

FOREST DOMESTICATION BY SMALLHOLDER FARMERS: ECONOMIC RATIONALE OR SOCIO-POLITICAL STRATEGIES?

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Intermediate systems of forest management can be interpreted as original attempts of domestication of forest resources by local people. What do we know about the significance of the emergence, adoption and generalization of this particular domestication process? What do we know about its main driving forces? The emergence and generalization of domestication dynamics in the history of human societies has been mainly attributed to economic, ecological or technical factors. However, this analysis is mainly based on examples of domestication for short-lived plants -grains and tubers- or animals in greatly artificialized ecosystems. How far do these conclusions hold true when transferred to long-lived forest plants in relatively preserved forest ecosystems?

The emphasis put on economic value of tropical forests during the last decade tends to conceal the important social and political dimensions of forest management. Forests are a determining element in the building of societies, as well as in the forging of relations between the various segments of societies. From the historical analysis and interpretation of the global trends in the emergence and extension of forest domestication in the world, one can argue that economic and technical factors, though important at one point in time, might not constitute the only driving force towards massive adoption of the domestication innovation in a given society, but that social and political factors are more important.

Historical accounts clearly show how forests all over the world have been extensively used by the all segments of societies, not only to improve their economic welfare, but also to claim, establish or change their respective social and political as well as economic place and role in the society. A relatively constant factor in the relations of power between the governing elite and economic actors has been the constraints imposed upon the latter -specially the weaker ones- by the former regarding access to and use of forest lands and resources. In this respect, any attempt of forest domestication has to be analyzed in its relation to the impact it has upon access and use to forests for the social actors who have induced this process. This analysis necessarily implies discussing the social and political dimension of forest domestication.

The argument of the importance of this socio-political dimension in the evolution towards and from intermediate forest management systems is discussed through the review of several examples of forest domestication by peasant societies in Europe and Indonesia. These examples reveal that domestication and production of forest resources by politically fragile societies clearly represent strategies for control and appropriation of forest resources. This appropriation process reflects either an internal social strategy, like the construction of a patrimony or the quest for social rise in a local context, or a political

act conducted in anticipation of or as a reaction to restriction or seizure of rights to the “traditional” forest domain and resources of the peasants by external actors.

The paper concludes with a more theoretical discussion about the respective significance of technico-economic rationale versus social and political logics for long-term forest production in the particular context of smallholder production systems.