Key issues influencing community forestry

Changing perceptions of the linkages between conservation and development

One of the most important factors shaping the development of community forestry has been the objective that it should contribute not only to livelihood enhancement for poor rural users but also to the conservation of biodiversity. The theme of 'forestry and sustainable livelihoods' has come to be concerned as much with maintaining ecological stability as with sustaining income and material flows.

However, as discussed in Chapter 3, it has become increasingly clear that it is difficult to successfully achieve both these objectives concurrently.

Measures deemed necessary in order to protect or promote ecological values of tropical forests nearly always constrain the ways in which local people can generate benefits for themselves from these forests. Conversely, local livelihood strategies often appear to threaten achievement of conservation goals, particularly when these are being pursued through a 'protected area' approach. As one study of experience with the latter has reported, "unambiguously successful and convincing examples where local people's development needs have been effectively reconciled with biodiversity conservation remain difficult to find" (Wells and Brandon, 1992).

As conserving global values of tropical rain forests, such as biodiversity and carbon sequestration, continue to feature strongly, it is possible that community forestry will be subjected to more rigorous efforts to make it compatible with such conservation objectives. If this were to be the case, it could be that conservation objectives become an even more dominant factor in shaping community forestry than has been the case in the past. As was noted earlier, progress towards legalizing the use rights of communities living in upland forest areas in Thailand has been held back by the growing strength of interests concerned about protecting the capacity of these forest areas to supply water to urban areas (Wittayapak,1996; Vandergeest, 1996).

However, arguments are growing that the conventional approach to the issue of the balance between conservation and development at this level has been based on flawed assumptions about how rural peo-

ple and the environment interrelate. It is argued that there is need for greater appreciation that the poor may experience their own environmental problems, which need to be addressed separately from environmental policies seeking to satisfy concerns about global values. To address these local concerns there is a need to move away from macroscale approaches and policies towards a more situation-specific focus, reflecting the protective mechanisms that local users themselves adopt, and the attributes of a resource that they value and seek to conserve (Forsyth and Leach, 1998).

This has been accompanied by increasing debate about the relevance and accuracy of the conventional conservation thesis. There remain few, if any, pristine tropical forests. Virtually all have been affected by the activities of people, and the arguments that it is necessary to isolate them from further human impact are coming to be seen as

questionable. It has also been argued that tropical rain forests are more robust and able to absorb and recover from use than has usually been acknowledged, and that they do not need to be protected against other uses to the extent that has been attempted (Sayer, 2000). Moreover, as much more of the remaining tropical forest genetic resource exists in managed landscapes than in protected areas, it could be more logical to focus more of the conservation attention on sustainable management of what is in use. Many of these locally managed resources have a high measure of biodiversity (Halladay and Gilmour, 1995). Furthermore, recent research has also made clear that what might be considered by ecologists and foresters to be degradation or depletion of a forest resource can be considered to be transformation, and even improvement, of the resource by those depending on it for inputs into their livelihood systems (Leach and Mearns, 1996).

Thus, there is growing acceptance that the pursuit of conservation has been too much driven by northern concepts and donor preoccupations, at the expense of those who depend on forests locally. It is therefore quite likely that the conservation objective for community forestry will progressively shift from a predominantly protective orientation towards encouragement of sustainable systems of producing livelihood benefits in as environmentally friendly a way as possible (Freese, 1997). For example, this could be done by encouraging options that result in landscapes like those found in parts of Southeast Asia, which maintain a patchwork, or

Can community forestry be made compatible with conserving global values, such as biodiversity and carbon sequestration, of tropical rain forests?

mosaic, of agricultural and agroforest systems that, though less species rich than forests, preserve much more biodiversity than the alternatives of plantations or clearance to crop agriculture (Noordwijk *et al.*,1997).

Another conservation-related shift in policy thinking that could influence aspects of community forestry is the revived interest in plantation forestry as a way of regenerating degraded areas and creating alternative sources of supply of forest products that could reduce the pressures on natural forests. It has been argued that pursuit of this objective through smallholder tree-planting schemes could have both livelihood and environmental benefits (World Bank, 2000). However, this could confront some of the

constraints to smallholder tree growing discussed above. In addition, availability of the concessional loan financing, which could be needed in order to make such planting viable on low-productivity sites, could also become increasingly difficult in the conditions of market liberalization and structural adjustment discussed in the following section.

