

Working together: forest-based associations and social justice

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Abstract

Poverty is not just about income. It is also about social isolation and powerlessness. Analysis of the private sector and poverty reduction must therefore deal with questions of social justice: Who controls enterprise? Whose culture and capacity does it build? Whose rights does it uphold or undermine?

The private sector in international development is often narrowly defined to mean corporate 'for-profit' forms of commercial activity. But an examination of six developing countries shows that many forms of forest business are not exclusively 'for-profit'. Many of these forms (family businesses, informal groups, associations and cooperatives) involve collective action with a strong social agenda. Even among local enterprises that are exclusively 'for-profit', a locally strong social licence-to-operate frequently curbs more exploitative forms of community interaction. Tens of thousands of mutual forms of small and medium forest enterprise (SMFE) or SMFE associations may even constitute the majority of forest enterprise numbers and employment opportunities in developing countries.

Mutual SMFEs and their associations often play an important role in building economic competitiveness vis-à-vis large enterprise - reducing transaction costs, adapting to new market niches or lobbying policy makers. But they often also explicitly focus on social justice. The emphasis on social justice is both a key requirement for the continued success of such associations and for tackling poverty.

This paper draws out some lessons on how associations can make a positive contribution to poverty reduction - summarising research from Brazil, China, Guyana, India, South Africa and Uganda. It suggests important types of external support that might enhance this contribution.

Introduction

Several influential papers reject discrimination in favour of small and medium enterprise. Some argue that they are neither more nor less job creating, innovative or competitive (promoting of economic dynamism) than large enterprise (Biggs, 2002). Others use cross-country evidence (limited to formal manufacturing enterprises and income-based measures of poverty), to assert that small and medium enterprises do not reduce poverty (Beck et al. 2003).

This paper uses examples of small and medium forest enterprise (SMFE) to challenge such viewpoints, emphasising that:

- *Concepts of poverty must include a social dimension.* Narrow income-based measures of poverty do not capture important social dimensions of poverty. For the forest dependent poor, poverty is not entirely, nor even primarily, to do with income.

- *The degree of social interaction and investment amongst SMFEs deserves attention.* The subset of small and medium enterprises used to make such claims is not representative of the multiple, often informal, forms of forest enterprises, nor of the degree of association between them.
- *Evidence exists that many SMFEs and their associations contribute to social justice.* SMFEs and their associations often reduce social powerlessness and isolation by improving local control over and returns from natural resources.
- *Internal association tactics to enhance social justice are well known.* Previous studies have already identified many of the internal conditions for effective collective action and the most useful types of external support. These should now be more widely applied.
- *Useful forms of external support can make a difference.* SMFEs and their association do not exist in a vacuum. External influences often define the degree to which they contribute to social justice and poverty reduction.

Concepts of poverty must include a social dimension

In a summary of how 40,000 poor people from 50 countries themselves saw poverty, Narayan et al. (2000) wrote:

“Poor people’s definitions of poverty do not only include economic well-being, but also include vulnerability, powerlessness, the shame of dependency and social isolation”

Causal diagrams of the most important common problems of the forest dependent poor revealed four interlinked issues (Macqueen et al 2001):

- the *lack of representation* of the poor in policy and decision making
- *inappropriate laws and policies* which result
- *locally weak institutional relationships* without sufficient clout to influence the former
- the *isolation* of the poor from supportive infrastructure and services

In a global review of the forest-poverty link, Angelsen and Wunder (2003) documented the trend to extend the definition of poverty beyond income to other, non-material aspects of human well-being. The reason is not hard to see. Income-based measures of poverty can neither measure elements of poverty such as social powerlessness and isolation – nor identify appropriate development solutions to them.

Studies in Yunnan China have attempted to discern the weight given by different cultural groups to ‘forest values’ (Rowcroft et al. 2006). They show that ‘commercial value’ (opportunities for the interviewees to generate cash income) accounts for only 6% of the sum total of scaled forest values (8th most important of the 13 values). This echoed almost precisely the findings of a similar study from Canada (Brown and Reed, 2000). In other words, poverty as a concept is not entirely, or even primarily to do with income.

