PARTICIPATORY APPROACHES TO CATCHMENT MANAGEMENT: SOME EXPERIENCES TO BUILD UPON

Dennis P. Garrity[1]

Strategic issues in tropical catchment management

As increasing populations expand into steeper, more fragile areas in the tropical uplands, many catchments are affected by severe soil erosion, declining soil productivity, and environmental degradation. Watershed degradation now poses a threat to the economies of many countries in Asia, and to the livelihoods of the ever-growing populations the depend on these resources. Unfortunately, past watershed management programmes to arrest and reverse this trend have not been effective. But the lessons learned from theses failures have been instrumental in promoting a major change in thinking with regard to watershed management (Douglas, 1996). The two key elements underlying this approach are better land husbandry practices, and active people's participation.

Better land husbandry represents a shift in emphasis away from a narrow idea of just soil conservation to a more holistic care of the land for sustained production. It follows recognition that, although there will be tradeoffs, the farmer's market objectives can be reconciled with society's watershed objectives such that neither loses and both gain. This affirms that the adoption of appropriate management practices that increase yields can likewise combat land degradation.

Emphasis on active people's participation in watershed management (catchment management in the British terminology) is a recent phenomenon in the tropics. It arose from the glaring pattern of failures observed in past "top down" methods used by the public sector to implement watershed management projects in which the residents were passive recipients of external interventions. These failures have fostered more serious recognition that success depends upon enhancing rural people's inherent abilities to apply and adapt new and indigenous technologies, and to involve local institutions to manage and conserve resources.

Successful watershed management in the tropics is built on two pillars:

- Sound, practical, suitable technical innovation, and
- Participatory institutional innovation

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This paper explores some successful experiences in the evolution of local people's management of watershed resources in the context of this broader, more holistic vision. It examines several key projects in the Philippines and Thailand that provide instructive case studies. The paper concludes by summing up the key points learned that point the way to greater success in future watershed management initiatives.