Extending market liberalization and structural adjustment

The growing importance of policies of market liberalization and structural adjustment has clearly been one of the determining influences on the way community forestry has evolved in recent times. The accompanying goal of devolving away from government any activity that could be more effectively performed by others has been one of the driving forces behind the transfer of responsibility for forest management and control to the local level. At the same time, the downsizing of government budgets available for forestry can reduce the capacity of forest departments to provide necessary support to the new structures and to adequately continue to perform functions that need to stay in the public domain, such as preserving non-market values of forests.

This is being accompanied by growing privatization of what, earlier, were public functions in the forest sector. As the private sector takes over more of for-

est management and utilization, and sometimes ownership of the resource, governments are adopting market-based instruments (e.g. financial incentives, market promotion and certification) to encourage and regulate sustainable forest management. Often, forestry authorities also are downsizing and restructuring, and in the process they are contracting out, corporatizing and privatizing such functions as monitoring and provision of technical support services (Landell-Mills and Ford, 1999).

Most countries are still in the process of making such changes, which are predictably often creating some problems and exposing the need for further work on them. Instances of problems include the difficulties encountered by *ejido* forestry organizations in parts of Mexico in continuing to manage forests on a sustainable basis as government subsidies were withdrawn, and the difficulties faced by smaller and poorer *ejidos* once they had to buy in technical and other support services when these were privatized (Taylor and Zabin, 2000). Similarly, in China, concerns have arisen that, as access to low-cost loan funds is withdrawn, tree planting by poorer households will no longer be profitable and will decline (Rozelle *et al.*, 2000).

Another impact of such macroeconomic and policy change has been the acceleration of the process of exposing community-level producers of forest products to market forces. As discussed above, this can both create additional opportunities to generate income and also heighten pressures on local institutions attempting to manage a resource as common

As the use of forest resources becomes increasingly determined by market forces, more attention will need to be paid to ensuring that the poorer can continue to participate.

property. This can cause breakdown of collective mechanisms for exclusion and control, and the effective privatization of the more valuable product flows by those best able to take advantage of the market opportunities.

Therefore, there is the likelihood that, without countervailing measures, market liberalization will accelerate the process by which communal forest resources pass from collective to individual or corporate control. Indeed, privatization of common pool resources features increasingly as a policy measure in contemporary literature about management of natural resources. For instance, a recent Latin American forest policy study argued that reserving areas of forest, such as those encompassed by the Plan Piloto Forestal in Mexico, for the exclusive use of the limited numbers of people who are members of the user groups in question, excluded other potentially more valuable uses of the resource

and the land (Laarman, 1997). However, the changes brought about in the PPF area by market liberalization have shown how this can result in increased difficulty in controlling overuse of the resource, in exclusion of poorer people from access to benefit flows from the forest, and in the fragmentation and conversion of the forest resource (Taylor and Zabin, 2000).

The task of ensuring continued collective control of local forest resources, where this is needed for equity and environmental reasons, is consequently likely to become more challenging. Equally, as use of forest resources becomes increasingly determined by market forces, more attention will need to be paid to identifying the measures that will enable the poorer to continue to participate. This could mean revising regulations and support programmes to make them available to small as well as larger participants, developing and encouraging innovative

forms of collaboration between community and private interests (and formal- and informal-sector producers), and ensuring equitable participation of local stakeholders in forest management arrangements that need to accommodate multiple stakeholders, a subject discussed in the next section.

Community forestry and the broader context of forestry

The enabling environment for the large and growing numbers of people whose involvement in community forestry is through tree resources on their own land, or through processing and trading of forest products that they purchase, is likely to be determined mainly by factors other than those related to the forest, such as land use and tenure, and access to markets and services. However, for the huge numbers of people who still need to draw upon forests, the principal issue is usually that of security of access to the resource. Effective empowerment of those who need to be involved in control and management of the forest resource that they draw upon thus continues to be of paramount importance. To be effective, empowerment needs not only to establish or recognize their rights of ownership or use, but also to enable the recipients to exercise their authority and rights. Failure frequently results less from people's lack of institutionally grounded claims on a

resource than from their incapacity to pursue these claims effectively against more powerful actors (Forsyth and Leach, 1998).

