

Locating Benefits: Expanding Decision-spaces, Resource Access and Equity in U.S. Community-based Forestry

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Abstract:

The Ford Foundation's Community-based Forestry Demonstration Program represents an important experiment in participatory forest management in the United States. In its call for proposals and subsequent assessments, the Ford program promoted an internationally prominent model of community forestry in which a defining feature is the simultaneous, balanced pursuit of ecological, economic and social goals (often symbolized as the "three-legged stool," or "triple bottom line"). In fact, as an ethnographic examination of two of the pilot sites finds, not all cases fit this model. The alternative framework proposed holds that community forestry will generate social benefits, when it expands: (1) who has a role in making what decisions about forest management how (i.e., decision spaces), and (2) who gets access to what resources (e.g., forests, capital, knowledge). Both cases met these foundational criteria, yet were pursuing ecology, economy and equity in sequence (and with uneven emphasis), rather than as an integrated whole. We also found that who – within communities differentiated by class, race, ethnicity and other social boundaries – gained access to resources and decision-making influence largely predicted who gained individually. Nonetheless, indirect benefits felt at community and higher scales were significant. These results further indicate that community forestry generally will not advance social equity unless it specifically targets the inclusion of marginalized groups.

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As with other forms of community-based resource management internationally, practitioners in the rural United States seek to improve the health of their communities and natural resources through community-based forestry (CBF). This investigation set out to examine what benefits flow as a result, and to whom. In doing so it became clear that it was first necessary to examine a more fundamental question: how does CBF bring about social change? An understanding of *how* CBF generates benefits² is required in order to explain the distribution of these benefits among individuals, families and communities.

This paper develops a framework for understanding the dynamics and impact of CBF based on: the documented experience of the thirteen sites participating in the Ford Foundation's U.S.-based Community-based Forestry Demonstration Program (CBFDP), the wider literature, a rich conversation among participants and other researchers in workshop settings, and ethnographic field research at two of those sites. Part I lays out the key questions framing the investigation, develops the framework, derives a model for CBF, and contrasts it with a widely accepted archetype. Part II applies the framework to two case studies – one on private lands, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives in Alabama, and the other, the Jobs and Biodiversity Coalition in New Mexico, a Western public land setting.

PART I -- An alternative framework for understanding CBF

Rather than attempt to define what community-based forestry *is*, we seek to understand what it *does*. Four propositions predicting likely outcomes of CBF structure the proposed alternative framework. The first asserts that: *CBF initiatives will bring about social change when they transform:*

- *who* gets access to resources,
- *who* makes *what* decisions *how* regarding forest management and related community development (i.e., decision-spaces),

In CBF (as in other interventions), social change is logically prior to environmental change. This holds even if one does not consider a healthy forest to be less important than a healthy community – or even possible without one. The reason is that it is *people* who decide whether and how to cut trees, pave them over, restore them or protect them. It takes people to do any of this work. So, if a change in forest management and forest condition is envisioned, social change will first be necessary at some level – local or global, specific or systemic, socio-cultural, political, or economic.

This approach contrasts in significant ways with a prominent model of CBF that stresses the balance among its social, ecological and economic components. Widely invoked in the community development and business

² Here 'benefits' include anything that is perceived by some of those affected as an improvement in their own lives, or in the condition of anything that they value (e.g., their community, the forest). The production of benefits is a form of social change, although not everyone affected will perceive a given social change as a benefit.

literature, it has been termed the “triple bottom line,” (e.g., Elkington 1998) or the “three-legged stool” (e.g., Baker and Kusel 2003). It has been persuasively articulated in the Ford-sponsored analysis of lessons learned from the CBDFP (Wyckoff-Baird 2005: 3):

Community-based forestry derives its fundamental strength and versatility via a three-pronged working framework that honors the mutual interdependence of forest and human communities. Within that framework, each component strategy of community-based forestry – social, ecological and economic – is considered to be equally important.

With the proviso that the balance among the three “legs” be construed as dynamic and adaptive, the “three-legged stool” is the model of the CBF *ideal* as advanced in the original call for proposals put out by the Ford Foundation. Embracing this model would suggest the yardstick against which the thirteen project pilot sites should be measured— to what degree did they simultaneously advance these three, integrated goals?

In fact, an examination of the record of accomplishments of CBF at the pilot sites finds that a number of the initiatives do not match up well to the “three-legged stool” ideal. In that sense, they stretch the boundaries of what is defined by the Ford program as constituting community-based forestry. However, employing this alternative framework brings into focus different strengths in the performance of these cases and suggests a more expansive notion of the definition of community-based forestry.

In contrast to the descriptive approach taken in applying the “stool” model, and generally in evaluating CBF “success” (cf. Pagdee et al. 2006), this framework demands a causal analysis. Rather than characterizing the *outcomes* of CBF (the social, ecological and economic “legs”), this alternative calls for an investigation of the mechanisms through which it acts to generate social change. A solid body of literature on community resource management and tenure in the Third World directs us to look to institutions of resource access and control (e.g., Ribot and Peluso 2003, Berry 1989, Leach 1999).

Ribot and Peluso (2003) define “access” to resources in the broadest terms, as “the ability to benefit from things.” While this comprehensive conception of *access* subsumes *decision-making*, for the purposes of this analysis it is useful to distinguish them as twin aspects of control over benefit flows from resources. Capturing benefits requires a role in both decision-making institutions (formal agencies or informal relations) and institutions guaranteeing or facilitating resource access (formal rights or informally recognized claims). Their interrelation is clear, in that access to certain material or symbolic resources may be necessary to make decision-making feasible and effective, in other words, in order to exercise control. For example, where forested land is privately held, access to the forest itself is not generally at issue (unlike in the U.S. West and the global South where most of the forest is under public ownership). However, access to other resources, such as capital, specialized knowledge, or governmental permits, may be necessary to generate and capture benefit flows from the private forest.

