

One Earth

Commentary

Prophets, Profits, Prove It: Social Forestry under Pressure

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Social forestry seeks to manage forests through local communities for their own plus national benefits, but it still falls short of the targets set. Reconciling local concerns for livelihood opportunities with the need for accountability requires intermediaries who successfully negotiate in the bureaucratic jungle of forestry as an institution.

Introduction

People have throughout their history related to forests and trees in many ways,¹ including as the home of spirits and wild beasts to be appeased, as a hideout for enemies, and as a provider of benefits at local, national, and global scales. The latter includes material outputs (timber, fuelwood, non-timber forest products, and clean water), regulating functions (habitat for two-thirds of global biodiversity in tropical forests, avoidance of landslides and floods,² modified regional climate, possible influences on rainfall,² and terrestrial carbon storage), spiritual experience, and landscape beauty. The word "forest," however, refers not only to an ecosystem with trees but also to a specific institutional arrangement.

Today, more than seven billion humans share the planet with approximately three trillion trees;³ about a quarter of these trees live outside forests, and 45% of trees and 40% of people live in the tropics. The estimated 46% reduction in trees since the beginning of human civilization shows that trees have been harvested for valuable products, as well as that land was converted to other uses. But it is not just forests that are under threat. As demand has grown for timber, agricultural land, and other forest products, communities in and around these forests must contend with many agents with competing visions, and many struggle to ensure that their interests are respected. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) aim to leave nobody behind, but this is a specific challenge

given that forests in many parts of the tropics are still associated with poverty, and forest integrity is seen as important for another segment of the goals.¹ Recent years have seen many attempts to ensure that local communities are not left behind, but this is more easily said than done.

Trees inside and outside Forests

The forest-people relation is strongly shaped by the power structure of societies. The word "forest" itself is about 1,500 years old and is, through silva forestis, derived from the Latin foris for "outside." This origin relates to the institution of excluding access by commoners and monopolizing access and resource use by the rulers.² Such dynamics are part of the story of Robin Hood, who lived in Sherwood Forest in England despite the ruler's claims of ownership. Stateclaimed ownership and appropriation of forests for selected (and all) types of profit with little consideration for local populations are steeped in history evident in the Global North and were propagated into other parts of the world during the colonial period.

In the tropics, the opportunity to generate profits for central powers (within or beyond the law) by licensing logging concessions and giving permits for plantations has been grabbed without much concern for local impacts. These actions have contributed to the last two decades of net forest loss, which was mainly in the tropics. In contrast, over the same time period, local communities have increased tree cover in agricultural lands outside the control of forest authorities. Locally controlled "agroforests" "domesticated forests" have emerged in many parts of the world⁴ where management is geared toward trees of direct value but avoids the monocultural plantation concept that forest authorities have preferred. Forests defined and controlled by forest authorities have in many countries become institutionalized with, from a local perspective, abstract and unlimited power, spilling over to permit requirements (and opportunities for associated corruption) for marketing trees grown outside forests (to control timber theft).4

A discourse on "forests for people" began in the 1970s, when conflicts over de facto exclusion of local communities from the profits made through forest extractive industries became a threat to the status quo. The term "community-based forest management" (CBFM) is used for specific arrangements within the broad concept of social forestry, which itself focuses on managing forests for the benefit of local communities. International support for, and pressure to implement, the inclusion of social forestry in national legislation became strong as countries with little commercial logging interests, such as Nepal, signed on. But countries with large logging industries, such as Indonesia, came on board more slowly and found the route paved with obstacles. Giving more space to local initiatives within a hierarchy-oriented institution requires new roles and agents to negotiate the rules.

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Prophets of Social Forestry

Many institutes and agents have interests in forests, resulting in a complex landscape. If local people are to push for their interests, they must successfully navigate through this tangle. The knot at the core of this tangle is the fact that forest materials and the land on which they grow are valuable commodities.

Forestry is currently driven by three types of agents each with a different interpretation of what a forest is: prophets (in this context, individuals who act as spokespeople for local communities in a complex external environment),⁵ profiteers, and prove-it accountants. Profiteers seek to benefit themselves and national economies by harvesting oldgrowth forest with little obligation to restore the resource, negatively affecting local communities. Prove-it accountants. who originally might have sought to combat corruption in forestry and protect local interests through transparency and increasingly complex approval processes, have in fact reinforced hierarchy and institutional control over forests. Local forest communities must rely on local spokespeople or "prophets" to ensure that their interests, needs, and perspectives are heard.⁵

Social Forestry in Practice

The past few decades have seen many attempts to balance these agents, and many challenges and confusions have resulted along the way. Recent experiences in Indonesia and Cameroon can illustrate the contradictions inherent to maintaining central authority over forests while devolving part of the rights in dayto-day management.

One example lies in Krui, Indonesia, where the challenge in the 1990s lay primarily in how forests were defined.⁶ In this area, logging concessions targeting the valuable dammar trees (Shorea iavanica) were sought. Because these lands met the prevailing definition of forests, which was based on the amount of tree cover, they fell under the forest claims of the state, which implied a right to issue logging concessions in the area. However, these lands were ex-multistrata coffee gardens overgrown with dammar trees (planted by local communities in their grandparents' time) that continued to be tapped for their valuable resin. Prophets fought for the area to be recognized as

a "farmer-made" agroforest rather than an undeveloped "state-owned" forest, which would make it deserving of special consideration and protection from logging concessions, and this eventually succeeded.⁶ The state forest claims were later found to be in breach of the country's constitution unless forests had been gazetted by the legal process.

