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How Community-Based Resource Management Can Benefit the Poor

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Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) is one of the most important manifestations of true decentralization as it relates to control of rural resources. CBNRM programs, if successful, can be models of local empowerment, imbuing communities with greater authority over the use of natural resources. Under the right circumstances, they can also bring important benefits to poor people and poor communities.

Improved Livelihoods

In many countries, community-based management of forests and other natural resources has improved livelihoods for the poor. The benefits of CBNRM can range from job creation to substantial management rights and long-term revenue-generation. For instance, in Nepal, community management of forests has created new jobs, including nursery staff and forest watchers, as well as wage labor for tree planting and weeding (Malla 2000:41). Community forestry concessions along the borders of the Mayan Biosphere reserve in Guatemala have generated more than 100,000 days of labor per year (Cortave 2004:26).

Where high-value resources such as timber are involved, CBNRM can generate significant revenues. A large forestry project in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh earns an estimated \$125 million per year for the communities involved, through sales of sustainably harvested timber and non-timber forest

products (Shilling and Osha 2003:13).

Improved Resource Condition

A crucial element of community-based management is its potential to improve the condition of the resources being managed. The Krui people of southwestern Sumatra have practiced a complex form of agroforestry for generations, planting a succession of crops that culminate in a full forest canopy. Their agroforests support about ten times more biodiversity than conventional palm plantations in the area, and have economic uses ranging from resin tapping to timber sales (ASB 2001:1-2).

In northeastern India, the Khasi School of Medicine and others are working to re-establish traditional laws and practices of forest management to safeguard sacred groves of medicinal plants, which had been depleted under centralized management of the resource since the 1950s (Varshney 2003:46). In 1996 the Guatemalan government began awarding forest management concessions to settler communities living on the borders of the two million-hectare Mayan biosphere reserve in the lowland Petén region. Satellite imagery indicates that the 388,000 hectares under community management show better forest cover than adjacent areas (Molnar et al. 2004:19).

Development of Village Infrastructure

In some communities, a portion of the revenues from community-based enterprises has been directed to investments in key infrastructure needs, such as the construction of schools and libraries, development of drinking water and irrigation systems, and extension of electricity service (Malla 2000:42). Community management of land and water use in Gandhigram, Gujarat, has increased both the area and yield of lands under cultivation, despite three successive years of drought. The increase in income has gone toward village improvements, including fencing to keep out wild animals, construction and maintenance of irrigation structures, tractor and equipment purchases, and to pay down village debt (Down to Earth 2002). In another example, the mountain village of Lazoor, Iran, was one of a number of villages granted substantial control over their land and water resources by the Iranian government in 1999. With technical support from outside experts, the community built an extensive irrigation and erosion-control infrastructure, increasing productivity and opening new lands to cultivation (WRI et al. 2003:183-184).

Representation in Decision-Making Roles

CBNRM is most successful at benefiting the poorest members of the community when it empowers them to play a full decision-making role in resource management. One

example of a community-based enterprise featuring equitable participation comes from the village of Deulgaon in Maharashtra State in India, where the community's forest-management committee includes representation by one male and one female member from each household, and all decisions regarding forest use are made by the general membership at its monthly meeting, rather than by an executive committee (Ghate 2003:9). CBNRM in Tanzania has sometimes spurred significant social change within the community itself, such that villagers gradually become less deferential to existing leaders and eventually may replace underperforming managers who serve their own self-interest rather than the interests of the community as a whole (Alden Wily et al. 2000:44).

In Lazor, Iran—mentioned above—the land management program gave women a direct voice in priority-setting, with a positive impact on their confidence and role in broader village decision-making (WRI et al. 2003:184-185). In the Mapelane Reserve on the northeast coast of South Africa, a partnership between the local Sokhulu people and the government Parks Board resulted in the regeneration of mussel beds that had been a source of bitter conflict. The co-management scheme that emerged altered the community's role from illegal harvesters to resource managers. The Joint Mussel Management Committee, consisting of elected community members, park representatives, and university researchers, established management rules only

after an extended process of experimentation and consultation with Sokhulu harvesters (WRI et al. 2003:176-179).

Reason for Caution

CBNRM can suffer from the same flaws that threaten all forms of decentralized management. Devolving decision-making power to the local level does not guarantee the poor a role in the process. An examination of Bolivia's effort to decentralize forest management found that the process did create new opportunities for marginalized groups to gain control of local resources and capture more of the economic benefits. However, only the better-organized groups have thus far been able to capitalize on the process; elsewhere, decentralization has simply strengthened the local elites (Kaimowitz et al. 1999:13-14).

Forest-user communities are often socially and politically diverse, with a range of different income levels represented (Malleon 2001:18). Unless these distinctions are taken into account, CBNRM will often end up favoring the more powerful. When the government of Laos introduced its land and forest allocation Policy in the early 1990s, it meant to foster local control over some of the country's agriculture and forest lands. However, the policy resulted in wealthier farmers reinforcing their rights to the best land, while small farmers and landless households found their access to both agricultural land and forest resources greatly reduced (Fujita and Phanvilay 2004:12).

Gaps in access to information about resource rights can also cause community forestry programs to work against the people they should support. In a blatant manipulation of the system in Cameroon, local elites in one region used community forestry laws to gain management rights over forests in another region, taking advantage of communities that were not yet aware of how to use the forestry law to protect their rights (Smith 2005:14). Studies from Nepal, one of the first countries to make a serious attempt to devolve forest management, show that lack of access to information and elite capture of forest-user groups have cut many of the poor out of benefits from community forestry (Neupane 2003:55-56, 58).

Finally, high transaction costs and complicated application and management requirements can deter communities from participating in CBNRM, or make it financially unsustainable for them to do so. In Cameroon, the application procedure to gain legal recognition of a community forest is lengthy and centralized. The costs for communities are significant—even more so because management rights are granted for only a ten-year period. Due in large part to these difficulties, only seven official community forests were established from 1995 to 2001 (Alden Wily 2002:18).

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