

Redefining Community Forestry

Excerpts from an article entitled "Redefining Community Forestry: For a Better Approach and Better World" by Bikash Rath, Development Professional and Researcher from India, Coordinator of the IUFRO Working Party on Community Forestry 9.05.06 (<http://www.iufro.org/science/divisions/division-9/90000/90500/90506/publications/>).

Community forestry is normally seen or defined as involvement of local communities in the protection and/or management of public forests. This perception, however, does not distinguish between community forestry, participatory forestry, and other related terms such as citizen forestry and social forestry and, thus, ignores the actual social and legal circumstances. For instance, according to J Revington's definition (1992) of community forestry, "(...) the local community controls a clearly and legally defined area of forest (...)". However, in many communities boundaries are often defined by traditional access, and not by revenue or land records. There are instances in which the legal boundaries recognized by the authorities significantly differ from the community's perception and are thus not acceptable to the community.

People's involvement in forest protection and management has developed differently across the world because of varying local factors and different levels of maturity of the community to take up the responsibility. In most cases, however, it developed because the authorized agencies failed to protect a forest patch or otherwise found it more viable to involve local communities. This community involvement has often been successful but there are also instances of failure. For example, in the author's home state of Odisha in India, the same village community adopted different approaches for two forest patches under their responsibility: they carefully conserved the one that they protected spontaneously, and did not bother much for the one in which the Forest Department involved them for protection and management under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) program. This was chiefly because they did not consider the patch under JFM to be their 'own', and knew that at any time the Forest Department might decide to cut the forest for one or the other reason.

FAO (1978) initially defined community forestry as "any situation which intimately involves local people in a forestry activity. (...) This definition uses the key word 'intimately' that has a lot of significance. It is this intimacy that is hurt when somebody else asserts rights over the resource. And it is also this intimacy that has implications for gender and equity since in the rural scenario of developing and underdeveloped countries rural women share a more intimate relationship with the forest because of their day-to-day activities.



Community forest guards appointed by Jamjharan villagers (Kalahandi, Odisha, India)
Photo by Rangadhar Behera (RCDC)

Community involvement in natural resource management has interesting dynamics and a great potential. It is high time that we understand this dynamics properly and make optimum use of this potential in order to face challenges like climate change. Defining 'Community forestry' properly is necessary to promote public forest governance, particularly decentralized forest governance, an aspect that is captured in the definition provided by J. Burley, Oxford Forestry Institute: "Community forestry, social forestry and rural development forestry are more or less equivalent and reflect Abraham Lincoln's view of democracy - government of the people, by the people, for the people."