

# Power from the Trees: How Good Forest Governance can Help Reduce Poverty

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**F**orestry is no magic bullet for poverty eradication any more than any other sector is on its own. But good forestry does offer some high-potential routes out of rural poverty. Forestry can contribute to food security, provide resource safety nets and sometimes enterprise opportunities where little else exists. Forests have also proven to be fertile ground for pioneering good local governance.

What is needed is for national and international governance frameworks to take a lead from local initiative and convert laudable intentions into some practical action. It is time to remove the barriers that prevent forests and trees from contributing to the livelihoods of poor people and to support emerging opportunities for sustainable local forestry enterprises.

## Introduction

### Changing environment, new world order, same old poverty

Trade, technology, information systems and many human aspirations and concerns are becoming more global. This is good news for some, bad news for others. Meanwhile, the world's forests are declining and global climate changes are expected to have further drastic impacts on forests. Yet demands on forests and trees are increasing – roughly 1.6 billion people are estimated to rely on forest resources for at least part of their livelihoods (admittedly this is not much more than a back-of-an-envelope

calculation). With economic inequity increasing, this reliance becomes more significant and poor people need safeguards more than ever.

### *Who relies on trees and forests?*

- 60 million indigenous people living in the rainforests of Latin America, Southeast Asia and West Africa depend heavily on forests
- 350 million people living in, or next to, dense forests rely on them for subsistence or income
- 1.2 billion people in developing countries use trees on farms to generate food and cash<sup>2</sup>

### *What do poor people get from trees and forests?*

- *Subsistence goods* such as fuelwood, medicines, wood for building, rope, bushmeat, fodder, mushrooms, honey, edible leaves, roots, fruits
- *Goods for sale* all of the above goods, arts and crafts, timber and other wood products
- *Indirect benefits* such as land for other uses, social and spiritual sites, environmental services, including watershed protection and biodiversity conservation

## KEY CHALLENGES:

### National governance:

- Strengthen rights, capabilities and local decision-making
- Reduce poor people's vulnerability
- Enable market opportunities to be seized by poor people
- Work in partnership

### International governance:

- Recognise the power of good forest governance to reduce poverty – but not through brute 'enforcement'
- Stop marginalising forest communities and start listening to poor people
- Stop making international proposals and start implementing some
- Demand responsible forest enterprise and fair trade
- Increase accountability of the UN and Bretton Woods agencies



## Water, forests and poverty reduction

*Global consumption of fresh water doubles every 20 years – twice the rate of population growth. Forest watersheds influence the local water cycle and improve water quality, but poor rural people's needs are increasingly challenged by external water demands. In India, many villages have active collectives to manage watersheds and negotiate with downstream users.*

## Emerging opportunities for pro-poor forestry

The world's rapid pace of change means increased challenges for poor people, but can also provide new opportunities for improved livelihoods based on sustainable use of natural resources. Forest resources can usually only provide contributions, rather than whole livelihoods.<sup>3</sup> But they can also complement and strengthen other key components of livelihoods and poverty reduction – for example through their use in food production, education and primary health care. Furthermore, if key actions are taken, many more poor forest producers, traders and workers can participate in local initiatives that offer commercial prospects. The challenge is to support specific changes that will lead to a greater role for forest and tree resources in the livelihoods of poor people. This challenge – primarily a local forest governance challenge – requires immediate action at two 'higher' levels of governance – national and international.

### **Benefits to local livelihoods from pro-poor forestry**

- Rights to access, control and use of forest and tree resources
- More say in decisions over use and management of forest resources
- Reduced vulnerability, not only through secure forest resources but political empowerment
- Income from forest goods and services
- Improved governance through more effective local institutions
- Partnership to enhance capacities
- Direct benefits from environmental services
- Increased powers of negotiation

## Forests for reducing poverty: four national governance challenges

### 1. Strengthen rights, capabilities and local decision-making

#### **Support poor people's own decision-making power**

Forests and trees, like other resources, can only contribute to reducing poverty when poor people are able to make

decisions and put them into practice – to be in control. Poor people are rarely completely powerless, but their authority to manage their local environments, or indeed their own lives, often goes unacknowledged. On the other hand, initiatives with forests and trees appear to have a strong record in engendering preparedness, capability, social networks and local institutions. These are just the kinds of skills and capital that are needed for marginalised groups to become participants in policy processes and better advocates for their own rights and capacities.

