

In the 1990s 'community-based' approaches to environment and development have become *de rigueur*. With the environment firmly on international development agendas, and in the wake of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), there is an emerging global consensus that the implementation of what has come to be known as 'sustainable development' should be based on local-level solutions derived from community initiatives.

Such reasoning has a long pedigree in the environmental field, dating at least from the Ecologist's (1972) 'Blueprint for survival', Schumacher's (1973) **Small is Beautiful** and, more recently, the Brundtland Commission (WCED 1987, Conroy and Litvinoff 1988). Equally, in the broader development field, it shares much with the Community Development movement which dominated much donor assistance throughout the 1950s and 60s (Holdcroft 1984). But recently, and more than in other development fields, community-based approaches to environment have experienced a rapid rise to prominence.<sup>1</sup> Statements of intent on global environmental problems following the Earth Summit, including Agenda 21 and the Desertification Convention, strongly advocate as solutions a combination of government decentralisation, devolution to local communities of responsibility for natural resources held as commons, and community participation (Holmberg *et al.* 1993). Such approaches are evident across a wide range of 'sectors', from forests and rangelands to urban water supplies, and in the policies and programmes of national governments, donor agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) alike. Although the details vary, all argue for some kind of 'co-management', or an appropriate sharing of responsibilities for natural resource management between national and local governments, civic organisations, and local communities. Such initiatives are to be welcomed, representing, at least in theory, major departures from earlier approaches in which environmental management was driven by state agendas and resource control, and apparently offering greater potential to meet local livelihood needs.

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<sup>1</sup> The reasons for this resurgence of concern are well worthy of analysis, but beyond the scope of this introduction.

# Editorial: Community- Based Sustainable Development *Consensus or Conflict?*

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Yet the practical implementation of community-based sustainable development initiatives has often fallen short of expectations. For a variety of reasons highlighted in a growing critical literature (for example Pimbert and Pretty 1995; Western, Wright and Strum 1994; Hobley 1992; Sarin 1995), programmes and projects undertaken under this rubric commonly fail to manifest the expected community-led consensus and to translate this into the expected improvements to the environment. This **IDS Bulletin** seeks to add to and complement this emerging set of critiques and offers some reflections on the practice of community-based sustainable development. It does so by taking to task several key, base assumptions embedded in community-based sustainable development: assumptions concerning the existence of homogeneous, consensual 'communities'; the existence of stable, universally-valued 'environments', and of a potentially harmonious relationship between these. By taking a different starting point – one grounded in an appreciation of social and ecological difference, and of differential perspectives on and command over environmental goods and services – the **Bulletin** suggests that conflict, rather than consensus, may be the key defining feature of the situations which such initiatives address. This, in turn, carries very different implications for policies and practical strategies in the environment and development field. The existence of conflict should certainly not be a justification for rejecting community-based approaches, but it does require them to be pursued differently.

The arguments and illustrations in this Bulletin have arisen out of an ESRC-funded<sup>2</sup> research project undertaken by the IDS Environment Group in collaboration with research institutions in India, Ghana and South Africa.<sup>3</sup> 'Environmental entitlements: the institutional dynamics of environmental change'. The first article draws on the conceptual framework developed for this project to critique some core assumptions in the current community-based sustainable development consensus. Elaborating an understanding of communities and environments as heterogeneous and variable, it goes

on to argue that key questions in people-environment relationships are about resource access and control, as well as overall resource availability. The notions of 'environmental entitlements', and of institutional dynamics, are helpful analytical tools in emphasising this broad point. An appreciation of difference, entitlements and institutions also carries methodological implications, and these are explored in the next article. A 'toolkit' of practical methods which can assist in moving towards a more differentiated, dynamic understanding of people-environment relations is outlined, together with some examples of how sequences of methods might be used to investigate different themes. The article also addresses the important question of who might use such methods and why; how research and action might be linked, and the roles and political identity of external researchers, in the context of community-based sustainable development.

The six articles which follow focus on specific local settings relevant to community-based natural resource management. The first three are based on case studies undertaken for the environmental entitlements project, and thus draw explicitly on its analytical framework. They are complemented by three others, based on presentations in a seminar series linked to the project. Each piece speaks to a particular community-based sustainable development context, whether more generically or in relation to particular project experiences. Thus Meenakshi Ahluwalia uses the environmental entitlements approach to reflect on the experiences and impact of an NGO in watershed development in Rajasthan, bringing out especially strongly the importance of intra-community differentiation in this context. Seth Afikorah-Danquah applies the entitlements approach in the forest-savanna transition zone of Ghana, showing how socially-differentiated resource use practices condition ecological outcomes in ways highly significant for community-based approaches to forest management. Thembele Kepe uses environmental entitlements analysis in South Africa's coastal Transkei, where community-based approaches to wildlife and biodiversity conservation are high on policy agendas. He traces

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<sup>3</sup> The Institute of Development Studies, Jaipur, India with local supervision from Dr M.S. Rathore; the

Department of Geography and Resource Development, University of Ghana at Legon with local supervision from Professor Edwin Gyasi, and the Land and Agrarian Change Programme of the University of the Western Cape with local supervision from Dr Ben Cousins.

conflicts and complementarities between diverse sources of livelihood and their supporting institutions, showing why an understanding of these needs to inform development approaches.

Of the articles which do not explicitly use the environmental entitlements approach, the first, by Ben Cousins, picks up the livelihood issues in South Africa raised by Kepe. He looks at the prospects for a rights-based approach to livelihoods and environmental use in the context of land reforms in the post-apartheid era. Still in the southern African context, Frank Matose examines conflicting perspectives among local and state actors over the use and management of Zimbabwean forest reserves, and reflects on the implications for community-based approaches to forest management. Finally, Lyla Mehta returns to the Indian context to examine how local social difference and power relations, and the contrasting perspectives of 'community' members and the state, affect water resources development on the plains of Kutch, Gujarat.

The concluding article draws on themes raised by all the case studies and on discussions at the workshop held at the end of the fieldwork phase of the Environmental Entitlements project.<sup>4</sup> It reflects on the implications of the perspective illustrated in the Bulletin for policies and programmes in the field of community-based sustainable development. It suggests how approaches might begin to address conflict rather than assume consensus; embrace social and ecological heterogeneity, rather than assume commonality, and work from an understanding of institutional diversity and dynamics; dynamics of which external development agencies themselves inevitably become a part.

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