

Assistance to forestry: what have we learnt?

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SUMMARY

Assistance given to forestry, like ODA (Official Development Assistance) in general, presents problems. It is well known that commitment and ownership are needed in order to achieve success. But projects are still very much donor-driven. The best way to overcome current problems is to support developing countries' own strategies for development in general or in a selected sector. Such an approach is not very likely. Support to capacity building, research, learning, strengthening of analytical capacity and other 'basics' should then be favoured as a second 'best bet'. The main objective must be to strengthen domestic capacity within developing countries so that they can better appreciate the importance of forestry and take full charge of their own forestry development. Conditions imposed by donors or the pushing of donor agendas do not work in the long run.

Keywords: aid, assistance, forestry, lessons, development.

INTRODUCTION

Development assistance in the forestry field is extended to developing countries to enable them carry out conservation and/or sustainable development of their forests. ODA in the form of investment or technical assistance is only one part of what is available, the other being local funding plus private sector finance. In view of this the importance of ODA for forestry tends to vary according to country and situation.

The current international debate on 'assistance to forestry development' is focused largely on how to obtain more funding (and ODA) for sustainable forestry programmes and to identify new international mechanisms for cooperation. My interest, however, is to complement the appeals for more money with a discussion on what can be done to use already existing ODA funds in a more effective way.

BACKGROUND

International forestry assistance over the past 30-40 years can be said to have passed through four different phases that have mainly followed each other chronologically, but to some extent have also existed in parallel. These phases are more visible in international debates than in the actual implementation of projects/programmes¹. The phases are: (a) industrial forestry; (b) social forestry; (c) environmental forestry; and (d) sustainable management of renewable natural resources (Persson 1998). When one approach has experienced difficulties, or the development agenda has been changed, then something new has been tried. Not only have the aims of aid changed but also the means of implementing them. The last 15 years have for example also seen the promotion of intensive planning efforts (*e.g.* the Tropical Forestry Action Plan, or TFAP). Generally speaking, interest in and funding for forestry assistance have increased.

Another aspect of forestry assistance has been the constant selling of crisis messages (*e.g.* deforestation, fuelwood shortage, erosion, climate change, loss of biodiversity) and of varying panaceas to solve each crisis (such as plantations, community forestry, sustainable forestry management, non-wood forest products, ecotourism) (Leach and Mearns 1996, Roe 1991).

Results achieved

A number of achievements in the forestry sector during recent decades (at least partly dependent on development assistance) can be identified. Forest policies have, for instance, been 'modernised' in a number of countries. Donors and forestry organisations have learnt important lessons and new knowledge has been created. Two decades ago we knew very little about many of the issues that are considered highly relevant to forestry today, such as tenure, gender, holistic approaches, non-timber forest products, joint forest management and sustainable forest management. In forestry research there have been some outstanding successes. In the case of fast growing plantations great improvements have been achieved in many countries. Research in wood technology now makes it possible to turn low quality wood into high quality products.

Based on these successes, a positive picture about developments over the last decades can be presented. However, deforestation has not stopped, and sustainable

¹ This paper refers primarily to projects. It is now often said that assistance is given through programmes (support to the whole forestry sector for example). This is hardly correct. Even so-called programmes consist normally of a bunch of projects. So what is said about projects is basically valid also for programmes. But in the ideal case 'programmes' (if carried out according to the text-book) could be one way of avoiding some problems.

forest management is hard to find other than at an experimental scale. There has been frequent mention of approaches to engage the local population but most Forestry Departments still resist giving rights (back) to local people. When assistance to forestry took off 40 years ago, ideas about sustained yield forestry, industrial forestry for development and reduced deforestation were already important objectives. In summary, forestry assistance has so far not achieved the objectives that were formulated 40 years ago. Why? What are the main problems?

