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EDITORIAL

Reframing Community Forestry to Manage the Forest–Farm Interface

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Abstract At the 2010 Montpellier conference on 'Taking Stock of Smallholder and Community Forestry: Where do we go from here?', researchers, policy-makers and practitioners came together to discuss historical trends and future directions for understanding and supporting forest sustainability and local livelihoods in forest-based communities. A consensus arising from these discussions was that there is a need to reframe and broaden approaches to understand forestry practised by smallholders and communities. The paper highlights three key topics from that discussion: (1) the need to reconsider definitions of community forestry, (2) the need

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to broaden understanding of rights surrounding forest resources and (3) the need to reframe research to focus on management of the forest–farm interface.

Keywords Community forestry · Forest property rights · Domestic forests

Introduction

Since at least the 1980s *community forestry* has been a popular policy intervention across Asia, Africa and, more recently, Latin America. At the 2010 Montpellier conference on 'Taking Stock of Smallholder and Community Forestry: Where do we go from here?', researchers, policy-makers and practitioners came together to discuss historical trends and future directions for understanding and supporting forest sustainability and local livelihoods in forest-dependent communities.

During the Montpellier meeting, a consensus emerged that overly narrow views of forest management by communities have limited the impact and reach of past research and development initiatives alike. Despite decades of research, policy reform and development initiatives, 'community forestry' has remained poorly defined in practice, resulting in confusion and complicating efforts to understand how rural people organize to govern use of and access to forest resources and the impact these arrangements have on their livelihood and environment.

Although waves of devolution and reform have expanded rights, or accommodated customary rights, of rural people to forest resources, these policy changes have not occurred everywhere nor necessarily had the intended effects of improving human well-being or conserving forests. Also, for many rural people, forests and forestry are not discrete concepts but rather are enmeshed within broader livelihood systems where the interface between agriculture and forest is blurred and changing, making it difficult to separate the two. Reflecting on these issues, conference participants agreed on the need to broaden the concept of community forestry to include a greater diversity of forest types, institutional arrangements and productive activities. Three salient needs were identified from the ensuing discussions: (1) the need to reconsider definitions of community forestry, (2) the need to evaluate critically the rights surrounding forest resources and (3) the need to understand better the forest–farm interface where smallholder decisions are made. The papers collected in the special issue represent the diversity of research that fuelled the discussions.

There has been much debate on whether initiatives to support community management systems have improved the well-being of rural people, and on which aspects have succeeded and which have failed. Some emphasize that community forestry has been a success (e.g. Bray et al. 2004; Robson 2007), while others view it as a failure (e.g. Blaikie 2006; Stearman 2006). Some national governments, donors and development non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have dropped the concept of community forestry, but others continue to promote it under a variety of new models and methods, as the debate focussed on the conditions under which successful community level management of forests could be fostered. Again, the articles in this special issue demonstrate some of this diversity.

In spite of hundreds of published articles on communities managing forests, few overarching lessons have been identified, though several authors have tried to identify key variables. One common problem with all these attempts at assessing community forestry programs is that analyses have frequently focussed on 'what it should be—rather than what [it] actually is', concentrating on the normative value of the concept rather than the actual outcomes of these programs (Maryudi et al. 2012:2). In one of the few attempts at a global comparative study of 'community forest management' using existing data, a meta-analysis of 69 case studies found that three sets of variables were most often associated with success of community forestry initiatives: well-defined property rights, effective institutions and 'community interest and incentives' (Pagdee et al. 2006).

Authors from the *common property* school, looking beyond community forestry to collective resource management more broadly, have enumerated a comprehensive list of biophysical, socioeconomic and institutional variables relevant to the sustainability of *common pool systems* (Ostrom 2009 presents a recent iteration of this list). Relatedly, Chhatre and Agrawal (2009) reviewed data on 80 forest commons in 10 countries. They found that larger forests and greater local rule-making autonomy increased the probability of sustainable management. They also concluded that, relative to government ownership, community ownership was associated with an increased likelihood that communities would defer forest use for the future. Nevertheless, these and other authors (e.g. Dietz et al. 2003; Charnley and Poe 2007) noted that 'results are highly context specific, depending on local, as well as national, ecological, social, and economic context, policies, governance and history' (Larson and Dahal 2012: 81).

Community Forestry Issues Warranting Further Attention

In order for policy and development programs to create conditions more conducive to improving livelihoods and sustaining forests, it is argued that the debate on community forestry must be reframed. Three issues deserve particular attention.

Definitions of 'Community Forestry'

The scope and definition of community forestry have remained vague and vary from country to country and even within countries (RRI 2012), as a wide variety of terms have been introduced, such as those based on specific models for project interventions (e.g. joint forest management, social forestry, community-based natural resource management). This raises at least three key issues. First, it is important to clarify when 'community forestry' is being referred to narrowly as a project, versus when it refers to a broader concept of people managing forests, such as 'the exercise by local people of power or influence over decisions regarding management of forests' (McDermott et al. 2009). Second, the many models and definitions of community forestry mask the many different meanings of 'management' and types of management arrangements, including bias towards particular arrangements usually manifest in the opportunities offered to rural people through

projects or policy. Finally, the term 'community forestry' also masks the many different institutional arrangements that constitute 'community'.

