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## Implications of devolution for participatory forestry in Scotland

A.S. Inglis

**Andrew S. Inglis**, formerly Environment Officer of the Tropical Forests Action Programme Coordinating Unit in FAO, is an independent trainer and adviser in participatory planning and management approaches. Currently based in Scotland, he was the technical adviser to the Scottish Rural Development Forestry Programme and is now working as a consultant and facilitator for FAO's Community Forestry Unit.

*Rural communities, politicians and state foresters must pull together to make devolution work.*

During the past five years, changes at both the local and national levels have been directed towards creating an enabling environment for a more participatory approach to managing state-owned forests in Scotland. At the national level there have been attempts to devolve responsibility for forestry, while at the local community level the number of participatory forestry initiatives has been increasing.

Forests and woodland at present cover more than 15 percent of Scotland's land area. About 40 percent of the forests -comprising mainly maturing and mature plantations of a few coniferous species - are state-owned and are managed by the Forestry Commission, the forestry department of the Government of the United Kingdom (Forestry Commission, 1998a).

In a 1997 referendum, the people of Scotland voted for the devolution of many of the functions of the Government of the United Kingdom - including responsibility for forestry - to a new Scottish Parliament. However, the Forestry Commission has been defined as a "cross-border authority", retaining much of its previous power. This article looks at the resulting ambiguities in actual responsibility for forestry in Scotland and examines the implications of the changes, particularly in terms of transparency, accountability and responsibility, and in terms of forest ownership rights and control over financial resources.

### [\*\*A rural plantation in the Scottish highlands\*\*](#)

### [\*\*More and more rural communities are aspiring to gain control of harvesting work and access to harvesting machinery\*\*](#)

## **PARTICIPATORY INITIATIVES AT THE LOCAL LEVEL**

During the past five years, the number of local participatory forest management initiatives in Scotland has been increasing. Some of these initiatives derive from the desire, primarily on the part of a few environmentalists and non-local volunteers, to manage the forests using more holistic, ecological regimes than those used by the Forestry Commission. Others, in contrast,

have been motivated by the aspirations of people in rural communities to enhance the contribution of local forests to local livelihoods and to achieve local community empowerment in its widest sense.

Rural people, often with the assistance of local or national politicians, journalists or independent third parties such as the Scottish Rural Development Forestry Programme, have been attempting with increasing frequency to engage with the Forestry Commission in order to:

- become more involved in consultations about future plans regarding state forests in their localities;
- establish formal partnerships for making local forest management decisions, as in Sunart, on the northwestern Atlantic coast of the Scottish mainland (Forest Enterprise, 1999c) and Laggan, in the central Scottish Highlands (Forest Enterprise, 1999b);
- achieve outright change of ownership and control through purchase, as in Abriachan, on the shores of Loch Ness (*Forestry & British Timber*, 1998a).

A growing number of participatory forestry initiatives are based on the idea that nearby state-owned plantations should contribute more to the local economy. One means of trying to achieve this is by adding more local value through forest product processing and utilization and/or enhancing recreation and tourism facilities, as has been done in Dunnottar Woodland Park (Forest Enterprise, 1999a). Another, increasingly common, means is to seek to augment the opportunities for local people to derive all or part of their livelihoods from timber harvesting and extraction, as was the case in Strashmashie Forest in Laggan (Forest Enterprise, 1999b).

The desire for more local livelihood opportunities has been driven by the lack of alternative livelihood opportunities in many Scottish rural areas and the small number of local people who find paid work through the Forestry Commission's contracting procedures for timber harvesting and extraction work. On the 1.1 million ha of productive woodland in Scotland (Forestry Commission, 1998b), and from a rural population of more than 1 million people (Scottish Office, 1993), there are at present only 3215 full-time equivalent (FTE) people engaged in harvesting and extraction work (*Forestry & British Timber*, 1999), i.e. 0.3 percent of the rural population or 1 FTE person per 344 ha. The comparable figure for England is 1 FTE person per 209 ha of forest land (Forestry Commission, 1998b; *Forestry & British Timber*, 1999). Furthermore, most contractors work more than 200 km from their homes (Dhubain *et al.*, 1994) and spend little time in their own communities (Scottish Rural Development Forestry Programme, 1997). These findings reinforce the perception, held by many Scottish rural people and politicians, that the state's investments in rural forestry plantations are not paying off with enough local livelihood opportunities, even though these investments were intended to create rural employment and aid in population stabilization as much as to increase domestic timber production (Callander, 1995).