To make poverty history, international development must give adequate attention to those other aspects of poverty that are important – for example, the social components of what Alkire (2002) calls ‘dimensions of human development’. The social dimensions of development are not abstract. They involve specific examples of local isolation and powerlessness that are best understood at local level. It is little wonder then that a book entitled ‘how to make poverty history’ concludes that (Bigg and Satterthwaite, 2005):

“The most vital challenge is to find ways to support local level institutions and processes whether municipal government, farmers unions, women’s savings groups or citizen associations”

This paper makes the case that small and medium forest enterprises (SMFEs) and their associations are highly relevant to poverty reduction – once the social elements of poverty at the local level are given the weight they deserve.

The degree of social interaction and investment amongst SMFEs deserves attention

Forest products and services offer development opportunities to the rural poor – where few other options outside agriculture exist. SMFEs make up a significant proportion of those opportunities. Rough extrapolations from existing information suggest that (Macqueen and Mayers, 2006):

- About 80-90% of forestry enterprises are SMFEs in many countries
- Over 50% of all forest sector employment is in SMFEs in many countries
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- Over 20 million people are employed by formal SMFEs worldwide – but there may be an additional 140 million people working in informal forestry
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- Over US\$130 billion/year of gross value added is produced by SMFEs worldwide.

Although there is little substantive evidence for poverty reduction from commercial forestry jobs or income (Mayers, 2006), SMFEs offer better prospects because of specific social advantages compared with large forest enterprises. For example, SMFEs tend to (Macqueen, 2004):

- accrue wealth locally
- empower local entrepreneurship
- show greater subjugation to local social and environmental licence to operate
- respond to cultural niches and preserve cultural identity

Different forms of business have different drivers that affect how they treat society and the environment (Macqueen, 2006). In many ways, the scale of enterprise is less important as a determinant of behaviour, than the business form that an enterprise adopts.

SMFEs are diverse in terms of the business forms they adopt. Many are not formally registered at all. For example, May et al. (2003) observed that Brazilian SMFEs comprise a ‘largely invisible economy’ – often avoiding cumbersome legislative requirements or simply without the capacity to comply. Not all operate responsibly. But while many SMFEs avoid the formal licence to operate, their small scale usually means they have insufficient power to bypass completely their ‘social licence to operate’ – the explicit or implicit consent of the adjacent community for their activities. In many cases these social expectations embedded in customary laws may be stronger than legal requirements – so much so that they often concern large enterprise as well (Gunningham et al. 2002).

Many formal SMFEs operate as mutual (e.g. associations or cooperatives) rather than corporate forms of business (e.g. companies limited by share or guarantee). In some cases, associations act as a single enterprise, while in other cases associations involve a group of enterprises. The tendency towards association among SMFEs is typified by Uganda where estimates suggest 2-3000 forest associations operate (Kazoora et al, 2006). According to Macqueen et al. (2006) working together in associations allows SMFEs to achieve their goals more efficiently by:

- reducing transaction costs
- adapting to new opportunities
- shaping the policy environment

The high proportion of mutual forms of SMFE or association between SMFEs has significant positive benefits for good forest governance (Macqueen, 2006). For SMFEs, the need to achieve a ‘social licence to operate’ - and for SMFE associations, the need to cement trust between members - usually requires a clear statement of social and environmental objectives e.g. within articles of association. In the following section the paper examines some of these objectives and provides evidence of their contribution to social justice.

Evidence exists that many SMFEs and their associations contribute to social justice

In the same way that justice protects the interests of individuals (“each according to their due”), social justice protects the interests of society – the common good. This does not mean that social justice is some kind of equality (Flew, 1993). Rather, social justice recognises the multiple societal levels at which decisions are made (Behr, 2003) and uses individual principles such as justice, charity, moderation etc. in search of the common good. What is understood by “the common good” may itself vary from culture to culture. For social justice, few hard and fast rules apply. Social justice is defined here as:

“a social virtue that pursues the common good by creating and devolving decision making capacity to the level closest to any given problem.”

