Community forestry - Liberation through scaling down our failures

by Peter O'Hara

This story is an outsider's reflection on 'us' after some time with 'them'. I think sometimes outsiders¹ working with community forestry within the development project industry often focus on 'them', the communities, but exclude their own roles and responsibilities. So I would instead like to take a look at 'us' and tell this story in the words of community members (in italics) with my own thoughts built around them. The quotations come from communities I have had the good fortune to work closely with and get to know over the last six years. Anonymity of the community members that shared these thoughts with me was guaranteed. All quotations were shared in group settings, verified and re-verified to avoid misrepresentation.

Ironically it was through community views and perspectives that I started to see 'us', outsiders and our constructs, as a barrier to community forestry. My world-view has changed, and my own personal learning journey, based on being with those closest to the forest has awakened the responsibilities that being an outsider brings. This story begins where I think a story about community forestry should, by trying to take the community perspective seriously.

"We are being asked [by outsiders] to improve the forest but we should be sitting down with them...to discuss and find the right direction...it is important to deal with the truth, the reality on the ground."

"Policy makers have to listen to the community...we are not against them, we just want them to understand us."

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¹ 'Outsiders' is a term used to define non-community members. Outsiders usually do not have their livelihoods tangibly connected to natural resources, and do not have the sense of belonging/responsibility in terms of place and with regards to social and cultural ties that community members do.

Community forestry is a bit like beauty, very much in the eye of the beholder. To a forester, it may be about trees and techniques, for an environmentalist it may be about biodiversity, for development project personnel it may be about service delivery and showcases, etc. From the perspective of those community members closest to the forest though, it seems to be primarily about rights - rights over use and rights over decisions that affect them and the forest.

"We don't have rights over the forest, so why should we protect it?"

"When there is much restriction, there is much corruption."

"A small poor farmer wants to cut a couple of trees so that he can sell them to feed his family, and that is illegal, whereas a rich man is given hundreds of hectares to cut and that is legal. It doesn't make sense."

"Why can we plant a vegetable and harvest it without problems from the government but have lots of problems when we try to harvest trees we plant?"

