
Community-Based Forest Management: Forests for the People who Sustain the Forests

The world is losing its forests. All over the globe, many people are suffering from destructive processes that are depriving them from the natural resources on which they have sustained their livelihood. WRM as well as many organisations from around the world have long been denouncing this situation and supporting the peoples who are struggling to defend their forests and their rights.

The story of colonial and later state appropriation and control of the forests under the banner of “scientific forestry” has been a common feature of a centralised technocratic management that was increased along the last century with the rise of the modern nation-state, the power of technology and of the global economy, eventually leading to the wholesale trade of the forests for the sake of industrial forestry interests. Scientific forestry, as imposed on the South by the North, first through colonialism and then through the development agencies and the UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation, has fatal flaws, it arrogates forest lands, the land of local communities, to the State and then hands out rights to exploit the timber to private interests. The result is an unholy alliance of powerful players who have a vested interest both in excluding communities from forests and avoiding serious limits on exploitation that would limit profits in the name of sustainability.

In the case of Southern impoverished countries, timber sales have been servicing the spiralling debt. Such debt is built on the dependence ties woven by major Northern countries acting on behalf of the vested interests of big corporations, and supported by the mediation of the international financial institutions (IMF, World Bank, etc.), while at the same time generating enormous personal wealth for a handful of timber tycoons. That process has given rise to a number of factors which have put enormous pressure on the forests and the people living in and depending on them, who suffer unequal access to forest resources. The unfair terms of international trade have depressed commodity prices --the main exports of Southern countries-- triggering a never ending search of increased productivity at the expense of ecosystems. Along these lines, “development programmes” --and the infrastructure that go with them-- have been imposed on the impoverished and nature-rich countries by the powerful nations which thus benefit twofold from easy access to natural resources and the high interests of the loans granted to carry out those programmes, which regard nature as a pool of merchandises --minerals, oil, genetic resources, wood, land for agricultural expansion-- to be exploited for short-term profit. That process, graphically described by writer Eduardo Galeano as “the open veins of Latin America” is equally applicable to Southern countries throughout the world.

The result has been forest degradation and destruction, displaced people, and the loss of local livelihoods and cultures. In face of that, there is now a growing concern to find a new way to preserve what is left of the world’s forests.

The WRM has put forward the urgent need for a change in the present relationship with the forest. Two approaches are confronted: one that sees the forest as land --to be exploited, to be explored, to be cleared and occupied, to be tilled, to be planted along large-scale monoculture commercial tree schemes--, and the other that sees the forest as an ecosystem --to be used in its multiple dimensions by and for the people without disrupting the necessary balance between the whole array of

components.

It is clear that only the second approach can ensure forest conservation and it is equally clear that Indigenous Peoples and other traditional and local communities are the ones capable and willing to implement it. They have a long tradition in the sustainable use of forests under common property regimes, where mutual dependence, shared co-operation and association values, and traditional laws have regulated access to and use of forest resources, conscious that they have been borrowing the forest from their children.

We are aware that many experiences have been dismantled, knowledge has been lost and natural resources have been depleted in a number of places. Many communities have suffered external pressure which forced them out of their land, destroyed their livelihood, or “contaminated” them with new fashions and consumerism trends, all of what eventually detach them from their rich culture. However, before it’s too late, the solution is at our hands reach. Indeed, it has laid there all the time. Policy-makers have the chance to prove their willingness to fulfil their proclaimed pledges of sustainability; it’s just a matter of serving the interests of the people --over transnationals-- and to support and promote the ancient systems of community-based forest management which for centuries have enabled forest-dependent communities to sustainably manage the forest for a living and at the same time to be their guardians.

The Forest: A Generous Providing Home

For forest dwellers and forest-dependent people, the forest is their main shop, supplying them with food --tubers, leaves, flowers, fruits, nuts, fungi, worms, ants, honey, birds’ eggs, small game and fish. They also find there building materials, medicines as well as fuelwood, and raw materials such as bamboo, reeds, leaves, grasses, gums, resins, waxes and dyes for making ropes, mats and baskets, which they can use, barter or sell in nearby villages. Furthermore, the forest is a great water provider; it is a rain catchment area which allows a balanced water storage and distribution.

Last but not least, the forest is more than a mere supply-provider for them. It is also the place where they gather for social and cultural celebrations, they assemble in order to take decisions, they bury their dead, they assert a deep moral and spiritual interconnection through which they see themselves as part of the forest.