For this framework, *decision-making* is expanded and replaced by the more nuanced conception of *decision-space*, with dual dimensions of power and process. The first aspect refers to the scope of the decisions that individuals and local organizations have the opportunity to participate in making, as well as the range of possible options they have the opportunity to advance. A number of the partners in the CBFDP have found ways to move past deadlock over environmental conflicts and governmental inaction by entering into collaborative processes with federal land-management agencies and others – first proving the success of this approach at the local level, and then successfully advocating for its wider adoption and, in some instances, institutionalization at the policy level. As a result, the voices of CBF organizations and rural community members (including those not associated with, or even opposed to, them) are increasingly shaping resource management decisions on public lands and public policy affecting private lands. Moreover, these voices are not just advocating positions, they are “weaving our own information” -- local knowledge about resources, as well as innovative solutions -- into the decision-making process.

This first dimension of decision-space is thus about finding power, and finding new ways to share power. Where this requires system change, CBF groups have been part of bringing that transformation about. In the words of one CBFDP leader,

The people most affected are often the least involved in terms of control and input. Step one is figuring out, or being educated as to what affects your life, and step two is how to gain control of this.... In this movement we've seen a huge shift in ten years -- from no voice, no consideration, to public action and voice.

For some, CBF represents a return to democratic principles,

When all else fails, fall back on democracy... It's the impulse that started it -- participatory democracy...for me, what's most important is the participation, the understanding of the people affected. Traditional forestry did not take this into account; that's what makes it CBF.

However, particularly where CBF constituents have found themselves to be highly marginalized (e.g., minority landowners and forest workers and harvesters), the emphasis has been not so much on gaining voice and influence in formal arenas, at the proverbial “table,” but in developing their own institutions or venues first to find and express their individual voices, and then to develop a collective vision and articulate it.

a collective say on particular issues. One CBFDP leader explained from her experience,

When you start from the position of being marginalized or disenfranchised, and this is built into your organizational ethic, you start finding other ways, away from the power and control decision-making model, for accessible participation ... What a lot of groups have done is to find other venues appropriate to what is desired from system. If you look at the participation aspect, groups begin affecting decision-making without even being there. Something else is going on.

This is the second dimension of decision-space, one that was dubbed by CBF project partners as the process of “creating space.” One workshop participant deemed this to be central to the definition of CBF, which in his view is defined as “the process of creating spaces for inclusive listening and dialogue creating holistic strategies to address community issues.”

At the final workshop, representatives of the CBF groups adamantly asserted that what they care about was not mechanisms, but outcomes – how do struggling people benefit? The alternative framework focuses concern on locating where those benefits go -- differentiating the community by class, race, ethnicity, gender, age, and other important social markers,. It directs us to consider the relationship between *who* among these groups gained access to resources and expanded decision-spaces and *who* gained those benefits.

Proposition #2 holds that the distinction between *who among community members has gained resource access and decision-making influence and who has not will reflect*:

- *the distribution of power,*
- *cultural values and preferences, and*
- *racial and ethnic dynamics in the community.*³

This suggests the further question: are benefits limited to those people? Or do indirect benefits, via economic multiplier effects, ecosystem services, land and population retention, conflict reduction and the like, significantly improve the lot of non-participants? These questions can only be answered empirically in each instance.

Proposition #3 indicates that *those who have a role in making decisions and obtain access to the resources to implement them are more likely to benefit than those who remain on the sidelines.*⁴

An alternative model – *Building the CBF House*

This framework for understanding community-based forestry holds that its essential foundation lies in the elements of social transformation -- expanded access to resources and decision-spaces for communities. This stands in contrast to the simultaneous and balanced integration of social, economic, and ecological objectives symbolized in the “stool” model. Some CBF partners feel strongly that the integration of the three objectives is appropriate as an *ideal*, and indeed that it is an essential part of a genuine CBF vision, however long-range the view. Regardless of whether this vision is a requisite feature, the alternative

³ While this complex proposition is clearly comprised of several sub-hypotheses, their interrelation makes them difficult to tease apart when evaluated in particular cases. More or less the whole corpus of work in political ecology delineates how power and difference shape the distribution of advantage resulting from environmental struggles and daily resource use practices alike (e.g., Blaikie 1985, Moore 1993, Schroeder et al 2006). The tendency towards elite capture is a common critique of community-based resource management (Li 2000, Agrawal and Gibson 1999, Leach 1999). Of particular relevance is recent work exploring how the cultural politics of race and ethnic identity are deeply tied to, if not mutually constitutive of, natural resource claims and conflicts (e.g., Kosek 2006, Li 2000).

⁴ Note that, according to Ribot and Peluso (2006), those with access are by definition those who benefit.

framework provides for the possibility that, as a matter of *strategy*, rather than building all three legs of the stool simultaneously, a CBF initiative may choose to tackle social, economic, and ecological objectives in sequence over time. One way of depicting the latter approach is as a *house*, in which expanded resource access and decision-space provides the foundation. Progress on the most valued and/or feasible of the three objectives is then lain down as the ground floor, before a second objective can be built upon as the second floor, with the third objective added last. The rate of progress from one “floor” to the next is not predictable, and reaching the top floor may take longer than, for example, the CBFDP five-year project cycle.