Later, the 1998 revision of the Indonesian Forestry Law included steps toward social forestry (with indigenous rights, community groups, and village-level administration at the center), but implementation was very slow. Here, local prophets stepped up and helped create coalitions, maneuver the bureaucratic obstacle race, and shape the result.6,7 However, despite these apparent successes, the approval complexity introduced by prove-it accountants-28 approvals before applications could be legalized and the required annual management plans that followed-was a major burden.⁸ Further complexity was added by the arrival of external entrepreneurs (a new type of profiteers) attracted by the impression of devolved local rights. This often led to conflict because communities were not prepared to negotiate contractual terms that were favorable to both.⁹ Non-governmental organization intermediaries, backed by (and benefiting from) international finance, often acted as "prophets" in an effort to aid local communities with such negotiations. Although these intermediaries benefitted from the arrangement and were seen as fulfilling their role for local communities, such communities still had difficulties with developing economic activities, although there were some notable exceptions (Figure 1).

National interest in supporting this form of forest conflict resolution increased when conflicts between forest authorities and local communities, including indigenous communities, were identified as part of the drivers of forest degradation. The global discourse on reducing emissions from deforestation and (forest) degradation (REDD, where national governments are offered financial incentives to prevent forest loss or degradation) became the center of attention in the forestry world.¹⁰ Finance for REDD became contingent on steps to reduce conflicts, and forms of social forestry were welcomed as part of the solution.



However, it led to disillusionment rather than local empowerment in many countries.¹¹ If national forest institutions hoped to attract finance and profit from this new type of forestry, they had to prove they were meeting the requirements. This "prove-it" focus stood in the way of profits and benefits to all stakeholders. In Cameroon, a lack of appropriately scaled business opportunities was found to be widespread despite decades of active policy support.¹² Subsequent analysis of "bright spots" has identified a number of enablers that can be used to forge ways forward.¹³

The Role of Culture

Given that so many agents and complex structures are involved in forests, achieving social forestry to the benefit of local communities is no simple task, and deciding how to make further progressrequires careful thought. Local communities are themselves complex, and a pathway that successfully reaches social forestry in one place could prove unsuccessful in another. It is important to take a flexible approach and be ready to adapt to what works within the context of local cultures and their orientation toward collective or individual resource management.¹⁴ Flexibility can be observed in a recent account of forest-tenure reform in China,¹⁵ where the national policy to privatize forests was locally interpreted to allow communal forest management in the same way that it had happened before nationalization.

Similarly, the global experience with performance-based ("prove-it") payment for ecosystem services (PES) modalities shows that they should match the local culture in order to achieve the best outcomes. Oftentimes these schemes are built on a "buyer-seller" relationship. However, social and culturally shaped perceptions of "fairness" have been found⁹ to be at least as important as the "economic efficiency" that markets were supposed to bring to PESs. In Africa and Asia, better success has been found through schemes marked by co-investment in environmental stewardship rather than through those involving marketbased individual PES contracts. Investment implies a long-term vision and overcoming hurdles rather than expecting recurrent financial transactions.





Figure 1. A Social Forestry Success Story

The village of Lubuk Beringin was one of the first villages in Indonesia to receive formal rights to its agroforest area.⁷ Lubuk Beringin is a toponym referring to traditional fish-management institutions and a fig tree. The local community is now exploring business opportunities to attract local tourists, such as renting out tubes for swimming and selling partly local food.

It still is a rare skill to get a careful balance between four types of cultural preference:¹⁴ hierarchy (power), private initiative (efficiency), (perceived) fairness of social outcomes, and (public) transparency (accountability and anticorruption). The carrot-stick-sermon perspective on effective policy can now be understood as a balancing act between profits, "prove-it" requirements, and prophets.

Reflections

In the past decades, many schemes have emerged to try and represent the interests of local communities in forests but have fallen short of recognizing the agroforests developed by local farmers. Schemes such as African versions of CBFM and Asian versions of social forestry and PES have made some progress, but continued micromanagement by state authorities has limited opportunities for success. The administrative burdens imposed in the name of transparency ("prove it") or even fairness (anticorruption) make it difficult for any community to progress without prophets who can shape coalitions to negotiate with the abstract and (almost) limitless powers at national levels. It is hard to achieve real and fairly distributed profits.

In reflection, the common metaphor of forests and trees shows the challenge of simultaneously understanding patterns and processes at local, national, and global scales. Although even fast-growing trees live longer than most policies that relate to them, it is hard to reconcile local concerns for livelihood opportunities with the need to respect planetary boundaries and retain functional forest and tree cover to support hydrological cycles, conserve tropical forest biodiversity, and play a role in atmospheric greenhouse gas stabilization. Where the SDG framework suggests that goals can be reached only in combination, local governments have more opportunity to break the siloed and sectoral approaches that dominate nationally. Integrative perspectives on all land uses, including those of forests and trees, as part of social-ecological systems is needed. Real progress is made in small steps but with tenacity, as the holes made in rocks by constantly dripping water show.

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