Seeing the forest with a holistic view

The close relationship with the forest is imbued in the forest and forest-dependent communities who have always had an “ecosystem approach” in forest management. The present trend of forest exploitation, with its reductionist approach, has taken things apart and disrupted the balance, leading to the present forest crisis. Thus, a holistic view is a necessary element of any community-based forest management experience. It has brought about a deep and wide system of knowledge with its own concepts, definitions and practices which have enabled a sustainable use of the forests along several centuries. This is still valid even now, where we can find examples of communities that manage to conserve and even sometimes restore against all odds areas of degraded forests on which they depend.

The forest is the source of forest and forest-dependent communities' livelihoods, so for them it is a matter of survival that their efforts are aimed at managing the forest in a way that guarantees its perpetuity. Otherwise, they are putting their own future at risk. However, when confronted by external forces that disrupt their environment, communities find themselves pressed to search for other means

of survival that generally imply an unsustainable management of the scarce natural resources left by forest companies and other commercial and market-oriented interests that have usurped communities' homelands. The wholeness has been broken from outside, but it usually happens that forest and forest-dependent communities, the weakest link of the chain, the victims, end up being portrayed as the culprits.

Secure tenureship for community management

Below and above all the way of living of forest and forest-dependent communities lies the concept of common ownership of the forest for its use, management and control. The community does not "possess" the forest; rather, it is its guardian for which it has duties as well as rights.

But for communities to be able to adequately fulfil the role of guardians they must have secure tenure over the resources contained in the forest and its use must be guaranteed through the governing bodies chosen by each community to adequately represent them. Case studies confirm that lack of security of land rights and user rights for communities is a major cause of decline in local systems of forest management. Conversely, within a context of conflict, security of land rights and user rights is the basis of forest conservation and the well-being of local forest-dependent people.

Autonomy and sovereignty for local decision-making power

The decision-making power of communities lies within their own representative institutions that legitimately represent their interests and which adopt different forms according to the local culture, the natural environment, and the organisation of each community. Whenever this has been altered to shift the power to a central government (national, state, provincial) the result has been the disruption of the ecosystem integrity with the ensuing decline of resource sustainability and the impoverishment of the community.

There is no single model of community-based forest management but all of them have as a common trait the necessary autonomy and sovereignty of their legitimate authorities in order to make decisions relevant to the control, use and management of the resource base of the community with a view to fulfil the needs of its members.

Challenges and expectations

Community-based forest management is re-emerging as a valid alternative to the present pattern of industrial forest use. A large number of people, organisations, and processes are already working towards achieving and strengthening successful experiences according to their local needs, background and history.

However, many challenges lay ahead and a number of questions need to be raised. Is it possible that isolated cases of community-based forest management can survive within a context where powerful actors like transnationals, governments, international institutions in charge of globalising an economic pattern of open markets and deregulation, are at the wheel? Will we be aware enough to make the difference between genuine cases and those which are just a co-option to the prevailing model? How to preserve the promissory model of community-based forest management from internal and external spurious interests?

Most forest and forest dependent communities are no longer living in conditions of balanced ecosystems that long ago they managed to maintain. Large scale deforestation and forest

degradation processes, depletion of forest resources with the subsequent scarcity for the surrounding communities have led to changes in their ways of living. In its turn, such alteration gives rise to new needs and values which may imply the loss of traditional knowledge, the shattering of old binds and beliefs which have been the pillar of social cohesion and cultural continuity.

Additionally, a number of issues need to be addressed within the communities to ensure their internal cohesion and strength. Among these mention must be made of the participation of women, who have specific needs, perspectives, and roles. Their active participation in decision-making and the equitable sharing of benefits between men and women is crucial for ensuring the long term sustainability of community-based forest management. Equally important is the need to generate the necessary conditions to promote the active participation of youth, representing the future of the community.

Getting together

Those of us committed to support the forest and forest-dependent communities who struggle to maintain or recover their forests, who support and promote that they regain control over forest management, need to bear in mind that there are many obstacles --both internal and external, national and international-- to be sorted out. The importance of summing up strength and efforts and sharing experiences needs to be underscored. Many local, national and international organisations --including the WRM-- have for many years been advocating and campaigning for a change in that direction. In May this year, a number of those organisations decided to join efforts in the Caucus on Community-Based Forest Management, which aims at influencing global and national processes to create the necessary conditions for enabling local communities to manage their own forests. This is a first step in the right direction.

It is now crystal clear that the industrial model leads to forest destruction, while community management allows for its sustainable use. Governments have agreed --at least on paper-- that forests need to be conserved in order to ensure the Planet's health. They must now be made to comply with their commitments and organised civil society --from the local to the international level-- is the key actor in ensuring that deeds match words. The message must be loud and clear: responsibility over forest management must be put back in the hands of forest and forest-dependent communities. Only then will forests stand a chance of surviving.