As with all models, its illustrative value lies in its simplicity; yet while this simplicity highlights key features, it inevitably obscures others. While co-equal and simultaneous emphasis on all three objectives might be uncommon among CBF efforts, an absolutely linear, discrete temporal sequence of objectives is in all probability even more rare. Moreover, the “house” model downplays the dynamic interaction and synergistic effects among the three elements (*a.k.a.* floors, legs, or objectives). The utility of the house model, however, lies in the degree to which it reflects and elucidates real experience: as described below, for some of the CBFDP partners the match is a good one.

The Social: *Equity, Capacity, Resilience, Empowerment*

House or stool, floor or leg, the “social” component of community forestry is the most difficult to define. As one constituent of the “triple bottom line,” in community development, it is generally referred to as the “equity” element (e.g., Baker and Kusel 2003, Elkington 1998)⁵. Consider three aspects of this multivalent concept: distribution, capacity and empowerment. First, adopting equity as the standard demands that we ask of CBF not just “has it made the community better-off and distributed the benefits *equally*?” but rather, “has it made the *worst*-off in the community better-off? have those in the most marginal social categories participated? has the level of social inequity decreased in terms of voice, power, respect, material or other benefit?” This is a tall order for any social program. No wonder then, that one of the participants expressed the opinion about the CBFDP that, “the equity leg was the shortest.”⁶

Progress towards this objective begins to seem more feasible and, arguably, community forestry may be found better suited to the task, when the notion of social equity is broadened to incorporate the second aspect of equity: community capacity. A community’s capacity (comprised of its physical resources, individual skills, and collective ability to work together) is an indispensable building block of community-based forestry (FEMAT 1993). It is necessary to pull CBF off, and inevitably must be built up before reaching the point where it is ready to do so. Applying enhanced community capacity to CBF activities and objectives generates social and economic benefits that have the

⁵ Another term used in Ford Foundation parlance and sustainable development literature (e.g., Edwards 2005) is the “3Es:” equity, economy and ecology.

⁶ This observation has been made more generally about the U.S. community forestry movement as a whole (Baker and Kusel 2003).

potential to reduce inequity. Enhanced community capacity helps build more resilient and sustainable communities, i.e., communities that are better equipped to adapt to shocks and respond to opportunities.⁷ As one workshop participant put it, "sustainability ... requires sharing resources... peace requires social equity."

On the other hand, the notion of community capacity is not subsumable under equity. The skills and resources that enhance a community's capacity to act need not be equally distributed among members, nor will all residents and their interests be represented in the institutions that build up a community's organizational capacity. For the purposes of this analysis, the emphasis is on equity as the "social" component or objective of the community forestry triad. Clearly it is part and parcel of addressing the question "who benefits?" Moreover, the gains in equity that can transform social benefit to social justice are unlikely to occur without focused attention. Stated as a *proposition (#4)*: *In order to reduce inequity, community-based organizations must make equity an explicit target to which they hold themselves accountable.*

When community capacity is the goal, marginalized groups are often left out, as for example when entrepreneurial opportunity or training is offered to whomever comes forward, with no targeted outreach, extra support or culturally appropriate adaptation to enable inclusion of disadvantaged populations. A workshop participant made the point forcefully,

Once you get the ecology and economy floors built, you don't naturally progress to the third floor [equity]... yah, it may take longer than the project, but if it's not in the blueprint, not part of the vision, you'll never get there.

Can equity be achieved by the passive redistribution of benefit towards an "equal" state? Or, does it necessitate *empowerment*, such that the beneficiaries determine what needs will be met and how? (cf. Leach et al 1999). Addressing this third aspect of equity brings us back full circle to decision-spaces and access to resources.

Proviso

The intent here is not to promote one model as *the* yardstick for evaluating community-based forestry. In fact, if the CBF "stool" is viewed as an ideal, or long-term goal, and the CBF "house" is understood to model particular strategies, then both heuristics are compatible. One practical concept, suggested by a workshop participant, blends the two models. He proposed thinking of the three elements of CBF – ecology, economy, equity -- as axes along which progress can be visualized. This makes it easy to understand community-based forestry organizations as occupying a spectrum of possible positions mapped in three-dimensions (or, if more elements are added, in multi-dimensional space). Such an understanding removes the implication that if the results of a CBF initiative don't fall along the balanced trajectory (a line at 45 degrees to each axis), "*it's not really community forestry.*" Rather, the essential element of community-based

⁷ Cf. Walker et al. 2006 on resilience. Some define capacity to embrace resilience, or adaptability (Donoghue and Sturtevant 2007, FEMAT 1993).

forestry lies in its foundation: expanded decision-spaces and access to resources.

PART II -- Case Studies

Methods

The research questions for the CBFDP research team were generated and iteratively refined by interacting with representatives from all thirteen sites who attended the periodic Ford-sponsored meetings and associated training workshops. At the final workshop, we critiqued, amended and supplemented the draft report and analysis.

The author spent a total of two months in the field, one month at each of the two sites comprised of three visits at each over course of three years (2004-6). I conducted individual or small group interviews with over 27 people at each site, including CBF staff members, local officials, agency employees, consultants, and members of other community-based organizations. I visited farms in Alabama and the mill site and woodworking shops in New Mexico. I also attended meetings of the JBC and Federation, including several called to solicit feedback on my research plan and, subsequently, preliminary findings. Wherever possible, I have incorporated these responses, as well as comments on the draft report and discussions by email. I also reviewed documents produced by the Federation, the JBC, other researchers, and the Aspen Institute (the managing partner for the Ford Foundation).

