Community forestry: Building success through people's participation

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Forestry management in the past considered only the protective and productive roles of the forest. Now, largely through the birth of the concept of "community" or "social" forestry, it is seriously beginning to consider the forest's social role as well. In this article, Y.S. Rao provides a succinct and clear definition of community forestry, outlines what is needed to make it succeed, and discusses the constraints under which it operates at present. Implementing community forestry, he argues, will require nothing less than a radical restructuring of forestry's traditional policies, practices and institutions.

Forests have historically constituted one of humankind's most important sources of renewable wealth. They perform the indispensable role of maintaining an ecological balance between soil, water, flora and fauna on which life as we conceive it depends. This role that nature ascribes to the forest is often referred to as the *protective* role.

Forests also provide timber, for a variety of industrial activities essential for human economic survival. They have been exploited and utilized by governments over the years to boost domestic revenues or earn foreign exchange. These aspects represent the *productive* role of forests.

Traditionally, forestry management practices were based on developing an understanding of the protective and productive aspects of natural forests. Biological, technical and macro-economic considerations received an overriding priority. As a result, forestry management practices generally concentrated on the following:

- Establishing a "legal curtain" between people and forests, with policing the forest estate an abiding obsession.

- Fixing targets for the commercial production of logs and increasing

the forestry output without reference to such questions as who benefited.

- Earning revenues (despite lip-service paid to concepts like sustained-yield production), which resulted in gradual erosion of the resource base itself.

- Practising forestry on government-owned lands exclusively through strategies and programmes developed by government functionaries without consulting "the people".

- Using people only as wage labourers and ignoring their role in safeguarding the resource.

These practices no doubt served a purpose during times when population pressure was low, when society's perception of equity and justice was still unformed, and when biological systems dominated people and society instead of the other way around. But, as the resources diminished and local populations traditionally dependent on natural forests for a wide range of goods grew, forest management practices of the past started losing their relevance. Continued adherence to them resulted in the people living near and around the forests feeling alienated. They could not see how forestry programmes were beneficial to them. Day after day, trucks went past their villages loaded with logs for consumption in urban areas or abroad, no doubt for a good economic reason, but what was left for them to cope with in daily life was a resource that was vastly reduced and a forest that could no longer support their agriculture or provide their daily needs for survival.

In recent years, both internationally and, more particularly, in the Asia-Pacific region, the importance of the social rote of forests and forestry, together with their protection and production roles, has received considerable attention. The need for developing holistic approaches that integrate the protective, productive and social roles of forestry has been recognized. The concept of forestry for development is now widely accepted.

The activities encompassed by community forestry are potentially compatible with all types of landownership.

The assumption that technological progress would automatically "trickle down" to even the poorest rural sections did not prove valid in reality.

The concept of community forestry

Several governments of the Asia-Pacific region have attempted, particularly over the last decade, to crystallize programmes that can loosely be described as "community forestry" or "forestry for local community development" or "social forestry". FAO in 1978 provided a definition of this developing concept of community forestry: Community forestry includes any situation that intimately involves local people in a forestry activity. It embraces a spectrum of situations ranging from woodlots in areas short of wood and other forest products for local needs to the growing of trees at the farm level. It includes the processing of forest products at the household, artisan or small industry level to generate income, and the activities of forest-dwelling communities. It excludes large-scale industrial forestry and any other form of forestry

that contributes to community development solely through employment and wages, but it does include activities of forest industry enterprises and public forestry activities at the community level. The activities encompassed by community forestry are potentially compatible with all types of landownership.

Over the years, the range of activities falling within community forestry has widened considerably. Recent years have seen foresters coming out of "reserved forests" and attempting to bring forests and woodlots to places where there is hunger for wood and other forest products. Foresters "intrude" into the traditional agricultural belts and seek to make space for trees alongside crops. They invade town centres and cities and plant trees in vacant spaces, seeking to create an "urban-rural interface". Foresters are trying to intermingle trees with people. They are practicing their profession, to a greater degree than ever before, in areas close to where the vast majority of people live.

