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Accommodating conflicting interests in forestry concepts emerging from pluralism

J. Anderson, J. Clément and L. V. Crowder

Jon Anderson is Forestry Extension Officer, Forest Resources Division, Forestry Department, FAO. Rome.
Jean Clément is Director, Forest Resources Division, Forestry Department, FAO, Rome.
Loy Van Crowder is senior Officer, Communication for Development, Research Extension and Training Division, Sustainable Development Department, FAO, Rome.

Using pluralism for a better understanding of the dynamics of sustainable forestry and rural development.

From being dominated by a single technical authority *(*although sometimes admitting the existence of "partners"*)*, forestry and rural development are evolving in a direction where values and objectives appear to be "plural, conditional, incompatible and incommensurate" *(*Daniels and Walker, 1997*) (*see examples in Box*)*.

What is pluralism?

Pluralism has longstanding philosophical and political roots even though the term is fairly recent *(*Clement, 1997*)*. At its core, the concept of pluralism recognizes the inevitable existence of differing, often conflicting, positions on any question of substance, from politics to ecosystem management *(*Reacher, 1993; Clement, 1997*)*. Pluralism describes situations where distinct groups are actively autonomous and independent, but often interdependent, with legitimate claims and different positions on critical substantive issues. These differences are based on separate values, perceptions, objectives and knowledge. It describes the dynamic interplay between different ideologies, interests and organizations. When applied conceptually to forestry and rural development, pluralism may improve the understanding of certain organizational situations and improve the assessment and use of techniques and methods for sustainable forest management.

Changing values and objectives in forestry development

• Despite comprehensive public consultation procedures and approaches, the majority of management plans developed by the United States Forest Service for the national forest system are being contested in the courts by a range of non-governmental organizations *(*NGOs*)* and citizen groups *(*Daniels and Walker, 1997*)*.

• In Africa, a growing number of studies show that forest service personnel and local groups have radically different perceptions, values and objectives in forest management *(*Sulieman, 1966; Sow and Anderson, 1996; Weirsum, 1997*)* and that exclusive management by a single entity *(*i.e. the national forest service or the local community*)* has not assured sustainable management *(*Dubois, 1997; Vira,

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1997; Babin, Bertrand and Antona, 1997*)*.

• In Central and Eastern Europe, the image of the "forester" in the region has changed from that of an "all-powerful government official giving orders" to a professional civil servant being pressed with conflicting demands from all sides by private owners, political parties, policy-makers, local government, NGOs and others *(*Beaus and Veselic, 1997*)*.

• In India, the forest industry's plans to establish plantations to meet the growing demand for industrial wood has met resistance from NGOs and local communities. A special independent committee has been set up under a former director of the Forest Service to address conflicting concerns of villagers, NGOs and the forest industry. A critical question is how to create and manage a "platform" or a forum for negotiation for multiple stakeholders *(*Mukerji, 1997*)*.

• National and international NGOs are taking over responsibility for the management of some natural resources such as parks and protected areas. International NGOs have taken proactive steps not just to influence global forest policy, but to formulate it; for example, in the WWF/IUCN Forests For Life programme, where protected areas and independent certification are targeted *(*WWF International and IUCN, 1998*)*.

Forestry and rural development are increasingly characterized by different types of organizations and groups which, although concerned with the same resources, often act independently and have different and sometimes conflicting perceptions, values, objectives and even knowledge systems. Moreover, these groups are all demanding a legitimate role in decision-making processes concerning natural resource management These differences often seem to defy traditional attempts at consensus building and agreement.

Pluralism is sometimes understood to be synonymous with diversity or is used to describe the existence of numerous groups. The existence of many organizations in rural or forestry extension activities does not necessarily reflect a pluralistic situation, since these groups may in fact not be independent and autonomous.

Pluralism can usefully be considered in contrast to two other seemingly opposing views. One view assumes that there is one and only one reasonable, rational system of sustainable forestry and rural development. This is the assumption behind in the "expert authority", such as a government forest service, imposing its conception of natural resource management. The other view asserts that all values are situational, that they are contextually defined and socially constructed. In any given situation, therefore, a particular value or value system may take precedence over others. Both views can be criticized as not fully operational or analytical frameworks; the former because it is too dogmatic and cannot easily accommodate a wide variety of beliefs and preferences, the latter because it provides no evaluative criteria and therefore risks anarchy *(*Daniels and Walker, 1997*)*. In contrast, pluralism recognizes that, although there is no single, absolute technical solution to any natural resource management problem and there are multiple values and objectives, accountability is still required. It also rejects the idea that differing positions are always and solely the result of ignorance and of specific interests.