ENSURING MORE EFFECTIVE EMPOWERMENT OF LOCAL USERS

To recapitulate points that emerged from the discussion in Chapter 3, a number of causes can be identified for the widespread failure of transfer of responsibility and rights to result in effective empowerment of local users. One is failure to entrench the transfer in legislation. Too much of decentralization is instead effected by decree, administrative order or permit, providing rights and authority that can be withdrawn or, if challenged, are unlikely to be upheld by law. Another cause is transfers of only limited rights, notably the widespread exclusion of rights over timber and other components of commercial value (Agrawal and Ribot, 1999). Processes of empowerment may also fail to provide recipients with enough security because they are incomplete, as in China, where the creation of rights for households to grow timber was partly offset by the tightening of controls over private harvesting, transport and sale of timber (Dachang, 2001).

Failure to implement devolution effectively frequently arises where the transfer of rights is made to local bodies that are, in practice, appointees or extensions of the central government, and are consequently more responsive to the latter than to the

people they represent. Another common weakness occurs when local institutions are not able to cope with the complexities arising from conflicting claims on the resource from within increasingly fractured user communities, and from competing demands on and interests in the resource from external stakeholders. Again, this is likely to result in control being captured by minority interests.

It is increasingly recognized that these problems exist, and the search for more pluralistic arrangements is driven by awareness of the need to identify collective systems that can accommodate greater complexity and multiplicity of interests in forest management. However, progress in identifying more flexible and less rule-bound systems that function satisfactorily is proving slow. Concerns have been raised that existing organizational mechanisms could be dismantled or could cease to function without new systems of coordination and collaboration taking their place (FAO, 1999). A related concern is that, with the decline in the role and authority of the State in forest management in favour of collaborative systems, the latter may become dominated or appropriated by the more powerful users (Sarin, 1999).

Given the political weakness of many local user populations, there is thus a danger that they will be unable to participate in an equitable manner. It has been argued that some rights of local users are paramount and should not be subject to negotiation, and that immersion in a system subject to the agreement of other interested parties could conflict with local

It has been argued that some rights of local users are paramount and should not be subject to negotiation.

people's right of self-determination (Sarin, 1999). This possibility has led some to express concern that the current enthusiasm for multiple stakeholder systems of local forest management could be more an expression of 'outsider' conceptions than a realistic way of achieving a more equitable and effective involvement for local users (Vira, 1999).

Another dimension of community forestry that continues to attract attention and debate is the issue of how best to provide the external support that most local forest management institutions will need in some measure. Fully self-managing groups may need little more than legal endorsement of their rights, government assistance in protecting and enforcing those rights when necessary, and access to government services. But many groups will need

A forester meeting with villagers. It is becoming increasingly clear that, in order to be effective, local forest management is going to need a high level of support.

more. Even relatively well-developed local institutions are likely to encounter difficulties in taking on responsibilities for environmental management tasks previously performed by the central government. When there are competing or conflicting claims on the resource that involve stakeholders from outside the community, issues may arise that need access to external sources of arbitration and management to resolve. Though one of the arguments for devolution of responsibilities to local institutions was that this would reduce the costs of forest management, it is becoming increasingly clear that, in order to be effective, local forest management is also going to need a high level of sup-

port. It is a mistake to think that community forestry is necessarily a low-cost route to sustainable forest management.

ENGAGING FOREST DEPARTMENTS AND CIVIL SOCIETY

In principle, as the main government agency with a presence in forested rural areas, forest departments should be well placed to provide such support. However, the potential to do so has often been limited by local distrust of the department due to past policies and practices that placed foresters and local people in confrontation with each other, and by lack of balance in its role in co-management arrangements of the kinds discussed in Chapter 3. This has contributed to the rapid expansion of the presence of NGOs in many collective forest management programmes, in which they act as intermediaries between State and users, facilitate change at the village level, and provide training, extension, advisory and even marketing services. Other NGOs have taken on an advocacy role, influencing policy at local and national, and even international, levels.

