



Networking and rural development through sustainable forest management: frameworks for pluralistic approaches

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An examination of attempts to build social capital (networks built on relationships of trust) for rural development through sustainable forest management.

[Visiting a farmer organization's trial plot. Building relations of trust between local people and authorities is crucial](#)

The sustainability of rural development initiatives (including forestry) depends greatly on the capacities of the institutions involved, the relationships among them and their relative power. Therefore a strategy to foster pluralistic approaches to rural development should focus on building the capacities of those who have typically been marginalized by development strategies and discussions as well as on developing relationships that allow more effective, efficient and equal interactions and greater accountability among all participants.

This article develops this argument by first drawing lessons from research into the nature of interinstitutional relationships among non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governments and rural peoples' organizations (RPOs). It then links some of those findings to recent discussions of the role of networks, associations and relationships of trust (or what has been termed "social capital") in sustainable development, and suggests that these discussions provide useful frameworks for thinking about pluralistic strategies. The article then considers two experiences in building institutional capacities and relationships: one is a longer-standing case from Bolivia; the other a more recent initiative in Colombia. In the Bolivian example, the initiative has come from civil society, whereas in Colombia the initiative has come from government. The overall conclusion reached is that synergistic relationships can indeed be built. While some of the examples come from agriculture, their institutional lessons are equally applicable to the case of forestry.

The problem of pluralism: More is not necessarily better

A decade ago a paper entitled "Strength in diversity" captured much of the spirit that underlies enthusiasm for pluralist approaches to rural development (Thiele, Davies and Farrington, 1988). That paper discussed the experience of the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), the public sector agricultural research system serving the tropical lowlands of Bolivia. CIAT had been successful in establishing a range of collaborative relationships with NGOs and organizations of small- and medium-scale producers. These relationships, linking

organizations with different capabilities, constituencies and geographical outreach led to a regional research and extension system that was more efficient and effective than earlier state-dominated approaches.

That experience led to the recommendation that public sector research and extension systems should strengthen their linkages with NGOs and RPOs as a means of increasing their impact and of stretching their budgets in times of increasing fiscal stringency. Indeed, efforts in the late 1980s to reform the highland part of the Bolivian technology development system aimed at replicating the experience of CIAT in establishing links with NGOs, producer groups and others.

CIAT's experience sparked two research efforts on relationships between government, NGOs and RPOs in sustainable rural development (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993; Bebbington and Thiele, 1993). The Santa Cruz effort was clearly the most developed and effective case of such a pluralistic strategy. Elsewhere, linkages between NGOs, government and rural people's organizations were less developed and, at times, characterized by weak or no coordination, inefficiency and even conflict. Indeed, the attempt to reproduce the experience of CIAT in the highlands of Bolivia failed (Bebbington and Thiele, 1993).

[Farmer organization buildings in Ecuador. Social capital is dynamically related to human made capital, human capital and natural capital](#)

While the CIAT case demonstrated the potential benefits of institutional pluralism, in other cases the existence of multiple actors was disadvantageous and inefficient. All too often, constructive relationships were not developed and organizations did not learn from each other, made similar mistakes and competed for territory and clients. Where NGOs lacked links to government, they were unable to exercise any influence on government institutions to be more poverty-oriented. In many cases, groups did not draw on the resources of one another even when this could have strengthened them without compromising their autonomy.

Sometimes collaboration between government and non-governmental organizations could also have adverse effects, above all on NGOs. In particular, the increasing tendency of government to engage in contractual relationships with NGOs, under which the NGOs merely implemented government programmes, has often served to weaken the identity and legitimacy of NGOs, although it did provide them with much needed funding (Bebbington, 1997). Institutional pluralism, it appeared, was not inherently desirable. While in some cases pluralism could have positive implications, under other circumstances it could imply increased transaction costs and conflicts, and under at times it could also weaken some of the institutions involved in these relationships.

The question was: What factors facilitated positive interactions in an institutionally plural environment, and could these factors be introduced where they did not exist? One hint was that mutually beneficial collaborative relationships *between organizations* seemed to be a result of networks *among individuals* that cut across institutional boundaries and fostered a more general atmosphere of trust and collaboration, as well as shared ideas, among people and institutions from the state, civil society and business (Bebbington and Thiele, 1993; Tandler, 1997). The existence of this trust was due in part to the networks themselves - they conveyed information about people in other organizations. But history was also an important factor suspicion prevailed where trust had been broken in the past by one of the entities involved (as, for instance, during periods of authoritarian rule). This implied that it would be harder to build synergy in conflictive, authoritarian environments, although, as the case from Colombia will show, it is possible to rebuild trust and networks even under such situations.