PROBLEMS WITH FORESTRY ASSISTANCE

The main objectives of forestry assistance undertakings are often unclear, perceived in widely varying ways and sometimes the subject of heated discussion and even controversy. A crucial question in this context is, for instance, is the main objective the well-being of trees or of humans? Varying objectives for major assistance projects within the same country can hamper the possibility of achieving positive results.

Problems on the receiving side

In many developing countries, forestry is viewed as a marginal sector and political interest in this sector is limited. Governments in developing countries are more concerned with more pressing problems like poverty. In most countries (even forest-rich ones) the Forestry Department is short of resources because funds created by forestry remain in the national Treasury. Lack of funding is often less of a problem, however, than corruption in the financial administration and the granting of permissions. The fact that there is considerable money easily available (through exploitation) often constitutes a problem in forest-rich countries. Interest in sustainable forest management is limited among most stakeholders because it provides a slower return and seems to be less profitable than the mining of forests.

There is often a lack of clear national objectives for forestry and forest authorities frequently have conflicting roles. Forestry Departments may be in charge of forest management and at the same time monitoring management. Many forestry authorities are very conservative, spurred by tradition to act in ways that essentially are aimed at protecting forests against people.

Other problems on the recipient side include:

- insufficient human capacity, and lack of commitment to capacity building – frequent changes and a high rotation of key personnel aggravate this problem;
- very low salaries of government personnel, implying that civil servants must live on something other than their salary alone;
- administrative weaknesses and complicated bureaucratic systems; and
- top-down decision-making, lack of local participation and lack of transparency – this seems to present more

problems in forestry than in other sectors as a large part of the population is involved.

Assistance to the forestry sector can actually delay necessary changes and defend the status quo. For various reasons, developing countries may find it difficult to say no to assistance offered, which often means that development projects become *ad hoc* efforts, making it difficult to achieve a genuine national strategy.

Problems on the donor side

Development assistance programmes in forestry are very much driven by the prevailing attitudes, priorities and operating cultures of donor institutions. Some donors, for example, are opposed to plantations and commercial forestry, while the agendas of others may be driven by issues of biodiversity, privatisation, gender or community involvement. This selectivity leads to inadequate attention to other important issues. Sometimes global concerns (represented by donors) in forestry are simply in conflict with rural and national realities but are still given great importance and frequently advocated. Many projects are drowned in objectives. New objectives (and conditions) are often introduced after a project is under-way.

Moreover, assistance programmes are often supply-driven and donors are typically not structured to take the long-term view. To increase the efficiency of projects a special administration is often used, bypassing the local structure. Donor organisations frequently make funding decisions without adequate understanding of the issues that are central to a complicated sector such as forestry (Griffin 1989). Attempts are still made to apply 'one-factor solutions'. Plantations, for example, may be seen as the best solution to a fuelwood problem but the tenure situation may actually be more important to the solution of the problem than shortage of trees. Lessons like these are being learnt but forgotten after some time because donors often lack institutional memory, or have a very unreliable one.

Some aid projects disperse high-quality local expertise to scattered components, leaving core-sector development agendas unattended. Problems are aggravated by heavy reliance on consultancy firms that are accustomed to working independently and have limited interest in the donor institution and its long-term activities and the objectives of development cooperation. Continuity regarding key personnel in assistance projects is frequently low, in spite of the fact that chances of success of a project are often related to the individual strengths and personalities of those implementing it. 'Counterpart' arrangements (the traditional UN model) rarely work (Berg 1993).

Below is a summary of some additional problems on the donor side:

- Many donor organisations have internal conflicts over projects (many 'cooks'), which tend to increase the number of (often conflicting) objectives. Additionally,

there is often frequent turnover of staff. This makes it difficult to adhere to a well-defined and long-term policy.