In other words, social justice has everything to do with developing social capacity, at multiple levels, to negotiate multiple entitlements, needs and aspirations. It is all about redressing the problems of social powerlessness and isolation.

By no means all SMFEs prioritise social justice – some SMFEs take on forms that are driven solely by profit. But where the social licence to operate is effective in moderating SMFE behaviour, or where SMFE associations operate democratically, social justice is often improved. In part, this is because negotiations leading to collective action allow individuals to articulate their entitlements, needs and aspirations – and help members to identify a common good about which they can mobilise. For example, stated objectives in articles of association frequently prioritise some elements of the common good:

“An association should: represent the needs and aspirations of members, and; seek opportunities that would enhance the maintenance and development of forests for the benefit of community members in general” Objectives of the Zamukuthula Platt Estate Trust, South Africa (Bukula and Memani, 2006)

“The original objective of the association was to create employment while contributing to the development of the community” Objectives of the Upper Berbice Forest Producers Association, Guyana (Ousman et al. 2006)

“Access rural credit and technical assistance, as well as financial support to implement social and infrastructure projects, notably housing, a health post, school and road improvements” Objectives of the Association of Small Rural Producers in the Caetés Settlement, Brazil (Figueiredo et al. 2006)

Associations often take on an important role in developing accountable systems of local governance. For example, in Uganda 97% of the 62 forest associations surveyed had democratic leadership elections (with fixed terms of office) and decision-making with a minimum quorum of members present (Kazoora et al, 2006).

In many cases, SMFE associations install the virtues of justice in member interaction with markets. For example in Guyana, the Kamuni Women's Handicraft and Sewing Development Association has meticulous procedures by which orders are shared between members – matched by careful financial record keeping of the stock held in their craft sales centre (Ousman *et al.*, 2006). In countries such as China where associations have not historically played a major role “there is growing recognition of the benefits of association as an interface between members and markets, and members and government”(Weyerhaeuser *et al.* 2006).

Beyond inculcating social justice amongst members, many associations also directly serve the poor in their communities. For example, in India, the Harda District Timber Merchant Association (HDTMA) collects money and makes loans to particularly needy members who have suffered losses beyond their control (Bose *et al.*, 2006).

In frontier areas where community cohesion is challenged by immigration from multiple origins, associations can play an important role encouraging mutual interaction. For example, in Brazil, association barbecues and games proved a popular reason for belonging to the Association of the Settlement Project California (Figueiredo *et al.*, 2006).

Internal association tactics to enhance social justice are well known

Research has highlighted issues that need attention to maximise the contribution to social justice (Macqueen *et al.* 2006 and literature review therein):

Autonomous origins

Almost every study dealing with associations has highlighted the benefits of independent beginnings, free from external interference. In Yunnan, China, political interference is strong—and the impact of associations on isolation and powerlessness is weak as a result. For example, the narrowly construed Yunnan Forest Products Industry Association currently does little more than hold an annual meeting. But this may be set to change as forest companies begin to play a greater role in managing the association (Weyerhaeuser *et al.*, 2006). Many associations that are driven by outside interests eventually undermine social cohesion. For example, in Brazil, the state agricultural extension agency EMBRAPA founded the Associação dos Produtores Rurais em Manejo Florestal e Agricultura (APLUMA) as a timber management project. Interviewees described little ownership by members, little trust in the leadership and little unity between members (Campos *et al.*, 2005).

Accountable leadership with a history of social commitment

Members who have served well in a voluntary capacity are likely to make good leaders. For example, in Uganda many of the financially poorest associations chose leaders who had initially subsidised association activities out of personal commitment to the collective interest (Kazooru *et al.*, 2006). It also makes sense to invest in future leaders. For example, the association of the Settlement Project California in Mato Grosso, Brazil, has worked in partnership with the municipality to develop programmes at the local high school and build sports facilities in the settlement. Young people now make up 12% of the association members (Figueiredo *et al.*, 2006).