[Facilitating involvement of local people in land use planning activities](#)

Social capital and sustainability: making pluralism work?

These observations regarding the potential importance of networks, civil society organizations and trust are consistent with recent interest in development circles in the concept of "social capital". This enthusiasm was initially fostered by Putnam's (1993) influential study of development and democracy in Italy. Putnam suggested that the critical factor in explaining regional differences in government effectiveness and development performance was to be found in corresponding patterns of social organization. He argued that regions with greater endowments of social capital (i.e. more numerous civil society organizations; social networks linking people in government, society and business; and relationships based on trust and shared values) enjoyed far greater mutual accountability among state, market and civil society and, as a consequence, were characterized by more efficient governments and more synergistic relationships between state and society (c.f. Evans, 1996). In areas with social structures based on authority and patron-client arrangements, citizen access to and control over state and market were far weaker, and the interactions between state and society were far less efficient.

Putnam's findings gave a broader-based theoretical framework against which development agencies could develop their interests in NGOs, participation, process projects, stakeholder preparation, civil society, etc. These latter concerns had either been specific to the level of "projects" and/or had proved difficult to link to broader, largely macroeconomic development concerns - and more particularly to the language of economics. Consequently, the social development agenda often ended up being "tacked on to" projects as an afterthought. The term "social capital" appeared to offer a way to integrate social development concerns into the very fabric of development models and thinking.

Sustainable development and sustainable livelihoods have been seen as being dependent on appropriate levels and mixes of four types of capital: human-made capital (financial resources, infrastructure, etc.); human capital (skills, knowledge, etc.); natural capital (natural resources); and social capital (social relationships) (Serageldin and Steer, 1994; World Bank, 1996). The tendency has been to suggest that social capital is the most important of the four, for it has the most significant influence on the efficiency and equity with which the other types of capital are combined at the household, local or national level. For instance, where local organizations and networks are strong, the benefits of training human capital formation are more likely to be put to socially positive use because of the sanctions that would be exercised by the organizations if those trainees were to use their training for more private gain. Similarly, strong RPOs can protect natural capital from irrational use by members (through the imposition of fines, punishments, etc.) and from degradation by external agents (through social mobilization). At a societal level, the greater the degree to which forest dwellers are organized at the regional and national levels, and linked to NGOs and government policy-making processes, the greater the likelihood that forests will be managed more rationally and that financial resources will be used to foster such rational use (as opposed to the types of irrational use fostered by tax breaks, cheap credit and other factors that have been reported in many cases [c.f. Binswanger, 1991]).

[A festival celebrating 500 years of indigenous resistance in Ecuador](#)

Endowments of social capital, therefore, may permit groups to be both more efficient in building and using the other forms of capital and more effective in influencing other actors. The protection and accumulation of the other forms of capital among traditionally marginalized social groups could be enhanced by building appropriate social relationships and organizations.

Can social capital be built?

The question then is: Can this social capital be built, and how? Putnam's (1993) study gives no guidance on this. However, other work suggests that there are varying ways in which social capital can be built through development intervention. Most efforts have been based on a 'bottom up' approach, based on building effective RPOs and strong networks that give them more synergistic and productive relationships with the market, government and other NGOs (Bebbington, 1996). However, there is also evidence that, under certain specific circumstances, social capital can be built from the "top down". In certain regions of Mexico, for instance, reformers in government have helped strengthen rural social organizations and link them more to the public sector (Fox, 1996). Tandler (1997) has identified cases from northeastern Brazil where government programmes have been able to build up civic organizations, where networks linking individuals inside and outside government have helped foster trust and collaboration between society and the state, and where as a result the efficiency and effectiveness of state programmes has been enhanced. Tandler's examples come from spheres as diverse as health services, agriculture, and small enterprise development (Tandler, 1997; see also Tandler and Freedheim, 1994). Social capital can, then, be built.

Case studies of building social capital for sustainable forestry and rural development

The following section discusses two cases to help identify workable strategies for building social capital and the circumstances under which they are possible. The first case focuses on successful social capital formation from the bottom up in Bolivia. The case discusses the emergence of federations of indigenous peoples that initially aimed to protect ethnic (forested) territories and subsequently linked this protection of territory to locally controlled programmes of sustainable, market-oriented forestry.