- Donors face increasing pressure from their own constituencies, which leads to more conditions, rules and regulations in assistance programmes, implying less flexibility. It also fuels pressure to produce glossy reports touting the 'success' of projects. Donors generally advance their own country plans and strategies in regard to environment, gender, poverty, development and other issues. In many countries assistance decisions are increasingly political and altruism seems often to be declining in importance.
- Constant reorganisation is prevalent among donor institutions because of demands for greater efficiency, which is often seen as requiring changes in rules, personnel and administrative structure. At the same time, the capacity of donor organisations tends to shrink because of budget cuts. In the case of forestry, most organisations are severely understaffed, and foreign missions nowadays rarely have knowledge of the sector.
- Donors 'follow the herd' when awarding assistance. There is often too much investment in popular sectors. In sectors considered 'risky' (e.g. Reduced Impact Logging) there may be no investment at all, even if highly relevant and needed.

Many of the problems described and discussed are usually related to large and costly projects. Small projects with limited funds tend to have fewer or different problems. Projects should ideally start small and grow if successful.

Some of the factors we do know are required in order for forestry programmes to succeed is that they must be long-term, the tenure situation must be well-defined and broad participation must be ensured – but these require more time for planning. The need for intersectoral planning and a holistic view was clearly recognised in the TFAP (Schmidt *et al.* 1999). Yet many forestry programmes are still decidedly sectoral. Attempts are often being made to engage other sectors to achieve goals predefined by forestry. Forestry wants to be intersectoral on its own terms: in other words foresters want to be in the lead.

How to define success and failure?

The literature is full of examples of 'disaster projects' (and some success stories). In practice, however, it is often difficult to tell what is success and what is failure. Success (or failure) as measured by whom? One person's failure may be another's success (Crewe and Harrison 1998)! What is the time span over which success (or failure) is measured? When studying the literature, we find that different authors can describe the same projects as a success or a failure – even when based on the same case studies (Riddell 1987). Sometimes individual projects are judged as successful while the sector at large stumbles. In other cases, individual projects may be classified as disasters while the wider sector shows progress. One may perhaps conclude that both 'successes' and 'failures' can provide knowledge that hopefully will influence future developments (Byron 1997, Persson 2000).

History revisited – What if Sweden had received international forestry assistance?

In the 1860s, the situation in Swedish forests was critical but deforestation and degradation continued due to different and powerful forces. What would have been the impact in this period if foreign advisers from, for instance, Germany or Japan had arrived, expressing their concern and interest in supporting initiatives aimed at controlling the exploitation of remaining forests and starting forest regeneration programmes?

Support to education and research could probably have produced some results, but not in the short run. Support for strengthening forest institutions and forest administration could perhaps have achieved some positive results as well – but would it have been sustainable? (Or, to put it differently, could Sweden at that time have afforded a larger administration, once the foreign support was terminated?)

Foreign assistance for the elaboration of new forestry legislation would most probably have yielded very limited results. Support to local organisations pushing tree planting might have speeded the process up – but it could also have undermined genuine individual and private initiatives.

Also, foreign assistance for the County Forestry Boards (established at the start of the 20th century) could have resulted in less local commitment and participation and more of a centralist top-down approach, which would have been counter-productive. By that time, however, Sweden had already built its own platform to deal successfully with deforestation and mismanagement.

Sweden did not receive direct assistance but certainly learned from Germany. Swedish foresters visited Germany and brought back knowledge. German 'experts' travelled in Sweden and wrote reports about the mismanagement they saw. But Swedish foresters used the German advice and knowledge as they themselves found best, considering local physical and political realities.

GENERAL LESSONS

Forestry is not the only sector that experiences problems with official development assistance initiatives (Hancock 1989). Below, I give my personal reading of the present conventional wisdom about development assistance. It is based on a summary of reports on development assistance, 'best practice', requirements, principles, etc. (Carlsson *et al.* 1997, Edwards 1999, Persson 2000, Uma Lele 1991, Wohlgemuth 1997, World Bank 1998).