In the light of these facts and perceptions, the Forestry Commission has been faced with increasing pressure to optimize opportunities for local work in rural Scotland while also needing to maintain efficiency and to serve the groups that it has traditionally tended to serve: industrial wood consumers, urban recreational users and environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Forestry Commission officials are gradually seeing that one of the best ways to face this difficult (some say impossible) task is to welcome the involvement of interested local communities to help the Forestry Commission to meet the challenges. The Forestry Commission estimates that, to date, it has engaged in dialogue with 35 such communities, with contact ranging from a single meeting to full-scale partnerships (Forest Enterprise, 1999e).

With few exceptions, this process of community engagement has not been easy. There has been a need to overcome what both parties have described as mutual distrust (Forest Enterprise, 1999b): many state foresters do not take seriously the forest management aspirations of local people who were not formally trained in forestry, and they hesitate to entrust them with the management of valuable assets that belonged to the whole nation. For their part, members of the local communities have often had the preconception that Forestry Commission officials see public forests as their own land and expect them to behave as insensitively as many private landlords. Indeed, in the past the Forestry Commission's response to locally led forest management initiatives in state-owned forests was generally not helpful. Even when locally based field officials wanted to react positively, support or approval from headquarters was generally not forthcoming. In addition, in those initiatives that did get under way, local communities often felt like subordinate partners because the initiatives generally seemed to be on the terms of the state foresters.

While participatory forestry initiatives have been on the increase, they seem to have been adopted on an ad hoc basis, depending on the viewpoint of the local Forestry Commission official. Communities and politicians have perceived a need to ensure that these opportunities be open to all rural communities close to state forests, and not just the lucky few.

## **CHANGES IN FOREST MANAGEMENT AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL**

Accompanying and underlying these local community perceptions was a feeling that the Forestry Commission appeared to be almost immune to political pressure in the British parliamentary system (Inglis and Guy, 1997). There was a call for new arrangements at the national level so that Scottish elected representatives could have more direct control over the state forests and their management.

When the Labour government came into power in 1996, it promised to devolve many of the functions of the Government of the United Kingdom to a new Scottish Parliament. The aim was, as the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, wrote in the preface to the devolution proposals, "to modernise British politics and decentralise power", by creating "a Scottish Parliament giving the people of Scotland more control over their own affairs" (Scottish Office, 1997). The proposals stated that "the new Scottish Parliament will be responsible for forestry" (Scottish Office, 1997). A 1997 referendum on the proposals passed with 74 percent of the Scottish vote (*Glasgow Herald*, 1997).

Most people's first reaction to the referendum result, including that of the Director-General of the Forestry Commission (personal interview, July 1999), was the belief that there would be new, separate forestry administrations for Scotland, England and Wales (the latter also having been given devolved powers from the Government of the United Kingdom via an elected assembly).

However, the Forestry Commission, the United Kingdom's forestry industry and environmental NGOs and major landowners were disturbed by the prospect of the devolution of forestry to the Scottish Parliament. The state foresters felt that it would be beneficial to retain their existing roles and responsibilities, especially with regard to policy-making, plant health monitoring and forestry research. The landowning, environmental and business pressure groups were keen to have only one centralized institution with which to build relationships and influence. Industrial wood producers and consumers were concerned about a possible breakup of the forest products market and disruption to timber trading (*Forestry & British Timber*, 1997a), even though they would still be working with the same language, the same currency, the same macroeconomic trading environment and no borders.

Although the opponents' arguments contradicted the spirit and the officially stated *raison d'être* of the devolution proposals - namely to decentralize power, to open up government and to

bring public decision-making closer to the people and communities directly affected (Scottish Office, 1997) - they succeeded in having the Forestry Commission defined in the Scotland Act as a "cross-border public authority" (Government of the United Kingdom, 1998). This was a new term, not mentioned in the text of the devolution proposals, created to accommodate British government departments dealing with devolved matters as well as matters for which the Government of the United Kingdom would continue to be responsible (the so-called "reserved powers"). This was an important, unreported political victory for the Forestry Commission, especially as neither the devolution proposals nor the final act had mentioned any special exceptions or reserved powers with regard to forestry.

