Communities and Their Partners: Governance and Community-based Forest Management

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A number of agencies closely associated with community-based forest management have recently commissioned reviews to assess the impacts of opening the arena for decision making and benefit sharing in forest management to a wider spectrum of players. This article draws on the findings of a set of reviews commissioned by the Ford Foundation and on an interactive process in which partners in activities supported by the Foundation had opportunities to respond to the conclusions drawn by the reviews. It analyses how governance is emerging as a central concern of all the partners involved in efforts to forge new relationships between government agencies, forest communities and intermediaries such as NGOs that work with them. All those involved in the process considered that the scientific bureaucratic model that has dominated forest management since the nineteenth century and earlier has reached an impasse marked by conflict between a spectrum of stakeholders, and by questions about the biological or ecological sustainability of current harvesting and production practises. Community-based forest management will not in itself resolve these tensions and conflicts, but it does have the potential to play an important role in sustainable natural resources management strategies if there is a realignment of relations between households, community and government. The reviews, therefore, call for more emphasis on crafting inclusive, equitable and accountable mechanisms to articulate and mediate relations between partners from the national and even international level to the local.

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Introduction

Forests have been the sites of conflict between states and people whose livelihoods depend on forest resources since earliest times. England's legendary Robin Hood or China's equally legendary Song Jiang and his bandits of the Water Margin are popular emblems of the tense relations between government and the governed in forests, punctuated by acts of passive resistance in the form of illegal activities such as grazing or logging, erupting at times into outbursts of violence and banditry. Assuming a 'public interest' in forest products and services extending beyond the boundaries of the forest itself, state authorities have regulated access to and utilisation of forest resources. They have demarcated boundaries to bring into existence an administrative category of land known as 'forest', created agencies to implement preferred management regimes on that land, and policed the forests to exclude and punish offenders against the declared 'public interest'.[1] The dominant pattern of government intervention has been one of increasing control over forest resources, and the loss of access to forest resources by groups that have traditionally or historically depended on them.

It has been some twenty years since governments, international donors and others initiated community-based forest management (CBFM)[2] programmes explicitly involving forest communities with the establishment and management of forests, which had formerly been the exclusive preserve of state resources management agencies. The Ford Foundation is one of a number of agencies closely associated with these programmes that has recently commissioned reviews to assess the impacts of opening the arena for decision making and benefit sharing in forest management to a wider spectrum of players. This article draws on the findings of six of these reviews and on an interactive process in which partners in activities supported by the Foundation have had opportunities to respond to their conclusions. The six studies are from China, India, Mexico, the Philippines and the United States, together with a review of the impacts of national, regional and global networks promoting CBFM. Governance was one issue that emerged as a central concern of all six studies, despite the significant differences between the countries and activities involved.

As communities and agencies around the world gain experience working together, there is a growing consensus that CBFM is concerned as much with negotiations between the different interests centred on forests as it is about the search for and implementation of technical solutions to problems of producing certain goods and services from the forest. The emphasis of all six reviews on governance is not surprising, then, if governance can be taken to refer to the procedures and rules by which decisions are made and consensus is reached, as well as mechanisms to hold decision makers accountable for their actions. Conventional forest management emphasises efficiency in attaining management goals, which have tended to be formulated in terms of the production, measured quantitatively of certain (usually commercial) products such as timber. Movement towards CBFM has come in response to the impasse faced by conventional forestry systems.

'Better governance' is an important measure of what sets CBFM apart from past practise, and equity and accountability, which have been conspicuously absent from conventional forest management are important measures of better governance. All those involved in the reviews referred to the importance of devoting more attention to crafting systems of governance that foster accountability and transparency with equitable relations both between communities and their partners at different levels of government, as well as between communities and intermediaries such as the NGOs that work with them.

OBSERVATIONS FROM THE SIX STUDIES

In seeking to reorder relations between government agencies and forest communities, CBFM is as much an experiment in improved governance as a search for more effective conservation and production of forest products and services. The six studies commissioned by the Ford Foundation all noted the coincidence of international agencies' interest in CBFM with the ascendancy of the language of improved governance as a central principle in their strategies for international development assistance. Proposed policies of devolution and decentralisation have extended to the management of natural resources creating a favourable policy environment for devolving management responsibilities in forested lands to communities or entities other than government agencies. In reality, though, there is considerable scepticism about the extent to which powers of decision making and enforcement are really being devolved to communities as well as the more onerous responsibilities of protection and monitoring. One of the studies went so far as to suggest that in practice, CBFM is 'a misnamed continuation of central control . . . [which] has enabled self-interested bureaucracies to inhibit the sharing and transfer of power' (Gollin and Kho 2002).[3]

