

Linkages between Community Forestry and Poverty

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Vision

Local communities in the Asia-Pacific region are actively involved in the equitable and ecologically sustainable management of forest landscapes.

Mission

To enhance capacities at all levels to assist people of the Asia-Pacific region to develop community forestry and manage forest resources for optimum social, economic and environmental benefits.

RECOFTC is an international organization that works closely with partners to design and facilitate learning processes and systems to support community forestry. It seeks to promote constructive multi-stakeholder dialogues and interactions to ensure equitable and sustainable management of forest resources.

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Acronyms

CBFM	Community-based forest management
CF	Community forestry
FUG	Forest User Group
ha	hectare
JFM	Joint Forest Management
PO	People's organization
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Program
RECOFTC	Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and the Pacific

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Don Gilmour,¹ Yam Malla² and Mike Nurse³

INTRODUCTION

RECOFTC conducted a review of the linkages between community forestry and poverty, with an emphasis on Asia. The analysis shows that there is some clear empirical evidence through case studies, that community forestry has provided some tangible benefits to poor people. The evidence is, however, limited to a few cases and there is no clear evidence of scaling-up. This has, in fact, been a general pattern across the whole development sector, not just within forestry. There have not been, until recently, specific strategies for addressing poverty through community forestry, rather agendas focusing on indigenous people and improving the environment.

The review demonstrates, however, the large potential of community forestry to deliver poverty related outcomes and to scale-up these approaches.

EXTENT AND CURRENT STATUS OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN THE ASIAN REGION

The important role that forests play in rural livelihoods, especially of the poor, is generally well recognized. In the late 1970s, in countries such as India, Nepal and the Philippines, it was generally perceived that widespread deforestation had led to environmental degradation, and that governments acting alone were not able to reverse the trends. Of particular concern was reduced access by local communities to forest products such as fuelwood and fodder that were critical to the maintenance of rural livelihoods. Community forestry⁴ as an identifiable implementation strategy evolved in its contemporary form at this time, and came onto the international agenda as an approach to address widespread forest loss and its consequent environmental degradation and negative impact on rural livelihoods.

The first 10-15 years of effort in implementing community forestry in countries such as India, Nepal and the Philippines was spent in developing, testing and institutionalizing approaches aimed at effectively involving rural communities in the active protection and management of forests. The protection and rehabilitation of degraded forests and the establishment of new forest resources were major policy and practical objectives. This is still the case for many countries in the Asian region where community forestry (under its various guises) has come onto the national agenda during the past decade. Utilization of the rehabilitated and regenerated community forests in India, Nepal and the Philippines has only commenced during the past decade and in other countries in the region it is barely being considered.

In some countries, community forestry has moved well beyond the pilot stage to become a mainstream and well accepted form of forestry in its own right (see Box 1 for examples). In other countries in the region (Bhutan, Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Vietnam), community forestry is a much more recent policy initiative, and is still in its formative stages.

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⁴ Community forestry involves the governance and management of forest resources by communities for commercial and non-commercial purposes, including subsistence, timber production, non-timber forest products, wildlife, conservation of biodiversity and environment, social and religious significance. It also incorporates the practices, art, science, policies, institutions and processes necessary to promote and support all aspects of community based forest management (RECOFTC 2004).

Box 1: The Extent of Community Forestry Worldwide

Nepal: Community Forestry (CF) (Kanel 2004; Kanel and Niraula 2004)

Since 1980, about 1.1 million ha of forest have been handed over to nearly 14,000 Forest User Groups (FUGs). About 1.2 million households are involved. Forest is handed over to FUGs after application to the Forestry Department and joint completion of a management plan. Supportive policies and legislation for CF have been adopted. About 25% of the national forest is now managed by more than 35% of the total population. There is evidence of marked improvement in conservation of forests (both increased area and improved density) and enhanced soil and water management, although some poorer groups suffer from less access to forest products than in the past. Retraining of foresters has been carried out to fit them for new roles as community advisors and extensionists.