Strengthened communities can take action to improve local livelihoods by improving access to infrastructure, education and health services. This feature of forest management activities amongst poor people – the improvement of local institutions and bargaining power – is a key reason why addressing poverty through a focus on forest resources makes sense.

## Agriculture, forests and poverty reduction

*Trees have many agricultural uses, such as food, fuel, fodder, fertiliser, shade, windbreaks, fencing, packaging, water regulation and erosion prevention. In Nepal, poor farmers – unable to purchase fertilisers – try to maintain a 3:1 ratio of forest to agricultural land, to sustain supplies of livestock fodder and hence manure to fertilise their crops.*

### **Secure poor people's forest rights**

Many people stay poor because they have insufficient rights to manage their resources, including forests. Evidence increasingly shows that transferring or returning ownership of forest assets to poor people, and securing long-term access and control rights, are politically feasible and cost-effective strategies for poverty reduction.<sup>4</sup>

Clear tenure rights allow local people to protect forests from outside encroachment, to increase their local food and forest security, and to enter into business contracts. Proven new mechanisms for devolving forest rights to poor communities include: joint forest management agreements (India, Tanzania), ownership or control of village forest reserves by indigenous and rural communities (Ghana, Nicaragua), long-term concessions (Bolivia, Indonesia), household forest allocations (China, Viet Nam), conditional handover of forest resources consonant with government policy (Nepal, Philippines), and complete transfer of forest resources (Mexico, The Gambia). These vary in the security they offer poor people, but all are valid under different circumstances and all can be stepping-stones to poverty reduction.

### **Back up rights with the capability to claim them**

Rights on their own are not enough: they must be supported by the capability to claim and defend them against more powerful actors. Clear constitutional guarantees, as well as specific supportive legislation and regulations are necessary, but are still not sufficient on their own. Poor people need to be aware of their rights and to be able to access effective routes to recourse.

Devolution of forest use and management rights requires effort to establish the effectiveness, legitimacy and accountability of local institutions.<sup>5</sup> Management of budgets, costs and benefits should be devolved along with responsibilities. Local institutions need sufficient autonomy to act on, modify and enforce local rules. In addition, regional or national laws should define rules by which communities interact with outsiders, provide basic protection for individuals and disadvantaged groups against the abuse of local power, and set guidelines for the protection of legitimate public interests.

**Recognise links between forestry and local governance**

Initiatives aimed at improving poor people’s use and control of forest resources provide entry points to elements of good governance such as representation, transparency, accountability, equitable taxation and increased civil society roles. The forestry sector has quite a good record in initiating public sector reform, capacity-building, and improvement of rights to natural resources, and has recently focused its attention on practical means for the elimination of corruption and illegal trade. The forestry sector is becoming increasingly effective in generating lessons for other sectors, learning from other sectors, and providing a springboard to broader action on governance.<sup>6</sup>

Improved access to, and transparency of, information on forest resources is central to people-centred development and requires appropriate information technologies and communication channels to assist local decision-making. The inclusion of information in local planning improves freedom of choice for poor people.

**Advantages to governments of pro-poor forestry**

- Reduced central government costs
- Environmental benefits
- Local conflict resolution
- Natural resources for local development
- Effective management through partnership

**2. Reduce poor people’s vulnerability**

**Make safety nets not poverty traps**

In situations of persistent poverty, forest products can help people cope with hard times. For the very poor, access to forest resources provides a vital buffer, absorbing agricultural risk and reducing vulnerability. The very poor have less access to market opportunities or participatory forestry initiatives. They need, above all, measures that protect their access to resources in the face of privatisation and trade liberalisation – for example rights to move freely and glean on public land – but that do not lock them into forest dependence.

**Cut the regulatory burden on poor people**

The regulations that govern poor people’s use of forests are often excessive and inconsistent – for example, imposing timber felling bans on community forests but not on commercial forests. Access of poor people to forest

resources is over-regulated while the more powerful interests can defy control, which undermines the rule and legitimacy of law. When poor people have enough say in defining regulations, they will usually adapt these regulations effectively and support their enforcement.