Federation of Southern Cooperatives

Context

The Black Belt Legacy Forestry Program, funded by the Ford CBFDP from 2000-2005, is run from the Rural Training Center of the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund. The sprawling grounds, its demonstration fields and forests, barns, dormitories and meeting hall, are located in Sumter County, western Alabama, on the border with Mississippi. Sparsely populated⁸ and heavily timbered,⁹ Sumter County lies in the heart of the Black Belt, so called because of its fertile soils and predominantly African American population (73% in Sumter (U.S. Census 2000)). Prior to the Civil War, the Black Belt was the center of the cotton plantation economy in Alabama, with Sumter serving as the major population hub in the state. At that time, nearly half of the county's residents were slaves, many of whom later stayed on as sharecroppers and eventually landowners (Thornton 1978).

While cotton has been replaced by loblolly pine and cattle pasture, making the area again rich in resources, its legacy of stark poverty remains. Today the

⁸ 16.4 per sq. mi., US Census (2000)

⁹ 69.2% forest land in 1999 (USDA Forest Service, Forest Inventory and Analysis. Data Base Retrieval System. <http://www.srsfia.usfs.msstate.edu/scripts/ew.htm>)

forestry sector is the county's most valuable.¹⁰ Yet this increasingly mechanized industry yields little local benefit, as Bliss et al (1998: 405) observe,

Alabama's forest-resource-rich counties are among the poorest counties of the state... although the pulp and paper industry has brought jobs and wood markets to rural Alabama, the counties in which the mills are located continue to lag behind the rest of rural Alabama (and the rest of the United States) with respect to the percent of households living below poverty, median family income, and other measures of economic well-being.

With unemployment figures consistently twice the state average and almost half its children living in poverty (U.S. Dept. of Labor, U.S. Census 2000), Sumter County is a case in point.

Despite limited financial resources, many African Americans in Sumter County have access to forest resources on their own lands. However, this is disappearing with the small farm, with black farmers losing their land at the fastest rates.¹¹ Moreover, the forests on the remaining black-owned farms have been subject to fragmentation to the extent that forest management has become problematic and rarely remunerative (Gan et al. 2003, Schelhas 2000). Not only are their properties often too small for profitable timber production, in many cases the land is held communally by a group of heirs, some residing far away. This leads to negative legal and financial complications, and increases vulnerability to land partition and tax sales (Dyer 2007, Thomas et al. 2005). According to local informants, outright timber theft and inadequate payment for (often damaging) timber harvests are rampant.

The long, dark history of discrimination facing black landholders is not over.¹² It continues to drive land loss and underproduction. Lack of access to government extension and credit services, compounded by low levels of income and education, limit capacities to pursue existing options to manage land beneficially (Gan et al 2005, Gilbert et al. 2002, Schelhas 2002). Out-migration from rural areas has left mostly the elderly on the land (Dyer 2007, Gan et al 2003).

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives, founded in 1967 by leaders in the Civil Rights movement, has been battling ever since to lay a foundation in fair access to resources to enable the attainment of social equity -- its first floor, or pre-eminent objective. Completing this floor will enable its constituency to establish a second-tier objective of economic benefit. While discussions with member farmers revealed a strong bond with the land and a desire to steward it for succeeding generations, ecological considerations clearly rank a distant third.

¹⁰ Alabama State Data Center, Center for Business and Economic Research, <<http://cber.cba.ua.edu/asdc.html>>

¹¹ Dyer (2007) citing United States Department of Agriculture and U.S. Department of Commerce statistics, shows a 94.9% decline in farms operated by African Americans in Alabama over a roughly 50 year period (1954-2002). The comparable rate for whites was 68%.

¹² Witness the 1997 class action lawsuit (now *Pigford v. Johanns*) filed against the USDA for discrimination against black farmers. Although the case was settled in favor of the farmers, more than 70,000 were excluded from receiving payment because they lacked evidence or missed the deadline (Dyer 2007, Gilbert et al 2002).

The CBF Demonstration Project

Promoting sustainable timber management, a long-term investment, to a population with pressing short-term needs and expectations, it was perhaps predictable that the Federation's CBF project would get off to a slow start. After some time, it hit upon a popular solution. The program now centers on agroforestry, in the form of a silvopastoral system in which goats, bred for the meat market, produce short-term income. With rotational fencing, goats can be used to clear land for planting, kept out of areas with new seedlings, and later be returned to keep down competing vegetation once trees are well established. By producing a regular income, which the planned producers cooperative would enhance, goat-raising can help keep the land in farming and keep it in the family by helping pay the taxes. Through maintaining the land in farm and forest, and thereby protecting it from development, community-based agroforestry generates ecological benefit.

Decision-space

While African-American smallholders are nominally the decision-makers on their own land, the barriers outlined above impede their ability to formulate and implement effective decisions as individual households. So, as the project leader explained, before the project could make any attempt to tackle forest management decisions *per se*, they had to create a collective decision-space:

Basically the first thing we did ... we organized. While we were organizing, we kept in mind that we wanted to create a space where people have a voice. What comes first is organizing -- it's giving everyone a voice and then you bring them together... You establish the process where everyone can speak up and share ideas.

Access to resources

In a private lands context, community-based forestry is not so much about changing who makes decisions about forest management, as it is about providing the secure and equitable access to resources that enables forest landowners to make informed decisions about how their land is managed – and that moves desired options within reach. Thus, one of the primary ways the Federation supports community forestry is through maintaining its pre-requisite: land retention, or secure land tenure. Although this endeavor, a key plank of the Federation, was not directly supported by the Ford Foundation's CBFDP, it underlies its success.