Evolving procedures and capacity to manage them

While dynamic leaders can carry an association at the beginning, longer-term social justice requires broader responsibility for rules and procedures. For example, in Nova California in Brazil, two small rural producers' associations joined together in 1988 to form a cooperative called Reflorestamento Econômico Consorciado e Adensado (RECA). While founding

members defined the initial objectives, RECA has now evolved a unique organisational structure. It groups members by area with regional coordinators (male and female). A one-year membership trial period helps to build membership quality. Clear rules governing decision-making and the partitioning of costs and benefits are a major strength (Campos *et al.*, 2005).

Ensuring democracy and representation

Associations can be a seed-bed for local democracy and governance of natural resources. For example, the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDB) in Guyana developed by-laws based on democratic consultation with its 16 participating Makushi indigenous communities. These cover organisational purpose, membership, board structure, employment, conflicts of interest decision-making and finance (Ousman *et al.*, 2006).

Men and women often have very different livelihood concerns, yet there are often fewer women in leadership positions. For example, Ugandan women made up 53% of the members of the 62 associations surveyed, but only 44% of its leaders (Kazoora *et al.*, 2006). In many countries, women create their own associations in order to have their interests represented. For example, in the Caetés Settlement in Brazil, women producers formed the Association of Caetés Women because the two existing producers' associations failed to represent their interests (Figueiredo *et al.*, 2006). In exceptional cases, associations decide on strict gender equity—one example is the Reflorestamento Econômico Consorciado e Adensado (RECA) (Campos *et al.*, 2005).

Larger associations frequently under-represent smaller enterprise members. For example, in South Africa, the large industrial association—Forestry South Africa—has an executive committee dominated by large timber growers (five members). These carry more weight than medium growers (three members) and small growers (two members). The flourishing of many alternative associations of small producers is one outcome (Bukula and Memani, 2006).

Making costs and benefits transparent

Social justice flourishes when association members know what their rights and obligations are. Developing clear procedures for costs and benefits and sticking to them can avoid corruption and abuses by powerful elites. One of the main attributes of the success of the Kamuni Women's Handicraft and Sewing Development Association in Guyana is the meticulous financial record keeping of the stock held in the newly built craft sales centre (Ousman *et al.*, 2006).

It is vital that members perceive some advantage over non-members. Graded membership can build loyalty for continuing membership and can improve inclusion of the poor. In India, the FORHEX association has three types of members, founder members, chartered members and associate members. The latter pay reduced fees and receive partial benefits in comparison with the former two categories. The Madhya Pradesh Minor Forest Produce (Trading and Development) Cooperative Federation Limited has a set membership fee, but distributes profits in line with particular activities—50% to primary collectors, 20% for forest regeneration and 30% for infrastructure development (Bose *et al.*, 2006).

Developing clear conflict resolution procedures and effective sanctions

Personality differences and poor representation can lead to a fragmentation of associations and abuses of power. One useful strategy is to ensure space for extraordinary meetings. Such meetings deal with contentious issues, new developments, hosting important visitors or discussing new government policies. In Uganda, 95% of the surviving associations had procedures in place to call such meetings (Kazoora *et al.*, 2006).

Finding ways of rewarding members and penalising free riders helps to reward those who sacrifice most to belong. The credibility of the association (and the willingness to pay membership fees) often hinges on how people who fail to pay are treated. For example, the Guyanese Orealla Fruit Cheese Women's Association (making forest fruit jams) stipulates an annual membership fee, commitment to waged work in the 'fruit cheese' production facility and regular participation in meetings. The association expels members if they fail to pay the annual membership fee or if a two-thirds majority vote against them (Ousman *et al.*, 2006).

Useful forms of external support can make a difference

Many policy environments unjustly discriminate against small scale enterprise – either passively or actively (Macqueen *et al.* 2005). Inverting this situation is no small task – requiring a combination of approaches:

Create an enabling environment that responds to the needs of existing SMFE associations

Kaimowitz (2006) highlighted overregulation, trade liberalisation with subsidies for the rich, and weak support services (credit, information and training) as the major constraints for SMFEs in developing countries. Overviews of SMFEs in six countries highlight the need for governments to level the playing field in terms of registration, resource access, taxation and so on (Auren and Krassowska, 2003; Lewis *et al.* 2003; May *et al.* 2003; Saigal and Bose, 2003; Sun and Chen, 2003; Thomas *et al.* 2003).