Requisites for success

Community forestry is practiced in widely different settings. An analysis of these situations suggests a number of conditions necessary for its successful implementation, and a number of constraints. Forestry systems for rural communities will seldom succeed unless the people concerned are persuaded of the systems, usefulness. It must be apparent to the people that the benefits to be obtained are relevant to them and are sufficient to justify their participation. Some of the important requisites include:

- political commitment;
- an assessment of rural needs;
- appropriate technical solutions;
- a system of incentives;
- suitable rural institutions;
- supportive organization;
- an extension network;
- research support.

Political commitment Forestry for rural community development will vary enormously between countries, depending on the ideologies and resources of governments, the type of society and the locality. Certain considerations, however, are likely to apply to most countries. First, there must be a commitment by government to the development of the rural sector, and especially to those parts where the poorest people live. As emphasized by FAO's World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (1979), this may require the redistribution of resources in favour of rural areas. Second, some restrictions of landownership may be necessary, involving legislation relating to land tenure. Third, it is essential that forest development take place with the full involvement and participation of the rural people, with programmes emanating from the bottom up rather than being imposed from the top down. Finally, because forestry is usually a long-term process, it requires a long-term commitment.

WORKERS ON A COMMUNITY FORESTRY PROJECT a need to involve people at all stages

Assessment of rural needs The first necessity is to identify the needs of the community through consultation with the people themselves, and to decide on the

possibilities that exist, taking into account the environmental conditions. Needs should be met in a way that will bring maximum benefit to the greatest number of people.

A survey will be required within the area under consideration. The area should be something well defined, such as a watershed or a group of villages. The survey should focus on the physical and biological environment - climate, soil, vegetation, land use; on the existing forest and forest-related resources; on wood use, wood needs and market prospects; and on the community itself, including social systems, land tenure and feeding habits. The people should be involved as much as possible in the survey.

As fuelwood is an important item in the requirements of rural communities, it should be a major constituent of the survey. A further need is to find out what uses the rural population makes of forest produce other than wood - for example, fruits, seeds, nuts, edible products from palms, fungi, honey, bush meat or fodder for livestock. Information will also be required on any forest activities that provide employment or are income-earning - for example, resin-tapping, harvesting fusser-silk, collecting seeds, pods or bark for tannin, or collecting those parts of plants that are used for medicinal or economic purposes.

Appropriate technical solutions In some ways, conventional forestry solutions suffer from orthodoxy. They are conceived by technicians and imposed dictatorially or conferred paternalistically upon people.

What is often forgotten by professionals is that people who are living in rural environments have a good understanding of the complexity of their problems. They may think in a more interdisciplinary way than many scientists, although not in a purely scientific manner. Therefore, it is appropriate that technical solutions are worked out *with* the people and not *for* them.

The principle should be to modify normal land-use practice as little as possible and to manage land for the production of various combinations of crops, including both trees and food crops. A significant example of early experiments in community forestry is the work of Perum Perhutani in Java, where new and intensive land-use practices have made an important contribution to land management. It has been demonstrated that it is possible to successfully combine systems of agriculture and forestry: producing fodder crops within forests for cattle, or growing fuelwood while simultaneously rearing silkworm and providing nectar sources for bees to make honey and wax.

The major guidelines for finding appropriate technical solutions in the practice of community forestry can be summarized as follows.

1. When there is competition for forest land:

- intercrop trees and crops;

- allocate forest land rationally between trees and crops;

- improve non-food benefits to forest communities - forest and forest industries employment, secondary forest product income, etc.

2. When there is competition for crop or grazing land to afforest:

- plant trees on roadsides, riverbanks, field boundaries and other unused areas marginal to crop production, or on erodible areas unsuitable for crop production or grazing;

- improve productivity on the more arable areas in order to release land for tree-growing:

- plant multi-purpose species or mixtures of species to increase productivity;

- intercrop trees with other crops or combine with grazing;

- introduce additional sources of income (e.g., bee-keeping).