**Regulations benefit livelihoods and forests when poor people have rights and control**

In Niger, where rural fuelwood markets were established, villagers gained control of fuelwood harvesting and trading through a set of regulations developed with their involvement. These provide a fairer balance of rights, responsibilities and revenues to poor people and the government, and extra revenues to both through higher prices.

Regulation often vastly exceeds government capacity available for enforcement – US\$5 billion per year is lost worldwide by governments unable to collect taxes from forest concessions, and a further \$10 billion is lost from illegal cutting of forests.<sup>2</sup> Regulatory frameworks need to focus more on effectively curbing the excesses of the powerful rather than on limiting use by the poor.

**The challenge to making forestry profits legal and equitable**

At the East Asian Ministerial Conference on Forest Law and Governance in September 2001 an unprecedented international commitment was made to combat illegal logging and other forest crimes. At the same conference it was said that in Indonesia alone, an estimated US\$600 million per year in royalties, reforestation funds and export tax payments does not reach the government. This represents four times the total government expenditure in the forestry sector, and about three-quarters of the annual budget for education.

Poor forest dwellers are also often expected to bear costs of forest management, rehabilitation and protection – costs way out of proportion to the benefits they derive. Regulatory frameworks can mean that despite their expected role as forest stewards, rural communities face major barriers in trying to acquire commercial rights to forest areas. States should simplify planning and monitoring requirements for small-scale forest managers. Effective planning, utilisation and monitoring can be based on clear guidelines, without elaborate management plans.

**3. Enable market opportunities to be seized by poor people**

**Remove the barriers to market entry**

Small-scale producers of timber and other forest products are frequently subjected to costly controls when harvesting, transporting and selling wood and other forest products, while state and large corporate producers are sometimes subsidised. States should provide enabling conditions for

poor people in those markets where small producers would have a comparative advantage. A next step is to remove constraints to poor people's access to the more profitable and dynamic opportunities in forestry, such as secondary processing and forest support services.<sup>7</sup>

Access to information on the value of forest resources in the market place is crucial. Emerging small-scale producers need support to analyse their markets and establish a competitive position, and to learn the financial and organisational viability of different business models and how to manage market risks.

### Health, forests and poverty reduction

*Forests provide medicines and critical food supplements. One billion people depend on drugs derived from forest plants for their medicinal needs. People living beside rainforests in Ghana receive more protein from forest products than from crops or livestock. In arid environments, forests are crucial to food security in dry seasons and years.*

#### **Base land use decisions on the true value of forests**

In the predominant system of state and corporate tenure over forest land, forest resources remain undervalued. Current valuation methods for forest goods and services do not reflect real costs and benefits. In particular, they do not take into account the opportunity costs of renewing forest resources, or the role of rural people in producing and providing forest goods and services. The losers are the rural poor and the forests, which remain unattractive as a form of land use. Greater control over resources and more secure tenure rights for poor people would ensure that these real values of forest resources are reflected in the market. In addition, policy-makers need to recognise and include them in their decisions.

Secure individual or communal tenure allows attractive returns to poor people from forestry when the government and private sector work on providing the right conditions rather than on promotional campaigns. In India, for example, farm forestry was kick-started, but not sustained, by the government's programme of vigorous promotion of farm forestry and the private sector's outgrower schemes in the 1970s and 1980s. Today there is more commercial realism. Development of more competitive and accessible markets – and the concomitant removal of regulatory barriers, such as the permits needed for planting, cutting and transport of wood – has made farm forestry a profitable option even to poorer landowners who are able to plant trees only along field boundaries and contours.<sup>8</sup>

#### **Ensure that markets for environmental services benefit poor people**

Market-based mechanisms to pay for environmental services, such as watershed protection, carbon storage and biodiversity conservation, already exist or look feasible in many countries.<sup>9</sup> The central rationale is that those who benefit from the services that forests provide should pay

those – often the rural poor – who maintain the forests. At the same time, these payments must benefit poor people in a cost effective and equitable way. For environmental service markets to benefit poor people, their rights must be secured; payments should be treated as a supplement to, rather than substitute for, sustainable forest use; and systems for market transactions and compliance must be equitable, transparent and efficient.