Some efforts to promote community forestry introduce externally driven projects that emphasize production of commercial timber and legal compliance with sustainable timber management norms designed for industrial enterprises, as can be seen in 1990s forestry reforms in Bolivia, Guatemala or Cameroon. By emphasizing private enterprise, the approach used by such projects fails to recognize the complexity of potential management systems and models and assumes that forest managers have rich contiguous forest with limited past intervention and large enough to provide the economies of scale to justify capital investment (e.g. in roads and machinery). To facilitate adoption of a national sustainable forestry model defined by legal norms, these projects tend to be heavily subsidized both financially and technically. Unfortunately, once subsidies end, the projects frequently prove to be poorly adapted to local capacities and market contexts (for example see Morrow and Hull 1996).

An alternative approach that does not promote commercial timber is when governments cede to local control only heavily degraded or fragmented forest patches perceived to have limited commercial value, as can be seen in the majority of plots allocated to community forest user groups in Nepal. The new access granted to rural people in these cases is rarely accompanied by subsidies such as credit and technical assistance to use or improve forest properties. Particularly in the early years of such projects, communities were often expected to donate their labour for reforestation and recovery of forest cover (e.g. Saxena 1997; Gilmour 2003).

Forestry development policies typically are accompanied by strict regulations that attempt to frame, condition and standardize community-level decisions (Larson and Pulhin 2012; Cronkleton et al. 2012), thus reshaping local institutions, organizations and management practices that must be adapted in response; For example, communal properties can be institutionally complex with internal nested subdivisions for sub-groups or individuals that allocate customary control over forest resources (Ankersen and Barnes 2004). Although rights to forests in such cases may be communal, use and management decisions are more often handled at the household scale (e.g. see Cronkleton et al. 2010). However, community forestry programs often require families accessing communal forests to manage forest resources collectively to gain legal authorization. Such approaches treat communal properties as institutionally uniform management units for collective production, which frequently clashes with existing patterns of access and household production. Projects that focus on large communal management plans may be attractive to project foresters hoping to gain economies of scale, but usually do not reflect pre-existing institutions and can generate conflict or allow elite capture.

Forest Rights, Tenure Security and Land Use

Up until the 1980s most of the world's forests were owned by national governments that granted legal management rights only to favoured forest industries. The situation has begun to change, as local forest-based people in different parts of the world, particularly in Latin America but also in Asia and Africa (White and Martin

2002; Sunderlin 2012), have received property rights and opportunities to manage forests. These changes have resulted from policy reforms, development initiatives and grassroots activism, including initiatives specifically termed 'community forestry'.

While there has been significant expansion in rights and reforms favouring community-level actors, many rural people use and depend on forests where (1) they do not have clear rights, (2) their rights are contested or (3) official rights categories exclude de facto or customary rights and practices. Conflict or the lack of clear, recognized rights can limit forest management options, including the exclusion of people from official community forestry programs and their potential benefits. At the same time, many communities outside of official programs manage forests, with and without formal—or even secure—property rights. Finally, participation in formal forest management institutions is no panacea for improved livelihoods and better forest conditions (see Larson et al. 2008).

The issue of tenure security—and thus attempts to improve it—raises numerous conceptual and practical problems. Land titles do not guarantee security (Bromley 2005; Nygren 2004). In some cases local social relations may be more important and more secure than formal title (Bromley 2005; Cousins et al. 2005). Sjaastad and Bromley (2000) argued that the security of rights is an issue of perception. Perception is likely to drive the behaviour of stakeholders, but perception alone may be insufficient for understanding security in light of threats or vulnerabilities that people may not fully understand (Feintrenie and Levang 2011).

Although some see community property rights as a viable strategy for conserving forests (e.g. Ruiz-Pérez et al. 2005; Agrawal and Angelsen 2009), secure tenure does not guarantee forest conservation. Without specific economic, political or cultural incentives to conserve forests, deforestation is often the rational choice and people with greater or more secure local rights may choose to convert forests to other uses (Tacconi 2007; Cramb et al. 2009; Feintrenie et al. 2010). In the Indian State of Karnataka, one of the authors of this paper recently observed how the Forest Rights Act referred to by Springate-Baginsky et al. in this issue, granting individual rights over land previously demarcated as forest, is leading tribal communities to erect fences and develop crop cultivation between trees. Similarly, the Indonesian Transmigration program, when successful, granted secure land rights to newly established local communities, leading to widespread conversion of forest to agricultural land (Levang 1997).