India: Joint Forest Management (JFM) (Poffenberger 2000; Bahuguna 2001; Ram Prasad *pers.comm.*)

Over 62,000 village forest communities (approximately 75 million people and 14 million ha of forest) are participating with the Indian Forest Service across 26 states since 1988. The share of benefits to community varies from 25-50%, in return for people's inputs of labor and time. Policy and laws strengthening the role and rights of communities in forest management and use support these programs. Extensive re-training of forestry officials in JFM is conducted.

Philippines: Community-based Forest Management (CBFM) (Rene de Rueda *pers. comm.*)

Social forestry started in the mid-1970s. CBFM is a national strategy for management and conservation of forest resources. There are now 4,956 social forestry project sites, covering 5.7 million ha. Tenurial changes have been issued for 4.4 million ha of this land. The beneficiaries are 2,182 people's organizations (POs) involving 496,165 households. Management of forest is transferred to POs after application is approved and a CBFM agreement is issued. POs prepare a community resource management framework for their forest. Policies, rules and regulations to support CBFM are in place. A pending Act will institutionalize CBFM and strengthen rights of communities to manage forests.

Africa (Alden Wily 2002)

Results of a community-based wildlife program in Zimbabwe (CAMPFIRE) provided major incentive for community management in other countries. Many countries have new legislation allowing community management. An upcoming law in Tanzania has led to over 500 village forest reserves and 1,000 clan-owned forests since 1996. Innovative CF initiatives exist in Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mozambique, The Gambia, South Africa and several other African countries.

Europe (Jeanrenaud 2001)

Strong public concerns about environment led to moves from industrial management of public forests, to multi-purpose management with increasingly participatory decision-making. In addition, there are 11 million forest-owning families, many belonging to 'community organizations' that provide information and marketing services and represent them on policy matters. Forest Commission and Local Councils support a network of 12 community forests across England.

Canada (Haley 2001; Poffenberger and Selin 1998)

There has been a push from some communities to manage local forests – mainly because of vast loss of biological and timber resources. The Model Forests Program in early 1990s gave impetus to CF in some areas. In British Columbia, a new Act will allow communities to manage their local forests in partnerships with government. Requests were received from 88 communities for CF licenses under the British Columbia Community Forest Management Pilot Project.

Unites States of America (Kusel and Adler 2001; Poffenberger and Selin 1998)

There has been considerable growth in community-based approaches to management of forests, lakes, watersheds and pollution. The main drivers have been environmental movements and frustration by communities over their "lack of voice" in local forest management issues.

Worldwide (Pretty and Frank 2000)

Between 1990 and 2000, more than 320,000 communities with over 10 million people formed natural resource management groups (watershed, forest, micro-finance, pest management).

At the global level, various forms of community involvement in forest management are becoming more widespread and accepted. Presently 11% of the world's forests are managed by communities, a far greater area than is managed by the forest industry, and about the same area as all private landholders combined. This figure is expected to rise from 378 million ha of community owned and managed land in 2001 to 740 million ha by 2015 – representing 45% of the world's forest estate (Bull and White 2002). Much of this area is managed under some form of collaborative arrangement involving sharing power between stakeholder groups.

BENEFIT FLOWS FROM COMMUNITY FOREST MANAGEMENT

One of the underlying articles of faith of community forestry is that human well-being will be enhanced. However, this is not well documented. It is only in recent years that significant benefits have commenced to flow from community managed forests in those countries where community forestry is well accepted and established. This has provided impetus to addressing distributional issues – specifically equity and poverty – particularly since poverty alleviation has become a mainstream objective of rural development programs in most countries.⁵

The success of community forestry in increasing the area and quality of forests, especially in countries such as Nepal, is now reasonably well documented. During the past few years, reports of the financial and other benefits that are being generated from community forests are also coming to light (see Box 2).

It can be argued that many, if not most, of the members of the FUGs referred to in Box 2 are beneath the poverty line. Consequently, most of the benefits generated from the community forests contribute directly to poverty alleviation. However, analyses suggest that there are many distributional issues, with many of the benefits flowing to local elites, and in some cases very poor people being made relatively, if not absolutely, worse off.

