Institutions, Consensus and Conflict

Implications for Policy and Practice

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1 Introduction

The case study articles in this Bulletin have presented a very different perspective on people-environment relations from the images which often underlie approaches to community-based sustainable development. A focus on social and ecological variation, on the different, and sometimes conflicting, values and benefits which variable ecologies afford different social actors, and on the dynamic institutional arrangements by which people access, control and sometimes compete over those benefits, has presented some fundamental challenges to policy approaches founded on the ideal of consensual communities managing resources sustainably for the collective good. What, however, are the alternatives? In this concluding article we reflect on some of the implications – but also dilemmas – which such a perspective raises for policy and practice in natural resource management.

2 Formal Organisations Versus Diverse, Dynamic Institutions

Conventional approaches to community-based sustainable development are frequently centred on 'community' organisations as the main vehicle for their activities. Thus water users' associations, village management committees, forest management committees and so on are expected to represent the collective interests of 'the community', and to undertake activities on members' behalf, whether in preparing community resource management plans, liaising with government, or distributing the benefits from resource-sharing. Although such organisations are very often formed anew in the context of a particular programme or project, development agencies and practitioners frequently believe them to be grounded in elements of 'traditional' organisation in resource management. Indeed, they are expected to build on or replicate such organisations, reproducing the assumed effectiveness of a 'traditional' past. As we saw in the introductory article to this **Bulletin**, this is a key part of the narratives which inform community-based sustainable development.

Yet as this **Bulletin** has shown, such formal, community-level organisations may be a very poor reflection of the real institutional matrix within which resources are locally used, managed and contested. Considerable caution is therefore

needed before assuming that such new formal organisations will replicate the assumed successes of indigenous systems, or enhance community involvement effectively (cf. Mosse 1997). The articles here illustrate how priveleging an idealised traditional past in debates on community development leads to many misapprehensions about the actual functionings and capacities of resource management institutions and organisations.

First, the case studies in this **Bulletin** show how multiple institutions are involved in resource management. Most of these are not dedicated to the purpose of resource management or dependent on it in any functional way. For instance, marriage and kinship exchange networks 'do' many other things besides their role in land access, yet are important in mediating the environment-related endowments and entitlements of certain social actors.

Second, amid this multiplicity of institutional forms, different people rely on different institutions to support their claims to environmental goods or services. For most activities they combine sets of claims supported by different, often overlapping, institutions; rights to access trees for woodfuel may be of little use to generate income unless combined with kin-based claims on labour for wood cutting and transport, and trading networks for effective marketing. Equally, it is frequently combinations of institutions, acting at particular historical moments, which shape particular trajectories of environmental change. Thus, unravelling the tangled institutional matrix for any group of social actors or for any particular moment in time presents a complex analytical task, one that is more challenging than assuming that an idealised past can be recreated.

Third, many of these institutions are informal, and consist more of the regularised practices of particular groups of people which persist over time, than in any fixed set of rules or regulations. As such they are also dynamic, changing over time as social actors alter their behaviour to suit new social, political or ecological circumstances. Local, informal institutions or organisations are therefore continuously in flux, not static, time-bound forms as so often assumed. What once worked well in some distant time in the past may not be appropriate today. In today's fast changing world, institutional flexibility and dynamism is essential. Introduced,

formal organisations which attempt to recapture an imagined past may undermine or reduce this flexibility.

Fourth, even where certain local institutions do have organisational forms, and do appear to take on major environmental management roles in 'community' interest – *panchayat* councils in the Indian context, for instance, or stool authorities in the Ghanaian case – these roles are not independent of the relations of power and authority which shape such organisations. In producing particular notions of a collective good, and appearing to act for it, such organisations frequently reproduce exclusions, marginalising the environmental perspectives and priorities of certain social actors. The persistent marginalisation of *harijan* and pastoralist perspectives from apparently 'collective' decisions regarding water management in Kutch, as described by Lyla Mehta, is a case in point. Equally, the assumption that 'indigenous' organisations make decisions according to consensus, or to principles of democratic and equity-oriented decision-making, is frequently badly misplaced. The fact that women may be represented on watershed management committees in Rajasthan, as Meenakshi Ahluwalia shows, is no guarantee that their priorities for watershed development are heard or implemented.

A focus on social difference, and the diverse institutions which support different people's endowments, entitlements and environmental management, thus reveals perspectives which may be marginalised by approaches assuming a consensual community. But does it also point to ways to support those perspectives?

3 Institutional Design
One response to the concerns raised above would be design-oriented. If certain institutions can be identified as supporting the interests of certain social actors, or as contributing to 'desired' courses of ecological change, then they can be targeted by projects or policy with specific strategies of institution-building or support. This would imply agencies moving away from generalised community support towards a far more partial and explicitly activist style; what Lyla Mehta terms 'aggressive partisanship'.

