources sustainably so as to conserve them and the biodiversity they contain; and

- as a component of government strategies to devolve and decentralize responsibilities, and to reduce the budgetary costs to the central government of managing the forest sector.

Different interest groups thus have different expectations in terms of outcomes, and it can be unrealistic to assume that win-win solutions are always possible when this is the case (Vira, 1999). Some community forestry approaches are now seen to have been overly biased towards one objective at the expense of others, for instance, pursuing progress in terms of institutional change, or more effective and lower-cost protection of forests, rather than in terms of impacts on people's

lives (Hobley, 1996). It has become evident that some of the relationships between the different underlying objectives need to be examined afresh, and ways of harmonizing policy and project approaches to accommodate a balance between them need to be recast.

Another important aspect is that of change in the parameters that underlie the emergence and evolution of community forestry. Chapter 5 first addresses the question of how shifts in approaches to environmental conservation and market liberalization could influence the future shape and extent of community forestry. It then examines the impact for community forestry, and for forestry as a whole, of the trend towards more pluralistic systems of forest management.