Furthermore, human well-being benefits of community forestry practice (and to a large extent policy) have generally been considered in terms of rural livelihoods in general rather than poverty in particular. Though community forestry was always linked to poor people, there have not been, until recently, any specific strategies linked to operational methodologies to address poor people's needs. This is now changing (see Box 3), but empirical examples are few. This is partly because they are so rarely documented and partly because even where evidence exists, there are good reasons for thinking that many of the claims about benefits are inconclusive, as they ignore equity aspects and the opportunity costs of engaging in programs (Fisher 2000).

It can also be argued that development providers in other sectors that have been perhaps more explicitly involved in poverty alleviation (including *inter alia*, community health, micro-enterprise development, savings and credit, cooperatives, agriculture and livestock development) have also had limited impact on the poor (Pandey 1999, quoted in Forest Action 2000). A recent study in Nepal found that pro-poor NGOs (Action Aid Nepal, Care Nepal, Lutheran World Federation Nepal and Oxfam/Great Britain) have in fact had most success with community forestry as an implementation modality (NORMS 2003).

⁵ Defining poverty has become one of the issues affecting the accurate analysis of development impact on poverty. We do not attempt to resolve the problem of definition here.

In macro-level poverty literature and policy making, generally little recognition is given to the role of forests. There remains great potential to improve the way forestry is perceived in poverty reduction or prevention. There is scope for integrating forest issues into poverty reduction strategies (Angelsen and Wunder 2003). In terms of strategic approaches and methodologies, there are few examples of strategic approaches and even fewer examples of methodologies that are designed specifically to address this issue. Even in countries such as Nepal, where community forestry has been demonstrably successful by many criteria, the need for an explicit pro-poor approach to community forestry has only recently been identified. The 4th National Community Forestry Conference in Kathmandu in August 2004 recommended such an approach, and this is likely to flow into the agenda of national implementation agencies and projects.⁶

Furthermore, in most countries, tangible benefits from community forestry have barely started to flow because of the considerable lag time between the establishment of effective community forestry regimes and the commencement of utilization. Hence, the potential future benefits are clearly enormous.

Box 2. Income Generation from Community Forests in Nepal

A rapid appraisal of forest product utilization, income and patterns of expenditure of 1,788 FUGs from 12 hill and Terai districts in Nepal was carried out in 2002 and extrapolated to all FUGs in the country. The results indicated that the total annual cash income from the sale of forest products from community forests was Rupees 747 million (more than US\$ 10 million). This amounted to almost 42% of the annual budget of the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation. At the present time 100% of these benefits are going to the FUGs.

To this figure can be added the cash equivalent of subsistence forest products and other income generated by the user groups, which was estimated to bring the total income to Rupees 1.8 billion (almost US\$ 24 million).

About 36% of the income from community forests was spent by the FUGs on community development activities such as building of schools, roads and drinking water facilities. Only 3% was targeted towards specific pro-poor activities.

Source: Kanel and Niraula (2004)

⁶ One recommendation was that a minimum of 25% of the income generated by FUGs should be directed to the poorest of the poor.

Box 3. Emerging Empirical Evidence of the Impact of Community Forestry on Poverty**Vietnam** (Apel *et al.* 2001)

A recent study in Vietnam demonstrated that poor people have been benefiting from cash income at household level from allocation of land under Forest Protection Contracts. Though poor households have no actual role in the management of forests, the revenue received for protection had been distributed equitably by communes. A strategy for community-based natural resource management to benefit poor households was also proposed and presented to the National Community Forestry Working Group.

Lao PDR (Foppes and Ketphanh 2000, quoted in Fisher 2000; Nurse and Soydara 2001)

In one village in Oudomxay province, the villagers had faced rice deficiency for part of the year. Although individuals earned cash from collection and sale of bamboo shoots, the income was inadequate. An IUCN-NTFP Project team facilitated a series of village meetings which led to an agreement to 'team up' and sell collected bamboo shoots at fixed prices (by weight rather than number) and in a fixed place. Within a five-month period, the average income per family came to US\$ 130. This was 'at least four times more than the year before'. In addition, several hundred dollars were earned for a village development fund. In the context of rural incomes in Lao PDR, this amount is very significant for the poor households. The same project had also supported the development of rice banks to poor households to solve food deficit problems with a positive impact on forest conservation by reducing hunting levels during the food deficit period (wildlife was previously being sold to buy rice). Furthermore, poor households have been provided access to forests allocated to village authorities for the collection of subsistence products.