For developing countries

- Development depends on a package of factors whose composition varies from country to country. The introduction of organised forestry in Sweden one hundred

years back depended on intensified agriculture, emigration, urbanisation, increased value (and shortage) of wood/forests and the fact that most social groups saw an interest in protecting the forests. To introduce organised forestry in, say, Laos a different package will be needed. It is important to recognise that it is rarely one factor which is decisive.

- Commitment (and ownership) is necessary, as well as a national will. Countries should say no to assistance that does not fit. There must be a commitment to use their own resources. A country like Botswana, which has followed these rules (Carlsson *et al.* 1997), has developed faster than countries that have seen assistance merely as free money and a pleasant gift.
- Policies and the macroeconomic setting must at least be 'acceptable'. A number of agricultural projects have failed because the macro-economic policy was completely wrong. Commodity prices decided by the state can cause serious problems for example.
- A certain level of domestic capacity is needed to manage assistance programmes.
- There must be a willingness to learn and a preparedness to change.
- 'Participation', avoiding a top-down approach, is important to secure long term success. Subsidiarity is also important.
- Assistance is just one of many instruments for development. It is not enough or most important for development and often is not even necessary.

For donor organisations

- Avoid pushing own political agendas.
- Consider quality (including sustainability) in assistance as important as quantity.
- Conditionality does not work (World Bank 1998). Conditions (*e.g.* concerning policies) are often used by Development Banks, as for structural adjustment loans. Conditions work if countries believe it is good for them. Otherwise countries can avoid fulfilling promises or change them when the project is over. Donors are reluctant to stop projects because conditions have not been fulfilled and it is also difficult to measure fulfilment. This means simply that policy changes cannot be bought.
- Donors do not really fund initiatives that would have been funded anyhow (fungibility).
- Coherence regarding different areas of action is needed, for example assistance and trade.
- Tied aid should be avoided. This simply increases the costs for the recipient. It may make standardisation of equipment difficult and can increase dependency. Tied aid implies a subvention to a supplier in the donor country and economists suggest that the benefit to the donor can often be negative.
- Long-term commitment is normally necessary.
- Coordination of donor efforts must be improved.
- Show some humility: what we believe today will often prove wrong tomorrow. Donors do not have all the

answers and standardisation does not work. Development cannot be planned as a scientific experiment (Edwards 1999); there are far too many unknowns.

- Primarily support recipient countries' own strategies.

Glancing through this list, it may be concluded that many of these lessons (often dearly bought) are currently not being put into practice. One overriding conclusion that can be drawn from the reports is the paradox that development assistance is least efficient where it is most needed; while functioning best where it is least necessary. It is difficult to achieve success in countries with civil unrest, no trained personnel, no local funds, weak administration, etc. Many projects try to do the impossible.

Why is existing knowledge not being used?

Donor governments give development assistance because they want to achieve political objectives, whether at home or abroad, or both. The 'flag' is important and development results may sometimes be secondary. Donor organisations want to show that assistance funds are used efficiently, and that little of the money has been used for administration in the home office instead of going to targeted beneficiaries (leading to low technical capacity). Openly admitting existing problems would make work more difficult.

There is a lot of technical proven knowledge that is not being used. Why? The answer is mainly that there are too many people who stand to gain from maintaining the existing way of doing things. Often, forestry authorities are also too thinly staffed to monitor and control forest activities and conditions even if they would like to. There are of course many cases when bureaucrats and officials just do not have the latest knowledge.

Donor organisations such as development banks are often well aware of the lessons that concern them, but if these were applied many projects would simply be closed down or never begun. For political reasons this is rarely possible.

There are often logical explanations as to why existing knowledge is not used. This is not the same as saying that the present state of affairs should be allowed to continue. Instead, the goal must be to make it politically possible and even attractive to fully utilise existing knowledge.

WHAT TO DO?

Is this new?