#### **Support associations and financing for local forest businesses**

Increased support is needed to improve the capacity of local forest businesses to access markets and match supply to demand.<sup>10</sup> Strengthened producer organisations, co-operatives, alliances and federations can reduce transaction costs, negotiate with buyers and provide economies of scale. Support measures are also needed to protect the rights of employees, particularly in contracted and outsourced sectors.

Financing local forest businesses requires innovation. Credit tends to benefit wealthier people who have individual land titles. Poor people will continue to rely on savings as the primary source to make investments. Many individual and group savings schemes have proven effective in forestry. Traders of forest products and conservation agencies need to support more local forest businesses, and venture capitalists may find that helping local enterprises scale up their operations is a sound investment.

## 4. Work in partnership

#### **Simplify policies and support participatory processes**

National forest policies, which have proliferated over the last few years, have created layer upon layer of new directives, while the capacity of over-structured and under-resourced forestry departments to implement them has decreased. One of the highest priorities in the forestry sector is to turn this around, by finding ways to simplify policies and share them more widely.<sup>11</sup> This means that local forest producers must be able to actively participate in policy negotiation and prioritisation. Agencies supporting poverty reduction need to adopt flexible, best-bet approaches, and offer regular exchange of information and experience inside the agency and with other stakeholders.

### Energy, forests and poverty reduction

*Wood remains the main fuel for cooking and heating among poor people in Asia and Africa. Small-scale rural producers and traders can take advantage of the growing urban market for firewood and charcoal. In 1998, a small producers union in Burkina Faso negotiated a 30 percent farm-gate price rise.*

#### **Promote inter-agency learning and action**

Single-sector solutions will not reduce poverty. An improved understanding of the various elements and dynamics of poverty suggests that multiple agencies need to be engaged.<sup>12</sup> At national level, insufficient intersectoral co-ordination and

unnecessary duplication result in poorly targeted action, sometimes at the expense of the priorities of poor people. Reports and evaluations have been highlighting this problem for many years but it seems to recur time after time. Mechanisms for inter-agency collaboration often exist but require concerted effort to create real interchange, recognition of comparative advantage of different agencies, negotiation and a steady focus on knowledge-generation with poverty reduction priorities.

Most countries are required – under various commitments and degrees of pressure – to produce national forest programmes (nfps), poverty reduction strategies (PRSPs) and national sustainable development strategies (nsds). These approaches, and a range of other sectoral and cross-sectoral planning processes, require a concerted multi-stakeholder process as well as concrete content and product. Yet, they are generally pursued independently, instead of being used as opportunities for a broader understanding of poverty and the role of forests in reducing it. They should be treated as systems of continuous processes – of information flows, analysis, debate, experiments, monitoring and learning – rather than parallel-track master plans.<sup>13</sup>

### Employment, forests and poverty reduction

*Up to 47 million people work in forestry industries globally. Forest investment can have high employment multipliers. In Guyana, forestry has benefited the national economy, expanding from 1 percent of GDP in 1987 to 8 percent in 1999, directly employs 19 000 people, and is the primary income source for the rural poor. Amerindian communities' timber sales are one of their main sources of income.*

### Make the private sector and NGOs partners in poverty reduction

Support is needed to increase capabilities and create partnerships among businesses and NGOs to spearhead the contribution of forestry in reducing poverty. Collaborative forest management remains a vital way forward and NGO roles, in particular, are crucial. The challenge is to reduce transaction costs while maintaining the drive for equitable local governance and sustainability. NGOs and the private sector can also provide specialised business services.

Partnerships between industry and local producers can enable industry to secure forest product supplies with competitive cost structures and prices while providing credit, extension, markets and skills development to poorer producers, through contracts on tree production and trading and other forms of contract arrangements.<sup>7</sup> A true partnership approach requires a long-term perspective, flexible contract terms and attention to reducing business risks. Co-operative arrangements and the bargaining position of small producers need to be strengthened, especially to enable them to gain a stake in the benefits of downstream processing and trade.

