Alternative Approaches to Managing Conflict Over Natural Resources

Community organizations have a pivotal role to play in managing conflicts involving the use of natural resources, but they need support from external agencies and legitimacy from the state, concluded an expert panel hosted by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC).

"Recent experience in various parts of the world suggests that problem definition, negotiation, and decision-making fora that bring previously excluded groups into the process offer new opportunities for improving natural resource management decisions and finding better ways to avoid, resolve, or manage conflicts," said Daniel Buckles, Senior Program Officer at IDRC and moderator of a panel on Alternative Approaches to Conflict Management. The event was held this May during an international workshop on Community-Based Natural Resource Management in Washington, organized by the Economic Development Institute of The World Bank, IDRC, The Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

Conflict over natural resources is "a normal feature of natural resource management," argued Jacqueline Ashby, the panel's plenary speaker and Director of Research at the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT). Dr Ashby based her remarks on six IDRC-sponsored case studies — involving the Galapagos Islands (Ecuador), Honduras, Sudan, Philippines, Laos, and Indonesia — as well as her own experience.

In the Galapagos Islands case, violent conflict was associated with the exclusion of a local fishing population from the use of resources. In Honduras, it stemmed from inequitable access to scarce resources — five landowners held all of the land in one community. Another potential trigger is a rapid rate of resource degradation, "which heightens concern about who is going to get what," she said.
Other factors

Other important factors include the increased extraction of local resources by non-local economic interests, and interventions of inappropriate scales. For example, in one case study, Larry Fisher and Ilya Moeliono reported that some communities in Indonesia had trouble policing forested areas under their jurisdiction because of government backing for external logging companies. "Control and management of local resources] needed to be institutionalized at a different scale than the community," explained Dr Ashby. Also in Indonesia, traditional boundaries recognized by communities in some cases have been simply overruled by the government, which then set different boundaries. "This process created a situation of conflict between the existing community and the community that was resettled on the disputed land."

According to Dr Ashby, "the physical characteristics of natural resources and the ease or difficulty of generating information about them are important factors in managing conflict over natural resources. When it is difficult for users to assess one stakeholder's affect on the amount or the quality of the resource available to another — or on the benefits of a conservation intervention — then conflict is more likely."

Stakeholder participation

"It is particularly important that the stakeholders relevant to the on- and off-site effects [of resource use] are participating in the development of solutions," she stressed. "Consensus building is an important need, as is improving what's called land literacy, creating incentives in the short run, and strengthening organizational capacity to manage collective action and solve conflicts, which is a normal everyday part of the business of natural resource management."

Dr Ashby listed several roles for community-based organizations in managing conflict. "They provide a basis for collective action and they contribute to 'social capital' formation — the extent to which people trust each other, and are therefore able to predict how other users of a common property resource are likely to behave," she said. "Social capital is fostered by community based organizations when they reinforce rules of reciprocity: when I do something for you I know that you are going to return the favour to me later."

Communication channels

Community-based organizations also create channels of communication, "by providing or organizing fora for negotiation and consensus building. They define roles and functions, they enforce rules and sanctions. And they often promote some site-specific technical innovations."

While local organizations are key to managing conflicts over natural resources, they often need outside support. According to Dr Ashby, external agencies can provide information "that is not accessible or obvious to the community-based participants." They can also facilitate dialogue, perform research, conduct training, act as advocates, and strengthen cooperation.

Higher level authorities

She said the main role of higher level authorities is to grant legitimacy to local decisions and to support community organizations against external, particularly foreign, interests. "How can we scale these micro-organizations up to form organizations that are sufficiently powerful to represent local needs and interests in situations of conflict and competition over natural resources? A critical problem is not so much capacity at the micro level, but the incapacity of governments to provide effective public sector counterparts to community-based organizations."
"The way forward must focus on formulating institutional design which supports power sharing with local organizations and direct accountability to clients — for effectively accomplishing development goals allied to the conservation of natural resources," Dr Ashby concluded.

*John Eberlee is the Features Editor of Reports online.* (Photo: V. Boyd, CIDA)

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