

ASIA-PACIFIC FORESTS AND FORESTRY TO 2020

Forest Policy Brief 07



Making forestry work for the poor

Under Millennium Development Goal 1, Asia-Pacific governments are committed to halving extreme poverty by 2015 and many have adopted poverty-related measures in national forestry policies and programs. The high incidence of poverty in forested areas and the high dependence of the poor on forest resources suggest a leading role for forestry in poverty eradication. Achievements to date have, however, fallen short of expectations. By strengthening tenure, building local capacity to manage resources, providing credit and supporting livelihood development and income generating activities, the forestry sector can tackle poverty and help to achieve MDG 1.

Despite acknowledgement of the importance of forests for poverty alleviation, forestry activities have not been effectively integrated into poverty reduction programmes in most countries. Even when poverty alleviation is an explicit objective of forest management, it is often afforded much lower priority than objectives such as state revenue generation and biodiversity conservation.

Historically, forestry agencies have focused on industrial logging operations, and the contribution of forests to poverty alleviation has been limited. The focus on industrial activities has in fact often created or aggravated poverty (Mayers 2006). The poor commonly lose rights and access to forests allocated for logging or plantation development and seldom share in the economic benefits.

Recent initiatives to include local communities in commercial timber



production have often failed because of a lack of systematic attempts to address obstacles. Often, community involvement in forest management is sought in poor-quality, low-productivity forests. Providing “little trees to little people” is, however, unlikely to alleviate poverty and often adds to the burden faced by poor communities. In several countries, withdrawal of timber rights through logging bans has also exacerbated poverty while community timber plantations

Box 1. Forests and poverty alleviation.

Forests can help bring about poverty mitigation and avoidance by serving as sources of subsistence, seasonal gap fillers and safety nets. Forests can also support poverty elimination through savings, investment, accumulation, asset building and permanent increases in income and welfare (Sunderlin, Angelsen and Wunder 2003).

have not proven economically attractive for small holders. In many countries, small and medium forest-based enterprises (SMFEs) employ millions of poor people but are seldom given high priority by governments.

To address these problems and increase the contribution of the forestry sector to MDG 1, renewed attention from forestry policy makers is necessary.

Box 2. To what extent is poverty alleviation integrated in national forestry agendas?

- For the first time, the Indonesian Ministry of Forestry’s strategic priorities for 2004-2009 included development for communities in and around forests.
- China has adopted massive forestry-based programmes to improve environmental conditions and reduce rural poverty, with relative success in increasing forest cover and rural household income.
- Pro-poor measures included in Nepal’s Forest Policy 2000 include prioritizing those below the poverty line in the allocation of leasehold forests and hiring the poor and the landless in forest-related work.
- Under India’s Joint Forest Management (JFM) programme about 30 percent of the national forest area (~23 million hectares) is managed by local committees. Poverty alleviation through improved supply of wood and other products and income generation are the primary objectives of JFM.
- The Bhutanese government’s 10th Five-Year Plan includes establishing community forestry and expanding commercial harvesting amongst its strategies.

Source: FAO 2012

Community forestry in the Asia-Pacific region benefits large numbers of stakeholders while traditional forestry activities sustain millions of forest-dependent people. But, while there are some success stories, community forestry programmes have not generally lifted large numbers of households from poverty.

While forests and forestry can be sources of income for the poor, “devolved forest management, NWFPs and outgrower schemes have to date not provided meaningful and sustained revenues to overcome poverty” (RECOFTC 2009). Policies developed over the past decade that have sought to broaden local participation in local forest management and increase benefits from forests need comprehensive revision to reflect governments’ international commitments to poverty alleviation.

Legal uncertainties and policy inconsistencies often weaken the status of community forestry. Where forests have been allocated to individuals and groups, capacity building and investment in productive activities are also needed.

The way forward

To improve the contribution of forestry to poverty alleviation, approaches must be tailored to the local context. Particularly, emphasis should be placed on the following:

- Improving familiarity with poverty in forest areas amongst forestry policy makers;
- Allocating clear and secure forest tenure and use rights over good-quality, productive forests to poor people;
- Ensuring consistency and continuity of policies;

Box 3. Towards greater integration of forestry in poverty alleviation strategies

“The challenge for forestry is not just the restoration of trees or forest-dwelling biodiversity, but also the growth of a political and social landscape that facilitates people’s abilities to make choices to secure their livelihoods; to move beyond forests as a resource that maintains them in poverty to forests as part of a wider livelihoods approach as a means to step out of poverty.” (Hobley 2008).

Most tenure systems maintain state ownership over forestlands and simply specify local management and access rights or benefit sharing arrangements. Timber rights have occasionally been transferred to communities, but allocated forests are often degraded and alternative livelihood activities are required in the hiatus before benefits materialise.

Harvesting and marketing regulations for wood and non-wood forest products often need to be simplified to allow community members to benefit from their efforts. Specific measures also need to be taken to prevent benefits from being captured by more powerful families and thereby widening existing income disparities.

Schemes to pay for or market forest ecosystem services - including watershed protection, biodiversity conservation or carbon storage/sequestration - have the potential to enhance local income. However, the technical and institutional complexities involved in establishing payment systems demand careful assessment prior to implementation. The complex financial transactions involved in global carbon trade are often beyond the grasp of local communities. New income earning opportunities are also likely to be grabbed by outsiders, and related restrictions could deprive the poor of what they have traditionally enjoyed.

- Training communities in skills necessary to sustainably manage forests, and improve livelihoods - literacy, accountancy, decision making, critical thinking, etc.;
- Strengthening local level institutions, especially to democratize decision making and ensure transparency and accountability;
- Integrating forestry-based poverty alleviation activities into broader rural development programmes;
- Supporting movement up the value chain, especially through development of processing and marketing arrangements.
- Supporting community enterprises and SMFEs by simplifying regulations relating to resource access, harvesting and marketing; increasing credit availability, providing marketing support and developing partnerships between forestry companies and communities.

References

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For more information, please go to the outlook website: <http://www.fao.org/asiapacific/forestry-outlook>