This process has been made possible by the development of relationships among indigenous peoples, NGOs and the church and, subsequently, between indigenous federations, NGOs and government organizations. The second case considers an attempt to build similar types of relationship, but from the top down. This case, which is from Colombia, is far shorter because the initiative is at a much earlier stage. It is included because it carries important lessons for what can be achieved by a public agency working in a conflictual situation where levels of trust and collaboration between government and NGOs are generally very low.

Building social capital from below: RPOs and forest management in lowland Bolivia

Introducing the actors

The humid forests of lowland Bolivia have been progressively degraded during the latter half of this century. For the many indigenous groups in lowland Bolivia this has implied incursions into their territories. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, indigenous resistance to these incursions took an organized form. The most significant event was perhaps the founding in 1982 of the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of the Orient, Chaco and Amazonian Regions of Bolivia (CIDOB). CIDOB was founded to represent four different indigenous groups and, above all, to help defend their territories. Since then, CIDOB has grown remarkably, and is now a confederation of federations of indigenous groups from all the non-Andean departments of Bolivia.

The growth of CIDOB has had much to do with support given to it by NGOs and others. One NGO in particular, Support for the Indigenous Campesino of the Bolivian Orient (APCOB), played a critical role in forming and consolidating CIDOB; indeed CIDOB and APCOB shared

office premises in CIDOB's early years. As CIDOB grew, it attracted the financial support of various funding organizations. This, plus its own internal processes of capacity building made it a significant force in Bolivian lowland (and subsequently national) development politics. As the Bolivian Government changed, and adopted more progressive policies *vis-à-vis* indigenous groups, it too helped contribute to the strengthening of CIDOB. Thus, in 1993, the central government created a Subsecretariat for Indigenous Affairs (staffed mainly by the more radical and intellectual elements within the government) which treated CIDOB as a principal interlocutor. Notably, though, the forestry agencies in the government have been far less supportive of the initiatives of indigenous organizations (Markopoulos, 1997).

While CIDOB was getting stronger, various other local federations of indigenous communities were also growing, with the support of NGOs and/or the Roman Catholic Church. One of these was the Intercommunity Federation of the Communities of Eastern Lomerío (CICOL), which links communities of Chiquitano people in Santa Cruz and was one of the founding members of CIDOB. Since its inception in 1982, CICOL has also been supported by APCOB (and the Franciscan order).

Both CIDOB and CICOL were created to defend territory and indigenous rights through more representative and political activities. Subsequently, they have also engaged in natural resource management and development activities. Through these activities - and as a result of the organizations' growing strength - they have been able to build strategic relationships with government and other organizations, with whom they would previously have shunned contact.

The following sections of this article discuss experiences of CICOL and CIDOB. As CICOL is a member of CIDOB, these experiences are closely related and demonstrate that different types and scale of RPOs may have different, but complementary, roles to play in fostering sustainable resource management.

From territorial defence to forestry enterprise in Lomerío

While the indigenous communities that are now members of CICOL had long ago cleared forest in order to farm, when roads began to open up the Chiquitania, a more serious threat came with the incursion of forestry enterprises. These enterprises entered the area partly by exploiting loopholes in land tenure legislation, and partly through their networks of contacts with local forestry authorities (Markopoulos, 1997).

CICOL's initial response was to intensify its struggle for "territorial defence", leading to violent encounters with the loggers. In time, though, CICOL's link with APCOB led it to pursue a different, less confrontational strategy. APCOB, with its wider networks of contacts and its knowledge of land and forest legislation, showed CICOL leaders that, by presenting a forest management plan, they could oblige the state to accept it in preference to the demands of forest enterprises and award CICOL a long-term concession over the forest superimposed on top of their existing land titles. With international financial support, APCOB helped CICOL to develop such a plan.

In 1986/87, the plan became a project, funded by Oxfam America, and two Dutch NGOs (SNV and HIVOS) (Markopoulos, 1997). The project linked forest management with income generation through a sawmill. A technical team (combining APCOB technicians and CICOL field promoters) identifies lands for logging. It also prepares inventories. Communities develop requests for logging (including communities with no forest of commercial potential within their own communal land). The team then assesses the technical viability of the logging plan, and approved plans are presented to CICOL's annual assembly. If approved, the logging is done by the technical team and the sawmill's qualified workers. The mill pays communities a fixed stumpage fee. Some timber is returned to the communities (especially for housing) and the remainder is sold commercially. The sawmill has a staff of some 40 people, 20 qualified

workers and 20 contract labourers who come on a rotating basis from the surrounding communities.