Participants at the FAO Workshop on Pluralism and Sustainable Forestry for Rural Development, December 1997

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Pluralism within the context of forestry and rural development

There are a number of reasons why pluralism should be considered within the context of sustainable forestry and rural development. Most important, new groups and fore have now either emerged or are better recognized. International recognition of the role of different major

groups in sustainable development is growing, with UNCED (1992) being perhaps the most obvious recent example. However, UNCED did more to describe categories of actors than it did to acknowledge the dynamics of autonomous and independent groups and changing decision-making processes. Some groups are pre-emptively taking on roles traditionally assigned to governments. NGOs are influencing and perhaps even "making" international and national policies and are managing natural resource systems (e.g. parks) in some countries. National Forest Programmes and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests are examples of existing and emerging platforms of multiple natural resource management stakeholders.

A number of political, social and economic trends are reinforcing the emergence of autonomous actors and groups and thus the interest in a pluralistic approach to understanding of natural resource management:

Shifting patterns in ownership of the forest/natural resource base. Forest ownership patterns are shifting in some regions - notably Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and parts of Asia from a large single owner (the state, with fairly uniform objectives) to literally hundreds of thousands of smaller owners with different objectives. In Central and Eastern Europe alone, more than I million new forest owners have emerged since 1990 (FAO, 1997). In many cases, these new owners are forming independent groups and associations.

Decentralization. An increasing number of local political and administrative powers are emerging that are less dependent on central control. The results of this process have been mixed. For example, in Bolivia, through recent legislative reform municipalities now play a much greater role in decision-making about the use of locally generated financial resources, which has a direct effect on sustainable forest management (Kaimowitz, 1997). In India, on the other hand, decentralization seems to have led to competition between sectors of government (technical and administrative branches), leading to confusion (and sometimes conflict) about who has the authority to grant "community forests".

Loading industrial timber as part at an FAO project, designed to Improve the livelihoods of local people in Peru

FIGURE: The range of products and services supplied by the forest ecosystem leads to inherent conflicts among users and interest groups

Democratization and multiparty politics. The decline of centrally planned, one party states is allowing for the emergence of numerous political parties with different policies and objectives sometimes with a strong interest in the environment.

Down-sizing responsibilities. Governments everywhere are under financial pressure to down-size and to retain control of only basic functions such as policymaking, planning, legislation, law enforcement and monitoring. This results in the delegation of other functions to NGOs, private sector entities or others.

Demographic transitions. The world's population continues to become more urbanized, and employment opportunities are shifting from the rural areas to the urban informal sector. Thus perceptions, interests and objectives in forest management are changing.

Separation of functions. The difficulty for a single natural resource management institution to reconcile and integrate the apparent contradictions between different functions (e.g. conservation and production or implementation and monitoring) and also the inconsistencies implied by an organization that is both "judge" and "jury" has led, in some cases, to the separation of functions by institutional reform and the breakup of organizations.

The motivation to explore the possible contribution of pluralism to natural resource

management also comes from a dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs. Exclusive management by "single entities", whether government, private, NGO or local community, has frequently been inadequate:

- Government control over forest resources in many cases has not led to their sustainable management, as attested to by the classified forests in Africa that exist only on paper.
- Private forest holdings and concessions have sometimes been degraded and mismanaged and have sacrificed sustainability to short-term profits.
- NGOs directly involved in natural resource management systems, particularly in running parks and protected areas, have clashed with both competing local interests and governments.

Turning forest management over to rural people's organizations and local communities has often been constrained and not entirely successful. "Even when their role is enhanced, community organizations can still be constrained by legal structure, local and regional government authorities, a lack of technological tools and capital and local interests not associated with the community" (IRG, 1997). The heterogeneity of communities and the importance of intervillage links are often overlooked. Management by local groups alone, without any support from other organizations, does not in itself assure sustainable management.