There are different interpretations of the impetus behind moves over the last twenty years or so to shift from authoritarian, bureaucratic models of state forest management to the various forms of partnership between forest communities and forest management agencies that have come to be known generically as CBFM. The six studies all pointed to a historical conjuncture in the 1970s, which challenged the claims of forest management agencies to be managing forests in the public interest. Continuing loss of forest cover together with widespread protest against the policing actions of government agencies as well as environmental and social impacts of large-scale commercial logging had led to an impasse in implementing forest management and in some cases, such as the USA, a paralysis in the whole process of forest policy making and planning. CBFM emerged as a search for alternative and less contested approaches to forest management in parallel with a growing international interest in participatory development and linkages between land rights movements (inspired in some cases in Latin America by liberation theology) and the environmental movement.

Against this background, it is not surprising that the various actors in CBFM have different narratives of the origins and objectives of CBFM. In the studies

from China, India and the Philippines, for example, it emerges that forestry departments saw CBFM as a route to more effective management of forested lands with the potential for achieving higher rates of success in large-scale reforestation programmes (the Yangtze Shelterbelt Project during the 1990s in Sichuan and Yunnan provinces in China), or as a strategy to reduce erosion and land degradation in upland areas (Philippines). In the China case, other government agencies participated in the experimental CBFM programme in the context of their involvement in national and provincial poverty reduction programmes. Interviews with members of communities in joint forest management (JFM) programmes in India and in CBFM programmes in the Philippines indicate that their interest in participating in CBFM is at least partly an interest in the prospect of reduced conflicts with the government agencies that patrolled access to the forests. Many NGOs in the Philippines and in Brazil drew their inspiration from the struggles of the landless poor, seeing CBFM as a way to secure rights of access to critical resources for rural and indigenous communities. The review of the Ford Foundation's support for a CBFM experiment in Yunnan and Sichuan provinces in China concludes that lack of a common vision of the programmes' objectives was one of the most significant factors limiting its impact to a small number of project communities (Lai and Lanying 2002). While a plurality of motives for participating in CBFM programmes is not in itself a critique of the concept, experience has shown the importance of managing the different expectations of diverse partners through principles of good governance such as open fora for discussion of issues, and mutually accepted procedures for making and implementing decisions.

Crafting New Relations between Government Agencies and Forest Communities

The six studies describe changes in relations between forest communities and government agencies that both parties ascribe to the implementation of community-based management. Allocation of forested land to ejidos (communities) after the Mexican Revolution was not initially matched with their' rights to manage and market timber. Violent protest in the 1970s against timber concessionaires led to a shift in government policy under which ejidos have been granted the right to form community forest enterprises (CFE) and to enter the markets for timber and forest products. Partnerships around forest management now involve a range of non-governmental 'second-tier' and 'third-tier' agencies providing technical support to CFEs as well as a number of government programmes extending financial assistance to overcome barriers to market entry such as the high costs of receiving certification for community-produced timber. The outcome of the Mexican model of CBFM has been a more respectful government engagement with communities, lower levels of conflict over forest resources, and an active, commercially viable community-based forestry sector (Bray and Merino-Pérez 2002).

CBFM plays a part in improved governance by opening a space for local voices to be involved in planning and management of local affairs that had formerly been

the exclusive preserve of bureaucratic—and sometimes autocratic—agencies. In the villages of Yao'an and Da Maichong in China's Yunnan province, the open and contested election of forest management groups in 1997 took place several years before the introduction of local government reforms that now allow a modest level of electoral competition in villages. JFM in India has sometimes been criticised for leaving considerable power in the hands of representatives of the forest departments. It is nevertheless widely acknowledged that rules requiring representation on JFM committees of Scheduled Castes and women, and rules requiring a quorum of committee members to be present when decisions are made have created a forum for the expression of the interests of the people who are most likely to be ignored in any community and yet are perhaps the most dependent on forest resources.

The Indian experience points to an important issue concerning the design of CBFM institutions. In a reaction to the rigid nature of conventional government resource management agencies, the initiators of CBFM programmes have tended to prefer loose associations that privilege local initiative and deliberately avoid hierarchical structures. In practise, however, when social, political and economic structures are inherently unequal, loose institutional structures are easily dominated by their more powerful and more articulate members. The case study of CBFM networks in Brazil observes, for example, that while much of the impulse toward CBFM in Amazonia was in the name of the rights of indigenous people, indigenous people's organisations are conspicuous by their absence from national and regional CBFM networks, which are dominated by well-funded, articulate urban conservation organisations (Laforge 2002). The study of the community forestry movement in the USA considers that present processes to involve communities in national forest management may be 'public' and open to all, but the structure of public meetings and written submissions responding to proposed management actions in fact excludes disenfranchised communities such as ethnic minorities and the forest labour force (Baker and Kusel 2002). Good governance must give the weak and disenfranchised equitable access to decision making about forest resources, and CBFM institutions must, therefore, consciously craft rules and procedures to ensure that their voices are heard as an integral part of the process of forest management.

