

Simplifying forest management planning

Many governments have put policies and laws into place to support local management of forest resources. However, experience has shown that complex requirements for the preparation of forest management plans can be a challenge to smallholders and rural communities.

In many countries, requirements for forest management plans have been developed primarily with State forests or large-scale timber concessions in mind, and tend to focus on large-scale production-oriented forest management. To prepare such plans, forest managers usually need significant technical knowledge and financial means. In many countries this type of forest management planning is also applied to small-scale and/or non-timber operations, without fundamental adaptation. Such unrealistic requirements inevitably pose a number of problems – such as high costs, delays and sometimes even halting of forestry activities, low-quality participation and overloaded extension services – to forest managers and those supporting them. They may provoke forest managers to operate outside the legal framework.

In some countries, efforts have been made to simplify the preparation of forest management plans to varying degrees. A study of forest management plans in 22 countries (FAO, 2004) examined approaches to doing this, focusing on some promising experiences. The study revealed, however, that even many of the “simplified” planning frameworks are still too complicated for small private or collective forest managers to complete without significant external professional assistance.

In simplifying the requirements, it is important to consider the four possible functions of forest management plans, as:

- a technical guide for management planning, implementation and monitoring;
- a legally required document;

- in the case of community forestry, an instrument to describe and regulate local forest governance, based on multistakeholder agreements;
- an output of an interactive learning, capacity-building and negotiation process.

Simpler forest management planning should occur in stages, with capacity of forest managers built gradually. It is not a question of simply following a checklist or a series of participatory exercises, but must include a sufficient period for internal learning, debates and negotiation. Four main stages are outlined for the forest management plan preparation process:

- development, through consensus, of local institutional structure, capacity and governance arrangements;
- development of forest management options and minimum environmental standards, local experimentation and monitoring arrangements;
- development of small-scale forest enterprise, marketing and business requirements;
- formalization and approval of forest management agreements at the local administrative level.

Policy issues that affect the preparation and

implementation of simple forest management plans include inadequate legislation, overloaded government institutions and power differences within local communities. The legal framework for simple forest management planning should be based on actual field-based practice, and should be flexible enough to accommodate local needs and diversity.

The plan preparation process itself should be used as a catalyst for facilitating capacity building, negotiation and participation in order to achieve local institutional accountability, local technical and intellectual capacity for management, economic strategies based on existing local resources, and cultural acceptance – which are all crucial for successful local forest governance.



Bibliography

FAO. 2004. *Simpler forest management plans for participatory forestry*. Forestry Policy and Institutions Working Paper. Rome. Available at: www.fao.org/docrep/008/j4817e/j4817e00.htm

Some mechanisms for simplifying forest management planning

- **Allow management standards to be set and agreed by forest managers but ensure that they comply with basic environmental standards.**
- **Collect only the minimum of information needed for forest management purposes by forest managers.**
- **Develop and build on existing practices and knowledge systems.**
- **Build capacity for research and learning among forest managers rather than imposing technical prescriptions.**
- **Consider multiple-objective forest management for a range of products and services.**
- **Include aspects of market information and business planning for income generation-oriented forest management planning.**
- **Ensure that the forest management planning process includes the development of systems for accountability, representation, equity and decision-making.**
- **Build on existing institutional structures but do not reinforce inequalities.**
- **Ensure a balance between individual and collective interests.**
- **Ensure a balance between external inputs and existing local capacity.**