The Federation provided direct access to resources to 18 (and counting) demonstration farmers, who, in return for a three-year commitment to maintain the goats, host visitors and share information and experience with other farmers, received either breeding goats or assistance in erecting fencing and sheds. Some of the offspring of Federation-bred goats (self-reproducing capital) are distributed to other farmers.

The Federation helps develop human capital: knowledge, information, techniques, skills and the awareness of opportunities for supplementing income and deriving other benefits from managing trees and goats. The project team

held workshops in goat-rearing, cooperatives, and forestry planning and management; hosted visits to its on-site goat and forestry demonstration plots; produced and disseminated brochures on forest and goat management; responded to numerous calls for information and advice; and sponsored peer-to-peer learning opportunities and exchanges. Helping initiate and support relationships among landowners catalyzed the formation of informal social networks, another form of capital.

In forestry and animal husbandry, as in other elements of its work, the Federation delivers access by bridging gaps in the delivery of governmental resources to its underserved “minority and limited-resource” farmers. The Federation (prior to the Ford grant) had advocated successfully to the Alabama Forestry Commission for creation of “outreach forester” extension positions dedicated to this population. It was able to broker Forestry Commission assistance to a few of these farmers in developing forestry management plans. Through a combination of advocacy to government officials and awareness- and confidence-building, it is likely that the Federation has played a significant role in expanding black farmer’s access to other agricultural public programs. The Federation also bridges the exchange of resources between farmers and universities (as well as other researchers). It advertises to and sponsors farmers to attend workshops, conferences and meetings held by universities, government institutions and others, while it supplies researchers, extensionists and politicians with access to farmers. The research, services and policies to which the farmers provide input have a much better chance of being accurate and useful to small, low-income and black landowners as result.

Greater access to markets and credit are key needs of that group as well, and the Federation has been helping catalyze the formation of a goat meat producers cooperative that would address this gap, at least in one sector. While the coop was still in a prolonged outreach and organizing phase by the project’s end, participants and staff feel that the multiple meetings held, first to determine that a coop was the best way forward and then to implement it, have catalyzed the creation of another “space where people have a voice,” where they can make collective decisions, i.e., a decision-space.

By providing a consistent source of funds through a lean period in the Federation’s history, the Ford grant also contributed access to resources for the organization as a whole. It thus indirectly supported black landowners’ political presence, advocacy, legal advice, agricultural services, social capital and other forms of assistance without which community-based forestry would not be a realistic option. In this sense, the project contributed to overall gains in resource access and effective decision-making power (proposition #1) that outstrip the social-change making potential of CBF alone.

Outcomes -- Distribution of Benefits

The demonstration farmers are relatively more prosperous, educated and progressive in their farming practices than are other smallholders. All of these households contain at least one member who is either employed part time or

receiving a pension. The demo farmers include a number of women and one white couple.

Data are lacking to assess the indirect benefits received by the many farmers who learn from what the demo farmers are doing, or who have attended any of the Federation's meetings, workshops and field visits. However, since lack of access to capital, a high discount rate on returns to investment, and aversion to risk often characterize "limited resource" farmers, it is a fair assumption that those that then gamble on goats or who undertake active forest management are similarly better off and better educated. This is a commonly observed phenomenon associated with "technology adoption" by farmers around the world (e.g., Franzel 1999).

In general, the landless poor, migrant workers and urban dwellers are not able to avail of the resources provided through the CBF project. However, the CBF staff and on-site demonstrations support the Federation's youth garden and forestry camps, which are open to non-landowners.

Because the Federation explicitly attacks inequity by targeting disadvantaged members of the local community (although not necessarily the most marginalized among them), it has some among that target group, black smallholders, better off and thereby reduced inequity (proposition #4). In so doing it bypasses the local white elite, and thereby challenges the implication of proposition #2 that the most powerful in the community will necessarily grab the benefits of CBF. By addressing racial dynamics and cultural preferences directly and offering services and opportunities consistent with their values and constraints, the Federation is able to gain the trust and involvement of black landowners. The fact that participation and direct benefits are largely limited to the relatively better-off principally reflects their lower constraints and greater receptivity. However, the implication of proposition #3 that the benefits of CBF will be restricted exclusively to those who personally gain resource access and decision-space was not borne out. The Ford CBDFP strengthened the Federation, while the Federation's trusted reputation and organizing, land retention and advocacy work provide essential context for community-based forestry. Thus, the benefits generated by the project and the institution in many respects cannot be distinguished. The CBF initiative modeled the prospect of sustainable, income-generating management of small, black-owned landholdings and demonstrated what kind of knowledge input and other external support it requires. In so doing it benefited the wider community by helping to transform the attitudes about what it is possible for minority and resource-limited farmers to achieve, what kind of resources they can access, and what sort of services they deserve.

The Jobs and Biodiversity Coalition

Context

The Jobs and Biodiversity Coalition came together in Grant County, New Mexico, under highly polarized conditions. Its home base, the village of Santa Clara, borders on the vast, rugged, and remote Gila National Forest. During the

preceding years of conflict, environmental organizations faced off against extractive industry and the U.S. Forest Service. Beginning in the late 1980s they began to deploy appeals and litigation and eventually brought active forest management to a standstill. Further hampered by its own lack of funding, by the mid-90s the Forest Service was effectively forced to cut off access to the forest by contractors, choking off the local supply of wood.

