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Decentralised Forest Management Reasons for official ambiguities and guide to donors

Decentralised forest management: a donors' darling

Decentralised forest management has in recent decades received increased attention from the governments of developing countries, usually as a response to donor advocacy and support. Many developing countries are in the process of or have enacted policies and legislation that favour decentralised forest management and recent estimates indicate that more than one fifth of the developing world's forests are subject to some form of such management (White and Martin 2002). However, this rapid spread of decentralised forest management frequently faces ambiguous support or outright resistance from various actors in developing countries. This policy brief seeks to describe and analyse this apparent paradox. The aim is to offer donors guidance on how such ambiguities may be managed through good policy design, support to civil society organisations and independent research.

How does resistance to decentralised forest management manifest itself?

Decentralised forest management has become a popular development strategy because it is expected to promote resource conservation and an equitable distribution of forest related benefits due to improved efficiency and accountability in forest management processes. However, turning this theoretical potential into reality requires that real decentralisation takes place, i.e. that meaningful and discretionary powers are devolved to downwards accountable management bodies (Ribot 2004).

Resistance to decentralised forest management in developing countries usually entails some part(s) of the central state. Central states often prefer devolving powers to



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management bodies that are more upwards accountable to the central state than downwards accountable to local communities. Devolution of powers to local branches of line ministries, appointed committees, NGOs, and the private sector frequently occurs in the name of decentralisation. In

this way, central states actually retain control over decentralised forest management bodies thus reducing the likelihood of decentralisation benefits materialising at local level (Ribot et al. 2006). Such ambiguity in decentralisation policy has been observed, among other places, in Cambodia where

Policy Conclusions

- Decentralised forest management as a means to improve rural livelihoods, conserve forest resources and promote good governance is officially promoted through policies and legislation by many developing countries
- Yet, the majority of decentralised forest management processes often face resistance by different actors within the administrative and political realms of these countries
- In dealing with these ambiguities, donors should avoid pursuing overly ambitious policies and combine support to official decentralisation processes with support to civil society organisations and research that may challenge articulated and hidden resistance against or overly optimistic support of decentralised forest management in national policy arenas

decentralised forest management has remained at the policy formulation stage while actual implementation is still to happen (IFSR 2004). The Cambodian central state contains multiple contradictory interests, some of which are represented by a rather autonomous military, and it appears difficult to establish a broad consensus about promotion of decentralised management (Sunderlin 2006).

Even when powers are actually devolved to local downwards accountable management bodies, the benefits of decentralised management may be curtailed in numerous ways. Often, local communities receive rights to degraded areas with potential for appropriation of subsistence use products only, while rights to areas with more lucrative commercial prospects remain within the domain of central states to be sold off as concessions, as is the case in Mozambique (Lund and Mustalahti 2007) and Uganda (Bazaara 2003). Alternatively, only low value or highly depleted forest resources are decentralised. Technical requirements to management may also be so complicated that local communities become totally dependent on forestry officials to comply with rules and regulations. When local communities gain substantial powers over valuable forest resources, central governments may still re-capture commercial benefits through rules and regulations that influence the profitability and hence the incentive to managing forests at the local level. Licensing systems, taxation legislation, and regulation of forest products transport and trade by ministerial decrees are widely applied techniques. Forest revenues are captured either directly through taxes and fees or indirectly through patronage systems and unofficial payments to officials that thrive in the shade of distorted markets created by ill-informed or ill-intended functional forest law. A recent example from Tanzania illustrates how central government through issuing a decree creates obstacles to decentralised forest management, which is a policy that the government has strongly promoted in policies and legislation (see Box 1).

The observed ambiguities in developing countries' approach to decentralised forest management can also be analysed from the perspective of the state being a multifarious creature, with actors at various levels having

Box 1: Forest re-centralisation in Tanzania through decrees

Since the early 1990s, Tanzania has pursued decentralised forest management through enactment of highly supportive policies and legislation and a concerted donor effort to support national implementation measures that has resulted in approximately 10% of Tanzania's forests being under decentralised management by 2006 (Blomley 2006).

Following a severe drought in 2005, however, all harvesting, transport and trade in forest products was suddenly banned through a ministerial decree. This implied an over-night removal of the more than 1,000 village governments' discretionary powers over forest resources. The ban was lifted after a number of months when an amendment to the forest regulations made new, centrally appointed district level committees responsible for coordinating forest products harvesting by allocation production areas, including forest areas under village government jurisdiction (URT 2006). Hence, the village governments' recently established jurisdiction over forest resources has de facto been re-centralised in a top-down fashion with no formal avenues of appeal.

different and often competing interests. From this perspective, overall explanations of resistance against decentralised forest management appear to include:

- Personal economic interests of various actors
- Political struggles over turf and resources
- Problematic donor behaviour

Personal economic interests of administrators, politicians and other powerful actors at various levels are important underlying reasons for ambiguous responses to decentralised forest management. In many developing countries, the forest sector is renowned for its culture of patronage and rather formalised systems of corrupt practices, which create special interests in relation to the regulation of forest management and trade in forest products (Treue 2001, Amacher 2006).