Participation and pluralism

Governments (or any other dominant single entity) often try to involve additional groups in natural resource management and to introduce participatory processes, especially in the face of political and social pressure, austerity measures, decentralization and privatization and sometimes because of the recognition of past failures and examples of successful participatory management by other organizations. However, the success of *some* "participatory approaches" has been limited and the sporadic failure of certain public participation/consultation processes can be illustrated by an example from the United States:

"The public involvement mechanisms adopted by the Forest Service have not altered the basic relationship between the agency and public constituencies .... Continued conflict between the Forest Service and public constituencies over national forest management suggests that these public mechanisms are not effective .... A more fundamental change in approach a new political form that enables national forest management to become truly participatory - is needed .... The failure results from the Forest Service's adoption of a "benevolent technocracy" relationship with local communities in which it tries to manage forests and forest-related development for them rather than establishing responsive and responsible partnerships with them (Henderson and Krahl, 1996).

In some critiques of the Joint Forest Management examples from India, it is suggested that local organizations or committees are often little more than a proxy for the Forest Service, i.e. they are not autonomous and independent, and the Forest Service is still controlling aspects such as the distribution of benefits (Hildyard *et al.*, 1997). Contradictions also arise when governments try to create or "reach out to" and strengthen partners through technical training, such as in nursery techniques, once again leading to proxies to meet government objectives, not empowerment or a "levelling of the playing field".

Even when the desire for participation is genuine, a process limited to a partnership between government and local communities may be insufficient to assure sustainable forest management and rural development. A range of organizations are often required, with no single organization or group controlling all aspects of the natural resource management arrangement. For instance, some analysis has pointed to the need for at least three types of

organization government services, local groups and communities, together with an intermediary (often an NGO), in the development process (Roling, 1988).

Is consensus possible or even necessary?

When applied to natural resource management, the logic in pluralism suggests that consensus on questions of substance, such as natural resource management for rural development, is highly unlikely or partial and temporary at best. Some attempts to achieve consensus actually subvert the participatory process. In some cases the government forest services have formed village forestry committees which are neither independent nor autonomous little more than local manifestations of the state. "Consensus" is achieved through the imposition of the view of the forest service as a kind of "coercive harmony" (Hildyard *et al.*, 1997).

Other views of and approaches to participation seem to seek consensus through "outsiders" losing their identity in "insider" structures and priorities. A kind of "the local group is always right" consensus emerges. Outsiders seek consensus by seeking to become like insiders.

Both these forms of consensus, and perhaps consensus in general, should be viewed with scepticism. However, progress can be made without consensus. Views, values, perceptions and objectives are likely to be different and remain so, but this is not an insurmountable barrier to communication, negotiation and the setting of standards and accountability (Rescher, 19931.) Techniques for managing in a pluralistic environment have been developed, and they tend to be respectful of each group's identity and objectives while being less intent on consensus.

The pluralist concept applied

A pluralist approach to a complex natural resource management issue would not apply narrow scientific approaches until a single "right answer" emerged, nor would it acquiesce to the competing special interests, political claims by assuming that "whatever the groups decide to do is fine". Rather, it would look at competing values and interests as expanding the range of possibilities for natural resource management. In natural resource management and sustainable rural development, there are also limits to the natural world that define what is possible and what is not (Binkley, 1996). However, notions of limits depend on what features of the natural world are viewed as important or on the disciplinary models one constructs. This gives rise to the possibility (more likely the probability) that there will be competing notions about which issues and resource thresholds represent constraints.

Some other key concepts of pluralism as applied to natural resource management include the following points:

There are no single, absolute, universal and permanent solutions for any nontrivial natural resource problem. For any given land unit there is no single, absolute, sustainable management/land use scenario. There are numerous, if not infinite, "sustainable scenarios". "While physical laws place constraints on the social construction of nature, the bounds are not so tight as to allow for a single, objectively knowable perspective. There are many alternative management plans that are consistent with available scientific evidence" (Binkley, 1996).

A separation of powers and a system of checks and balances are needed to avoid the inefficiencies and abuses of monopoly in management. When several autonomous and independent organizations are involved, errors and mistakes by any of them are more easily identified and corrections made. What is important is that pluralism accepts "bounded conflict" or "restrained dissonance" as not only inevitable but potentially useful (Lee, 1993; Rescher, 1993). Conflict arises because of the plural values (among which there may be conflict), multiple parties (whose desires cannot all be met simultaneously) and limits of the natural world (which sets the bounds to what is feasible). The only ways in which conflict could be

eliminated would be: i*)* to converge on a single social belief and policy goal towards nature, consumption, population and sustainability; or, alternatively, ii*)* to find an infinite amount of natural resources so that nothing in nature is limiting. Since neither of these options is possible, a different operational framework is needed. The task, therefore, is to learn to work with multiple perspectives and possibilities, and not attempt either to shirk from or acquiesce to them *(*Vira, 1997*)*.

