
Bolivia: Community-based forest management in the history of the indigenous peoples

In a document prepared in the framework of FOMABO (Forestry Management in the Tropical Lands of Bolivia) --a project arising from an agreement between the KVL University of Denmark and UAGRM-UMSS Universities of Bolivia, with the support of DANIDA-- the main characteristics of community-based forest management related with the multiples uses given to forests by the indigenous peoples have been identified. In native understanding, the forest is the "big house" of the indigenous being "for indigenous peoples, the forest is what a supermarket is for non-indigenous peoples," where they are supplied with all the necessary goods and food and where the different labour and socio-cultural relations are concentrated. In the indigenous cosmovision, the territory is the necessary space to enable reproductive and productive relations to take place with nature, with both these relations making possible the appropriate use of the natural resources existing in forest territories. These characteristics enable us to define community-based forest management as the multiple uses and management of forest resources by indigenous peoples.

Before the arrival along the Rio de la Plata of Europeans to the lowlands of Bolivia in 1535, the indigenous peoples comprised different ethnic communities, with a common denominator based on the dominant relationship nature-human beings, in which human beings benefited from the reproductive cycles of nature, through gathering wild species, fishing and hunting. This system continued throughout time and presently forms part of the systems for management and traditional use of space and natural resources in their respective territories, and is part of the characterization of social identity as indigenous peoples, adopting, assimilating and merging other knowledge from different cultures, while maintaining their own values.

The present indigenous social identity is a result of a whole set of encounters and miss-encounters with other different social sectors and the syncretisation of foreign values: religiousness, organisation systems (captaincies, chapters, agrarian zones) communal labour systems such as "minga" (meeting of friends or neighbours to carry out some job together, with no other remuneration than a meal when the job is finished), which later became part of traditional use and management: gathering, hunting, fishing and the many uses of the forest. These aspects are collected together in the present cosmovision, presented as the restructuring of their ancestral territories and the interpellation to the State and to Society for development with their own identity, based on occupying national and local spaces of power.

It may be concluded that at the level of communities inhabiting forest areas, practice, production and use of forest products on a village level are usually set in complex social systems regulating resource management, where many of the factors affecting our capacity to intervene with forest solutions do not have a forest nature. These are mainly human factors, related with how people organise land use and the use of other resources. Therefore, they require specific approaches for each situation and cannot be approached with success by means of general solutions or approaches aimed at one element of the situation on its own.

For this reason, initial analyses regarding the nature of the population's dependency on trees and

their products have been incorrect or incomplete in some aspects and therefore, the solutions identified have not been appropriate. This happens in particular with solutions to the decreasing availability of firewood and with attempts to intervene in ways that are contradictory to the social and institutional framework existing in the communities. Even those projects that have attempted to identify the local needs, expectations and possibilities, in practice have based themselves more on the opinion of planners and other external agents than on those of the local population. Very frequently, the dialogue to obtain local participation has started after the project design has been finished and established.

Community-based forest development has suffered from considerable confusion and lack of clarity as to its nature and purpose. On some occasions, the use of this generic term seems to have hidden the great diversity of objectives established for community-based forest development. Often, the design and execution of projects has been hindered by a lack of clarity regarding which of the objectives is being sought or had priority. Although some of these multiple objectives may be compatible and even strengthen each other mutually, others may be contradictory. It is improbable that the plantation of trees to achieve ecological objectives such as soil protection will be able to produce sufficient marketable goods to be economically attractive to farmers. Similarly, it is unlikely that the plantation of trees to generate income will benefit those who have little or no land. Furthermore, it is improbable that projects originally conceived to achieve a production objective will also be able to serve in achieving a social objective added later on, such as benefiting the poor, unless they are duly restructured.

Community-based forest management is not a discipline or a separate programme, but rather a dimension of silviculture, agriculture, rural energy and other components of rural development. Although other experiences have contemplated community-based forest management as part of the activities of "rural" populations, they have always assigned it a secondary priority, seen as tree plantations and not as a main activity for use and multiple management of forest resources, as now proposed. Finally, the institutionalisation of community-based forest management as multiple uses and functions of the forest is the institutionalisation and recognition of Amazon indigenous peoples practices.

Extracted and adapted from: "Entendiendo la historia de los pueblos indígenas para promover la forestería comunitaria como una alternativa de desarrollo socio-económico local en las TCO's", José Martínez Montano, e-mail: jomartinez@scbbs-bo.com , Proyecto FOMABO (the full document is available in Spanish at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Bolivia/TCO.doc>)