3. When the output from trees will not meet immediate needs:

- plant multi-purpose species, or mixtures of species, that give some early returns;

- provide financial support during the establishment periods - low-interest loans, grants, subsidies, wage employment, etc.;

- introduce or expand complementary non-forestry sources of income;

- adopt forestry systems that do not compete with peak demands for labour.

4. When there is no forestry tradition or an unfamiliarity with the necessary techniques:

- provide guidance and support through extension services, education, technical advice and inputs, grass-roots training, and demonstration projects.

A system of incentives The overriding need for income to meet everyday needs means that rural people cannot afford to invest in activities from which the returns would accrue only after an interval of some years. Therefore, some way must be found to provide the community with income until the trees are harvestable. This may be achieved by external support during this period in the form of wages or some other type of cash payment (as in Gujarat, India). Alternatively, it may be achieved through growing multipurpose species or mixtures of species that, in the form of fodder or fruits, produce some saleable produce from the first year onwards.

Another alternative is to introduce additional sources of income to the community at the same time as forestry activities are introduced. Direct credit is another means of financial support. But most developing countries have their experience in rural credit linked directly with cash-crop and food-crop cultivation, and there is no experience in organizing credit for such "non-traditional" activities as tree-crop cultivation. There is a need to devise mechanisms for accelerating the flow of credit to tree farmers.

Subsidies and grants given at the initial stages of raising a plantation provide inducement for small farmers to cover the cost of land-clearing and land preparation.

Exemption from forest charges, land tax, irrigation rates and revenue tax can also be operated as incentives. Tax concessions can also be provided for diverting the investment resources to rural areas, thereby enlarging employment opportunities in the rural sector.

A further incentive is that of crop-sharing, whereby the community provides the land and the necessary labour while the forest services or a private company provide the seedlings, fertilizers and technical assistance. When the crop is harvested, the net profit is shared in proportion to the inputs.

Other incentives include the free supply of seeds and seedlings, including transport costs; the provision of hand tools for planting, or fertilizer or food aid (such as the World Food Programme is providing in many countries); and free medical services, water-supply systems or building materials.

Besides these direct inputs relating to tree-planting, social inputs are also necessary to help tree farmers living in areas far removed from the traditional village environment. The construction of village roads and the provision of irrigation, schools, cooperatives and dispensaries are some of the inputs that can be considered. The improvement or establishment of these social inputs not only benefits tree farmers in their efforts but also assists in integrating community forestry with the development taking place in other sectors. The promotion of cottage industries directly linked to tree-farming, agriculture and sericulture is another example of specific programmes being combined to increase rural income and employment opportunities for community prosperity.

Marketing based on demand and supply may not be very effective in a rural situation, because of the nature of consumption patterns in rural societies. Thus, fuelwood, trees, fodder, fruits and grass that are gathered free of cost from community forests and consumed or used locally may not be offered for sale even if there is demand elsewhere. It is essential to devise alternative marketing mechanisms to enable villagers to sell surplus products at remunerative prices.

Suitable rural institutions It is now well recognized that the "acceptance" and "spread" of technical innovation take place in a structural context about which too little is known. The assumption that technological progress would automatically spread or "trickle down" to even the poorest rural sections did not prove valid in reality.

Though the approach to local development must involve existing institutions, such structures can at the same time constitute an impediment to change. They may reflect the interests of the rich rather than the poor members of the community. Therefore, the formation of new local organizations should be encouraged. Farmer associations (like those in the Republic of Korea) and non-governmental organizations could play an important role, and their involvement should be sought at an early stage.

The possible contribution of forest industries to community forestry should not be forgotten. Where forestry can be introduced as an income-generating activity, industry can contribute directly to local forestry programmes through assuring markets and providing technical support (as happens in the Philippines). Tax exemptions or loans could serve as an incentive.

The relationship of local people to the surrounding forests and to community forestry will certainly be influenced considerably by the prevailing form of land tenure. It may be necessary to re-examine and change existing forest tenure in order to encourage

local people to have greater involvement in the management and utilization of the forests. Communal and cooperative ownership of forests seeks to resolve the problem of the restricted availability of land for community forestry. In a sense, the Chinese tenurial system followed by the communes, production brigades and production teams contains the essential ingredients of a communal and cooperative ownership system that ensures that the productivity of the land and the returns made on the land are equally shared by the society.