"Policy is so complicated, there is no consultation with the communities in the development of it."
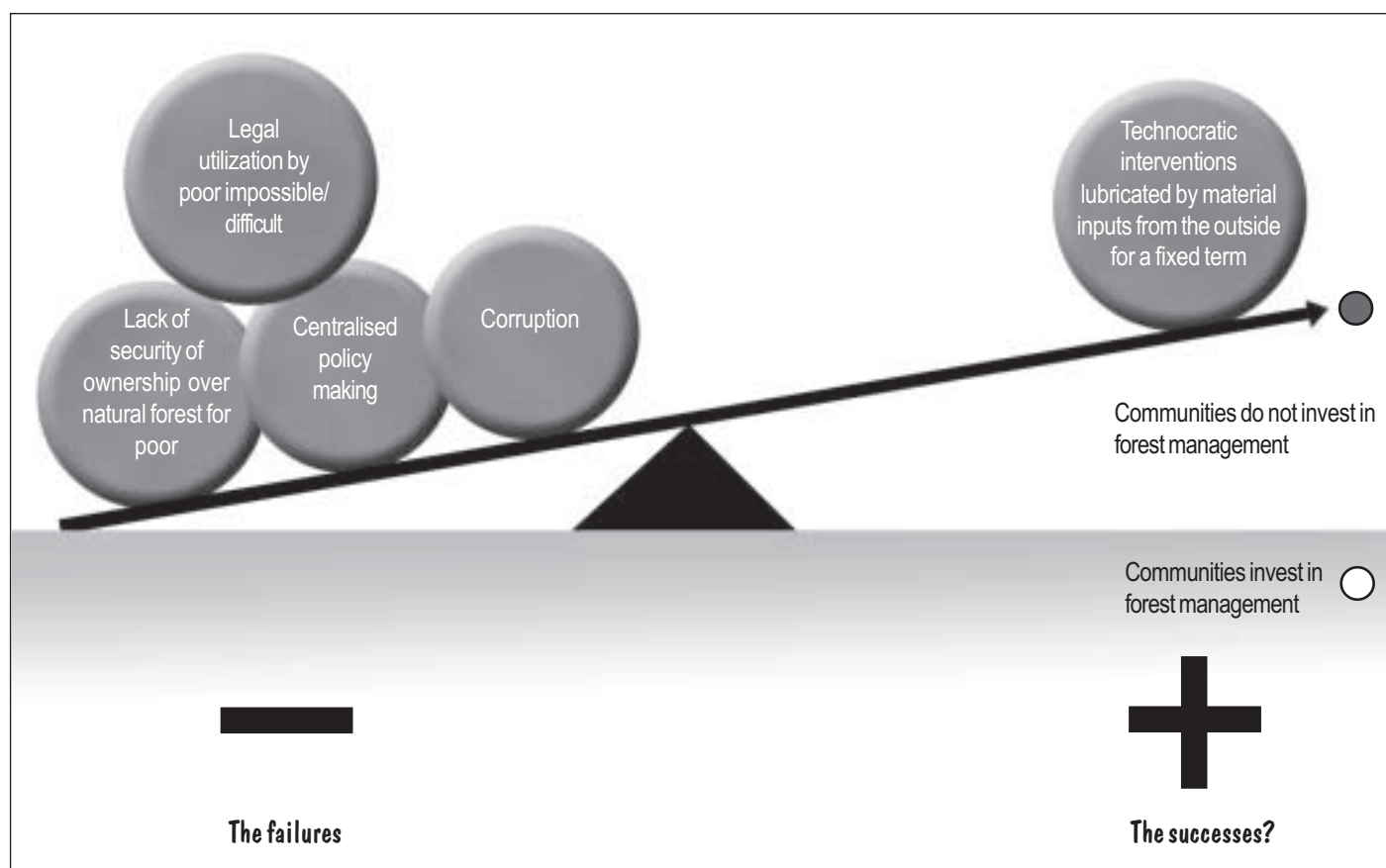
"Policy that is being brought in is not applicable to communities, as policy makers have no idea of the realities at the community level."

The performance of state as regulator

The performance of states as regulators over the natural forest has been questionable, to say the least. Those states that have had the most centralized regulatory systems such as Britain and the USA have only a tiny fraction of their natural forests remaining, and communities on the whole have been forced to become divorced from their forests. As a result much local wisdom on forest management has been devalued or lost. Yet, as the British Empire and its like grew to cover half the global landmass, it exported the 'protect the trees from the

people' policy so that among outsiders (non-community members) it has almost become the acceptable norm. It has been superimposed upon and has often extinguished the complex patterns of community forest management that existed from the Americas to Asia to Africa. The impact has been devastating for forests and communities and on the relationship between communities and forests. The British Empire and their like are long gone, but the policy legacy, of 'protecting the trees from the people' remains, as does the empowered role of the few outsiders who have the authority to make decisions that affect the many community members and the forests.

Outsiders often trained in an Euro-centric formal academic way seem to be a relatively homogenous bunch, whether they are from Nepal, Ireland or wherever. We have all been trained as professionals to accept a certain worldview. This is grounded in values, context and goals very often aloof to

See-saw 1

A community perspective on forest issue - How to tip the balance so that there is a rationale for communities to invest in forest management?

Question for the reader: What should outsiders prioritize ...scaling up current 'successes' or scaling down the failures?

those of communities who have a grounded relationship with their place and their natural resources. Our source of livelihood is very different to communities, so our view of 'Mother Nature' is very different. We professionals all talk the same academic talk and reinforce each other's assumptions during workshops from Bangkok to Dakar as we talk about 'them', the poor. Much of the difficulty with the interface between communities and the forests according to the community perspectives seems to be outsider constructs, constructs built on the foundations of the outsiders' worldview and often in the outsiders' self interest. In our relative homogenous group we may be too high in our ivory tower to consider we are part of the problem, but rather like to see ourselves superimposed onto problematic situations, to provide solutions for 'them'.

