

# Farmer-Led Organizations For Natural Resource Management in the Tropics

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Reversing global land degradation is about better and simpler technologies, national policies, and much more. But ultimately it is about rural people and their institutions. The prospect for reversing tropical land degradation in the next century will be greatly enhanced by the evolution of real farmer-led community organizations that take charge and transform the way research and extension in land management are done. Broad-based evidence for this is beginning to emerge. This is part of a historical process toward people taking back greater control of their futures through decentralization, democracy, and local leadership.

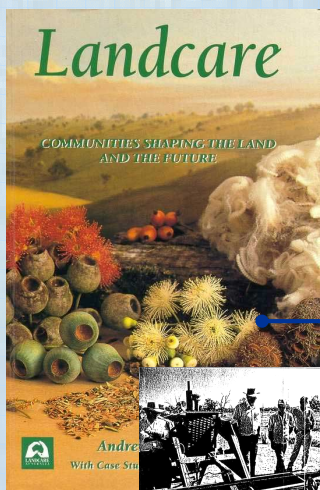
Locally-led processes in natural resource conservation follow two successful streams

**Locally self-organized groups** whose activities may be assisted by outside stakeholders. These farmer-led institutions are independent self-governing entities that may receive training and material support from outside, but they determine their agenda and implement it through their own efforts.

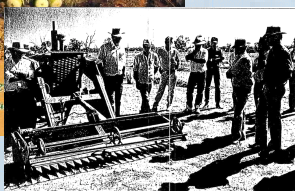


Women's Mwethya group making terraces in Machakos, Kenya

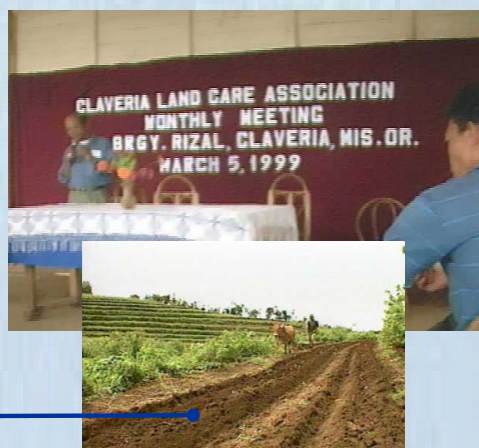
The *mwethya* self-help work groups in the Machakos District in Kenya that have constructed large areas of terraces to control soil erosion over the years (Thomas-Slayter *et al.*, 1991).



The explosive development of 4500 farmer-led community Landcare groups in Australia. The movement includes about a third of the country's farmers (Campbell, 1994; Marriott *et al.*, 1998).



A Landcare movement has evolved in the uplands of the southern Philippines focussing on the spread of natural vegetative strips, farm forestry, and other agroforestry practices (Garrity *et al.*, 1998).



**Local conservation organizations guided by the public sector**

Catchment Committees are communities mobilized to embrace soil and water conservation practices on their own terms. The Committees are guided to analyze the community's farming and conservation problems and plan conservation measures at the farm level. The approach is currently applied in Kenya, and five other East African countries, by their respective soil conservation agencies (Thomas *et al.*, 1997).



The Conservation Districts movement of over 3000 self-governing districts in North America and Australia have been supporting the spread of conservation practices among their members since the 1930s.



The emergence of municipal natural resource management planning and implementation in the Philippines (Pajaro and Catacutan, 1998; DENR, 1998).

The two streams of institutional approaches are not incompatible with each other. They may be integrated in the same area in mutually supportive ways, as seen in the confluence of Landcare and Conservation Districts in Western Australia (Campbell, 1994).

These experiences from both the temperate and tropical worlds indicate that community organizations are a vast underutilized resource for planning and implementing resource conservation. Local labor and resources, combined with modest external assistance through cost-sharing, foster sustainable development.

Outside support is often critical, however, for leadership training and modest capital needs. And linkages to external sources of information and support are fundamental for long term sustainability of these organizations. Networks of farmer-led community groups need to evolve to bolster this. These networks will accelerate the realization of the power of farmer-led community groups to reverse land degradation on a global scale during the 21<sup>st</sup> century.