Managing the Forest–Farm Interface

By focussing on forest management plans—sometimes only for timber or other specific products, and often primarily as a required bureaucratic procedure—promoters of community forestry fail to see the dynamics of local systems in their entirety or consider fully how they would be affected by development interventions. At the community or smallholder scale, it is difficult to separate forests from farms, because these usually occupy complex mosaics. Often the management of fallows and second-growth forests as well as the products and services that local producers generate in these areas are considered peripheral by community forestry advocates.

As a result, these activities are rarely supported and in some cases, as when efforts are made to eradicate the use of fire by swidden cultivators (Colfer et al. 2010), are even prohibited by law when they are in fact essential for rural livelihoods (Sinclair 1999), and contribute to shaping and even maintaining the forest ecosystem (van Vliet et al. 2012).

While there is a rich diversity in forest management by local communities throughout the tropics, Michon et al. (2007) underline some common characteristics: (1) at the local scale, forests are fully integrated into agricultural activities, and most local forest managers are farmers; (2) there is no clear frontier between natural forests, fallows and agroforests in terms of vegetation structure and composition, but rather a continuum in the level of artificial changes induced by human actions; (3) natural forests, forested fallows and agroforests can provide equivalent ecosystem services and products that differ more by their use than by their nature. The authors refer to this broad range of forested systems—natural secondary forests, forested fallows, agroforests—as 'domestic forests'. As a consequence of this integration of local forest management within agricultural contexts, forest policy-makers need to reconsider the forest–farm interface to develop programs and approaches that are more in tune with the realities faced by forest-dependent people and by rural farming communities that manage forests.

New Challenges and Opportunities for Smallholders and Communities

As the *community forestry* concept has emerged, new global trends are increasingly affecting local forest dynamics and the context in which community forestry functions. Climate change, chronic social vulnerability, continued incentives for deforestation and land-use change could all have negative impacts on forests. Potential new opportunities include recognition of indigenous rights, payments for carbon capture and storage as well as mechanisms for biodiversity valuation.

In many parts of the world, rural livelihoods are changing, with rural people less isolated from the urban world and no longer relying solely on agriculture as their source of livelihoods (Rigg 2006). Globalization will change values and perception, as seen in how quality of life is defined by local communities and how it is measured by international indicators such as the Human Development Index (Zorondo-Rodríguez et al. 2012). As perceptions change, so do the needs and wants of forest-based communities, and the pressure they put on forests (Levang et al. 2007).

Community forestry has moved from its infancy to adolescence. It will not reach adulthood unchanged. Rather, new concepts, terms and approaches are needed to meet the challenges of the coming decades. People manage forests all over the world, both in- and outside of community forestry projects, through traditional and adopted institutions, on land they own and on land they use, with and without formally recognized rights and with and without secure tenure. They manage forests, and landscape mosaics of forests, trees and farms, to contribute to livelihoods that are increasingly a mix of on-farm and off-farm activities. Local

people and forests would benefit from broader and more grounded approaches to policy and practice at the forest–farm interface.

Papers Presented in this Special Issue

The following papers examine various aspects of community forestry. Wiersum et al. document the evolution of community forestry and discuss the increasing influence of forestry certification on the devolution of forest management schemes. Using the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) as an example, these authors illustrate the role of multi-level and multi-actor partnerships in efforts to adjust global standards to reflect better local practice.

Wright and Andersson build on examples from Bolivia to analyse the role of non-governmental organizations in the development of community forestry. Interestingly, in the 200 rural communities they studied, the influence of NGOs on community organization was not apparent; instead local government had greater influence on community self-organization for forest governance.

Lescuyer discusses the advantages and limitations of formal community forest models in comparison with customary management patterns in Cameroon. Using a village case study where local people have both customary and formal commercial access rights to forests, the author found that, beyond subsistence uses, forest resources did not dramatically contribute to livelihood improvements.

Robiglio et al. follow up the discussion by analysing small-scale timber harvests in Cameroon and find that timber from informal sources rivals harvests from the official timber sector. Because much of this timber originates from forests being cleared for agriculture, important questions are raised about the sustainability of timber from this source.

Rives et al. provide a long-term historical assessment of the evolution of rural markets for fuelwood in Niger. Although policy changes opened market opportunities for rural people in the country, technical norms intended to regulate wood trade have not successfully limited over-exploitation of forest resources.

Springate-Baginski et al. describe a clash between the rights of local communities and the interests of State Forest Departments in India, in relation to the implementation of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers Act 2006 (Forest Rights Act). Although the act represented significant devolution of rights to local individuals and forest-dependent communities, full implementation of the reforms has been blocked by local forestry officials resistant to change.

The ecological impacts of community forestry are addressed by Vihemäki et al., who analyse the role of forest and agroforestry management systems on bird and plant diversity on the borders of a protected area in Tanzania. The authors report that the multi-functional land uses that characterized village land—combining forest, fallow, agroforestry and agriculture—positively contribute to biodiversity conservation.

Finally, Macqueen builds on a global comparison of community forestry cases to underscore the main success factors in community forestry. The author finds that

three important conditions for sustaining community forest enterprises are clear commercial forest rights, strong social organization and competitive business skills.

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