

# International development assistance in forestry and land management: the process and the players

NEIL BYRON<sup>1</sup>

Center for International Forest Research, P.O.Box 6596, JKPWB, Jakarta 10065, Indonesia.

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## SUMMARY

'Why do so many forestry aid projects fail?' is a question being asked more frequently. Most replies list technical difficulties in implementation. However, this paper argues that the answer can only be found through understanding two much more general processes: how a forestry activity relates to the broader socio-economic context in which it is embedded; and how development assistance operates in practice. Many projects which professional foresters see as failures in technical or even humanitarian terms may have been successful according to other political or commercial criteria, or to the tests of other interest groups. In spite of the constraints inherent in the international development process, many forestry projects have successfully delivered real and lasting benefits to societies, economies and the environment. Projects, especially ones of social forestry character, will continue to fail if design and implementation do not pay attention to the needs of the target group, the poor.

Keywords: beneficiary, donor, implementation, project design, stakeholder.

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## THE EVOLUTION OF FORESTRY OBJECTIVES

In the last 60 years or so, there have been major changes of content and emphasis in the objectives of forestry, thus:

- a. From about 1930, especially in the West, forestry had explicit social objectives – the creation of decentralised rural employment opportunities and so the maintenance and stability of rural communities – overlaid on the protective and production priorities;
- b. From about 1950, increasing priority was given to the production of industrial timber, in response to rapid expansion of production capacity and consumption, and the long-held fears of the impending approach of a world-wide wood famine;
- c. From about 1970-75, a world-wide change in social values and attitudes to the environment began to alter the emphasis in forestry away from industrial wood production towards the protection and conservation functions again, including wildlife, watersheds, control of soil erosion, forest recreation, and so on.
- d. From 1975, accompanying a broader move towards 'poverty-focused rural development', there was increasing recognition that local communities and their needs (such as fuelwood and fodder) had been overlooked or damaged by previous concentration on industrial forestry. This gave rise to social and community forestry initiatives, or what FAO called 'Forestry for local community development' (Westoby 1979).
- e. From about 1980, with recognition of the potential role of the private sector in growing and managing trees and

record of success, in practice, of) State ownership and control of forests, the agenda has broadened to include more private and farm forestry, agro-forestry and forestry extension services, as well as large-scale industrial plantations.

The international face of forestry as displayed in technical assistance projects generally mirrored the fashions in the West – the 1950-75 obsession with the production of industrial timber being followed by the social forestry phase, allegedly producing fuelwood and fodder for the poor and the needy. By 1990, the donor-popularity of this phase had begun to recede, perhaps to be subsumed into "Integrated Conservation and Development Projects" (ICDPs) and other projects for the conservation of forest bio-diversity. Moves to 'smaller government' and declining government budgets have led to corporatisation and privatisation of industrial-commercial forestry and devolution of non-industrial forestry to NGOs and local community groups.

It is important that foresters do not become isolated from the public, or else they miss the 'wind-shifts'. Foresters may have been isolated in the past: in our Forest Reserves; in our autonomous Forest Services and Commissions; and by our professionalism. A graduate from most British Com-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper presents the author's personal views based on experiences prior to the creation of CIFOR. It has benefitted from the private comments of many colleagues in diverse countries and institutions who have experienced similar frustrations and con-

monwealth (or American) forestry schools in the 1950s and 60s would have been well-trained in the various tasks of industrial forestry and strongly inculcated with the belief in the value and veracity of his industrial forestry mission. However, not only was this a poor preparation for different tasks in subsequent years and in different cultures, but his<sup>1</sup> attitudes may have been a serious obstacle to acceptance of the re-definition of social priorities.

I have deliberately chosen not to give explicit examples of project failures in this paper so that the specific details do not detract from the general argument. Some are already well documented, such as the Magarini Project (Porter *et al.* 1991) or the mere 2% survival in \$250 million of plantations in the Philippines (Pasicolan 1996). Anyone who has been involved in international forestry aid projects could furnish many examples.

#### HAVE MANY FORESTRY PROJECTS FAILED, AND IF SO, WHY?

In order to answer this question, it is essential to have a definition of success and failure, which in turn requires a **locus of evaluation** – from whose viewpoint and according to which criteria is the evaluation to be made?

If one asks those involved in the execution of forestry projects that are failing to achieve expectations what went wrong, then typically one receives a list of what may be called execution failures. Examples are: the weather was bad at planting time; the equipment was delivered too late; there were delays in approvals due to Head Office (or local) bureaucracy; the expatriate experts were unsatisfactory; or there was a lack of involvement by the local people.

Similarly, if one asks 'What does this project do?', the answers are usually in terms of practical inputs and outputs, such as: we operate nurseries; we establish 1000 ha of plantations each year; we train extension workers.

But underlying **design failures** are more insidious and more fundamental than weaknesses in implementation. As task-oriented production managers, foresters tend to be more interested in 'doing the job' than questioning the underlying assumptions and concepts.

The **logical framework** was introduced as an analytical tool ostensibly to ensure that the underlying assumptions and logical structure of any policy, programme or project were sensible and reasonably valid. How then could any projects still fail, given reasonable screening and attention to design and implementation?

I conclude that in many instances the project failures are not a result of unfortunate accidents or negligent design, but rather stem from congenital flaws, how and by whom the project was conceived. Many projects are initiated for political or diplomatic objectives, and these may be attained once the project is initiated - whether the trees live or die, whether the peasants benefit or not. Trade objectives also often dominate, so if a project leads to purchases from the donor country the project is a commercial success and has achieved

#### WHO DESIGNS FORESTRY AID PROJECTS, HOW, WHY AND FOR WHOM?

##### The project cycle

Much has been written about the international 'project cycle' already, and even in regard to forestry projects (see, for example, OECD 1986). I first describe how the process frequently occurs in practice, before examining the question of why the process operates in that way.

Donor organisations may be officially requested by governments of developing countries to undertake a 'sector review' – a preliminary overview of the forestry sector to identify possible areas where technical assistance, loans or foreign investment might be appropriate for the future development of the sector. In practice, many donor organisations invite themselves, because of a shortage of projects to manage or upon which to disburse their (loan or grant) funds. They often come with preconceived ideas on which sector, district or activity is suitable for the support they wish to provide.

From this shopping list the prospective donor and recipient may choose to follow up any or all of the possibilities outlined by sending a project preparation/design mission. Multi-lateral and bilateral aid projects are typically then prepared in detail by a small team of three or four foreign experts, typically including one or two subject matter specialists, an economist, and in recent years a sociologist or social anthropologist if it is a social or community forestry project, and/or an institutional specialist. All are chosen for their technical expertise, although one or two may have worked in the recipient country before, and perhaps two members of the project preparation team may have met before.

This small group of outside technical experts may be given one month to prepare a project costing \$US 10 to 100 million. Their design proposal will subsequently be reviewed by an appraisal mission, an independent verification by the donor that the project is indeed technically feasible and financially and economically viable. After satisfactory appraisal, the contracts are signed and implementation begins, with periodic reporting by the managers and monitoring of delivery of inputs to the project and its outputs, by both donor and recipient. If the project lasts more than 2 or 3 years, then a mid-term evaluation will frequently be arranged, to confirm that the project is still on target.

Finally, on completion of the project, the manager prepares a completion report to the donor, who will report to the recipient government, including suggestions for possible further actions. Since the early 1980's, another phase has been added to the cycle, namely a Performance Audit or Impact Assessment, perhaps 5 years after the project has

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<sup>1</sup> Very few women professionals were engaged in these activities, but their position may well have differed from that attributed

been formally completed. It is however extremely difficult to assess long term social, environmental or economic impacts of a project, or its sustainability, immediately upon its completion.

This is an extremely brief summary of a very complex and expensive process. I leave further discussion in order to focus on particular aspects of the cycle, notably who is driving it and who are the stakeholders and what are their roles in the process? I shall argue that the reasons why project designs are too frequently defective, concern how and why they are prepared, and by and for whom.

## The stakeholders

### *a. The donor*

The donor is the obvious starting point, given my assertion that many projects are not a response to grass-roots, or even host-government requests for technical assistance, but rather were initiated by donor agencies in search of projects to fund and/or manage – a supply-driven, rather than demand responsive process.

Donor agencies exist to disburse funds, whether as loans (in the case of banks) or as grants. As both Galbraith (1979) and Westoby (1987) have argued, the ‘problems of development’ were perceived and defined in terms of the remedies which the West had to offer, particularly capital and technical expertise. So the first imperative, from the donor agency viewpoint, is to justify its existence by transacting business. Any aid bureaucracy that ceases to have projects on which to disburse its available funds is unlikely to survive very long, and this directly threatens the employment and prosperity of those employed in the donor agencies, or dependent upon them, such as consultants who design, implement and evaluate projects. This is quite rational and perfectly normal. The comment is not intended in any derisory or critical way, but it is essential to understand what motivates and directs the behaviour of *all* the participants in the process, not just the subjects, the ‘target groups’, the poor and the needy.

Recognising that donor agencies need projects, what are the desirable attributes of suitable projects, from their point of view?

- Regular disbursement, with a predictable timetable over two to five years, preferably in approximately equal annual budgets.
- Accountability and transparency: there should be readily quantifiable and verifiable physical targets which can be compared with funds expended.
- Predictable and non-controversial, the project should not generate any headaches or embarrassment for any of the parties involved, but particularly for the responsible administrators or politicians. Projects should be relatively easy or straightforward to administer, with a known beginning and an identified and fixed end-point.
- More recently, there have been increasing pressures for the projects to be ‘green’. In principle, any possible

now before a project can be approved. Further, in light of recent criticisms about the adverse effects of certain projects, including forestry projects, on ethnic minorities and on women, especially poor rural women, it is now essential to screen out any possible such impacts.

- The economists and accountants must be satisfied that the project is both financially and economically viable and worthwhile, that is, it must pass through financial and cost/benefit filters. Furthermore, in the light of experiences with projects that collapsed after external assistance ceased, under the weight of recurrent costs to service and maintain the infrastructure created by the project<sup>1</sup>, donors now attach greater weights to long-term sustainability.
- A further requirement, which is not developed further here, and which applies particularly to bilateral donors, is that the aid budget should be good for business in the donor country. Even without strictly tying aid funds, there is generally an expectation that home-sourced equipment and consultants will be used in the project.

Apart from the requirements of the organisation, one needs also to consider the requirements, motivation and behaviour of the individuals who constitute it. Once they understand where the interests of the institution lie, they can then, quite rationally and respectably, pursue their own interests within that framework. Often there is rapid rotation of desk officers so that no one individual has continuing personal commitment to the content and implementation of the project from the donor’s side.

In summary and very generally, for the donor country aid is rarely just humanitarian. There are frequently dominant geo-political, diplomatic and trade considerations. Within the aid agency, conducting an adequate volume of business while avoiding mistakes or controversy may be a paramount aim. Many of the goals of donor agencies (projects that are low risk, with no delay, with verifiable physical targets) are almost totally inconsistent with rural development and forestry projects. This is especially true of those in community or social forestry, which need to be firmly based in local people’s habits in order to engage their trust. For this, they need to be long-term, supportive, open-ended, flexible and responsive to local needs as new lessons are learnt by the project, from its initial position of ignorance (Griffin 1988). The two most naive assumptions of donor agencies are first that they understand the problem well and second that they have a workable solution. In reality, many projects are based on mis-understandings, naive assumptions or defective data. For example, Southgate and Clark (1993) describe how so much of the ‘Save the Amazon’ campaign relies on defective data about the extent of the problem and presumptions about the interests that indigenous peoples have in preservation, as compared to use, of biodiversity.

<sup>1</sup> For example, plantation projects which have stopped abruptly because there are no spare parts or trained mechanics to keep bulldozers operable for essential site-preparation works; there was no road nearby for the heavy machinery to be transported.

*b. The recipient country*

Many developing countries have institutionalised mechanisms for receiving international aid and development assistance, often as a national co-ordinating agency, a Planning Commission or group within its Treasury Department. This organisation of the recipient government may have certain features which it prefers to see in the projects proffered to it. For example:

- a substantial percentage of the total budget in hard-currency support, to be spent on hardware, such as high-tech equipment;
- technology transfer of the 'software' or state of the art know-how;
- institution building, improved training programmes and manpower development, possibly supported by some foreign training programs;
- the minimum number of and expenditure upon expatriate experts and advisers ;
- channelling of funds and activities into priority areas both physically or regionally, and to priority sectors;
- a balance between different donors, in number, scale, location and sector; and
- respect for, and advancement of, national sovereignty and independence.

Clearly, many of these interests do not fit well with those of the donor agencies, but sufficient overlap must exist for the negotiation of a project to proceed.

*c. The implementing agency*

For the purpose of illustration, it is assumed that a Forest Service is to implement the project. The interests of the Service may include:

- to better understand and to be able to better serve the citizens of the country by improved technical and managerial efficiency.
- to strengthen the institution, maintain or expand its *esprit de corps* and traditions, but not necessarily to see it radically reformed or re-structured.
- to retain, or if possible increase, the wealth, income, power and status of the Department, and its officers and staff.
- to receive bounty such as new equipment, scholarships and new skills.

Individual members may hope to find some 'escape routes' (Galbraith 1979) as means of improving their own household economy. Such options for escape from the system may come through training, scholarships and experience (even improved fluency in a foreign language) that open new doors to the outside world. Again, this is a quite honourable motivation, mentioned here not to criticise, but to emphasise that it is naive to assume that every forest service in the world is staffed by a dedicated corps of eager professionals anxious to serve their nation's poor and land-

*d. The managing agency/consultant firm*

The organisation selected to provide the technical assistance to our hypothetical project, naturally enough, has certain interests which are being furthered, otherwise it would not be a participant in the process. The most obvious corporate motivations are financial and, perhaps, an enhanced reputation as a result of successfully managing and guiding a complex technical assistance project.

*e. The beneficiaries or target groups*

It is remarkable how little is really understood about decision-making at the level of the peasant household, considering the billions of dollars that have been expended in the hope of modifying peoples' behaviour. Often they are labelled as shifting cultivators or encroachers, and as Poffenberger (1990) states, any positive contributions they may make to forest management, protection or conservation, through indigenous technical knowledge, are routinely dismissed. Another beneficiary group is the workers who are expected to benefit from the creation of jobs in plantations and mills. Ultimately, the objective in any rural development or social project from *the State viewpoint* is to modify behaviour, to reduce the number of 'undesirable' actions and to popularise new methods, concepts and processes (and also perhaps to raise household incomes). From *the household viewpoint*, the project is only of any interest if it offers credible, lasting improvements in quality of life, income, security, freedom, etc.

The minimum starting point for many forestry projects must be a thorough understanding of why people behave as they do at present and whether they might seek or accept change, and if so, in what direction. As Fisher and Gilmour (1990) have cogently argued, the community must be at the centre of community forestry research and practice.

### **The organisation of the process**

Donor agencies initiate negotiations with the recipient government agency. Should there be sufficient coincidence of interest in creating the proposed new project, a preliminary concept paper might be drawn up by the donor agency, in association with the developing country coordinating and implementing agencies and possibly in association with inputs from prospective managing agents or consulting firms. Each of these participants in the process can be very influential and articulate, but in general, the funding agency has the final word on most decisions.

It is crucial to note that, up to this point and even in the case of a social forestry project, there may have been no input whatsoever from the people whose lives are supposed to be significantly modified by this project. If it is a commercial-industrial project, there may have been studies of the site and of growth and yield, but no market demand studies (transport facilities and substitute products are often overlooked) or there may have been no studies of who is

'unemployed' prospective workers are currently busy in the informal sector, supporting their families.

The donors select, arrange and fund all the steps associated with the establishment of the project, although the recipient country and consultants may also be actively involved. These steps are:

- pre-feasibility assessment, technical feasibility assessment and the design document;
- the benefit/cost analysis to satisfy criteria of economic efficiency in the use of (allegedly) scarce capital resources<sup>1</sup>;
- a logical framework, to ensure consistency of logic, completeness, verifiable indicators of success at each level, and that most implicit assumptions are made explicit;
- an environmental impact statement;
- a regional economic impact statement, including estimates of income and employment multipliers and the aggregate indirect economic impact of the project; and probably
- a social impact statement, especially regarding women, ethnic minorities and the poor or landless.

All of these can be clearly seen to be in the interest of the donor agency. These are required to protect their interests just as much as to ensure that the beneficiaries will indeed benefit from the project. Bilateral and multi-lateral agencies must retain the credibility and support of their constituencies, otherwise the future of the organisation may be at risk.

## THE INTERACTION OF THE STAKEHOLDERS

We can now consider the project as a process in which the identified interest groups participate and interact. The participants come together and co-operate in the process, because it serves the self-interest of each, and will continue to co-operate for as long as it seems that their interests are better served by participating than by withdrawing.

The poor, landless, needy target group is almost always the least powerful, in conventional terms, in fact that is a major cause of their predicament, and are generally the least able to articulate their expectations of the project, or to threaten or cajole for what they want. Interestingly, it is not only governments and donors who can mis-interpret the interests and aspirations of local communities or indigenous people. Conklin and Graham (1995) have described how international environmental NGOs imputed their own motives to be those of indigenous people of South America. Moreover, they felt betrayed when it finally became clear that the interests were not identical, and that local people had 'exploited' NGO support as a 'temporary marriage of convenience' in order to advance their own long term interests. A fatal defect of many external interventions is to presume that outsiders know best what local people

## Adoption problems

Project evaluation reports frequently refer to adoption problems with the implication that the local people stupidly and stubbornly refuse to accept what we experts have designed for them because we know it would be good for them. There are many complex issues that arise here.

As Galbraith (1979) argued, many resource-poor and powerless people have become accommodated to their status quo, 'accepting their fate' because they have learnt, collectively, perhaps over centuries, that 'to struggle is futile. To be poor, exploited and oppressed is the norm, but at least we survive.' Galbraith contrasted this with the situation in Western countries where the constant dynamic is of 'progress', where improvement in living conditions is not only possible, but expected and it is normal to try because there are good prospects for success. In developing countries, in conditions of mass poverty, there may not be such a dynamic but rather a stasis. Social systems of patronage, for example, which appear to the modern Westerner to be feudal and exploitative, may at least provide some safety net for the poor in the event of a crisis. In the case of very poor small-scale farmers and landless rural people, the choice of farming system and their household livelihood strategies will most probably **not** be governed by or oriented towards maximum productivity, even under 'normal' conditions. Rather, they will be geared to survival under extremely adverse conditions.

It would appear self-evident that if the clients of an extension service consistently decline to heed the advice offered, there is likely to be something wrong with the quality of that advice in terms of its relevance and usefulness to those clients. In practice, such is the self-confidence or arrogance of those preparing the advice, that a common response is to intensify and upgrade the media of communication, equivalent to shouting louder at someone who is not interested, and then using visual media on the assumption that he or she must be deaf!

## Whose project is it?

A fundamental question for any project is 'who is driving it, committed to it, wanting to see it succeed?' Logically, the answer would be those who benefit most, whose interests are being served. Indeed, one might expect commitment to an activity to be proportional to the extent to which it advances one's own interests.

As for the manager of the project, his role is to try to best balance all the stakeholder interests, for the sake of the

<sup>1</sup> This is in fact rather specious. Once the donor agency has its annual allocation of funds, it rarely acts as the theoretical banker, allocating its budget down a list of projects ranked in decreasing order of profitability. There are country and sector quotas to be met, there is a limited supply of likely projects, and the funds must be disbursed. It seems the B/C analysis is often merely a quick check to ensure the proposal is not too grossly uneconomic.

whole process. If the project organisation collapses, because of the withdrawal of an important constituent stakeholder, then all the other participants may lose. But even in regard to the risks of collapse of a project, not all the participants are equal since some have other options.