"Projects come with solutions but don't understand the issues. How can you have a solution if you don't understand the issues?"

When it comes to community forestry the insider, community perspective is the key to community forestry. It is after all 'community forestry' and not 'forester forestry ' or whatever. If community forestry is built on the community perspectives, its initial threshold will be the return or the handing over of rights to communities. Such community forestry will thus have implications on outsider constructed policy and on the policy making process. New space will be provided not only for delegating responsibilities for forest protection to communities, but also for community rights to use the forest. This does not only include the rights to use, but also changing what equates to a lack of rights - the outsider dictated procedures and permits required for utilization that are often inappropriate, cumbersome and costly for communities.

"We applied for a permit to cut trees we planted. [The permit was only valid for one year.] It took almost one year for the permit to be processed and by the time it was, it was only valid for a couple of weeks."

"The reason there are rampant 'illegal' activities is because we are forced into it because to do it legally is just so complicated."

"Costs of permits are more than the value of the trees. It is better just to cut and bribe."

"Forest policy making should be

devolved to communities, as each place is different. ...by-laws should be created for the community forest by the community."

The fact that we tend to look after renewable resources that we have secure, long term rights over and can benefit from legally, and that we will not mess on our own doorstep are the two key principles that make community forestry work. Community members are often devoid of secure rights to use their forests legally because of decisions made by outsiders. Outsiders are far removed from the negative consequences of those decisions, community members are not, and the sources of wealth of a forest for a community go far beyond simply turning trees into money. But community members who do not have secure rights to use their forests legally may understandably cut the forest ('illegally') for the moment, instead of investing in it for an uncertain future.

'The law bans cutting hardwoods here which actually has resulted in lots of hardwood logs being transported on the road. What happened?'

This fear of an uncertain future may be very justified, as it appears that some corrupt elites within countries and some exploitative foreigners view the forest as a resource that should be liquidated as quickly as possible for the benefit of the rich and well connected. In fact for those that need the money least. In many countries there seems to be a dichotomy of the centralized 'protect the forest from the people' policy in combination with the 'liquidate the forests as fast as possible for the rich and well-connected' policy. That those with power are very private violators and very public protectors of the forests seems to be a common view among community members.

"The implementer is the violator."

"The implementers have a very close relationship with money men, not the villagers...where does the law come in to fight this corruption?"

Technicians tend not to see the people for the trees

What about the role of those in the development project industry? In the Euro-centric academic way, we are trained to solve problems on behalf of others, in our

own image, according to our context and values. Often the 'problems' with regards to forests and communities are made to fit what we can and would like to offer. Often we use and even misread physical features to come up with technocratic solutions. For example, if we see soil erosion on a hill-side our prescribed solution may be terraces or reforestation or other techniques we have been trained for. The community, however, may view the core cause of soil erosion as being their lack of security of rights over the land and forest resources. The rationale for communities to invest in land and forest is not there. 'Answers' without questions, are not answers at all.

But such 'non-answers', lubricated by material inputs or the expectation of material inputs, are often welcome all the same by communities.

"What happens is that there is a consultation with us after they [projects] have been formulated, but they come with inputs so we say they are beautiful."

The nature of the development project industry means that it requires 'success' stories that validate the solution-providing-role of the outsiders. Very visual site-specific 'success' stories, best practices, and models are all the rage. Failures are not in fashion. Donors on field visits (rural development tourism) are guided from site-specific 'success' story to site-specific 'success' story. This blinkered site-specific view inevitably leads donors to ask the question How do we scale up these successes?".