This programme has helped to defend the territory of CICOL's members and to keep other logging companies out of Lomerío. It has also produced timber needed by the community and has strengthened CICOL's external legitimacy. However, it has been weaker in other critical respects with the result that CICOL still lacks the internal capacity to run a successful enterprise. The mill was initially managed directly by CICOL but after a series of difficulties a tripartite directorate was created, comprising CICOL, APCOB and the Bolivian Sustainable Forestry Management Project (BOLFOR), a project linked to recent forestry legislation in Bolivia which seeks to foster sustainable forestry and private sector forestry initiatives.

A further problem was that, until 1996, the mill was not profitable and thus not sustainable as an enterprise - the enterprise had depended on subsidies from APCOB. This was partly due to a lack of management capacity and partly because of design problems (Markopoulos, 1997). By 1993, income did not cover operating costs and, as external subsidies were reduced, the mill began to fall into debt with communities. Yet, in 1996 the enterprise finally turned in a profit, made possible by a series of parallel initiatives in CIDOB.

CIDOB's Green Labelling Project

In 1993, CIDOB asked its funding agencies to suggest new projects that could simultaneously address the goals of grassroots economic development, protection of territory and environmental sustainability. The Dutch NCO, SNV, suggested the certification of forest products as one such option, and thus was born CIDOB's Green Labelling Project (PSV - Proyecto Sello Verde).

Given the progress that had already been made by CICOL, PSV decided that the best place to launch the certification process would be in Lomerío. PSV began to develop contacts with nationally and internationally recognized timber certifying- institutions and to examine critically recent Bolivian forestry legislation. This legislation is pro-business and a potential threat to indigenous territory, but the law also speaks of fostering sustainable forest management. Thus, CIDOB and APCOB concluded that the legislation and the resources of BOLFOR could be vehicles for furthering CIDOB's members' territorial concerns if, indeed, the state was required to enforce guidelines on sustainable forest management, and increasing the income that CIDOB's members might generate from their forests.

CIDOB and its partners set up an agreement with BOLFOR through which BOLFOR supports CIDOB in research and training and helps to develop international contacts with certifying agencies. In particular, BOLFOR helped create the Bolivian Council for Voluntary Forest Certification (CFV). BOLFOR also assisted CICOL in developing a marketing plan and market contacts for the sale of timber in the United States and Europe.

Through CFV and the certifying agency, and with SNV's financial support, CIDOB and CICOL arranged the (albeit provisional) certification of timber products from Lomerío. Exports of these products in 1996 gave CICOL its first profitable year, although many questions remain regarding the feasibility and long-term sustainability of certification-based initiatives.

The CICOL-CFV experience is a model that CIDOB can use as part of a strategy to push the Bolivian Government to ensure that the "sustainable" dimensions of the new forestry legislation are implemented. The development of "internal capacity" for forest management has thus also increased CIDOB's "external capacity" to make effective claims about the management of natural capital in lowland Bolivia.

Most significantly, a shared concern to foster more sustainable forms of forestry in Bolivia has made it possible to build synergistic relationships among organizations who have quite

different agendas at another level, and certainly different political and financial origins. While it is not necessarily possible or desirable to ignore all differences in outlook, many relationships have been built that might have seemed impossible a decade ago.

Building social capital from above: Technology development in Colombia

This second example, from Colombia, focuses on building human capital from above. Although it is from the agriculture and agroforestry sector, its implications stretch far wider, certainly to forestry. This is a "case in process", an initiative started two years ago and still only in its earliest stages - for that reason the lessons are perhaps all the more relevant for policymakers and -implementers.

In the 1980s, faced by growing civil unrest and severe problems of state legitimacy and capacity at the local level, Colombia embarked on a programme of government decentralization that aimed to pass more autonomy to local entities and to enhance the role and recognition of civil society organizations. These reforms led to the creation, in 1989, of the National System for Agricultural Technology Transfer (SINTAP). SINTAP aims to replace the largely top-down approaches in which the central government identified technology needs, with a more demand-driven and participatory approach that aims to respond more effectively to poverty alleviation and sustainability concerns.