CBFM can create a structured space for negotiations between state agencies and other actors in society with claims on forest resources and services. The existence of that space may be a necessary condition, but it is not sufficient to realise the realignment of relations and shift in power relations between stakeholders that advocates of CBFM may look forward to. Many communities complain that CBFM has devolved the most burdensome responsibilities for protection, patrolling, monitoring and planting or regeneration to them without a symmetrical devolution of decision-making authorities that tend to remain firmly in the hands of the government resource management agencies. The six studies all describe ways in which CBFM institutions can entrench and reproduce inequitable relations between partners potentially undermining much of the potential for improved

governance of forests through CBFM. These unresolved issues persist in places where responsibility for CBFM has been incorporated into the functions of existing community institutions as well as where new institutions have been brought into existence specifically for the purpose of implementing community-based natural resource management programmes.

Where existing institutions have taken on CBFM responsibilities, it is critical to remember that those institutions may be far from democratic and equitable. The Mexico study warns that traditional societies are often fractured by divisions of class, gender, age, religion or education, and that they may not always favour 'just and wise' management of forest resources. The US study also points to deeply ingrained social inequalities based on race, gender and class, which make it necessary for the community forestry movement there to build new and more equitable forms of local forest governance. The studies from China and the Philippines also observe that government agencies are deeply ingrained with a hierarchical bureaucratic culture that strongly resists the participatory decision making and mutual respect between stakeholders that are important in forging the forms of partnership at the heart of CBFM. The authors of both studies suggest that government involvement in CBFM programmes has often been initiated and supported by a small number of individuals within the agencies and that the failure to expand beyond a limited number of project sites (particularly in China) is symptomatic of hierarchical institutional cultures that do not favour questioning conventional patterns of action or partnerships with civil society.

A different set of issues confronts institutions that have been created specifically for programmes—more often projects—for CBFM. All such constructed institutions face fundamental problems of legitimacy, especially where the projects themselves are seen as artifacts of outside interventions. At worst, they may be seen as opportunities for the local elite to benefit from the infusion of capital and technical assistance, which often accompanies such development interventions. The Philippines study also questions the mismatch in scale between 'forest users', 'community', 'forest' and CBFM management institutions. A forest or a watershed almost always covers a geographical area larger than the area under the control of one community or one user group. Efforts to bring several communities together to formulate and implement a management plan to which they will all agree have tended to fail. Again, to have a chance of success, such constructed 'community institutions' require carefully crafted systems of governance incorporating accepted rules for dispute resolution and to ensure the equitable participation of traditionally weak or disenfranchised groups.

A final unresolved issue of governance in CBFM is the precarious legal status of many, if not most, CBFM institutions. While many governments have adopted some form of CBFM as formal policy, it is still common for community-level institutions allocated responsibility for managing forests to exist on sufferance of the state forest management institution. Studies from the Philippines and India both refer to attempts to limit or recapture authority and rights that had been devolved

to local CBFM institutions. Without a commitment on the part of national governments to secure the legal status of community-level CBFM institutions, they will remain vulnerable and unable to play their full part in more effective forest management and governance.

Conclusion

CBFM offers the promise of a new framework for relations between the many stakeholders in forest resource management. The processes involved in developing partnerships initiate dialogue and open space for new voices to be heard where confrontation and tension had formerly been the norm. Experience has shown, though, that open dialogue and fora for negotiation do not ensure equitable sharing of benefits and responsibilities nor do they, of themselves, change the unequal relations between government and citizens or between community-level institutions and the civil society intermediaries working with them. Successful partnerships depend on mutually accepted rules to share decision making and to ensure the participation of all partners, including traditionally weak and disenfranchised groups.

Notes

1. Several studies have traced the processes by which forests have been created by administrative actions and people excluded from using resources to which they previously had access. Recent studies include: Bryant (1994); Peluso (1992); Peluso and Vandergeest (2001); Sivaramakrishnan (2000); Thompson (1975).
2. Different programmes in different times and places have been given a wide range of names. This article will use the term community-based forest management (CBFM) to refer to all programmes whose objectives explicitly include facilitated access to forest resources, community involvement in their management, and some form of benefit sharing with the community.
3. For a critical analysis of devolution and decentralisation in natural resources management, see Ribot (2002).

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