### Land titles, forests and poverty reduction

*Titles to land need to be recognised, enforceable and tradable to benefit poor people. In Bolivia in 1998, the smallholder institution, the Central Intercomunal Campesina del Oriente de Lomerio (CICOL), developed vertically integrated forest enterprises, geared towards forest product certification, which allowed 25 Chiquitano communities to secure legal recognition of indigenous territorial claims.*

## Forests for reducing poverty: five international governance challenges

Forestry's protagonists, particularly at the international level, often bemoan their powerlessness in the face of the intransigence or lack of interest of others responsible for trade, macro-economic and non-forest sectoral policies, institutions or markets that constrain or prevent forestry from reaching its potential. But they should make new alliances and try harder. When the advocates of forestry's potential to reduce poverty collectively make their case and push for change they may surprise themselves to find that some forward steps are possible. Five challenges for effective international forest governance stand out:

### 1. Recognise the power of good forest governance to reduce poverty – but not through brute 'enforcement'

Forestry has advantages over many other sectors in offering high potential routes out of rural poverty. Forestry can provide resource safety nets and sometimes enterprise opportunities where little else exists. Sustainable rural livelihoods are often highly complicated and some elements of livelihoods can be helped by forestry while others cannot. Yet the governance required to allow forestry to contribute to improved livelihoods is not unattainable – as shown in the above sections of this paper. The forest sector has pioneered approaches to pro-poor governance change.<sup>14</sup> Supporters of poverty reduction should take a longer look at these – and integrate support for forestry's potential to generate governance and livelihood benefits into nfps, nssds, PRSPs and other cross-sectoral approaches.

Governance is much more than just law enforcement – it involves fundamental rights, institutional roles, policy sticks-and-carrots, and systems by which decisions are actually put into action and monitored. The UN Forum on Forests' generally feeble Ministerial message to the World Summit on Sustainable Development contains an important call for 'enforcement' of forest and protected area laws. This joins other significant efforts, such as the South-east Asian and African Forest Law Enforcement and Governance initiatives, to combat illegal logging and the power of some forest industries to run amok. However great care must be taken – enforcement of current laws is in some contexts irrelevant, or at worst highly detrimental, to poor people. Laws frequently prop up existing exploitation systems,

denying the rights and blocking the potential of poor people at local level.<sup>15</sup> Enforcement without regard for human rights and livelihood opportunities must be prevented.

### **Forest product markets, forests and poverty reduction**

*Small-scale forest product enterprises are among the top three non-farm rural commercial activities in most countries. More than a quarter of Brazil's timber is produced by micro-enterprises. In South Africa, government policy has increased opportunities for poorer farmers to participate in timber markets, and large companies are pursuing out-grower schemes with considerable local benefits.*

## **2. Stop marginalising forest communities and start listening to poor people**

The balance struck thus far at international level between conservation and development has done little for the rural poor. The potential of vast tracts of forest in tropical countries to contribute to sustainable livelihoods has been removed as they are turned into protected areas, without reference to their historical owners or users, to satisfy North American and Western European preoccupations with global biodiversity, at minimum cost to themselves.

Meanwhile some sections of the forest industry are working hard to ensure that forestry production is widely perceived as a specialised business to be undertaken only by large corporations in subsidised plantations in high-productivity areas. Just as poor people are beginning to establish their rights and potential to develop their livelihoods through use of forest resources, they are in danger of being condemned to the margins as passive onlookers to commercial forest production and conservation.<sup>16</sup>

It is time to listen to poor people's organisations involved with forest issues, to engage with their ideas on how to influence the governance agenda with respect to poverty and forests, and to commit to supporting them. Support should be given to the organisations that poor people already have – such as *campesino* forestry organisations from Central America, forest user groups from Nepal, the national council of rubber tappers from Brazil, people's natural resource management organisations from the Philippines – to get to the WSSD and related fora. Here they can be helped to build on what they are already doing, and to enable new partnerships. Multi-stakeholder poverty-forests learning processes should be fostered – and codes of conduct developed for supporters of pro-poor forestry and national forest programmes that integrate poverty reduction priorities.