"There has been little success with forestry projects, as they come for 2 years and give inputs then when the project leaves there is no further implementation by us."

Outsiders though often do have power. This power if pragmatically used in the communities' interest could be focused on scaling down what, in the eyes of communities, are failures, for example inappropriate outsider constructed policy. This may lead the outsider into un-chartered waters in terms of his or her role, i.e. away from only changing 'them', the communities. The other safe option of only focusing on 'them' through strategies like scaling up site specific 'successes' however, tends to secure a clearly defined comfortable, technical and/ or gatekeeper type role for the outsider.

By 'hitting the nail on the head', by

tackling often complex and difficult interrelated issues identified by communities (such as those on the left side of See-saw 1), rather than tackling safe issues which are often built around the assumptions and academic baggage of outsiders, there will be many challenges ahead for outsiders. Much of the change will have to be by and of outsiders and their role. It is so much easier to think about changing 'them', rather than us, to see us within the development project industry as 'do-gooders' superimposed unto problematic situations to provide solutions, rather than seeing us as part of problematic situations.

Policy and institutional set-ups are not fertile ground for community forestry

If policy and institutional set-ups and their consequences are the soil that community forestry can grow in (See left side of see-saw 1) then the soil is very dry and rocky indeed. This is so despite the heavy and successive bombardment of communities by technocratic forestry projects that have taken it upon themselves to change communities. Raising the level of 'community understanding', 'organising them', 'training them', 'empowering them' and 'capacity building them' are common items on the intervention menu but yet there still is no widespread rationale for communities

to invest in forest management. Forests are disappearing as fast, if not faster than ever, and with them so are the livelihoods of forest dependent communities.

"We have had lots of trainings [from forestry projects], and we are grateful for them...but the forests are still disappearing. We are very concerned about the future of the forests in our area."

With technocratic interventions it may sometimes be a matter of better matching intervention to community issues rather than vice versa. If the issues on the left side of see-saw 1 are being addressed (i.e. if the outsider actions are nested in the communities' issues rather than outsiders' agendas), technocratic interventions may more often find fertile ground (i.e. technical concerns may emerge as a priority community issue in a demand rather than supply driven way, if rights/power issues are being addressed). The infertility of the policy and institutional set-up may go a long way to explain the reason why a favorite forestry project pastime of giving out trees in plastic bags (this does provide lots of numbers for reports) has often resulted in no more than trees suffering from the 'bonsai effect' after no maintenance or in unsightly thickets in village heads' back gardens.

"We were given trees and paid to plant them [by the project], we planted them in the wrong place and there was no follow up, no maintenance."

Interventions based around community issues may be required at the national level rather than at, what suits projects best, a carefully delineated field site. In fact issues may emerge in this globalised world where answers to some community issues are to be found further a-field, maybe in the over-consuming North. Is the present development project industry set-up able to deal with this more organic nature of emerging issues where solutions are not conveniently located in clearly defined field sites?

"The whole system [of outsiders] is corrupt, it has to be changed, it doesn't work."

Good intentions are no excuse for a lack of self-reflection

Often well-intended technocratic pedagogic forestry projects may actually 'smokescreen' the real community issues. In fact in the clamor for the 'holy grail' of development work – site-specific 'sustainable development' success stories or models lubricated on the whole by very unsustainable service delivery practices – often the community voice has not been heard.