However, there is perhaps a danger in such targetting becoming, in effect, another form of imposition

of formal organisation on previously informal, dynamic arrangements, analagous to, and open to the same criticisms as, this at a generalised community level. Indeed, design-oriented responses almost inevitably gloss over complexity and dynamism, assuming that steady-states – ecological or social – are achievable and supportable. Such assumptions may well be misplaced, as we examine further below.

Instead, a more flexible approach may be needed; one which, as Mosse (1997: 500) puts it, strategically supports subordinate groups to enhance access to and control over resources by taking 'operational clues' from ongoing struggles, knowledge and strategies (cf. Li 1996: 515). Such operational clues could form part of a broader learning process approach (Korten 1980), as an alternative to design-oriented responses. Learning process approaches require new skills of facilitation among development professionals, ones which encourage critical reflection linked to action (Schön 1983). For instance, external agencies could facilitate particular social actors in reflecting on their needs and the institutional arrangements which might support them, using methodologies such as 'back-casting': stakeholders decide what their needs are likely to be at some point in the future, and then reflect backwards to see what the required institutional frameworks to acheive those needs would be.

However, strategic support to certain people's livelihood needs and preferred environmental ends cannot be acheived in a vacuum. Conflicts between different people's environmental needs, and between the institutional frameworks which support them, are pervasive. Development agencies do not, as the articles in this **Bulletin** have shown, engage with a steady-state ecological or social setting; things are dynamic and agencies must interact with contested local interpretations and meanings, shaped by politics and power relations. So, how might approaches to community-based sustainable development address such pervasive conflict?

4 Conflict and Negotiation

As an alternative to the type of 'aggressive partisanship' which sides with particular social groups in ongoing struggles, development agencies might choose to facilitate a more open and inclusive negotiation. The aim here would be to decide on

desired ends through a negotiated process, whether between an encompassing range of social actors at local and State level, or between smaller groups of resource users, depending on the issue in question. Through negotiation, it might be assumed, conflicts between users' perspectives could be laid bare and worked through.

There exists a large literature on conflict, mediation and negotiation which distinguishes different types of conflict in terms of the contrasts in goals and objectives, the levels of gain or loss between parties or the degree of non-negotiable issues (such as fundamental rights or social identity) at stake (see for example Cousins 1996; Burton and Dukes 1990). With different types of conflict, different processes are important – negotiation, mediation, conciliation, arbitration and so on (Moore 1986; Pruitt and Carnevale 1993; Kramer and Messick 1995), which may, in turn, be supported by different institutional frameworks, sometimes requiring a legal basis which enshrines the right to negotiate and establishes the procedural options for doing so (Vedeld 1992; Jenkins 1997).

It would clearly be naive to assume that negotiation processes take place on a level playing field. Indeed, the very idea of negotiation conjures up an image of parties equally able to voice their positions and argue for them, which is very far from reality in most of the situations confronted by community-based sustainable development. Just as power relations pervade the institutional dynamics of everyday resource use, so they would pervade any negotiation process. Different social actors have very different capacities to voice and stake their claims. Furthermore, negotiation processes would need to take account of differences in political culture and styles of expression: differences between, for instance, the language and discursive styles of state bureaucrats, as compared with the language and hierarchies characteristic of village meetings; contrasting, again, with the more subtle, informal networks and practices through which subordinate groups of women, for instance, might be accustomed to pressing their claims in everyday life (cf. Mosse 1994). All negotiation processes will reflect prevailing power relations, it could be argued; and if powerful groups do not acheive their desired outcome through open negotiation, they are likely to do so through other means.

Empowerment to subordinate groups therefore needs to accompany negotiation, through approaches aimed at enhancing the claims-making capacity of subordinate groups (cf. Bradbury *et al.* 1995). Using the analytical tools of the environmental entitlements framework, claims-making capacity could even be seen as an endowment, which social actors combine with other endowments – rights to land, labour and so on – in attempts to acheive effective command over environmental goods and services. Indeed, as we saw in the case studies, entitlement failure frequently results less from people's lack of institutionally-grounded claims, but more from their incapacity to make claims 'stick" against those of more powerful actors in the context of resource struggles. The challenges for participatory development initiatives, then, can be thought of in these terms, whereby the links between local negotiating capacities and power relations are firmly made. This requires an approach to participation which takes the dynamics of power relations between social actors involved in the development process seriously (cf. Nelson and Wright 1995). As discussed in an earlier article in this **Bulletin**, this has many methodological implications.

5 Dynamics and Uncertainty

Just as approaches which aim to give strategic support to institutions must confront issues of conflict and power, so they must confront questions of uncertainty; both social and ecological. Because institutional arrangements are dynamic, influenced by the ongoing practices and agency of numerous social actors, as well as by contingent events in environment, economy and society, institutional design cannot assume predictable outcomes. Changes in land law, for instance, cannot be assumed to have predictable effects on farmers' practices, given ongoing changes in other institutions affecting agriculture: market networks and crop pricing policies, for instance, or marriage and gender relations. From this perspective, it is clear that strategic institutional changes – such as alterations of legal frameworks – do not necessarily lead to particular outcomes. Nevertheless, they can provide altered settings in which people can struggle to make their claims realised, perhaps with more chance of success.

