



Win-Win Approaches to Development and the Environment

Forest Stewardship Contracts: Trees for Land Access

Center for Development Information and Evaluation

Developing-country governments are finding they cannot save dwindling forest resources strictly by patrolling and enforcing against encroachment for logging and farming. They have neither the budgets nor the human resources to convert forests into fortresses. Ways to engender local cooperation in partnership with government appear essential. With USAID support, several countries have begun to employ formal agreements or contracts with local communities and indigenous groups for managing forest resources. In exchange for greater control over and longer term access to resources and products from forests under their stewardship, local communities and user groups have demonstrated a willingness to “take back the forests” and manage them on a sustainable basis.

The Problem

Runaway deforestation, particularly the destruction of tropical forests in developing countries, is resulting in the loss of critical watersheds, wildlife habitats, and recreational areas. Many forests are being destroyed by commercial timber interests and by neighboring communities in need of fuelwood and additional land to farm. Developing-country governments have few resources for halting further deforestation or for managing and restoring forest lands.

The Win-Win Solution

Recent evaluations of USAID forestry programs in several developing countries have identified some innovative arrangements between developing country governments and local communities to save and manage forests in a sustainable fashion. (See Synthesis Report *Forestry and the Environment: An Assessment of USAID Support for Farm and Community Forestry*, July 1995). These arrangements often take the form of formal agreements or contracts between government agencies and local communities or groups for the long-term management and use of public or common forested lands.

To extend the reach of their forestry programs, some developing-country governments have redrafted their national forestry codes to grant communities and individuals authority over management and use of forestlands for extended periods in exchange for agreements to return the land in equal or better condition. These forest stewardship agreements are becoming popular forms of social contracts between national authorities and local groups and

communities. A common feature of the agreements is their explicit recognition of local authority over a public resource—trees and the land they grow on. The exercise of control by government officials ends at the edge of the forest.

Local communities are charged with responsible stewardship of the forest and with working out equitable arrangements for sharing the costs of forest management and the benefits of forest products harvested and consumed or sold. Forest stewardship contracts have become vehicles for increasing local empowerment, democratic practices, and capacity for governance.

International donors and environmental nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have aided promotion of natural resources stewardship contracts by providing technical, administrative, and financial support to government agencies responsible for preparing and issuing stewardship contracts. Donors and NGOs also support training for community groups desiring to qualify for stewardship agreements. Training for government officials has been critical to effective expansion of forest stewardship contracts, as an important element of local forest stewardship is changing the outlook and skills of government forestry bureaucracies.

The Role of USAID

Natural resource stewardship contracts and agreements between governments and local communities or NGOs have emerged as a new feature on the institutional landscape of several developing countries.

In the **Philippines**, USAID has helped the government introduce and spread the concept of “community stewardship contracts” among groups that have settled in forested upland areas, which by law are public domain. Previously, settlers simply cleared forests and farmed with no title. They moved on when the soil became depleted and eroded. The government was reluctant to provide social services out of fear of attracting more immigrants and accelerating the pace of forest destruction. Certificates of stewardship gave settlers “rights” to the land for 25 years, renewable in exchange for agreements to restore trees on fragile soils and to cultivate land in a sustainable fashion.

In **Nepal**, USAID has helped the government draft a new forestry code that provides for resource management agreements in much the same way as the Philippines. Instead of requiring communities to obtain tree-cutting permits from local forestry officials, the agreements grant authority over trees on the land if harvested in a sustainable way. Communities agree among themselves how the benefits are to be distributed as part of the plans they submit. To qualify, communities must first receive training and gain development management skills.

The **Gambia** introduced a community resource management agreement that built on a USAID-supported forestry project aimed at involving local villages more directly in the stewardship of trees and tree crops. Originally proposed to promote woodlots, the management agreements have formalized and expanded local community control and accountability over common-property forest resources.

In **Costa Rica**, USAID is supporting a regional environmental NGO that acts as a government agent in negotiating and overseeing natural forest management contracts with landowners. The contracts include commitments to employ methods for selective tree harvesting that will do the least damage to the standing forest.

Forest stewardship contracts and natural resource management agreements appear particularly appropriate for developing countries where wood for fuel, construction, and other uses is in short supply. USAID can foster these types of arrangements between national governments and local groups by

- # Helping developing countries reform policies to promote community forestry and forest-products enterprises—for example, setting up and operating tree seedling nurseries and custom tree-planting and -harvesting services
- # Mobilizing complementary funding from NGOs and other donors to fund the transfer of technical and management know-how for local forest stewardship
- # Reducing risks of failure in community reforestation projects through training and technical support for fire protection and other management oversight activities
- # Funding research into technologies and practices for sustainable forest management and wood-products markets and trade.

Outstanding Issues

Confidence and trust. Fear of authority and distrust of public officials pose an obstacle to the formation of stewardship contracts between local groups and government institutions. Forestry officials have traditionally viewed their role as policing public forestlands, not working as partners to promote tree planting on private farms. Government foresters must evolve from enforcers to extensionists.

Regulation and control. In some countries farmers fear that by planting trees they lose control of their land, because traditionally permits have been required before the trees can

be cut or harvested. Attitudes of government bureaucracies must be changed from enforcement to extension and from policing to promoting before local groups can be expected to enter into a partnership for stewardship of forests. It appears better to separate into separate agencies enforcement of forest regulations, on the one hand, and promotion of forest stewardship, on the other. In this way, forestry extensionists are not required to perform both functions and risk losing local trust in so doing.

Distribution of benefits. Community forestry is a long-term commitment with risks of failure. Without systems for short-term income and protection against loss, many communities will be unable to take part. This is especially true for poor ones on marginal lands where trees may be the most environmentally useful.

Contract administration. Contracts with large numbers of local groups and communities are required to have an effect on halting forest loss and fostering sustainable forest stewardship. This places new burdens on government agencies charged with preparing contracts, negotiating agreements, and overseeing compliance. Because the basic skills of local groups (literacy, numeracy, financial administration, community organization, forest-management practices) may be low, public agencies must also budget resources for training and extension if forest stewardship contracting is to spread.

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