The involvement of NGOs in these ways has been enormously important and, overall, has greatly facilitated the emergence of functioning forms of community forestry. However, as experience with such arrangements has accumulated, it is becoming clear that they often need to be better focused in order to achieve the most effective and appropriate contribution of NGOs and other forms of civil society to local forest management. Confusion has sometimes

arisen because of failure to recognize the particular skills, interests and agendas of different NGOs. Some may be interested in community forestry because of the environmental implications; others may be involved as part of a mandate to support community development or the rural poor. Not all have proved to be equally helpful in the pursuit of community forestry. The confrontational positions adopted by some advocacy NGOs have sometimes hampered the development of promising joint management systems. The agendas pursued by some environmental and other special interest groups have proved on occasion to be not necessarily congruent with the interests of the populations with which they work. NGOs are often accountable only to their leaders and donors, rather than to the communities with which they work. Therefore, it is important that there be clear understanding of the role of each civil society organization, and of the interest it represents, when it becomes involved in community forestry (Thin *et al.*, 1998).

It can also be important to ensure that government agencies are not encouraging NGO involvement to avoid having to confront the need for internal change in order to undertake tasks that should be their responsibility (Dove, 1995). Forest departments are now generally responsive to the arguments that their traditional approach has failed to secure sustainable forest management, and is no longer appropriate to the demands currently being placed upon the forest sector. There is often considerable concern within departments that they become more successful, and be seen as being more

relevant to current government (and donor) concerns (Vira, 1997). However, it is not always clear how they should respond. In many countries, forest departments continue to be responsible for regulatory functions and direct management of large parts of the forest estate. Trying to combine this with transfer of control of parts of the forest estate to others creates understandable internal tensions and confusion. Some of the problems encountered in co-management programmes reflect the ambivalence, or lack of clarity about seemingly conflicting objectives, that this dual role can engender. It can lead, for instance, to reluctance to authorize indigenous local forest protection groups, because of a concern that this would enable them to encroach on the position of the forest department (Poffenberger, 1996). Concerns about protecting the position of the forest department as a producer also underlie many of the restrictions placed on others who are producing and trading particular forest products.

There are a number of ways in which such constraints on achievement of a more balanced role for forest departments in collaborative forestry systems might be reduced or removed. They include separating regulatory functions from involvement in forest management and delivery of support services, eliminating areas of avoidable competition with local producers for revenue and markets, and reducing pressures on forest departments of overambitious targets that can force them to rely on centralized and bureaucratic operational procedures. Forest departments could also pursue procedures for working with local partners that

Community forestry is changing to become more effective and responsive to local needs and aspirations.

is no longer the sole source of knowledge about how to manage forests, and the role of the forester will often be as a facilitator to others engaged in forest management. Thirdly, the conventional perspective of foresters as the guardians of forests, and government regulation as the sole arbiter of conflicts over forest management and use, is changing to an approach of social negotiation and consensus building (Wiersum, 1999).

Thus, recent changes in forestry increasingly reflect interpretations of the role that the forest sector needs to play in developments that were first articulated through community forestry. However, the need to adapt to changing societal conditions and needs is a continuing imperative. In putting new arrangements in place to better reflect present needs, there is a need to try to anticipate whether they will also be relevant to further change in the future. For instance, in what way would a sharp decline in local demand for many forest products, as rural livelihood options expand, affect a structure for forest management and control constructed around local collective institutions? There can be no single answer to such a question, but it will surely call for flexible governance systems that can readily be adapted to cope with whatever change does emerge.

encourage more flexibility and willingness to adapt to the particular attitudes, needs and constraints encountered in each location. For instance, the experience with JFM projects in India has shown to what extent progress and performance relate to the ability of individual officials to establish a rapport with the people with whom they work, and to adapt standard procedures to what is needed locally (Vira, 1997).

In sum, thinking about ways in which community forestry should change in order to become more effective and responsive to local needs and aspirations is currently undergoing change. Different approaches are being developed and tried out, but it is too soon to be able to determine with any confidence which approach will prove to have wide-

spread, sustainable potential. Much of what is happening at present involves an element of trial and error.

What does seem clear is that as community forestry becomes an increasingly important part of the overall forest and tree resource sector, it is being reflected in important shifts in the ways in which forest management as a whole is being pursued. Firstly, the norm of forests under State custody and managed by professional foresters following normative prescriptions has given way to forest situations characterized by multiple users and more empirical management, reflecting particular objectives and possibilities in each situation. Secondly, this broadening out introduces management practices other than those based on scientific forestry. The forester