The description of problems associated with assistance given here states nothing new. Fifteen years ago much the same was said, *e.g.* in the works of Cassen (1986) and Riddell (1987). More recent reports continue to give almost the same picture (Brown *et al.* 1999, Edwards 1999, van de Walle and Johnston 1996). The above presentation of problems is by and large accepted by those with practical experience. However, when one presents these facts to a more mixed audience the result is

frequently a furore. I evidently say what people do not want to hear and aid bureaucrats claim I overstate the case. Criticism of aid has long been met by the argument that the problems described were solved some time ago and that we now should concentrate on the future. This is hardly true. Recipients still have, for instance, to accept all the hobby horses and bureaucratic peculiarities of different donors. Donors certainly vary (from bad to good) but there is no donor whose assistance could not be significantly improved.

If basic rules are followed, assistance can work quite well (World Bank 1998). Botswana is a case in point (Carlsson *et al.* 1997). Given a realistic project, the basic prerequisite for success described is commitment and ownership. But if these rules were to be seriously and consistently applied it would often imply that support to forestry would decline, at least in current money terms.

Possible models for improvement

The present donor-driven model for aid is full of problems. In order to overcome these obstacles, rather drastic changes are required in developing countries and in donor agencies (Gwin and Nelson 1997, Kanbur *et al.* 1999). In the ideal case, the country itself should develop a general strategy for development and donors should then allocate money to support the implementation of this strategy. It would be the developing country that decides what to do and where to buy services for planning, implementation, etc. Donors should not be able to interfere in details as happens at present. This approach would also mean that developing countries themselves prioritise between sectors and within sectors.

Donors could not be expected to provide money if they did not believe in the strategy, or if the country suffers from high levels of corruption. So donors would only support countries in which they had confidence and would reduce their support to others.

Applied in such a general way this strategy may seem unrealistic. Support to a selected sector along the same general lines could constitute an alternative. This has actually taken place in some cases relating to transport (Ethiopia), health (Ethiopia, Tanzania), education (Ethiopia) and even agriculture (Zambia). However, I can foresee problems to achieving this in forestry. Different donors and the developing country will probably not be able to agree on the main objective, for instance humans or trees? Another problem is that prioritisation of the sectors will then be strongly influenced by the donors' choice. In some countries donors favour forestry or environment while the country itself prefers to give priority to, say, agriculture or education.

These 'new thoughts' will at best develop very slowly. For the time being, the basic alternative for donors is probably to contribute to strengthening domestic capacity so that the developing countries themselves can be in charge and even say no to aid that does not fit.

Below I discuss some of the changes that are needed and which could sometimes work in today's less than ideal setting. My suggestions below can be seen as the four 'best bets', providing there are no drastic alterations in donor

organisations and countries that would expand the scope for real change.

Increasing capacity ('Capacity building')

Most studies on assistance and development emphasise the need for increased capacity². During the past 30 years considerable capacity has been established but much has also been lost. It is quite easy to strengthen the capacity of individuals but building institutional capacity is another matter altogether. To succeed in this field there is a need for a strong commitment from governments and a real ownership of the process. Success cannot be bought just with aid money. Institutional cooperation over long periods of time has often been successful. Training can have good results as well. But there should be a balance between the capacity established and the ability of society to sustain it.

Networks organised by the FAO and others have often been effective in providing much needed capacity regarding, for example, inventories, statistics and agroforestry. A major reason for their success is that these networks involve strongly committed individuals or organisations. The need for commitment is a prevailing theme. This will happen spontaneously if there is an economic advantage to be gained by following the rules. If this is not the case, it is a matter of changing attitudes.

What is set out below on policies and analytical capacity and research is of course primarily capacity building in these important fields.

Improving policies

Changes in policy can reduce many of the problems in forestry and the need for external support. International organisations and donors are often central actors in a dialogue about policy, but their 'truths' are frequently proved wrong after a number of years. The dialogue is, in fact, not very equitable: dialogue with the power of money easily becomes a monologue. The ideal situation is of course for developing countries themselves to assume full responsibility for policy-making and, if needed, have a competent dialogue partner.