Forest cooperatives could be organized at the level of a village or group of villages or at that of groups of settlers and forest owners. They may be concerned primarily with planting trees and harvesting the available forest produce, but they could also expand to processing and marketing to ensure maximum benefit to the community.

There must be a commitment by government to the development of the rural sector, and especially to those parts where the poorest people live.

Supportive organization
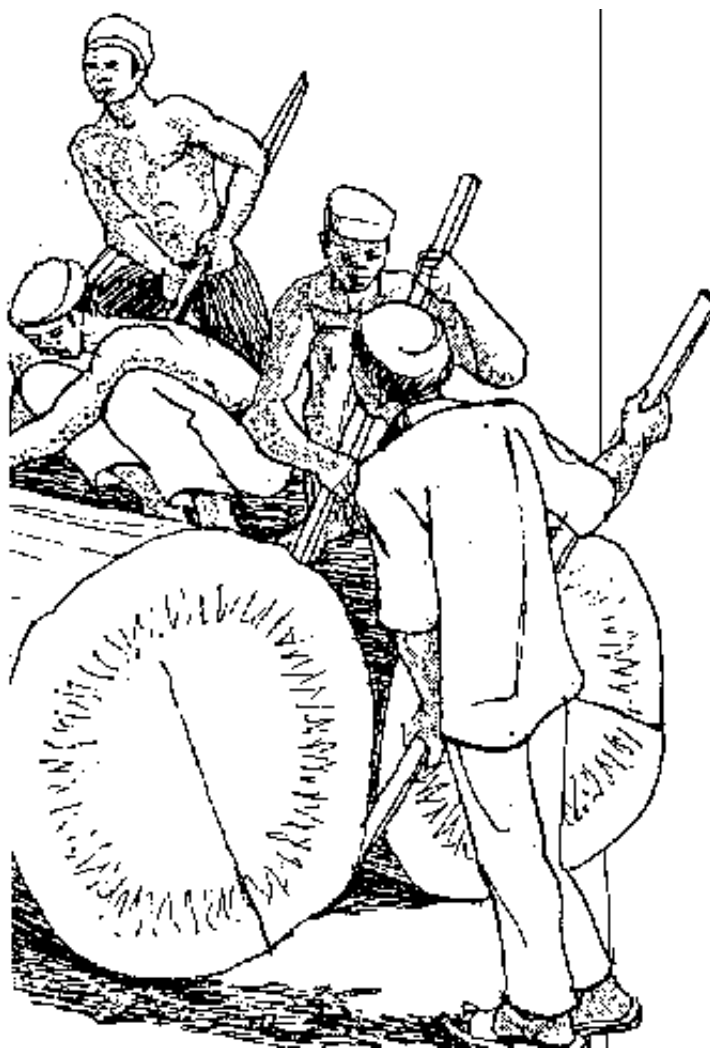
Supportive organization Fundamental changes will be needed in attitudes, in training methods and in the structure of forest services in order to orient activity more toward the needs and aspirations of rural communities. A special branch concerned with community forestry, extension and training may have to be created at various levels within the forest services, and additional staff are likely to be required so that frequent

contact can be maintained at the village level. Staffing requirements, which may include specialists in disciplines other than forestry (social scientists, for example), will have to be assessed carefully. It has to be borne in mind that "bringing forestry to the aid of rural communities" is not so much a technical problem as an institution al, social and political one. Therefore, changing the attitudes of government officials through training and education and providing an appropriate institutional and organizational structure to foster communication with rural people is of prime importance for the promotion of community forestry.

Existing institutional and administrative structures have been found to be inadequate to achieve these new objectives. Forestry education systems have by and large produced some excellent technicians. But to provide leadership in adopting a socio-technical approach, forestry as a technical science should be combined with the social sciences.