Thailand (Fisher 2000)

In Pred Nai village in eastern Thailand, villagers are attempting to renovate a mangrove forest damaged by commercial shrimp farming. They initiated a mangrove management planning process which is being facilitated by RECOFTC project staff. So far the plan includes regulations to prevent (or reduce) over-harvesting of mangrove crabs which are a major source of income for poorer villagers (one collector can earn as much as Baht 500 or US\$ 12 per day from crab collecting.) Management includes mangrove protection and regeneration, as well as planting of mangrove species. Community members clearly recognize that crab numbers depend on adequate supplies of food from mangrove tree species. There is a clear link between forest conservation activities and economic benefits. At Pred Nai, the benefits in terms of poverty alleviation are undisputed, but it is less certain that the management system, as it now stands, is sustainable. It is, however, undergoing continuous development and there are good reasons for optimism based on the commitment of the community.

Nepal (Pokharel and Nurse 2004)

The Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project has been developing field methodologies for pro-poor community forestry for two years. Focus group and household interviews with the poorest FUG members have shown that poor FUG members have gained most from education scholarships; (in some groups) free forest products; support in the case of a crisis (e.g. free fuelwood upon the death of a family member or cash support in the case of sickness of a family member). These options are not yet institutionalized across all FUGs, but methodologies for building good forest governance are now providing the foundation for institutionalizing these and other pro-poor options. Integrated development planning is another strategy that uses the FUG institution as a coordinating body for broader development assistance to fit the poor's needs in health, water, education and food security.

On an additional cautionary note, it seems that the idea of linking forest conservation with poverty alleviation can sometimes be seen as being mostly about meeting conservation objectives and poverty alleviation seen as a means to that end, not as a simple matter of human rights. Fisher (2000) notes:

A somewhat different view, motivating many advocates of the incentives approach (Hinchley pers. comm.) is that local people must be compensated for the costs of conservation and that conservation methods must be implemented as equitably as possible. Both of these positions tend to share the characteristic that conservation goals are non-negotiable. Unless the objective of enhancing human wellbeing is taken seriously as a fundamental prerogative in itself, the approach can become just another form of neo-colonialism [Fisher 2000: 9].

The challenge for the future, therefore, is to see how the significant benefits that can accrue from the management of forests by communities can be used explicitly to alleviate rural poverty. Much remains to be learnt, though there are encouraging empirical examples demonstrating that much can be achieved with further testing and consequent scaling-up of successful approaches. A number of countries in the region have poverty alleviation as a key component on their development agenda, and have embedded the agenda in policy (for example, the World Bank supported PRSPs), but translating this into practical outcomes for community forestry and specifically poverty on a large scale remains a considerable challenge.

RECOFTC'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING POVERTY ALLEVIATION THROUGH COMMUNITY FORESTRY

RECOFTC has committed itself to addressing equity issues (including poverty) within the context of its five-year Strategic Plan 2004-2009 (RECOFTC 2004). It can play an important role in advancing the pro-poor community forestry agenda in several ways:

- Raise awareness through networking, training, workshops, publications, and so on, of the importance of adopting an explicit pro-poor approach to community forestry;
- Design and undertake action research studies on the impact of community forestry practice on poverty (as well as on the forest resource base);
- Design and implement country programs in selected countries in the region to advance, among other things, pro-poor community forestry;
- Contribute to the development of indicators for measuring the impact of community forestry implementation on the livelihood of the poor;
- Design and conduct national and international training courses of how to plan for and implement pro-poor community forestry;
- Analyze the results of field experiences from various countries for practical and policy implications; and
- Communicate and advocate results and lessons learned from field experiences to relevant national, regional and international policy fora.

Many of these activities can take place concomitantly and synergistically, working across the three program areas of RECOFTC (regional analysis, capacity building and country programs). RECOFTC looks forward to taking this agenda further in the next four years.

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