Equity among groups in decision-making power is far from realization but this should not preclude attempts to achieve equitable processes, nor detract from its value as an important goal.

Conflicts are inevitable and *cannot* be *(*permanently*)* resolved. At best they can be temporarily managed. While specific disputes may be resolved, many natural resource management and rural development situations are characterized by a complex interaction among social' political, cultural, economic and scientific aspects that defies either quick or enduring resolution. The more appropriate task from a pluralist perspective, then, is to manage conflict situations rather than to attempt to resolve them. Indeed, many complex natural resource situations can he managed well, so specific disputes that arise within them fin not become destructive, and may in fact become constructive *(*Vira, 1997*)*. However, conflict management is a partial approach since it treats problems mainly as they arise and is essentially reactive. It is difficult to do natural resource planning and set up management systems in the face of open conflict.

Next steps - proactive approaches to pluralism?

An increasingly complex organizational environment with more autonomous and interdependent players means that a certain amount of pluralism already exists. Pluralism acknowledges a growing reality at the local, national and international levels. Put simply, "pluralism may be messy but it helps bring us closer to the reality of the field" *(*Garces, personal communication, 1997*)*. This acknowledgement has broad ramifications in terms of sustainable forestry and rural development policy, management, approaches and techniques. Acknowledging pluralism means developing ways to accommodate it so that different groups can collaborate and build dynamic institutional frameworks for sustainable forestry.

Acknowledging the existence of pluralism is not the same as promoting it. It is reasonable to ask whether it should be promoted. In many cases, it appears that pluralism merits promotion as part of the natural resource management system. More work needs to be done so that proactive approaches to sustainable forestry and rural development in pluralistic environments can be refined and implemented. There is some urgency to improve proactive approaches since some present trends are "likely to have contradictory effects on the sustainability of forest resources: sometimes giving local communities tools needed to protect their resources, on other occasions empowering groups involved in forest-degrading activities" *(*Kaimowitz, 1997*)*.

Key concepts for pluralism in sustainable forestry and rural development

• Different groups have and always will have different experiences, positions, opinions and objectives on sustainable forest management and rural development.
• Groups are autonomous and independent, there is no single, absolute and permanent to any substantive natural resource management problem - for any given land unit there is no single, absolute, sustainable management land use scenario *(*there are numerous "sustainable scenarios"*)*.
• No group/organization can claim a superior or absolute scenario.
• Sustainable forestry and rural development decision-making is no longer the sole mandate of expert authorities.
• A system of organizational checks and balances is central for avoiding errors of a narrow single entity management system this is the positive aspect of "bounded conflict".

- Conflicts are inevitable and cannot be resolved but managed.
- Equity in decision-making is a distant but worthy ideal.
- Platforms, mediators and facilitators are often needed to provide the conditions for negotiation and cooperation needed for sustainable forest management.
- Communication is essential and helps participants understand their differences better.
- Consensus is unlikely but progress can be achieved without it.
- Approaches to sustainable forest management that aim at consensus are often misguided and unsustainable.• Proactive approaches and new processes of sustainable forest management decision-making in pluralistic environments are emerging - more experience is needed.

Conclusion

This article has discussed what pluralism is, why it is potentially important, how it can be used for a better understanding of dynamics of sustainable forestry and rural development and what operational tools exist that might be particularly well equipped to deal with the seemingly growing set of pluralistic situations. The Box gives a brief summary of important aspects of pluralism in sustainable forestry and rural development.

Proactive recognition of pluralism and its potentials calls for prudence and caution - it would be unwise to promote pluralism simply for pluralism's sake. A careful assessment is needed of situations (human as well as biophysical dimensions) to determine whether a better understanding of the pluralistic dynamics and the application of appropriate tools could improve the situation as well as whether, in the longer term, a pluralistic framework might be more sustainable.

From an institutional perspective, the promotion of pluralism in forestry and rural development cannot be achieved solely through decentralization, privatization, participation or other processes that are currently high on the development agenda. The solutions needed are of a more subtle and complex nature. There are many different examples of successful experiences to draw on rural fuel wood resource management contracts, territorial charters, codes of conduct - using varied organizational mechanisms.

The fundamental question is whether pluralism has practical significance for sustainable forestry and rural development, and whether it can offer concrete tools and methods which contribute to sustainable forestry and rural development.

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