The National Programme for Agricultural Technology Transfer (PRONATTA), based in the Ministry of Agriculture, was established to implement SINTAP. The programme operates as a demand-driven fund that cofinances technology development activities on the basis of annual calls for proposals. Any NGO or producer organization can present a proposal to PRONATTA.

As the programme is a fund, and does not "do" technology development, it has only a very small team - a group of very young professionals, not predominantly from the agricultural sciences, who have developed a positive relationship between PRONATTA, NGOs and small farmer organizations. Thus, while PRONATTA is, at one level, a mechanism for funding more demand-led forms of technology development, the central team views its more important role as being a vehicle for building the legitimacy of the Colombian state by redefining how the state relates to civil society. The state's legitimacy in Colombia has been seriously undermined for many reasons, and civil society organizations generally perceive it as corrupt, self-serving, unaccountable and inefficient. PRONATTA has therefore put great effort into:

- being as transparent as possible, by making clear and open to all concerned the criteria on which resource allocation decisions are made;
- placing as much decision-making power as possible in independent and anonymous panels of experts, as a means of taking resource allocation decisions outside politics, and basing them on clearly established and more or less widely disseminated technical and professional criteria; and
- protecting itself from political interference.

The team also views PRONATTA as an instrument for improving overall efficiency in an institutionally pluralistic environment. It tries to do this by being rigorous in applying high standards in judging proposals, and by inducing more competition in accessing funds for technology development. In particular, by opening up resources to NGOs and others. it pushes government technology services to become more efficient and competitive. It also provides resources and support to increase the technical capacity of civil society organizations in agricultural technology development, and to foster more constructive relationships among NGOs, RPOs, government technology services, PRONATTA and other state and private organizations.

PRONATTA has begun to have impacts on local social capital formation. Clearly these are early days but, since it began two years ago, PRONATTA has helped develop new regional networks of government and civil society actors. New government-NGO-RPO collaborations in technology development - previously very infrequent have occurred in response to PRONATTA's funding. Significantly, some of the networks and links that PRONATTA helped form around technology issues have now taken on a life of their own and are being used to discuss wider issues of regional development, education policy, etc. A significant and explicit investment in building institutional legitimacy on technical (as opposed to patronage) grounds has permitted PRONATTA to help strengthen social capital in rural Colombia, which in turn helps improve the overall effectiveness of relationships among organizations involved in agricultural development and natural resource management.

Conclusions

The emerging debate on social capital in development provides a useful framework for thinking about strategies in an institutionally pluralistic environment. It focuses attention on several important issues:

- the role that strong civil society actors can play in making state and market institutions work more effectively for local development;
- the very positive role that networks linking people who work in these different institutional spheres can play in making interinstitutional relationships more productive; and
- the role that these types of strong social relationship can play in retaining accountability for the use and distribution of other forms of capital, particularly human and natural capital.

[A meeting in Ecuador between representatives of community organizations and administrators of a rural development project](#)

The cases described in this article support these arguments. In particular they show that the quality of key relationships among individuals and organizations is critical in determining whether institutional plurality fosters more synergistic forms of development, as opposed to simply more conflict and inefficiency.

The article also argues that one particular civil society actor, the RPOs, can play an important role in fostering sustainable resource management and livelihood development. In the case of the lowlands of Bolivia. RPOs have protected natural capital from degradation by external forces, although often for reasons that are more related to the protection of indigenous territory than to forest management per se. However, for this protection to be maintained, these RPOs need to identify economic incentives for sustainable forestry. This requires that these organizations initiate new types of activity (such as new forms of extraction and production, dealing with new markets, etc.).

The strategies and institutional capacities required for pursuing such income-generation objectives often differ from those that RPOs have developed in pursuing their more political roles. RPOs that have been successful in taking on these new types of activity have also enjoyed significant support from key partners in forming human capital, rethinking internal structures, building new linkages to other actors and to the market and in creating new organizational forms.

Under specific circumstances, reformers and innovators within government structures can play a potentially important role in strengthening social capital, even when the wider context is quite adverse. Experiences also suggest that initiatives to build social capital through the state

ought first to identify strategies for rebuilding the legitimacy of government *vis-à-vis* civil society actors. Such legitimacy is an essential basis for building a more trusting and collaborative relationship, for building new networks and relationships and, thus, for making institutional pluralism more effective.

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