



CHAPTER 6

Conclusions

The importance of the roles that forests and forestry play in rural livelihoods is by now probably universally recognized. The need to address this through a reorientation of forestry to involve rural users who draw upon forests for part of their needs is also widely accepted. These shifts in emphasis and approach are becoming all the more important as the State reduces its involvement in forestry and the sector has to adjust to growing participation by civil society and private-sector interests.

Many countries are still at an early stage in the process of developing and introducing forms of community forestry appropriate to their situations. In others community forestry is by now a well-established and integral part of the framework for management and use of forest resources. The

experience of some of the longer-established and more flexible of these community forestry initiatives has been encouraging. It has become clear that, in the right circumstances, local or joint control does result in increases in product and other benefit flows to local users, and can bring about an improvement in the condition of the resource. Agroforestry outputs have often also become more important components of rural household livelihood systems.

Not surprisingly, though, these experiences have often exposed problems and constraints. Acceptance of the importance of devolution to local levels has not always been accompanied by the political, legislative and regulatory measures needed to empower those to whom responsibility is being passed. People are sometimes being invited to take on more of the responsibilities and costs of managing forests without obtaining a commensurate increase in security of their rights, and they are thereby being put at risk. Individual initiatives to participate in markets for forest products are, similarly, being impeded or undermined by lack of progress in removing inappropriate restrictions and regulations.

Progress in evolving ways of implementing more genuinely participatory forms of local forest management, capable of accommodating the interests of several different categories of stakeholder, has also often lagged. In particular, the local institutions to which responsibility for forests to be managed collectively has been devolved have often proved to need support, or have been found to function in ways that lack suf-

ficient transparency and accountability to ensure equitable participation by all their members.

That difficulties have arisen has sometimes been because of the speed and extent of the changes that are taking place and the exposure that this brings to unfamiliar problems. Changes have sometimes been promoted before the capacity to implement them is in place. Strong promotion of community management, often at the urging of donors, has frequently imposed pressures on forestry bureaucracies that they have found difficult to absorb.

Where this is so, it could be desirable if there were now to be a period of consolidation, moving from promotion to critical analysis, with increased consideration of how best to address weaknesses and problems that have arisen. One need is to better understand the circumstances under which local control is, and is not, likely to succeed, thereby avoiding initiatives in situations that are not conducive to collective management. Another need is to encourage a more flexible and responsive approach

that is more situation specific and less formulaic. Another is to address the difficulties that forest departments are encountering.

At the same time, exaggerated expectations need to be avoided. Just as there is a danger in trying to

achieve too much too quickly, so there is also a risk of overloading community forestry. It is important to recognize the limits to how much change can be achieved within the framework of forest-oriented programmes, and to keep community forestry in perspective.