At a local level this may mean a community gets 3 income generating projects for 4

Fertile soil, infertile policy? Rich soils and villagers who want a forest, but yet no trees. A villager near this area commented *"It is easy to cut natural trees when they are small, but to let them grow to maturity and then try and cut them and transport them will mean we have lots of problems from the authorities"*. After concessionaires ravaged this forest and with no rights over any natural trees that may grow, a local man resorts to charcoal making from even the smallest trees. *Photo: Amando Yambao.*

years, and the project is evaluated as being successful before the inputs are withdrawn. This is good for the project staff and the development project industry as well but the benefit to the community is only temporary. There seem to be many evaluations of successful projects but yet many failed projects. It doesn't add up. Maybe questions such as: Who carries out the evaluation? Who sets the evaluation criteria? and When are the evaluations are carried out? need to be considered. Even when projects become increasingly participatory with regards to who makes decisions, the power over evaluations almost always still remains with the project implementers. When considering the different world-views community members and outsiders may have, depending on whose eyes you are looking at the project from will determine what you see. The outcome of evaluations will very much depend on who sets the criteria.

"Evaluation criteria to judge the success of the project are set by the FD and the foreigners."

For the community it is difficult to say no to a hand out, even though the income generating projects may not operate after the withdrawal of the project. Community members are often only listened to if it fits into the agenda of the project intervention. However, most community members will not bite the hand that feeds them, even if it often is only regarding a handful of scraps that remain after the funds have been siphoned off along the donor-to-community chain by gatekeepers.

"[Development assistance] *money from outside gets slashed and burned before it reaches the village."*

In areas where there is a rich legacy of supply driven projects this has encroached on to the mindsets of some within communities. Articulate smiling community elites, skilled at fishing for convenient material inputs welcome outsiders (projects) with open arms, often with good intention, but sometimes for personal material gain or political mileage. For project people, getting off this path of least resistance, even if they want to, is often difficult.

Is the development project industry a smokescreen?

At a global level, where 'free' trade is having massive negative consequences on the poor, draining their resources and their ability to take control of decisions that affect them, the conscience of the rich and fortunate with regards to the poor is somehow appeased by the development project industry. Northern governments for example are very private violators of poor farmers in the South through supporting unfair trading regimes but very public assistors of them through the development project industry. As the rich (who consume beyond their means) drain the resources from the poor (who must consume within their means) through unfair trading regimes, the trumpeting of the North-South development project industry can mask the concerns of the poor about the resource flows in the world. Maintaining the myth that the 'problem' is entirely with the communities in the South and not in the over-consuming North helps to justify the perpetuation of the development project industry especially within its charitable and pedagogic role rather than in a listening and facilitatory role. This helps smokescreen the bizarre dichotomy where Northern official trade and aid policies are at odds with each other. The development project industry may have been founded on good intentions, but then again the road to forest and community destruction seems in many cases to have been paved by good intentions. Good intentions are no excuse to avoid being reflectively self-critical.

'Communities are the problem' - a myth

"Policy makers think that we villagers are ignorant."

Restrictive centralised forest policy in combination with pedagogic forest projects seem to find justification around the central theme that the key problem of forest degradation is that communities lack some knowledge and that communities by nature must be kept in line. Usually the assumptions are something like 'poor people are poor because they lack knowledge' and by nature 'use their resources unsustainably because they do not understand.' The answer of the outsiders has been to try and keep communities in line with imposed regulations whilst filling that knowledge gap by technocratic interventions.

Some win from a restrictive forest policy. Trying to get any product that will thus be labelled as 'illegal' to the market will help those individual regulators who decide to benefit from 'under the table' salary supplements and allow the product to pass. Forest guards may actually become road

A government sign encourages people to plant trees. *Photo: Amando Yambao*

guards. These guards on the road may have to make decisions between supporting their family adequately or enforcing the restrictive forest policy that clearly does not work. Decisions I, and others in development organizations, have the luxury not to make. It is easy to be righteous from a comfortable position.

"Restrictive policy only benefits government officials, forest guards and policemen on an under the table, individual basis."

"Forest guards do not guard the forest, they guard the road."

"I am told by them [the corrupt road guards] to transport wood at night, then I have to pay 6-10 bribes for a 90 km journey."