Ecological uncertainties compound the problems already inherent in defining desirable courses of environmental change or sustainable development. The notion of environmental sustainability is problematic given the diverse, partial perspectives of different social actors: what is to be sustained, and for whom? This is not to argue that there is no place for consideration of overall resource availability, and for management processes which aim at increasing it. Indeed, in some circumstances this might be essential to reduce resource conflicts triggered by fundamental resource scarcities. However, different people will have different views as to which resources or services should be given priority within overall attempts to enhance 'natural capital'. Any such attempts, therefore, should not divorce themselves from the underlying social meanings and interpretations of environment and natural resources which inform different perspectives on appropriate courses for environmental rehabilitation or management.

Recent thinking and non-equilibrium perspectives in ecology, however, question the notion that future environmental states can be planned for in such a way (Holling 1986; Ludwig *et al.* 1993). As articles in this Bulletin have demonstrated, historical conjunctures of change processes, and contingent ecological events, can bring about quite rapid, and unpredictable, shifts in landscape ecology. The arrival of *Acheampong* weed and its interaction with fire in Ghana's forest-savanna transition zone is a case in point. In this context, management needs to seek to influence processes or transitions rather than to define states; and be adaptive rather than pre-planned (Walters 1986). As Buzz Holling (1993: 554) notes: 'there is an inherent unknowability, as well as unpredictability, concerning these evolving and managed ecosystems and the societies with which they are linked. There is therefore an inherent unknowability and unpredictability to sustainable development'. Given such uncertainty, environmental management policies and programmes cannot be fixed, expecting to achieve a pre-defined sustainable form of resource management; they must be responsive, adaptive and open to the unexpected, continuously testing, examining and monitoring the unknown implications of different trajectories of environmental change.

6 Strategic Uses of 'Community' Imagery

We have argued repeatedly that the image of consensual communities so frequently presented in the literature on community-based sustainable development is misleading as a guide to empirical reality, and hence for practical strategies. However, this is not to argue that they have no value in a broader policy context at a strategic level. As Tania Murray Li (1996) has recently emphasised, there may be contexts in which static, idealised representations of communities successfully managing equilibrium environments – and of harmony, equality and tradition in this context – can have great strategic value. As counter-narratives, planners, analysts and policy makers may be able to use them in making the case against other, more dominant narratives or orthodoxies; to counter emphases on State control over resources, or neo-liberal agendas stressing privatisation and market liberalisation. Indeed, images of consensual communities can, in part, be seen as being discursively produced within this context. By countering orthodoxies and providing a legitimating vocabulary for alternative approaches, such images may be argued to have an important role in opening up a space for policy shifts and new programme directions within agencies which otherwise favour an exclusively top-down style of intervention (Li 1996: 506). The case described by Lyla Mehta in this **Bulletin**, where the narrative of community-controlled water resources development has emerged in polar opposition to a 'big is beautiful' narrative placing faith in large dams, exemplifies this kind of process. However, as Mehta makes clear, the 'small is beautiful' counter-narrative has a very limited capacity to inform actual programme approaches on the ground, and a more sophisticated, disaggregated and nuanced perspective is required during any process of implementation.

Images of consensual, ecologically-harmonious communities are also created (or invented) by local social actors, as part of ongoing political struggles over resources in contexts of uneven power relations. As Ahluwalia showed for the hill areas of Rajhastan, land users may invoke such representations of community strategically in their interactions with the State and NGOs, whether to present a contextually-unified opposition to external, politically powerful actors (in this case a mine owner) or to secure development benefits by presenting an image of community cohesion which implementing agencies like to hear. Such temporary, contextual representations, of course, gloss over the profound cleavages of caste, gender and wealth in the study area, again making a more detailed analysis of the type carried out with the aid of the environmental entitlements approach an essential precursor to any programmatic activity.

An emphasis on the use of representations of community in institutional dynamics serves to highlight that external development interventions do not confront a static reality. Rather, such representations 'offer material and symbolic resources for use in the on-going renegotiation of social relations' (Mosse 1997:500). Agencies need to acknowledge their positioning in these dynamics, amid many dynamic and contested meanings of 'community' invoked by different social actors, and to work from such a starting point.

7 Conclusion

Intervening agencies, whether government or non-government, become part of a complex nexus of multi-layered institutional dynamics. The type of analysis attempted in this **Bulletin** may potentially be most helpful in helping agencies involved in community-based sustainable development initiatives to reflect critically on their own roles, and the ways they become embroiled – wittingly or unwittingly – in the struggles of other actors. By making institutional interactions explicit, and by situating these within an understanding of the dynamics of both social and environmental realms, the environmental entitlements approach offers one route to more reflective, analytic and, hopefully, effective intervention in this important and challenging area of development endeavor.

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