One general rule for support is to foster what exists rather than impose what does not. In many cases, successful support occurs through technical support or loans that emerge through genuine partnerships or as a response to demand from the association itself. For example, in Mexico the Union of Zapotec and Chinantec Forestry Communities (Uzachi) was established autonomously in 1989 following decades of private exploitation of their natural mixed pine oak forests. The Union then approached Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and achieved certification in 1996. It has subsequently been able to attract greater financial and technical support and has gained in status with the government environment ministry (Markoupoulos, 2003).

Before rushing to push external loans or technical support programmes, it is worth exploring what internal credit unions or revolving loan funds can do. For example, the North Rupununi District Development Board (NRDDDB) in Guyana runs a women's revolving loan scheme for small loans at 5% interest. It also finances a larger North Rupununi Credit and Development Trust (NRCDT) geared towards business start-up. This is initially repayable in 6-9 months, at which time borrowers can access a second larger loan (Ousman *et al.*, 2006).

Forcing particular models of association can cause lasting damage. For example, in Uganda the cooperative form of association provokes a highly negative reaction because of the high failure rates among government-sponsored cooperatives in the 1980s (Kazoora *et al.*, 2006).

Underwrite communication networks that link forest enterprise associations, markets and service providers

In very poor countries, the infrastructure to connect SMFEs and their associations to registration authorities, consumers and service providers is often absent. This gives a perception to the outside world of poorly organised (and often informal) enterprises, dispersed economic activity and high risk – which discourages government authorities, financial institutions and technical support services.

One of the most productive forms of support is to connect SMFEs and their associations to the outside world and vice versa through communication networks. For example, in China, the Zhajijaiwa Village's Persimmon Association posted information about its products in the Baoshan Forestry Bureau's publications and secured buyers from as far away as Shanghai (Weyerhaeuser *et al.*, 2006). Umbrella associations such as the Budongo Forest Conservation and Development Organisation (BUCODO) or the Uganda Honey Association (UHA) in Uganda can act as support hubs for the development of better communication networks (Kazooro *et al.*, 2006).

Many associations would also benefit from exposure to other like-minded product or service groups. Support in this area through printed or radio bulletins or by financing visits to trade fairs can be very useful. For example, the Essential Oil Association of India (EOAI) publishes a journal entitled 'Indian Perfumer' with latest research and market information. It also sponsors workshops and seminars for member entrepreneurs (Bose *et al.*, 2006).

Provide ways of distinguishing, and increasing the returns from, responsible local enterprise in the market

Consumers are often willing to pay a premium for the social benefits that accrue through responsible community-based SMFEs and their associations. For example the fair-trade movement already offers considerable price premiums for many timber and non-timber forest product craft and furniture items traded by Fair Trade Organisations certified by the International Federation for Alternative Trade (IFAT) (Macqueen *et al.* 2006). Major timber buyers have expressed an interest in developing fair-trade timber (Roby, 2005). But there is currently no product specific label for timber available from the Fair trade Labelling Organisation (FLO) that might allow mainstream traders to deal in fair-trade products (i.e. those not certified by IFAT).

Despite well-publicised social concern, the labels of the three major certification schemes FSC, PEFC and Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI) do not distinguish between small community-based products and products originating from large multinationals (Boetekees, 2006). As a result, community based SMFEs and their associations continue to face disproportionate costs for certification without seeing many economic benefits (Bass *et al.* 2001). Taylor (2005) called for new market mechanisms to address this deficiency. Such mechanisms might involve mainstream trade, fair-trade, certified trade or a combination of all three.

Conclusion

SMFEs are usually locally embedded – operating within a keenly felt social licence to operate. In many cases they have no choice but to work together to survive. The negotiations involved in working together often result in forms of association that significantly improve social justice and hence poverty. As such, it is both possible and necessary to argue that SMFEs and their associations play an important role in poverty reduction – irrespective of whether they are more or less job creating, innovative or competitive than large enterprise. Support to mutual SMFEs and their associations can be effective in enhancing social justice and reducing poverty.

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