Empowerment of gatekeepers

The empowerment of gatekeepers in the development project industry is a subject rarely discussed, at least not by those in this industry. The 'poor' and assumptions about them are what drive the development project industry. The poor are the justification for the industry and all its trappings. It is interesting with this in mind how the views of community members runs contrary to the common practice by outsiders of calling community members 'beneficiaries' of development projects. Clearly, it is we, the professionals, within the development project industry who are the main beneficiaries, is it not?

"[Concerning foreign forestry project 'experts'] T*hey receive a brief case full of money, have very nice houses and cars... and have a sense of power, control over everything that they would not have at home."*

"The foreigners benefit most from this project."

Both the centralised regulations and the development project industry have had detrimental aspects, from creating the labelling of some, especially poor forest users as 'illegal loggers' or as mentioned before, placing community members in the awkward position of having to welcome input lubricated projects. It is difficult to say no to a handout, or the expectation of a handout, no matter if the projects happen to be patronizing and/or misguided, or if the

project expert is arrogant through excessive empowerment. Communities are cornered into playing these project games. For example they often have to form 'organizations' to meet the requirements that outsiders set for them to qualify for project inputs.

"They [government officials] *came and told us a big project was coming but that we would have to form a committee, so we did."*

Why do we not embrace failures as lessons?

The set-up of the development project industry often runs contrary to the growth of community actions for change, creating quite confusing contradictions. Projects are in reality upwardly accountable to their donors and have to operate according to their agendas and demands, whereas theoretically with participatory approaches they are supposed to be more accountable to the the communities who supposedly set the agenda.

This can be frustrating for some employees of the development project industry, especially for those at field level. They are often forced into a scenario of providing services that are not relevant for or demanded by communities and into constructing showcases to meet the expectations of the implementing organization/donor. Participatory approaches are usually only allowed to go so far, so that interventions remain within the implementing organisation's comfort zone of agendas and world-view. Although those close to the field are aware of the community issues, they are often stuck within an organizational straight jacket, unable even if willing, to act on community issues that would eventually challenge their organisation's agendas and world-view.

In the words of a government field level employee working with a forestry project: *"We are only implementers of the guidelines... and those who set the guidelines are not in touch with reality on the ground."*

Typical 'success' stories are often molded to fit the requirements of the development project industry . They exist in false economies (subsidized by outside funding), and often donors or individuals have created institutional linkages that are not the norm. These do not provide sufficient evidence to have more of the same. Only taking into consideration the mathematics, in terms of costs, scaling up is out of the question. In fact the lessons from embracing the many more failed and forgotten forestry projects, and the experiences community members have had with them could yield

The project phenomena - very public forest project signs pepper the rural roadsides in some areas.
Photo: Amando Yambao

many more useful pointers for the future. This is very clear to community members.

"They [project people] should learn from mistakes and our experience."

"It is important to deal with the truth, to avoid duplication of mistakes. "

While this development project industry pre-occupation of blindly chasing successes to scale up whilst ignoring the failures goes on, the failed system is very quickly working its way through the remainder of the forests whilst benefiting only the few.

Projectization of community forestry - a kiss of death?

One of the major potential threats to a process of community driven community forestry is if outsiders hijack the process. If outsiders' greed, unaccountable power and/or false assumptions based on arrogance, ignorance and academic baggage have contributed to forest and community destruction , then it is our responsibility as outsiders to do something more appropriate about the situation. What may be more appropriate is to see ourselves as insiders and ensure we are self-critical and at least try to correct our mistakes.

The fact that intentions of outsiders whether bad or good currently hold sway over community intentions when it comes to decision making over forest resources seems to be a core barrier to community forestry. One of the main obstacles to the emergence of community driven community forestry are regulators. Another is the development project industry as it continually tries to reinvent itself on its own terms, as it searches for new relevance and niches that do not challenge its role of providing solutions for 'them'. The 'industry' may try to ensure its own sustainability by jumping on community forestry initiatives that emerge, fuelled by the often introvert and pragmatic search for new success stories, best practices, models etc. to scale up. We have to learn to let go.