Even where patronage is not the primary problem, forests are important sources of revenue and political turf for government administrators and politicians. Accordingly, forest policy easily becomes an arena of power struggles whenever changes in control of forest resources and revenues hit the political agenda. These tendencies are expressed in the exclusive focus on degraded areas for the implementation of decentralised forest management in Uganda and Mozambique, and also appear in the apparent lack of interest in the concept by forest revenue dependent district councils in Tanzania (Blomley 2006).

Finally, problematic donor behaviour may be an important underlying reason for resi-

stance against decentralised forest management. The policy of decentralised forest management inherently carries the notion that centralised management has somehow failed. Either forest resources have declined despite official goals of the opposite or the cost of their management has exceeded officially collected forest revenues, or both. Nevertheless, forest administrations generally find it difficult to accept that local communities, which are often perceived as part of 'the problem' should be better forest managers than professional foresters. Hence, if donors push decentralised forest management too hard, central state agencies may consider them exponents of a hidden agenda to drastically downsize or eliminate them. Accordingly, intended partnerships in development sometimes turn into 'policy games' between donors and recipients who pretend to share a common vision but actually disagree fundamentally on the appropriateness of promoting decentralised forest management. If unresolved, such pretended consensus inevitably ends in confrontation and possible discontinuation of the collaboration, which leaves communities in pilot areas as the real losers. Laos appears to be such a case where a promising pilot phase of decentralised forest management during the late 1990s was followed by a more centralised approach with far less benefits to involved local communities from 2003 onwards (Sunderlin 2006). The solution to such predicaments can only be found in committed cooperation between recipient countries and donors. Yet, donors' policies are often shaped by current international development trends and, in the case of bilateral agencies, domestic aid policies (Mosse 2004). Accordingly, donor organi-



sations may face restrictions in pursuing compromise models of decentralised forest management that are acceptable to both recipient countries and their own government and parliament.

How can donors promote and counteract resistance to decentralised forest management at the same time?

Donors should avoid overly ambitious policies in terms of what decentralised forest management should entail from the outset. Some donors and scholars express disappointment when central governments are reluctant to decentralise large tracts of commercially valuable forests (Sunderlin 2006). Yet, seen from the perspective of resource constrained line ministries and local governments there may be perfectly good reasons for their concerns, which have little to do with protecting special interests. Rather, donors should identify which degree of decentralisation is politically possible and then push/support a swift handing over of management authority to as much forest as soon as possible. The objective being to establish the foundation for forest rights based civil society movements with sufficient membership-mass to effectively use demo-

cratic means of maintaining and enhancing rights to forest resources and revenues. The point is that, in addition to assisting official agencies, strong donor presence and alignment during the early phase of implementation should kick-start a process towards formation of advocacy groups, which can pursue their members' interests on the national policy stage.

Whether decentralisation of forest management is pursued through devolution of powers to democratically elected local governments (as in Tanzania) or delegation of powers to self-forming forest user groups (as in Nepal) appear of little practical relevance. It is probably more important to use windows of opportunity to initiate the process and support the establishment of management bodies that are downwards accountable, receive meaningful powers and rights that cannot be arbitrarily removed by the state. Moreover, donors should support these management bodies to become capable of advocating their cause in the national policy arena. No system of decentralised management will be perfect from the outset and the central state should in any case seek to prevent or correct inequities and

assure environmental standards. Such intervention may be (ab)used to re-centralise rather than improve the social and environmental outcomes of decentralised forest management, but this is an inescapable feature of any decentralisation process.

To promote democratic decentralisation, donors should identify and support grass-root movements and NGOs that can take a leading role in policy advocacy for decentralised forest management. This has proven its worth in Nepal, where a proposed amendment to the forest act, which would re-centralise control over community forests, was met with fierce popular resistance (see Box 2 next page).

The final means, through which donors can support decentralised forest management and promote democratic decision-making is through supporting independent research. Decentralisation is hardly a panacea to sustainable forest management and should always be critically assessed. Yet, as argued by Ribot (2004) among others, predictions of decentralisation leading to uncontrollable forest clearance or gross inequalities are frequently voiced. In the absence of credible

Box 2: Re-centralisation in Nepal countered by poæular resistance

Following 20 years of community forestry, the forest management by Nepalese communities had turned large areas of previously degraded government forest into valuable resources. In 2001, the central government proposed an amendment to the 1997 forest act, which would re-centralise much control over community forests and impose a 40% taxation of profits arising from products sold outside forest managing communities (Chhetri 2001).

This amendment bill was, however, met by strong popular resistance organised by the Federation of Forest User Groups Nepal (FECOFUN) and communicated through the free media as well as large protest demonstrations outside the Parliament in Kathmandu. Furthermore, FECOFUN raised and won a Supreme Court case against the State where FECOFUN opposed the 40% tax to be collected by district forest officers (NSC 2003). Due to the recent years' political turmoil in Nepal, the amendment bill is still pending in parliament, but the strong and professionally articulated popular resistance has definitely had an impact and showed how decentralised forest management can serve to promote bottom-up democratisation.

and well-documented information on how decentralised forest management works in practice and over the long term, such negative claims as well as their positive opposites, are impossible to refute or substantiate. Hence, independent research is needed to inform the public debate and political decision-makers.

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