

Communities and their partners

Governance and community-based forest management

Nicholas K. Menzies

Since very early times, forests have been the site of conflicts between States and people whose livelihoods depend on forest resources. States have intervened to control forest resources in the name of ‘public interest,’ thereby restricting access to these resources by people who have traditionally or historically depended on them.

It has been about 20 years since governments, international donors, and others initiated community-based forest management (CBFM) programs involving forest communities in the management of forests, which had formerly been the exclusive preserve of state agencies. The Ford Foundation is one of a number of international organisations that have recently commissioned reviews to assess the impacts of CBFM on communities, the forests they depend on, and on government forest management agencies. This review consisted of case studies from China, India, Mexico, the Philippines, and the United States. The Ford Foundation review also assessed the impacts of national, regional, and global networks promoting CBFM. It found that despite the differences between the countries and the activities involved, governance is emerging as a central concern of all the partners involved with the evolution of CBFM.

Community-based forest management initiatives have attempted to create a favorable policy environment for devolving management of forested lands to communities or entities other than government agencies. In reality, though, the various actors in CBFM have different perspectives on the origins and objectives of CBFM. In some places, forestry departments saw CBFM as a route to more effective forest management, to higher success rates in reforestation programs, or as a strategy to reduce erosion and land degradation in upland areas. While a plurality of motives for participating in CBFM programs is not in itself a problem, experience has shown the importance of managing the different expectations of diverse partners through principles of good governance such as open fora for discussion of issues, and mutually accepted procedures for making and implementing decisions.

Many communities complain that CBFM has devolved the most burdensome responsibilities for protection, monitoring, and planting to them without a symmetrical devolution of decision-making authorities, which tend to remain firmly in the hands of government agencies. CBFM institutions are also easily dominated by their

more powerful and more articulate members, entrenching inequitable relations within communities. Good governance must therefore give equitable access to decision-making about forest resources, and CBFM institutions must consciously craft rules and procedures to ensure that the voices of the weak and disenfranchised are heard.

Community-based forest management will not in itself resolve long-standing conflicts over resources, but it has the potential to play an important role in strategies for sustainable management if there is a realignment of relations among households, community, and government. To realize this potential, it will be important to place more emphasis on crafting inclusive, equitable and accountable mechanisms to mediate relations between partners from the national, and even international level to the local.

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Institutionalising Biodiversity Conservation

The case of Ethiopian coffee forests

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In Ethiopia, as in many other countries, the conservation of biological diversity poses a challenge requiring social re-organisation at different levels. Encouraging experiences with co-management approaches in participatory forest management show that local resource users can sustainably use biodiversity when rights and responsibilities are fairly shared. A diversity of institutions and governance structures, at multiple levels, is required, however, to achieve the conservation of biodiversity. This is due to both the manifold features and functions of biodiversity at different scales and to the varying attributes of the actors directly or indirectly involved

Current approaches to biodiversity conservation very often entail inventorying plant and animal species, modelling ecosystem dynamics, or harnessing traditional plant medicines. Approaches that recognise the importance of institutions in biodiversity conservation often propagate the market, the State, or the community as the most suitable form of governance. I argue that none of these forms of governance is a panacea for biodiversity conservation, and that the various components of biodiversity require to be managed by a diversity of institutions.

Institutional diversity, per se, however, cannot ensure successful biodiversity conservation. Nor is it useful for identifying practical starting points for action. The Ethiopian case demonstrates what happens when the government ‘steps aside’ to allow the market to ‘work its wonders.’ For governments

and markets to function properly, trust is an inevitable ingredient of institutional design for sustainability. Therefore, the entire range of institutions, from the level of informal local institutions to the level of bureaucracies, markets, and prices (see Figure) needs to be considered in that design. In the words of Prof. H. Vogtmann, president of the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation, on a recent trip to Ethiopia, “All keys of the piano need to be played.”

Although federal officials willingly pass on responsibilities and duties to the regions, the institutional grounds for biodiversity conservation have not been fully laid in Ethiopia. What is required is a better recognition of local rights. So also, a better

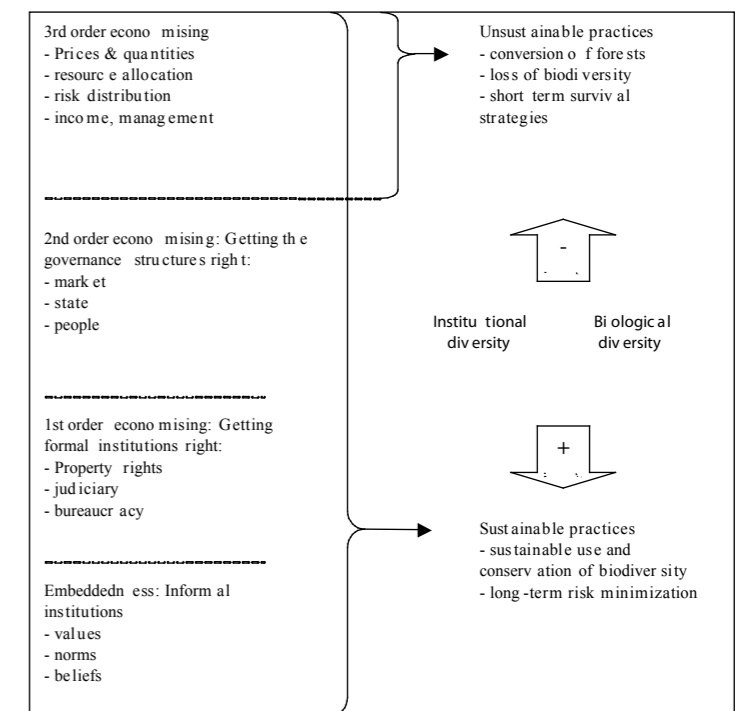


Figure: The entire range of institutions, from the level of informal institutions to the level of bureaucracies, markets, and prices needs to be engaged in well coordinated, collective action for achieving the sustainable use and conservation of biodiversity