The strengthening of analytical capacity and research

Analytical units and basic data

Without basic data all strategic discussion or planning becomes difficult. Forest inventories have been a common form of assistance to forestry development but often give correct answers to wrong or irrelevant questions. There is a need for an analytical unit that identifies the key questions to be answered. The information required is the second step

² Capacity here means that there are enough personnel and institutions (even NGOs) capable of doing what is needed. If capacity building is successful the need for foreign experts will be reduced.

after these questions have been identified. Such a unit should supply the policy or political level with analyses of various alternatives for action. Success of an analytical unit cannot be assured without government commitment. There is also a need to create domestic capacity to collect some of the basic statistics identified by the analytical unit as necessary.

Research

Forest policies should be based on knowledge, but in many countries forest research is non-existent. Developing countries do not necessarily need brilliant scientists publishing peer-reviewed articles in a steady flow. Instead, most countries need researchers who have the capacity to understand the research undertaken in the field of interest, who have been trained and are able and free to think and undertake detached, critical analysis. This can rarely be achieved simply by reading books and attending conferences. Some hands-on research is certainly needed. To build this kind of research capacity it is not enough to provide support in the traditional way. In fact, there are a number of things necessary under the 'research umbrella'.

- Produce results related to the needs of the country. The reason why research has generally not had a great impact is that it often gives correct answers to irrelevant or low-priority questions.
- Build capacity. To build a functioning research environment has proved to be a complicated but necessary process.
- Establish research funds or councils. Donors should support projects of priority to the individual countries.

Linking research with development

It is often said that forestry research has not had much of an impact on reality. The research is often academic and the results of little practical use. The contact between development work and research is often very limited. There is a need for closer contacts between the practitioners of development cooperation and people engaged in research. In developing countries, the basic aim of research (at least in forestry) should be to support national development.

Learning

Forestry projects are often designed and carried out without analysis of what works and what does not. Implementing ten different types of community forestry programmes in a country should, for instance, generate a substantial body of knowledge. It is true that much research and many of the investments in small enterprises are failures. But these 'failures' may produce lessons that can advance development if the experience is analysed, recorded and disseminated. Acceptance of diversity should constitute one important component of an enhanced and systematic learning process.

There is a need for think tanks that can analyse ongoing projects/programmes in order to learn from experience. Such think tanks are primarily needed at the national level. But

donors also need to improve their systems for learning. The discussion about learning often scares forestry departments, forestry advisers and not least development banks. They want action and, often, big programmes, whereas learning takes time, consumes little money and may even give rise to more work and some embarrassment.

CONCLUSIONS

The principal message of this paper is that forestry assistance (and development assistance in general) suffers from many difficulties. The main reason for problems in forestry is that donors often are more motivated than the developing countries themselves. Projects or programmes tend to be donor-driven. Furthermore, trees and forests are often placed in the centre whereas people frequently are seen as mainly a nuisance or as predators.

In practice, there is no easy way to begin applying existing (often dearly bought) knowledge and lessons in order to improve assistance programmes because development assistance is a political undertaking (but see Mayer and Bass 1999). Donors' objectives in providing 'aid' are not only to do good. This impedes the learning process and errors experienced will continue to be repeated. However, we must persist with analysis and discussion of how development assistance, even within its disabling political framework, can be improved as much as possible and at least try to avoid clearly negative effects.

I question whether a push by donors can 'save' forests and ensure that they are used 'sustainably'. What has this strategy produced so far? Isn't it time instead to take a long-term view of the changes that are really needed?

Finally, is it realistic to expect that forests can be saved and used wisely in a world where poverty, misery and tyranny are prevalent? It is prosperity which, in the long term, can truly save the forests. When assistance to forestry began, it was thought that forestry development would sometimes contribute to making this prosperity happen (Westoby 1962). What is our answer today?

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