The "cross-border public authority" outcome produced "the hoped-for minimum disruption for both forestry and for the Commission" (*Scottish Forestry*, 1997). An internal publication of the Forestry Commission commented: "We should not lose sight of the importance of the decision to keep the Forestry Commission as a Great Britain-wide body, under a single board of Forestry Commissioners. We shall continue to perform throughout Great Britain our functions of advising Ministers, regulating and grant aiding private forestry, managing the public forest estate and promoting good forestry practice." (Forestry Commission, 1999b).

After elections in May 1999, the new Scottish Parliament opened in July and the new members of its Rural Affairs Committee found themselves not, as some of them may have expected, discussing how they were going to manage and be responsible for forestry in Scotland, but being told that a strategy and policy for Scotland had already been drafted by Forestry Commission officials and was under consideration (Scottish Parliament, 1999).

The members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) had come into a situation where they were, apparently, a subordinate body: the Forestry Commission's Board of Commissioners remained in place with the same powers and duties that apply throughout the United Kingdom (Forestry Commission, 1999a; *Timber Grower*, 1999). As the Forestry Commission's Director-General put it, "I suspect that there will be some issues where we will have to say [to the Scottish Parliament]: 'You cannot do this because of UK forestry policy'" (*Forestry & British Timber*, 1997b).

### **[The first \(temporary\) Scottish Parliament building, The Mound, Edinburgh](#)**

People in Scotland now perceive that, as far as forestry is concerned, devolution has meant only few internal changes to the Forestry Commission. The newly elected MSPs were given, on the one hand, an Act of Parliament that stated that forestry was now to be their responsibility, and on the other a British Government department that was more or less unchanged. As the Forestry Commission Director-General recently commented, "I do not think the changes in structure will be very noticeable" (*Timber Grower*, 1999). Indeed, some sceptical Scottish observers see the only real difference as an increased ambiguity in actual responsibility. For instance, one consequence of the final devolution legislation is that responsibility for the Forestry Commission, which was previously held by the Secretary of State for Scotland, will revert to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food in London, which has a mandate only for England and Wales, with no jurisdiction over Scottish affairs (Forestry Commission, 1999a).

However, others, including the Forestry Commission's Director-General, are of the opinion that there have been some important changes. A crucial difference is the transfer of the budget for the Forestry Commission's Scotland-only activities to the Scottish Consolidated Fund. The Scottish Parliament can allocate these finances any way it likes: when the Forestry Commission presents its work programmes and budgets to the Scottish Parliament, the parliament could give exactly what is asked, but it could also give more or less, depending on whether it decides the Forestry Commission delivers good value for public money (Director-General of the Forestry Commission, personal interview, July 1999).

The Director-General of the Forestry Commission has stated that MSPs can, if they wish, "create their own forestry administration(s), as a mini commission or within other land use departments" (*Timber Grower*, 1999), as the Scottish Parliament has the power to alter the structure or to dissolve existing public bodies and create new ones (*Forestry & British Timber*, 1997b). Crucially, the MSPs will be the actual owners of the state-owned forest land. Under the new arrangements, the Scottish Parliament is the ultimate owner of the publicly owned forests and it invites the Forestry Commission to manage them (Director-General of the Forestry Commission, personal interview, July 1999). In the future, it could give the land to another forest management entity, be it another government agency, local government authorities or (although this would probably require a change in legislation) an NGO, a forest management company or constituted community groups.

The new Scottish Parliament already shows signs of greater transparency compared with the United Kingdom's Parliament, and this may provide opportunities to make all public bodies, including the Forestry Commission, more accountable. Reports of Rural Affairs Committee meetings are posted on the Internet the next day. However, as in the British style of government, there are already restrictions on the reporting of interactions between officials and the new MSPs when crucial briefings and advice are given.

