

Planning and Participation in/for Community Forestry

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This paper provides a brief introduction and suggests a discussion topic to the issue of "Planning and Participation in/ for Community Forestry" in Asia. The discussion is expected to result in: 1) formulation of key questions and suggestions for addressing those regarding critical CBNRM program issues, and 2) a sense of priority concerning these different CBNRM program issues.

The Importance of the Issue in Asia

There is no single definition of "community forestry" as different actors often interpret the term differently. In general, community forestry is loosely employed to describe various types and levels of local involvement in and control of forest management. The forms of local peoples' participation may range from merely being informed, consulted, to sharing or even being the primary decision making power. The stages of management activities in which local people participate may also vary, from the very early planning to implementation stages. Throughout Asia, millions of poor peasants draw their livelihood from forest-based resources and thus, hinge their very survival on healthy forest environment. Yet, three decades ago, many (especially governments) perceived local forestry practices as merely a hurdle to sustainable forestry. Only recently that active local forest users' support is acknowledged as an essential component of effective forest management. Decades of increasing deforestation and forest-related social conflicts have indicated that forest departments have neither capacity nor resources to monitor and control the use of and activities in their administrative territories. In this light, local participation to manage forests holds great potential for sustainable development.

Presently, various forms of a community forestry scheme are being pursued in many Asian countries, reflecting the increasingly important role of local forestry system in the countries' national policy strategy. India, Nepal, and Philippines - and Indonesia and Thailand to a lesser degree - are among those who have adopted community forestry as an important subset of their national forest management approach. As Gauld noted: "... the move toward community-based forestry is possibly one of the most important developments in forest policy in the developing world since the adoption of scientific forestry ..." (Gauld 2000: 230).

What Do We Know about the Issue ?

As a management regime, community forestry often represents two different activities: government-sponsored projects/programs and grassroots-based forest management practices. The two can be overlapped when government programs are intended to promote grassroots-based activities, although in many cases (especially

during the 1960s - 80s) the former is designed to replace the latter. As government-sponsored endeavors - usually with support from international donors - community forestry has developed and diversified into various management arrangements with increasingly sophisticated approaches and methods to embrace local participation. During the 1960s - 70s, top-down approach was predominate, where decisions regarding management problems and solutions were decided exclusively by the governments or other outsiders who sponsored the projects. This somewhat changed in the 1980s, where community participation became increasingly recognized as a key factor of program success. Early forms of participatory methods were developed to identify community preferences and needs, although local people still had very little decision making role in project planning and management.

It is only in the past decade that the way participation is understood and approached has dramatically changed; from being perceived merely as a means to effectively achieve program goals (e.g., through the identification of local needs, mobilization of local resources), community participation now serves much broader purpose as an end in itself. By participating in decision making process, it is believed that people will experience a sense of fulfilment and empowerment as they have control to influence decisions that affect their lives. Local people were no longer seen as passive development object, but competent decision makers and resource managers who know a great deal of what works best for them and their environment. In accordance with this new understanding, participatory approach has developed into various methods and tools to encourage and facilitate local people to identify their own needs, set their own objectives, play an active role to plan, manage, monitor and evaluate development activities. At the same time, community forestry has evolved into various forms of management and tenurial arrangements in an attempt to reconcile government and local peoples' needs within locally specific social and ecological context.

The central role of local participation in the planning and implementation of forest management has gained wide acceptance in mainstream development endeavors. In practice, however, this notion is generally implemented only at the project level. At program and policy levels, decision making process continue to be predominated by government and its national and international technical advisers, with local people remain in the periphery. In some countries, indeed, representatives of Non-Governmental and People Organizations (NGOs and POs) are beginning to participate in policy making, although their role is largely limited to technical matters.

Limited community participation in forestry policy making and management planning is arguably a significant factor that leads to a gap between policy decisions and local realities. Bridging this gap remains a major challenge to sustainable development. In India and Philippines, for instance - the two countries with most developed community forestry policies -government community forestry programs (Joint-forest management, Ancestral Domain Land Claim, etc.) require the participating villagers to be organized according to clearly defined administrative and forest boundaries. In reality, however, social units or "community" congregations do not

necessarily overlap with ecological and administrative borders. This creates a serious problem as social groups whose members live in scattered geographical areas are being refused to join community forestry programs and being denied for legal recognition of their forest access and tenorial claims. Thus, translating complex and locally specific social and ecological realities into blueprint national development policy and planning - and vice versa -remain problematic.

In summary, while local participation has been widely adopted in community forestry project planning and implementation, the same thing has not yet to occur in policy making process. Community participation in development planning and policy formulation, it is argued, is potential means to bridge the gap between policy decisions and local realities. Yet, some important questions remain and are suggested to be discussed in this session: