

Forests, poverty and equity in Africa: new perspectives on policy and practice

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SUMMARY

This paper places forestry in the larger context of rural development and therefore in the current debates on poverty and inequality. While Africa has high levels of natural and human capital it is the poorest and most unequal region in the world. In order for natural assets to contribute to environmental, economic and empowerment outcomes four principle interlinked changes are needed: 1) Improve the recognition of the fundamental role of natural resources in economic growth of poor countries and poor populations and in the development of democracies and good governance; 2) Better distribute resource rights, both property and procedural, giving the poor greater security, access and control; 3) Develop and implement frameworks, regulations and enforcement to assure that natural resource markets work for the poor; 4) Redefine the role of science and technology, and associated planning and institutions.

Keywords: Forest policy, natural resource management, Africa, poverty, equity

INEQUALITY, POVERTY AND NATURAL RESOURCES IN AFRICA

Natural resources are critical for the development of poor countries. A recent study by the World Bank (2005) shows that natural capital accounts for about 26% of total wealth – more than that of produced (man-made) capital – in low-income countries. While most of the natural capital wealth is associated with cropland (59%) a significant share is closely related to forestry related resources – including pasture, timber, non-timber forest resources and protected areas. In developed countries natural capital only accounts for 3% of total wealth and 2% of employment and income. In poor countries the rural sector can account for 32% of employment and income. In some Africa countries such as Mali and Malawi the percentage is closer to 80% according to their respective Poverty Reduction Strategy Statements (PRSPs). Griffin and Ickowitz (1997) stated ‘The importance of natural capital in the total stock of capital tends to vary inversely with the

level of income per head. That is, the poorer the country, the more significant is natural capital likely to be in determining the overall distribution of wealth.’ The economies of poor countries are not just ‘rich country economies in miniature’; they are structurally different.

Africa has the highest percent of people living on less than a dollar a day - nearly half (46.5% in 2001). In contrast in South Asia, the next poorest region, the figure is 30%. Of greater concern is that the percentage of poor people in Africa has increased over the period 1990 – 2001 while in Asia it dropped by 10 points (CIFOR 2005). Globally 75% of the poor live in rural areas and this is certainly true in most African countries where poverty is predominately a rural phenomenon. It is estimated that over two-thirds of Africa’s 600 million people rely directly or indirectly on forests² for their livelihoods including food security (CIFOR 2005). For

¹ This paper represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the organizations for which they work.

² In Africa it is often difficult to distinguish ‘forests’ from agriculture. Forest fallows and field trees are often important aspects of the rural production system.

example a review of the PRSPs for several countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Ghana, Guinea, Niger and Senegal) shows (where data exists) that between 86 and 93% of the poor live in rural areas. These countries have between 60 and 90% of their labour force in the rural sector and between 16 and 45% of GDP generated by agriculture. The forestry sector in Africa performs poorly both in relation to other regions and in terms of its regional potential providing only 2% of global value added and exports due a variety of political, economic and structural problems which must be of concern to policy makers (FAO 2004). Yet the proposed public expenditure for rural development is only about 14% of national budgets. Some of these countries (Mali, Burkina Faso) have experienced relatively good growth (5-6%) over the past decade and yet rural poverty seems not to have been reduced significantly.

In spite of this critical role, the investment and attention to rural issues and natural resources has declined since the late 1980s. As one measure of this IFAD 2001 (quoted in Ashley and Maxwell 2001) stated that 'the real value of net aid disbursed to agriculture in the late 1990s was 35% of its level in the late 1980s'. Countries and international donors alike seem to have a lack of focus and investment in natural resources. There are presently efforts to reverse these trends and bring rural development back on the agenda (Ashley and Maxwell 2001)

Given the importance of natural capital for poor country economies a key issue for African growth, poverty reduction and equity, is the distribution of this capital. '... a redistribution of assets in favour of the poor would reduce poverty, both once-for-all and over time, because of its effect on the rate of economic growth. ..., only existing stocks of natural capital can be redistributed quickly and relatively easily. (Griffin and Ickowitz 1997) Hence equity in natural asset distribution is a major concern (see Human Development Report (HDR) 2005, World Development Report 2005, and the 2005 Report on World Social Situation which all deal with equity). Inequality compromises growth, poverty reduction, social justice and stability. Africa unfortunately has high levels of inequality. According to HDR 2005 Sub Saharan Africa is the by far the most unequal region in the world. The income distribution Gini coefficient for Sub-Saharan Africa is 72.2 (the Gini coefficient is a common measure of inequality, 0 being perfectly equal and 100 being perfectly unequal). Africa is the only region where the Gini is higher than the world Gini of 67.0 and much higher than Latin America and the Caribbean at 57.1 (HDR 2005). Levels of income inequality can also reflect inequalities in rights over assets and resources that are used to generate income.

The poor need assets and particularly natural assets to escape poverty. Security of tenure (including rights of alienation, management, and over benefits), control and access over resources are key. However a recent review of forest ownership patterns shows that governments dominate forest ownership patterns (White and Martin 2002). Globally 77% of the worlds' forests is owned and administered by governments 11% is reserved for or owned by local communities and 12% is owned by individuals. It is difficult to disaggregate this data for Africa but for example for the

six countries cited in White and Martin (2002) (Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sudan, Tanzania, Cameroon, Central African Republic and Gabon) state ownership of forests varies from 98 to 100%. Although there have been a series of moves towards more community and local ownership and claims that a significant transition is underway globally there does not seem to be much progress in Africa in allowing local control and community ownership of forests. There is a need for forest tenure reform.

Complementing tenure and property rights, procedural rights and rights of association are also needed if local people are to benefit from forest resources and other natural resources. These rights include access to decision-making, access to information and access to justice. If local people do not have rights over forests or wildlife these resources cannot become part of their livelihood and production system choices. If they cannot capture benefit from the resources the resources will be seen not as resources but as constraints on the systems that they can capture benefits from. Decentralization efforts are often seen as a way of providing local people with better procedural rights. Decentralization programmes have been very common in Africa promising rights to local people but recent analyses conclude that decentralization programmes have rarely in fact been fully implemented (Ribot 2004).

Similarly economic liberalization and globalization have not had the expected benefits either for growth or for poverty reduction. While positive reforms such as the elimination of marketing boards and price controls have taken place market failures persist and insufficient attention has been paid to making markets work for the poor. For the poor barriers to market entry are widespread and include lack of access to capital and credit, limited market contacts and information, and low levels of technology. Because volumes and values can be low and dispersed, markets tend to be segmented. Markets previously dominated by state monopolies and monopsonies are sometimes now dominated by private monopolies and monopsonies at multiple scales. Dominant market actors collude and manipulate prices. Local economic institutions and organizations are non-existent, weak or captured. In some cases regulatory frameworks and policies discriminate against community producers. (Scherr, White and Kaimowitz 2003)

Unfortunately important natural resources endowments seem to have failed to reduce poverty and inequality in Africa. This failure can be seen as having at least four interlocked components – a lack of focus and investment in natural capital, a lack of civic science (Lee 1993), lack of an appropriate distribution of natural assets, and lack of pro-poor natural resource markets.

QUESTIONING RECEIVED WISDOM

A particularly persistent barrier to a more pro-poor and equitable distribution of natural assets has been the state and technocrat dominated perceptions of environmental change (Leach and Mearns 1996). In particular conventional technocratic views of environmental degradation, the impacts

of population growth and of local capacity and capabilities have significantly impacted approaches, institutions and the distribution of rights mostly in ways that have been negative for local people. These arguments have been seriously criticized and yet remain part of the reasoning of the forestry community (see for example Leach and Mearns 1996; Robbins 2004).

A common and recurring argument from foresters and others is that of environmental collapse and crisis – giving the impression that draconian action and central control are needed to avert catastrophe. This logic exists since at least the 1920s in parts of Africa and repeatedly has been shown to be exaggerated (USAID 2002). Despite repeated warnings and in spite of continuing development challenges, no system collapse has occurred, and issues such as the ‘firewood crisis’ have faded from the news. Even more surprising, the recommended actions to avert disaster do not appear to have been a mitigating factor. Most of the large-scale tree plantings fell far short of producing the volume of wood that planners anticipated. Many of those that did survive are relics that do not contribute substantially to the wood supply (although there are exceptions). (USAID 2002). This environmental threat argument has fueled a ‘crisis management’ approach to forestry where centralized control, remedial measures and protection are privileged over investment, sustainable use, and local control.

A second popular argument is that of population growth and poverty as major causes of degradation. Although Africa has much lower population densities than many developing areas (such as fast growing India and China) and its consumption footprint is very small the population arguments are very strong. Throughout Africa the equation of more people consuming more resources has been used to calculate deforestation and other degradation rates. However throughout Africa there are many examples of increased population, even doubling, and improved environmental outcomes. Box 1 provides just a few examples.

BOX 1 *There are a number of success stories where long-term improvements in natural resource management and average incomes have been achieved. Some examples follow:*

- Kenya: *Machakos and Makueni* Districts. Between 1932 and 1987, the Akamba people increased the average value of production per hectare by a factor of >10, and its value per capita by >3, while their population grew six-fold (Tiffen et al. 1994). During the latter half of the period, they reversed a crisis in soil erosion, planted trees, extended the cultivated area, and created a landscape of meticulously terraced fields and private pastures. They diversified their livelihoods in the growing urban and commercial sector. These achievements were sustained during the 1990s, even in the dry areas of Makueni District, notwithstanding economic recession and increased

uncertainty.

- Burkina Faso: *Central Plateau and Eastern Region*. Between 1980 and 2000, the Mossi people living in this area increased their crop yields, the numbers of on-farm trees, the numbers of livestock (and amount of manure), and fodder production (Reij and Steeds 2003). Household food security improved and out-migration was partly reversed. Some water tables rose. They implemented soil and water conservation measures on a large scale. Yield improvements without soil degradation were achieved, over 40 years, during which time the population quadrupled.
- Namibia In the past decade, Namibia developed approaches for extending the economic benefits of ecotourism to rural households. The programme moved NRM away from state ownership toward a system that supports local rights. A landmark policy on conservancies established a relatively straightforward, transparent process for local communities to: mobilize and register interested community members; adopt a constitution and by-laws; identify boundaries of management areas; commit to a plan for sustained yield management of their resources; organize resource monitoring and planned harvesting; and agree on a plan for distribution of benefits. In the past decade, overall impacts have been significant, with greatly increased wildlife populations, significant expansion of major wildlife-based tourism, and empowered communities through organization of conservancies.

Source: Anderson et al. (2004)

Population growth can be a source of innovation rather than degradation (Boserup 1965). More important than the absolute numbers of people is how they are organized. Poverty is also often considered a source of degradation – since the poor are thought to lack options other than degradation. In many cases the poor are not mostly responsible for environmental abuse but certainly suffer most from it. Large-scale mismanagement is often the result of more powerful and richer interests – sometimes using poor as proxies. ‘Frequently the poor and powerless are blamed, and punished for forest degradation, while the real culprits go unpunished’ (CIFOR 2005).

A third common argument is that local people, groups and communities lack the capacity, skills and knowledge to sustainably manage forests and other resources. Civil servants, especially at the national level or in sector ministries, often state that a big problem for sustainable management is high rural illiteracy rates. While formal education is useful in some parts of the industrial and service sectors its relevance to very local issues of resource management is questionable. Sector technocrats and others hesitate to transfer rights before capacity is built when many people believe that rights must

come before capacity – otherwise there is no incentive to build it. Rights are critical to ‘learning by doing’ – an essential element of natural resource management. Literacy is no guarantee of good management and illiteracy no guarantee of poor management. In fact formal human capital measurements say very little about the very strong human capital that exists at local level for forest management.

These questionable arguments produce a number of outcomes unfavorable to the environment, local populations, poverty, equity and growth. Local organizations can be the building blocks of rural development (USAID 2002) and key to empowering and amplifying the voices of the rural poor. However distrust in local capacity and knowledge on the part of powerful external actors may be leading to the creation of rural bureaucracies and organizational proxies for powerful interests. Supply driven organizational development responds mostly to the perceptions of outsiders. These organizations sometimes represent outside interests more than local interests and sometimes are used to control and orient local activities in unproductive ways. The structure and functioning of these organizations reflect outside imperatives, processes and procedures more than local needs and environments. In addition different projects or sector ministries often aim to set up their own organizations. There is a profusion of organizations with varying roles and mandates that cause confusion and can increase transaction costs (especially if certain functions can be performed by several organizations). It seems that it is also a way for some to control decentralization by either demanding (for ‘capacity’ reasons) that new organizations be created or using organization confusion and poor performance to justify retention of powers (Ribot 2004). New organizations can also undermine emerging local governments particularly if they capture resources from ‘public goods’ and do not pay local taxes.

These perceptions also influence approaches to natural resource management planning. To encourage sustainable management, forest departments often require local communities or groups to develop and submit forest management plans. This can be a very complex, complicated, time consuming and costly procedure for getting authorization from the forestry department for some basic use rights over local community forests. This includes very detailed management plans requiring extensive inventories and that require approval by government technicians. Approval is often centralized and time consuming, taking years in some cases if it happens at all. Directly or indirectly these plans increase management costs and dependency and rarely confer more than desultory use rights (which they may have had already) (Ribot 2004). Management planning costs far outweigh any ascribable theoretical benefit from the forest. As we have seen earlier they rarely confer any ownership rights. They are a means to claw back any type of meaningful decentralization (Ribot and Oyono 2005).

NEW PERSPECTIVES

In spite of a still largely unfavorable policy environment, the forestry sector has made some progress in addressing difficult issues over the last 25 years. The forestry services in a number of countries are participating in the decentralization process by sharing forest management authority and responsibility with local communities. Where management authorities have been devolved, important environmental, economic and social benefits have been realized. Local communities and user groups have made dramatic achievements in organizing sustainable, equitable forest management systems (USAID 2002). They have developed management plans for natural forests that include apiculture, gum and fruit harvesting, livestock husbandry and sustainable wood collection. For plantation forests, individuals are increasing revenues through the sale of construction wood. While communities and individuals receive return on investments, consumers also benefit by lower prices and increased supply of goods and services. These remarkable achievements underscore that local capacity is not a barrier to effective management and that there is urgent need to craft policies that give communities appropriate powers and security and to continue to reorient natural resource bureaucracies to play an enabling role.

Experience with community-based forest management show that it holds great potential to promote good local governance by increasing participation, accountability and transparency (Hutton *et al.* 2005). Involving communities in natural resource management processes empowers individuals and communities to make decisions about the very resources upon which their livelihoods depend.

Investing in tomorrow’s forest, therefore, will directly and positively affect the livelihoods of millions of Africans. Tomorrow’s forests are the fruit of a variety of approaches and management objectives, well adapted and suited to differing contexts, community priorities, changing aspirations and market-driven opportunities. Further evolution in these approaches and supporting programme strategies is anticipated, as we continue to assess, evaluate and learn from failures and successes, and adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities.

What incentives are needed to secure livelihoods?

The challenge of forest development is to create an enabling environment in which local people are able to improve their livelihoods by using their resources more productively (Campbell *et al.* 2003). We need to move away from a dependency view of forest people. Research has shown that even the poorest can be regarded as autonomous, responsible, experimental, and, though risk-averse, also opportunistic and innovative. Constraints, not ignorance, deter poor households. It follows from such an optimistic interpretation that they don’t need to be lectured, ‘planned’, organized, controlled, pressured or motivated but offered choices of, and access to, appropriate technologies, practices, information and experience within a rewarding economic and institutional environment. Given such an autonomous rather

than a dependent profile of small-scale resource managers, the objective of policy should be empowerment, allowing people the opportunity to explore technological and economic options for themselves (Anderson *et al.* 2004)

There has been some work on the types of practices and interventions that are most likely to lead to better management, poverty reduction and local empowerment. Some of these are listed in Box 2.

Box 2 Principles to Guide NRM Investments in Africa

Nature:

- Improve information and knowledge management systems
- Promote local land use planning and appropriate resource tenure systems
- Foster innovation, social learning, and adaptive management
- Build capacity and invest in human resources
- Promote cost-effective technical advisory and intermediary services

Wealth:

- Be strategic about the economics of natural resource management
- Strengthen markets and NRM market incentives
- Invest in rural organizations
- Create a framework for better NRM choices
- Assure that local resource managers have secure access to NRM means and benefits

Power:

- Strengthen environmental procedural rights for rural people
- Improve rural input into public decisions and policy
- Redistribute natural resource authority and functions
- Transfer powers, rights, and responsibilities to representative and accountable authorities
- Explore a minimum environmental standards approach
- Promote platforms that allow for continuous and inclusive consultations

Source: USAID (2002)

Enabling environments may be created in many ways. Some incentives may work best by changing the conditions for economic activity. For example, the removal of barriers to trade, achieved through international agreements, or the implementation of economic reforms aimed at improving terms of trade, could substantially improve market conditions for producers in dry forest regions. A pro-poor rights framework

with appropriate distribution of property and procedural rights also provide significant incentives. Other incentives may work through public investments in infrastructure (*e.g.* hospitals, clinics and schools; communications, improving market access; water supply and sanitation) and services (*e.g.* health and education; market information; access to soft loans and credit). In the discussion below, we highlight three key areas where such policy tools could be used: (1) developing capacity, confidence and competence of service providers; (2) diversifying incomes and securing linkages; and (3) unleashing the capacity of individuals and organizations (Anderson *et al.* 2004)

1) Developing capacity, confidence and competence of service providers

Service providers (government extension and research agencies, NGOs) and local authorities are often poorly equipped for addressing the problems of people in natural resource dependent regions. They are currently not responding to the expressed needs of farmers and other small-scale producers. All too often, extension services push rural producers towards technologies that will not work under local conditions. The service providers frequently lack incentives and have insufficient resources to meet local needs. Institutional arrangements for interacting with local people and their organizations are often inadequate. These problems may be exacerbated by decentralization, in which local authorities have to implement new functions, unless provision is made for support by central government.

More weight needs to be attached to the knowledge and experience of resource users. The complexity of rural environments, and the need by households to be flexible and adaptable, must be more fully appreciated. The content of training courses should be reoriented towards tomorrow's world - away from simple technical packages to providing information on a wide diversity of activities, including existing rights, regulatory and policy frameworks; literacy and numeracy; organizational development and management; advocacy; etc.

2) Diversifying incomes and securing linkages

Producers, living in highly variable environments, are constrained by the risk of production failures and loss of assets. Under conditions of poverty or inefficient markets, irregular droughts and variable production lead to food insecurity. Identifying and managing risk are important both to protect investments and to enable producers to anticipate and manage the impacts of drought and other sporadic shocks. Rural people are exceptionally resourceful in responding to the opportunities created by local conditions and by links to more developed or urbanised regions (Campbell *et al.* 2003). Thus a key strategy employed by many people is diversification, whereby households spread their livelihood base amongst a number of activities, so as to avoid having 'all of their eggs in one basket' and to seize passing opportunities that offer a better return to their labour and skills.

Promoting income diversification strategies in households

In order to harness the full potential of rural regions, policy should ensure that future development options are not foreclosed, by being proactive in enabling people to respond to changing natural and economic circumstances. For example, targeted infrastructure could be provided to help develop potentially lucrative market niches. Rural natural resource dependent regions should not be treated as mere welfare sinks or 'problem areas'. (Anderson *et al.* 2004)

Promoting urban-rural linkages

Households are increasingly multi-locational. People employed in towns and cities frequently remit part of their income to relatives living in rural areas. This often allows the purchase of agricultural and other production inputs. Large agricultural markets are located, and linked to consumers, in towns and cities. Links also provide information about income opportunities and prices. Public investments in building and maintaining roads help people to access larger and better organized markets. Enlarging communications networks, particularly those based on integrated communications technology, increases the potential for accessing more accurate and timely information about markets and technologies. They may also make it easier for information about rural regions – people's needs, their activities, and the opportunities for investment – to reach the outside world. Provision must also be made for people to seek opportunities beyond the natural resource sector and outside forest regions. Incentives are needed that create the right environment for such developments and which induce people to mobilize and employ their own assets in this regard (Knowler *et al.* 1998). Such incentives need to be developed as much through external organizations and the State as within local communities. However the rural-urban dynamic is not always positive. There has been a historical urban bias in policy. In Africa, perhaps in contrast to other regions, urban areas may be centers of consumption, control and bureaucracy rather than centers of representation, administration and representation (USAID 2002).

Encouraging private sector investment

Currently, the level of private sector investment, outside mining and ecotourism, is low in most forest areas. To attract more requires governments to create an enabling environment, not only in providing basic infrastructure and services, but also in considering options for underwriting investments, tax incentives, or credit at preferential rates. Governments may be able to stimulate investment by promoting integrated development nodes, such as growth points or spatial development initiatives, to link areas with complementary attributes. Strengthening internal linkages will help small producers whose marketing costs are high.

3) Unleashing capacity of individuals and organizations*Distributing authority and functions to institutions best positioned to exercise them*

Recently, there have been calls to reallocate power among different levels in the political administrative hierarchies of government, and between the public and private sector (USAID 2002). There is a need to clarify and better distribute property rights or usufruct security for products of better management and to allow for revenues generated from forest enterprises to be reinvested in management at the site of exploitation. Decisions that can be made by citizens without regulation should be established within the domain of citizen rights. Decisions that are best made by representative local government or local non-state actors without jeopardizing social and ecological well-being should be retained at that level. Greater commitment by governments to decentralizing responsibility for decisions on natural resource management to local administrations, coupled with more secure rights for local people to benefit materially and in other ways from the products of that management, could create incentives for more appropriate and sustained use of natural resources. Increasing local people's rights over land, or their access to and use of the resources on communal land, is also crucial. There is much talk of decentralization but the mechanisms for doing this successfully in poor, remote communities have not been implemented, realized or developed (Ribot 2004).

Decentralizing and delegating responsibilities without providing the necessary resources often leads to increased costs to citizens. Projects from different sources, donors or sectors often leave local people and their organizations running from one activity to another, further increasing transactions costs. In some cases, the supported activities may promote contradictory outcomes. Capacity is diluted and focus and funding are dispersed. Resource mobilization should be linked with the delegation of responsibility, and capacity built into local structures to use the devolved rights and responsibilities more effectively.

Invest in rural organizations as the building blocks of development

Well-managed and *locally controlled* rural organizations create economies of scale and contribute to higher economic returns for the rural poor. Models of development built on local credit and local savings are more cost-effective and replicable than those relying on external financing. Policies to promote self-reliance should build a development framework that recognizes, values, and builds on rural smallholders' existing capacity to mobilize their own savings and resources. Another key to development is the nurturing of markets so that they penetrate economically remote areas, a feature of forest regions. Support through market information and the development of marketing organizations will enable households to respond positively to markets, and thus allow them to drive development themselves. Governments should promote and facilitate legally-recognized producer groups to

develop management plans and legally-recognized bylaws for managing local forest resources and allow them to enter into contracts with private operators and/or government on exploitation of forest resources.

Promoting the development of business-based, well-governed rural groups and their confederation will go a long way towards stimulating private investment. More needs to be done to encourage the establishment of producers' associations, helping them to access markets and maintain the volume, quality and continuity of supply, an important consideration in some forest regions where productivity is often low and variable. By themselves, rural groups have limited influence on policies and markets; confederations, however, produce economies of scale, critical mass, and effective advocacy (e.g. the Botswana Community-Based Organizations Network).

Develop effective local voice – moving from subject to citizen

A new vision sees local people as citizens, not subjects. This vision can be promoted by taking a rights-based approach, rather than one based only on needs. The challenge is to incorporate existing power structures – traditional, administrative and party political – into the vision. Effective local voices can be built in a four-step process:

- Creating an inclusive voice of individuals and the community at a local level, through capacity-building approaches and participatory dialogue, using local languages.
- Aggregating this voice to achieve greater influence, by strengthening organizations and improving interaction with higher levels.
- Building the accountability of service providers and governments. The ability to listen to and respond to voice requires very different ways of working and thinking by service providers and local authorities. Their downward accountability is critical, though they still need to be effective in their links to higher levels of governance.
- Developing advocacy, mediation and facilitation skills and processes to ensure linkage between local voices on the one hand and service providers and local authorities on the other.

What new approaches to policy can be pursued?

In many countries there are few policies that specifically target pro-poor natural resource management. In many jurisdictions, uniform national policies on development often lack the flexibility needed to help people in particular places and times to consolidate or expand their assets and opportunities. At a national level, there are seldom adequate organizational structures or institutional arrangements designed specifically to assist communities, other than in the context of disaster management and the provision of famine relief. (Anderson et al. 2004)

We advocate a shift away from a policy view of natural

capital as unproductive or low potential for development, towards taking up the challenge that it presents, recognizing its current contribution and supporting opportunities for sustaining present and future livelihoods. Unintended bias can result from implementing macro-economic policies that fail to take into account the special challenges and opportunities of natural resource dependent communities. For example, formulating Poverty Reduction Strategies or other national-level macro-economic policy instruments that fail to address these challenges, could inadvertently produce inequity in the distribution of benefits.

A people-centred approach to developing natural resource dependent areas should aim to increase choice and opportunity, and to reduce vulnerability. Chance as well as change characterizes these environments and are a critical concern for policy. However creating choices for rural people – both in the sense of options and decision-making ability – are key to unleashing potential. Traditionally the entry point for public investments was addressing needs or solving environmental crises. Increasingly it is evident that a needs and a rights-based approach should play complementary roles. The approach should support and enhance adaptive capabilities that have developed in response to risk and vulnerability. There is a need for empowerment, effective local voice, and participation in policy processes. With these elements in place, many environmental challenges will likely to be solved (Anderson et al. 2004)

How can we shift thinking about forestry and development?

A *people-centered approach* to developing rural areas should be taken, rather than giving undue attention to environmental 'crises'. This should aim to increase choice and opportunity, and to reduce vulnerability. Rights-based approaches to development need greater attention, so as to complement the current needs-based approaches. To address the complexity, diversity, and variability in time of rural areas, policies and programmes need to be *adaptable* to specific circumstances and *flexible* in response to change. Policy needs to take a *long-term, holistic and strategic* view, including strengthening the linkages between local livelihoods and the wider economy, and in creating linkages among different initiatives and stakeholders. A range of *incentives* are needed locally and nationally that will further encourage local people to mobilize and employ their own assets in support of their livelihoods. Among such incentives, strengthening *resource rights* must play a major role. Policy should facilitate and strengthen linkages between agriculture and income *diversification*, which provides livelihood opportunities and pathways out of poverty, and between dry forest regions and other regions. A prime objective of research and development is *empowerment*. We need to give a voice to local people – a voice that is heard and listened to (Anderson et al. 2004).

The inequality of access to natural assets must be addressed if poverty is to be reduced, if people are to move from subjects to citizens and if environmental threats are to be addressed. However governments in many African

countries fail to decentralize and appropriately distribute resource rights, correct natural resource market failures such as segmentation and adverse incorporation, and invest in natural capital in relation to its importance.

The improved management of trees and forests cannot be pursued in isolation, through sectoral efforts. Forest management can be a complex undertaking, and requires careful consideration of biological, economic, social, cultural and institutional factors. The status of incentives and constraints, enabling conditions for behavioral change, and the likely impacts of proposed interventions on 'winners' and 'losers' are but a few of the many aspects to be considered. Without sufficient economic incentives and in the absence of other favorable enabling conditions, widespread change and long term success is unlikely. One important lesson is the need to link forestry sector investments to the achievement of results in such critically important areas as poverty alleviation, food security, health, improved governance and rural development. Indeed sometimes these sectors are more open to the importance of forestry for poverty and equity than the forest departments.

Another key lesson is the importance of focusing less on resource protection and on slowing or arresting resource degradation, and more on how to mobilize stakeholders in pursuit of the opportunities for improving resource management in ways that directly contribute to local empowerment, realization of rights, increased household incomes, more secure livelihoods, enterprise development, expanded commerce and improved socio-economic well-being. Forests are dynamic ecosystems that can respond to the evolving management objectives of local stakeholders, and that can be managed proactively to generate the goods and services that respond to local and national needs and priorities. At the same time, a shift in emphasis from regulation to empowerment can greatly increase the efficiency and effectiveness by which these management objectives and associated results are achieved.

Community-based management of natural resources requires investment in the organization, training and capacity development of legally recognized, empowered community-based organizations. Given the key role played by the State in the process of transferring authority and rights to local communities and resource managers, the continued support of government decision makers and political leadership at all levels is vitally important.

The juxtaposition of modern and traditional tenure rights and rules governing the use and management of forests and other natural resources has been a source of tension and conflict. More attention to securing property rights and to clarification of rights, rules, authorities and conflict management procedures is needed, with an appropriate level of empowerment of local decision-making structures.

The decentralization process has frequently been hampered both by confusion about the emerging and changing roles of stakeholders (e.g. insufficient elaboration and communication of the new policies, regulations and practical procedures to be followed etc), and by a reticence of the part of government authorities and vested interests

to fully implement the new policies and legislation. This reticence can be partially countered by increased attention to the opportunities to disseminate information more widely, and to support the role of civil society in promoting greater transparency, accountability and advocacy for implementing the new policies. In the process, traditional authorities and other vested interests should not be ignored, but engaged in an appropriate manner (Ribot 2004).

These lessons, and other insights gained from field level innovations and assessments of what has worked and why, are contributing to our increased understanding of enabling conditions and evolving 'best practices'. These can be applied to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of forest sector investments. It is in our collective interest to make the most of these lessons and to apply what we have learned.

TOWARDS PRO-POOR SUSTAINABLE FORESTRY

Without a concerted effort to make the most of opportunities to invest in tomorrow's forest and to improve development assistance effectiveness, the forces and pressures that now stall or hinder efforts to improve forest resources management will likely result in loss of income and continued disenfranchisement of rural people. Economic growth will be undermined, and conflicts over resource shortages and incompatible uses will be aggravated.

The issues of natural resource management, poverty reduction and local empowerment are intrinsically intertwined in rural Africa. They cannot be tackled in isolation. Resources are the major source of wealth and the central issue on which good governance must deliver. Poverty reduction will have environmental benefits and contribute to local empowerment. Governance (such as property and procedural rights) is needed for economic systems to function and for environmental investment.

We propose below a prioritized and interlinked four point agenda for forestry policy and practice that will help reduce poverty and inequality and spur growth and better environmental management.

- 1) Improve the recognition of the fundamental role of natural resources in economic growth of poor countries and poor populations and in the development of democracies and good governance. This means shifting priorities in programmes, budgets and plans towards greater investment and integration of natural resources across the board – in poverty reduction programmes, in national and donor budgets, in decentralization programmes, etc.

- 2) Better distribute resource rights, both property and procedural. This is critical for pro-poor impacts and real efforts to reduce poverty. Equally important it can also decrease inequality and lead to improved political and social articulation of local people. Control and access over resources, critical to growth and livelihoods, is for rural people the main governance issue.

3) Frameworks, regulations and enforcement are needed to make natural resource markets work for the poor. Better market linkages alone will not address either poverty or inequality. This means responding to market failures and imperfect competition and identifying new opportunities that take advantage of the assets of the poor.

4) Redefine the role of science and technology, and associated planning and institutions. Science and technology should be used to support and empower local initiatives and objectives. Too often scientific and technical plans and institutions are used as instruments of control, bureaucracy and a means of transferring costs to the poor under the name of 'sustainability'. Science should not be the sole criteria for setting objectives, which is a social process, but as an unequalled means to help meet objectives in sustainable ways (Hutton *et al.* 2005).

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