Extending to within ninety miles of the border in Southwestern New Mexico, Grant County is one of the least densely populated in the United States.¹³ Despite its rural nature and geographic isolation, Grant County has been tightly linked to the global political economy by its historic and on-going dependence on the mining industry. The Phelps Dodge Corporation (the second-largest global producer of copper) operates two mines and a smelter in the county. Phelps Dodge and its predecessors shed workers on a periodic basis, with the last round of massive lay-offs bringing the county-wide unemployment rate up to 14% in 2003 (U.S. Dept. of Labor).

The traditional land and natural resource-based sectors of agriculture and forestry employ just under 5 percent of the county workforce (U.S. Census 2000). Other than employment by the U.S. Forest Service, there are very few forestry or timber-related jobs in Grant, nor have there ever been many. The last local sawmill out of the few that operated in the southern part of the forest shut down in the early 1980s when the supply of large-diameter logs was cut off by environmental litigation and unfavorable macro-economic trends in the industry.

After an extended period of relatively high earnings that lasted until 1982, per capita income declined fairly dramatically compared to the rest of the U.S., reaching 62% of the national average in 1999. That year 15% of Grant County families were living in poverty (U.S. Census 2000). In 2002-2003, 57% of public school students county-wide received free or reduced-price lunches, that number rising to 75% in the mining district (Grant County Community Health Council 2004), where the JBC is headquartered in the village of Santa Clara. Almost half the residents of Grant County are of Hispanic/Latino origin, with a large cluster in the mining district (GCCHC 2004).

The diverse physical landscape of the county extends from thick forest in the north to semi-arid desert in the south. The Gila National Forest covers approximately 3.5 million acres, comprising about half of the total land in the county. Over a century of heavy livestock grazing, widespread logging, and fire suppression have led to current environmental problems, notably an increase in the size and severity of fires. The threat (and periodic reality) of catastrophic wildfire has become the burning environmental issue for the Forest Service, environmental groups, and the community alike – continuation of the “no management” option no longer appeals.

The CBF Demonstration Project

In 1999, the executive director of the Cooperative Ownership and Development Corporation (CODC), a local non-profit organization, applied for the planning phase of the CBFDP. During that year, in response to the grant

¹³ 7.8 persons/square mile (U.S. Census, 2000)

opportunity , the CODC brought in the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), a locally-based, regionally influential environmental organization. The CBD had been engaged in efforts to initiate forest restoration work with the US Forest Service and Gila WoodNet, a local non-profit. These core partners brought in a suite of others, all of whom were united by a common interest in implementing a CBF project. Beyond this, the JBC has never formed a formal organization; rather the coalition defines its “members” as those who share its purpose, attend its meetings, and join in project activities. That shared purpose is, in the words of a co-founder, to promote “low impact forest restoration that yields wood that is used to optimize job creation and economic development.”

Decision-spaces

At the inception of the CBF project in 1999, there was essentially no access to the Gila National Forest for the purpose of cutting trees (other than a few cords of firewood). Those gates had been slammed shut. The situation had arisen due to a combination of factors: shifts in the timber industry in response to globalization and mechanization, neoliberal cuts in the Forest Service budget, and the oft-implemented threat of litigation by environmental groups (the CBD in particular). Finding common ground in “restoring the forest” emerged as the solution, leading the nascent JBC to premise its project on obtaining access to the National Forest to remove small-diameter timber. It took over two years of concerted effort before the JBC was able to pry open the rusty gates of the Forest and to re-start the flow of wood in Grant County.

In order to achieve this breakthrough it was first necessary for the JBC to insert itself into the stalemated decision-making process of the Forest Service. In essence, it had to create a new decision space. The opportunity to gain in power and exercise influence over an expanded range of issues followed from the creation of a new *process*, or way of making decisions, with a new role for (elements of) the community.

The three key founding members undertook the first challenge even before the JBC was formed. A courageous local environmentalist, an enterprising local small wood-based business owner, and an open-minded District Ranger were able to locate what has since become their mantra -- the “zone of agreement.” As they explain, where you find that zone is by focusing on an on-the-ground, in-the-forest, small-scale project. As one founding member put it, “Start with a project, not a grand plan, and leave aside other issues, about which you can agree to disagree.” This way, even mutually antagonistic groups can find common ground. He further explained, “Once we got into the forest, it was astounding how much we agreed on which trees should be cut. Immediately, our zone of agreement, and trust level, went up ten times!”

Having agreed on a restoration-based prescription for a small sale on the Gila was the first step. The next step was to neutralize the external opposition. Here it took the willingness of the environmentalist member of the trio to “lay his reputation on the line.” His credibility with local and national environmentalists was such that they agreed if he endorsed the forest practices proposed by JBC, they would not appeal them.

Achieving agreement alone was not enough, however. The subsequent step in gaining access to the trees was to shepherd the sale through the NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) process. To do this not only required bureaucratic skill, it required capital, since the Forest Service was broke. The JBC, which had acquired access to capital through the Ford project, was able to step in.

This pattern has persisted past the end of the Ford project: the JBC gains a seat at the decision-making table at least in part because it has funds to contribute (as well as the capacity to do the work); the JBC subsequently pays for the actual forest restoration work and/or NEPA process out of its own grants money. “Bringing money to the table” has enabled the JBC not only to gain access to the forest, but also to influence the type of forest management that occurs.

Moving from a bureaucratic decision-making process, in which “public comment” and formal appeals were the only entrées for external input, to a collaborative one, in which local parties not only participate with the Forest Service in making management decisions, but are regularly consulted by them, constitutes a tremendous achievement. The Forest Supervisor credited the JBC with making a national impact:

The JBC changed a lot of attitudes, changed a lot of minds... This has had repercussions across the Forest Service, not just in other districts, but across the region and the country... because people inside and outside the Forest Service could see what’s happened – that work is going forward without appeals... thinning is happening, wood is coming off... I’ve given talks around the country on our experiences with collaboration...