Given the magnitude of community forestry programme required to meet rural needs, part of the responsibilities for management should eventually be transferred from the government to the rural communities. To this end, key persons in rural communities should receive training in essential aspects of social forestry through programmes that make use of training methods such as short courses, field visits, practical demonstrations and carefully prepared documents.

An extension network The skills and requirements of community forestry staff, especially field staff, are narrower than those of conventional foresters in fields such as silviculture and engineering but much broader in subjects such as sociology and extension. Therefore, the bulk of community forestry staff need not have received the conventional forestry training. Rather, forester positions should be filled by extension workers familiar with rural society. They may be given short courses in plantation establishment before they are assigned to community forestry. Extension workers are supposed to act as messengers who both carry innovation to the farmers and bring farmers, problems back to the researchers.

CHILDREN IN A THAI FOREST VILLAGE forestry can bring a better future

A community forestry programme should also be concerned with the development of supporting materials for extension workers, provide them with information about relevant species, equipment and techniques, and develop new information where this is needed.

Research support In a programme like community forestry, which is constantly evolving and adapting itself to differing needs, perceptions and situations, the scope for research support is enormous. Areas of research likely to be relevant to community forestry include sociology, species introduction, soil improvement, farming and silvicultural systems, systems for combined agriculture and forestry on a long-term basis, joint forestry and grazing, product utilization, identification of new sources of income, development of technology, economics of production, and soil and water conservation.

Constraints

The most obvious constraint is that the time-scale of forestry is bound to conflict with the priorities of the rural poor, which are logically focused on meeting basic present needs. Land, labour and other resources that could be devoted to providing the food, fuel and income needed today cannot easily be diverted to the production of wood that

will be available only many years hence. Forestry can continue to exist or be introduced at the community level only if it allows for the real present needs of the rural poor.

In several countries, forestry is still awaiting a berth in integrated rural development programmes and in community development projects. Forests and their benign influence on the improvement of the environment are often taken for granted, and conscious efforts are not made to develop forestry as a "land use" to benefit local communities. Most land-use systems in operation today have their thrust toward food production only. Mono-crop cultivation for food and cash requirements becomes the rule. Lands that are not suited for cash-crop or food-crop cultivation and that cannot be provided with irrigation facilities come to be identified as suitable for forestry development. Such lands awaiting development are far away from the normal settled village environment and devoid of institutional and social infrastructure. Public and local institutions servicing these development efforts cannot easily be persuaded to shift or enlarge the area of their operations to bring forestry into their sphere of activity.

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Security of tenure of land is another important constraint. Unless the farmers (or community) are assured that the trees will remain theirs at the time of harvesting, they are unlikely to cooperate. In many situations, therefore, it may be difficult to insert forestry before a more far-reaching reform of land tenure or change in land use is effected.

The lack of a tradition of managed forestry in most developing countries contrasts with the strong tradition of agriculture. Even when such essential items as fuelwood or building poles are scarce, hostility may still persist to forests and trees as harbourers of birds and other wildlife that damage crops. The attitude, based on the past abundance from the forest, tends to be inimical to managed forestry. It is difficult for rural populations to appreciate the results of forest destruction until actual hardships develop. To persuade them of the beneficial effects of managed forestry will be equally difficult and will often require a profound change in attitudes and behaviour.

Any voluntary solution presupposes confidence on the part of the population and imaginative sympathy for the local way of life on the part of the instigators of development. There are other constraints that arise from the bureaucratic structures associated with the process of change, such as rigid procedures, strict interpretation of rules, arrogance of petty officials and inadequate training at lower levels. There is also the tendency for the responsibility for the rural development effort to become fragmented, with lack of coordination among different bodies.

The traditional preoccupation of forestry with conservation and with management objectives focused on the production of wood for industry has little relevance to the needs of the rural people. This bias is reflected in the structure, staffing and budgetary priorities of forest administrations and in the training of foresters. If forestry is to contribute to the bettering of the conditions of the rural poor, a radical reorientation, extending from policy to the very technical foundations of the discipline, will be needed.