## **3. Stop making international proposals and start implementing some**

The last thing the world needs right now is more inter-governmental proposals for action on forests. The Inter-governmental Panel, then Inter-governmental Forum, on Forests – set in train in Rio in 1992 – has produced

hundreds of them already. Some of these are just what we require. Now they need to be implemented. The UN Forum on Forests is supposed to oversee and facilitate this, but so far has been a major disappointment, as governments have refused to move on from negotiating and proposal-making. Whilst many civil society organisations and some governments will abandon ship, [would they abandon ship if the re-focusing happened? Or is this a way to keep them onboard?] it is not too late to re-focus the UNFF and a wide range of other pieces of the 'international forest policy process' towards making some solid commitments, targets and indicators based on what is already agreed. International fora should be used to hook up demand for help with supply, and to share learning about the tactics for change.

### **Biodiversity conservation, forests and poverty reduction**

*Biodiversity of trees and crops in the managed forest/agricultural landscape can often be more important to poor people than those in protected areas. In Nigeria, carefully managed farmland provides a more varied and higher yielding source of fuelwood and fruits than local woodland. Global conservation efforts will be more constructive in helping poor people if they promote sustainable management of utilised biodiversity rather than focusing only on forest protection.*

## **4. Demand responsible forest enterprise and fair trade**

The huge effort that has gone into forest certification is beginning to pay off in terms of environmental performance, but is yet to represent an effective tool for pro-poor forestry.<sup>17</sup> Bright international ideas such as the Global Reporting Initiative will also strengthen corporate responsibility commitments. But much of what is called corporate social responsibility is nothing more than cynical reputation management.

Furthermore, there is much concern that progress with social responsibility, like agreements on investment codes and protocols, will favour only large companies. Calls to greater accountability tend to bolster the positions of the biggest corporations, pushing out the more livelihoods-linked small and medium scale companies unable to make the grade, or worse still, pushing production into sectors that are not subject to scrutiny. Types of partners other than limited liability companies, such as co-operatives, should receive more attention and support – a shift of focus from 'corporate' responsibility to 'enterprise' responsibility.

International forestry fora should sharpen their powers to install the elements of good forestry governance and management into international trade rules and investment systems. WSSD, for example, should support actions in other fora to mainstream social criteria in certification and fair trade protocols. A particular effort is needed at the WTO to bring an end to overt and disguised subsidies and dumping.

## Carbon management, forests and poverty reduction

*The possibility of managing forests for their carbon storage values represents a major opportunity for some poor people. In Costa Rica, groups of smallholders already receive payments from certified carbon offsets. Local land rights and equitable distribution of benefits must be secured in these schemes.*

### 5. Get your own house in order – increase accountability of the ‘lumbering giants’

The UN and international financial institutions presiding over the pieces of the global sustainable development jigsaw are insufficiently accountable and democratic. The two and half billion people in poverty today have no vote in the Bretton Woods and UN agencies, and hence do not wield the political power to demand change. These bodies operate in ways which are mysterious to those they are supposed to represent. Which of them could give a clear and credible answer to four basic questions of power: Who do you really represent? What is the extent of your power? How do you exercise it? How do we get rid of you? The legitimacy of these lumbering giants, and their ability to help forests play their part in poverty reduction, will depend on their future answers to such questions and their practical demonstration of effectiveness over time.

Commitments and clear steps for reform are needed – reform towards getting global governance right for local governance. Civil society scrutiny will need to play a large part. Much can be learned from experience with local level forest governance. Findings from local forest management in many parts of the world point to the great importance of process-led approaches, of building confidence amongst stakeholders, and taking time to ensure that everyone has the same level of information. Like these local processes, international bodies must show transparency, clarity of vision and effective communication to stand a chance of delivering for the disadvantaged as well as the powerful. ●

1. A previous version of this paper was prepared by the authors in September 2001 under the title *How forests can reduce poverty*. It drew on documents prepared for, and discussions held at, an interagency Forum on the Role of Forestry in Poverty Alleviation, hosted by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) and supported by the UK's Department for International Development. *How forests can reduce poverty* was published as a policy brief by FAO and DFID (2001), FAO Forestry Department, Rome. This opinion paper develops this earlier work with a particular focus on the role of international action.
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