Members of the JBC, and the example provided by their experience, have been influential in a number of policy arenas, e.g., the federally legislated, state-run Community Forestry Restoration Program and the Western Governor’s Association. The latter in particular has had a significant role in generating policy for federal public lands management. Through alliances facilitated by participation in the CBFDP, the efforts of the JBC and other CBF groups have been instrumental in instituting collaborative process in several federal policies, such as stewardship contracting and community wildfire protection plans.

While the beneficial impact of this new way of making decisions on forest management has been widespread, the participation in the decision space created was much more narrow. JBC members have defended the limited range of participation by contending that they could not have succeeded under the bureaucratic and conflict-ridden conditions prevailing if they had diluted their focus even slightly. The coalition has stayed unstructured and *ad hoc* and has resisted incorporating in any way or developing by-laws. Their attitude is, “Why change what’s working?” While meetings are open, they are not advertised.

Although a local sportsman and several members of the Hispanic community and have attended a number of meetings, only one persisted in his involvement (a Hispanic Forest Service retiree employed by the project). As a result, they have stuck with the same core group of people – a group that can draw on years of personal experience to take a “sophisticated approach” to

working with the Forest Service. Thus, without necessarily intending to be exclusive, the JBC have effectively limited access to the decision space they have opened up to those with narrowly focused interests and access to specialized knowledge, a group that is largely comprised of well-educated Anglo males.

Access to Resources

The dedicated and persistent efforts of the JBC unlocked the forest gate, providing access to contract work and the woody biomass removed in the course of forest restoration. In addition to JBC member Gila WoodNet, at any given time there are usually two to four small thinning outfits operating on the national forest and, periodically, on private lands. The wood they extract constitutes a resource for local businesses and consumers. Many of the contractors produce firewood, a locally valued commodity that lower income people often find difficult to obtain or afford. GWN aims to be able to sell firewood year round at the same reasonable price. Firewood is but one of the products coming off of the integrated processing line that GWN has been assembling incrementally by stretching grant dollars through some creative sourcing and re-tooling of used parts. In addition they produce logs (for *vigas*, cabins, trusses and pallets), wood for furniture, slabs for fencing, chips for landscaping, and compost from waste.

These products provide the inputs for nine other small businesses, all located in Santa Clara. Together these businesses (including GWN) employ twenty or more people, thus providing the community with access to much-needed employment.

Receiving a prestigious grant, with the associated capacity-building and networking it enabled, provided the JBC with a track record and the matching funds to leverage additional capital. In addition to the \$635,000 from the Ford Foundation, members of the coalition have been able to leverage over two million dollars in eleven different grants from state and federal sources in a little over five years.

A significant portion of this funding has been invested in infrastructure: in developing and producing low-impact logging equipment and the wood sort and processing yard. Access to these forms of fixed capital has been made available to the other small start-up businesses previously mentioned, with the door left open for others with adequate initiative to enter.

Another resource JBC has brought to the community is knowledge and information. The coalition consulted with leading forest ecologists regarding the most appropriate forest restoration prescriptions, holding a workshop for academics, agency staff and practitioners, and producing a journal article. They have generated and shared information on grant sources, grant-writing, equipment design, product development and markets. The forest operations and processing crews have received on-the-job training. The small businesses have received informal business incubation services from coalition partner GWN and have networked with each other to problem-solve and improve their products. In partnership with the Forest Service, the JBC supported three years of the Southwest Firefighters (SWFF) program, training a total of 92 youth (of whom 23

earned college credits). In the final phase of the Ford project, funds went to the Gila Conservation and Education Center to train and lead students from a local charter school in ecological monitoring on forest restoration sites.

Attempts to gain access to needed resources have not been uniformly successful. Access to markets remains an on-going challenge, particularly due to the limited size of local markets and high transportation costs to larger, urban markets. Finally, small business spin-offs from the community forestry project have been constrained by the lack of access to financial capital.

Outcomes – Distribution of Benefits

The Jobs and Biodiversity Coalition succeeded in putting the two crucial mechanisms for social change in place: expanded access to resources and participation in decision-making about forest management (proposition #1). Beyond these impacts, significant benefits in themselves, what positive social outcomes, if any, have resulted?

The local economy has been supplied with resources crucial to its development, starting with a key raw material input, namely, wood. Access to capital has opened up not only through grants obtained by GWN and other forest restoration/thinning contractors and product developers, but also through grant spending. For example, Santa Clara Woodworks, a JBC partner and one-man shop, subsidizes the nascent small businesses with which it collaborates by paying them out of grants, sometimes more than their work will earn. In addition, project monies have been invested in research and development and in the infrastructure that has been made accessible to local businesses.

Despite the newness and small scale of the businesses aided by the CBF projects, JBC members stress their disproportionate importance in the context of the mining district, which is otherwise nearly barren of economic activity. Ten small, entrepreneurial businesses or partnerships have sprung up in association with the JBC. As the name of the coalition indicates, jobs are the most socially important benefit of its efforts. In addition to the employment the JBC indirectly stimulated by re-opening work in the woods to other contractors, its efforts are directly responsible for typically 21 jobs, with pay ranging from little to a lot above Walmart wages. Economic multiplier effects are said to amplify the net impact of these businesses on the local economy, as not only wages, but more sale-dollars, value-added products, and local taxes (including on grants) are generated and circulated.