It is argued here that the purpose of a forestry for rural development project, is not to **do** activities, nor is it to deliver inputs or disburse funds, but it is to enable local people to play a greater part in determining their own future, and demonstrating that real, sustained and sustainable improvements in the quality of life, are indeed possible and can be achieved by their own efforts<sup>1</sup>.

Jaycox (1993) then Vice-President for Africa of the World Bank argued that excessive use of expatriate technical advisors had 'undermined the development capacity of Africa'. As Leslie (1988) has argued, ultimately all forestry is or should be social: it is just that the form it takes to achieve social objectives varies between countries with different stages of development. Trees may be a means towards that end, and tree-planting may be one ingredient of a production system that people chose to adopt, but not necessarily.

### Why do so many projects fail?

Reviewing the successes and failures of over 30 years of industrial forestry and 20 years of social and community forestry, I conclude that what was done, was done because it suited the interests of those in control of the process. Donors needed projects to disburse funds, national governments were anxious to accept large sums of hard currency, and government departments saw opportunities to consolidate and increase their control over lands, funds and, sometimes, people. Even if it had been known that the poor, marginal and semi-landless, especially women, children and ethnic minorities, would be significantly disadvantaged, relatively or absolutely, many of these projects would have gone ahead anyway, because they served and advanced the interests of the other, more powerful stakeholders.

Thus my primary conclusion on why many projects fail to deliver real and lasting benefits to the target group of poor and needy, is because they are designed and driven by and largely for outsiders, donors, consultants and local officials. Commercial activities occasionally fail through technical incompetence, but rarely through neglect. Because few made claims of significant social benefits, one can hardly accuse them of failing to achieve that. Even where commercial forestry has generated conflicts with local people, some companies have been more adept than their governments in negotiating mutually-beneficial outcomes with the local populace.

Other, secondary factors for failure are first, that such projects tend to be concentrated on a single sector, in a single ministry or department and are therefore non-integrative, compartmentalised and top-down, and second, that they are rushed into far too quickly, in substantial ignorance of the real situations of both the subject households and the imple-

necessary. Planting 50 hectares in the first year, not 5000, would mean that only small mistakes occur, rather than having spent \$15 million on 15,000 ha before it becomes clear that the species is unsuited to that site. Donors are still generally reluctant to permit a research phase, in both technical and social aspects of forestry projects, to precede implementation.

### Implementing projects in a context of extreme uncertainty

There are very few certainties, especially in the risk-taking business of implementing rural development work. How can one implement a project in the face of Himalayan uncertainty (Griffin 1988)? Some useful rules are these.

- accept and explicitly recognise our ignorance and limitations;
- explicitly think about and make contingencies for what might go wrong;
- constantly monitor performance towards goals and objectives, in close association with local people;
- monitor local markets and changing demands;
- move slowly and cautiously, one small step at a time, if that is the pace at which the people wish to adjust;
- recognise that there will be some mistakes but learn from them;
- seek clearer articulation of each participant's role and expectations;
- seek views and listen, collect information and make the process as transparent and open as possible;
- conduct periodic reviews of performance (even though evaluation is often threatening) by genuine dialogue with representative samples of each of the players.

All these observations relate to implementation in the field, but all have a pre-condition, namely that the donor agency and recipient governments can permit (or tolerate) the flexibility, the learning, the small-scale incremental approach. To the extent that failure is associated with bureaucracies, it is perhaps not surprising that the alternative of working with and through local (and external) NGOs has been perceived as a much better way of delivering real benefits to local people, especially over the past 5-8 years. The NGOs' popularity with donors is itself a critique of the past performance and role of state forestry in achieving development. I am optimistic that major donors, as they review their programme evaluations, are realising that a major re-orientation of their own attitudes and *modus operandi* is required.

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<sup>1</sup> The contrasts between two production systems, one state forestry, the other community and farm forestry, are illustrated in

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