Trying to 'scale up' community forestry according to the agenda and 'good intentions' of outsiders within project set-ups, rather than it being able to emerge from communities, primarily through outsiders tackling their failures, may be its kiss of death. It would be very sad if community forestry were to become another fashion developed according to the terms of outsiders, serving as only more workshop fodder. Wrapping up new or old approaches and programs in the right amount of community friendly acronyms to make them appear 'people first' but not tackling the nature of the existing power balance between outsiders and communities will ensure that in fact people will still come last. Top-down 'participatory' approaches actually legitimize the status quo.

"As new acronyms are brought there was no learning from the previous ones."

The liberation of communities' potential for community forestry may require disempowerment of us, the 'do-gooders' in the development project industry. If the communities' intentions drive the process, and they take control of the agenda, they may only want involvement from us on their terms. They may also enlighten us that we have been looking in the wrong place and also at the wrong people all the time for the most pressing problems associated with forest degradation. If we get on with prioritizing the dismantling of damaging outsider constructs and accepting new appropriate roles, communities can get on with community forestry.

If the power balance is addressed 'liberated' communities may just want outsiders to stop meddling in their affairs!

"Even when we have full ownership of the forest the Forestry Department field staff are still coming to the village but at this stage they shouldn't be."

With anonymity guaranteed, the question, 'Who benefits from the community forestry project?' was asked in 3 different participating communities. Their answers for all 3 communities were remarkably similar to those shown above from one of the communities. The seeds on the left hand column show the community members' perspective of the distribution of total benefits (both material and non-material) from the project - for the community members at the top, through the hierarchy of implementers to the foreign experts at the bottom.
Photo: Peter O'Hara

Community forestry - back to the future

The most immediate challenge (See See-saw 2) is to deprioritize the agendas of diehard regulators and gatekeepers and prioritize those of communities. This challenge will always be with us.

"If the community will work hard now [to look after the forest] *maybe in the future the rich will come and take the forest again."*

"We agree with them [the outsiders] *that the forests have to be protected, but there is no security for the future if* [we did protect and] *outsiders destroy the forest again, will the next generation again be asked [by outsiders] to plant'.*

I would like to conclude this story by framing the role of outsiders in community forestry processes from an insiders' perspective not as being 'better'. If we reflect on the impact outsiders have had on forests, communities and their relationship, we as outsiders may be able in the eyes of communities, to contribute only to make things less worse. It must be noted that in many countries, rights would not be given, but in fact would be returned, although sadly often without an actual forest to return.

"The forest was only given back to communities after it was cut by the rich."

Community forestry in many places with regards to rights though would be to a large extent going back to the future.

"The forestry department will do well in the future from community forestry also. In this area before community forestry, the forest resources were declining."

"Policy should be made in favor of both communities and the government - rights handed over to the communities but taxes paid to the government...all done above the table, legally." ❐

Peter O'Hara has experience of working with community forestry in Asia and West Africa. He has also worked for a year with the Forest Trees and People Newsletter as co-editor. He welcomes comments and discussion on the issues raised in this article. The views expressed are very much his own and do not necessarily represent those of the organizations he works for or collaborates with.

Currently he is working for the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction, with headquarters in the Philippines, as a community forestry specialist on an action research project to further the cause of community forestry. This work is done in partnership with Lambaga Alan Tropika Indonesia (LATIN), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada and the Regional Community Forestry Training Center (RECOFTC), Thailand. See information note on writeshop on page 89.

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See-saw 2 A community perspective on forest issues if the balance is tipped to community forestry?

Communities do not invest in forest management

The agendas of diehard regulators and development project industry gatekeepers

Government and communities legally share benefits of forest utilization

Outsiders provide appropriate assistance on demand from communities

Decentralised policy making to communities combined with secure rights to use the forest legally

Communities invest in forest management

The threats

The opportunities