The JBC's community forestry efforts did transform decision-spaces and open up access to resources (proposition #1). The question then becomes -- to *whom*? We predicted (proposition #2) that this would reflect the distribution of power in the community, cultural values and preferences, and racial and ethnic dynamics. The results have borne this out, although only to a degree. Although the key players in Grant County who gained decision-making influence and access to resources are socially advantaged (mostly white, middle class, middle-aged men), they are not members of the local power elite (associated with the mining corporation), nor have they used their new influence only to advance their own interests.

In terms of the distribution of direct individual benefits of CBF: one out of nine business-owners was Hispanic, one was female, and the rest were white.¹⁴ Most were low-income with little in the way of personal savings or other access to capital. Almost all of the workers are from working class backgrounds; seven out of twelve were Hispanic, and two were female. Hispanics and whites each comprised exactly half of those receiving training from SWFF, while only 15 out of the 104 were women. While, apparently, opportunities are not restricted, in order redress inequity directly such openings would have to be skewed in favor of marginalized groups.

The JBC has provided capacity-building to start-up businesses and their employees, as well as other local non-profits. Beyond this limited circle, over the long haul, the coalition hopes to foster a shift in attitude and values that they believe will contribute to community resilience:

We really are creating a new *culture* of community forestry. It's going to take a couple of generations...I hope our legacy is one of stewardship... of forest restoration instead of commodity production.

Other realized and potential benefits register at levels of social organization above the individual. Perhaps chief among these are the (realized and potential) impacts of forest restoration itself – enhanced accessibility for recreation, intrinsic biodiversity and landscape values, and re-established ecosystem services, in particular a lifting of the threat of catastrophic wildfire. These manifest benefits, along with those mentioned above, at the community (multiplier effects of new economic activity), regional (transformation of conflict to cooperation) and higher (policy reform) levels, counter the implication of proposition #3 that the benefits of CBF will be restricted exclusively to those who personally gain resource access and decision-space.

Notwithstanding these benefits of JBC's community forestry work, it cannot thus far be said to have advanced social equity substantially. Minimally, as one associate of the project asserted, "All groups have to have buy-in... and ownership of the project. If you don't get buy-in, then they won't know if they've been benefited." By and large, most Hispanic and low-income residents of the county do not know that they have been benefited by the CBF project. This finding would tend to confirm the final proposition (#4) proposed in the introduction: *in order to reduce inequity, community-based organizations must make equity an explicit target and hold themselves accountable to it.*

Thus, the 'equity' leg of the community-based forestry 'stool' is still shorter than the others. However, do we then conclude that the JBC's endeavors are but a wobbly exemplar of community-based forestry, if indeed they qualify as such? Or, do we find that the JBC is engaged in progressively constructing a CBF house? We have shown how the coalition laid a solid foundation by expanding resource access and decision-space (proposition #1) and has made substantial progress in erecting the ecological and economic floors. It is arguable that the very qualities that made it successful in these efforts, its single-

¹⁴ Business and employment created indirectly through opportunities opened up to other contractors and NGOs are not included. The employment figures include only those working for the nine businesses referenced around July 2006.

mindful focus on forest restoration and utilization of the by-products, also render it ill-suited for tackling social inequity. Nonetheless, the potential is there for the third floor to be built up over the years – perhaps best undertaken not by JBC alone, but by a wider, collaborative construction effort, with grassroots community development organizations joining the crew.

Although the JBC has been criticized for a lack of community engagement, its community-base in fact has been essential to its success. Although its roots in the Grant County “community” may not spread wide, they go deep. Because the principals are rooted in the locality, they contribute local (and regional) knowledge – knowledge of the forest, the Forest Service, local and regional environmentalist groups, local business and more. Crucially, they also display the commitment to sticking it out on a long and bumpy road. As one of the principals averred,

It’s a slow process, with a lot of false starts. You have to start small and stay the course. That’s why this community control stuff is so critical, because of that need for long-term commitment.

Conclusion

In order to accomplish social change (and thereby also reach ecological goals), CBF transforms:

- *who* gets access to resources,
- *who* makes *what* decisions about forest management and related community development and *how* (i.e., decision-spaces),

and, as a result, who benefits. We have argued that, whether or not these outcomes are balanced evenly on three legs, when local communities are empowered to act through these mechanisms – expanded resource access and decision-spaces -- the essential and operative elements of community-based forestry are in place. The corollary propositions were largely borne out by evidence from the cases: benefits primarily flow to those who gained access and influence; the composition of this group reflects power, culture, and racial-ethnic dynamics; and reducing equity must be an explicit target to be efficacious.

The Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Jobs and Biodiversity Coalition, are examples of community forestry initiatives that better approximate a house under construction than a balanced stool. However, both are established on a foundation providing enhanced access to resources to the local community. The JBC also helped forge a new, collaborative mode of decision-making on public land, while the Federation has expanded the decision-spaces open to black farmers. Both have generated a wide range of benefits for their communities and surrounding forests.

It could be argued that maintaining a commitment to inclusive community, if not seeking social equity as an explicit goal, is an essential, defining element of community-based forestry. From another perspective, one might ask, “how much heavy lifting do we expect CBF to do?” Must each organization tackle social reform (against major odds), as well as economic development and ecological restoration? Or, is it enough to take a pragmatic approach, to “start from where we are,” build on community strengths and member passions, and seize upon

opportunities as they emerge? Is the CBF movement a big tent, encompassing a diversity of groups? Or, does the concurrent integration of social, economic and ecological aims constitute a threshold across which groups must pass to enter?

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