### [The document expounding the new community engagement policy for Scotland](#)

The development of the relationship between MSPs and senior officials will be crucial in determining whether there will be a comprehensive improvement in the transparency, accountability and responsiveness of the Forestry Commission in Scotland. Some MSPs are resentful about what they perceive to be a patronizing attitude on the part of the Forestry Commission and about being constrained to contribute hurriedly to a Scottish forestry policy consultation process that they had no input in designing; thus the relationship begins to echo earlier levels of distrust and lack of cooperation between Forestry Commission officials and Scottish elected representatives in the United Kingdom's Parliament. However, if, in their strong desire for change, the MSPs can work together while disregarding party lines, structure and monitor all their interactions with officials and make all advice and information offered by officials public, then they will have a stronger hand in trying to ensure the transparency of Forestry Commission decision-making processes that affect local communities.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF RECENT EVENTS FOR LOCAL MANAGEMENT AND CONTROL OF STATE FORESTS**

State foresters in Scotland are under pressure from two fronts: the new political powers of MSPs following the devolution settlement, and the increasing demands of local communities, particularly for more local forest-related livelihood opportunities. They are responding quickly, using the experience from the increasingly numerous local initiatives of the past five years to inform and shape new policies.

In July 1999, the Forestry Commission launched a new community engagement policy for Scotland. Although it was put in place without consultation with the full Scottish Parliament or its Rural Affairs Committee, it contains ideas that are progressive for the Forestry Commission. The language of the new policy is very positive and wide-ranging, and its menu approach presents a variety of options for community engagement (Forest Enterprise, 1999d). At the policy launch meeting in Falkirk, Scotland, in July 1999, senior officials gave verbal assurance that it will be entirely up to local communities how far down the menu they want to go. However, the emphasis is on increasing local management of the less commercial state forest resources, and the onus will be on local communities to initiate contact and to prove to the Forestry Commission that they want to, and can, take on the management responsibilities.

The Forestry Commission appears to have published the new policy hastily, with hardly any

internal debate about the policy's implications for the Commission's transactions with industrial wood consumers and its ways of managing larger commercial plantations in Scotland. For example, 60 percent of all Forestry Commission timber will still be sold standing, with purchasers looking after their own harvesting and marketing (*Forestry & British Timber*, 1998b). Some senior officials still informally admit that they are not convinced that there is a demand for more local management of state forests. Furthermore, they are still wary of the consequences of providing more local livelihood opportunities and maintain that providing work opportunities for rural itinerant workers constitutes rural development, even if it entails travel of more than hundreds of kilometres from home to work.

There can be no doubt that the new community engagement policy is very good news for the field-based officials, who for years have been trying to respond positively to local management initiatives on state forest land. Now they will have official policy backing from headquarters, which is very important. The Forestry Commission has also taken the opportunity provided by devolution to try, at the headquarters level, to move some of the most conservative thinkers from key positions (Director-General of the Forestry Commission, personal interview, July 1999). The Commission has taken the opportunity to try to open up its style of management and decision-making. Now there is no formal requirement to go to the British management for permission to enter into local partnerships, although headquarters can still have the final say (Director-General of the Forestry Commission, personal interview, July 1999).

More openness within the organization and scope for individual field officials to use their own judgement will certainly be welcomed by all observers and customers of the Forestry Commission, industrial concerns and local communities alike. There is also talk of training field-based officials in skills needed at the local level and of employing community liaison officers. These innovations could potentially result in dramatically improved positive relationships between Forestry Commission officials and the citizens of Scotland and their elected representatives.

## CONCLUSIONS

The signs are that increased participatory management of Scotland's forests will be possible. When local communities are approached in a positive and open-minded way, they will be comfortable about expressing their aspirations, capacity and limitations (Scottish Rural Development Forestry Programme, 1997).

The new MSPs have some powerful tools with which to manage the Forestry Commission and help it be transparent, accountable and responsive to participatory forest management opportunities in the future. This may not be easy, but as far as the people of rural Scotland are concerned it could be one of the single most important changes to be achieved by the new MSPs.

Can MSPs effectively manage an organization that has retained a British mandate and power base? Can rural communities meet the new responsibilities they have sought to take on? And can state forestry officials at all levels in Scotland be responsive and sensitive to the Scottish people and communities? To pull together in the same direction will be a test for all concerned.

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