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PHOTO: MOEKO SAITO-JENSEN

Herd of goats.

The potential of Community Based Natural Resource Management for benefiting local communities?

Introduction

Over the last decades, Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) approaches have proliferated in many developing countries. CBNRM supports participation of rural people in governing natural resources. CBNRM proponents often refer to local people as »local communities« and view CBNRM as a means to increase the power and benefits of local communities.

To implement CBNRM, governments usually change public policies and laws to ensure that local communities are involved in and benefit from governing natural resources. Yet, little is known about the conditions under which communities can actually exercise power and gain benefits under CBNRM. Critics have argued that:

- Community power and benefits are likely to be limited because the State tends to dominate the processes
- Differences in community attributes such as size, heterogeneity, and resource endowment result in differing outcomes of CBNRM.

Policy Conclusions

- Law- and policy reforms are needed to legitimize increased power and benefits for local communities, but cannot stand alone.
- CBNRM initiatives should attend to the diversity in community attributes and power relationships with other actors, and devise flexible implementation strategies that incorporate this diversity.
- If external actors such as the government and NGOs are found to be less motivated to support communities, reasons should be identified and appropriate strategies should be devised to leverage their motivations.
- CBNRM initiatives should facilitate regular monitoring and evaluation of the implementation processes and outcomes to identify context-specific challenges and modify implementation strategies accordingly.

This development brief contributes to the debate about the potentials of CBNRM for benefiting local communities by examining the processes that shaped the actual allocation of power and benefits on the basis of a case study of Joint Forest Management in India. For the analysis, this brief mainly looks at power and benefits at the community level rather than the individual level.

Case and methods

Data collection was carried out in four communities (two each from the Khammam and Medak districts) from 2005 to 2008. The communities differ in terms of forest endowment, community size and caste composition as shown in Table 1.

Results

The Indian government introduced JFM in 1990, whereby forest protection groups were constituted at the village level. The main aim was to promote sharing of power and benefits between the communities and the forest department in governing forests.

The forest protection groups' new responsibilities were to:

1) prepare and implement a forest management plan in collaboration with the forest department,
2) facilitate meetings,
3) manage revenues, and
4) monitor and implement these activities under the guidance of their elected executive committees.

Their new rights included:

1) direct benefits derived from harvesting of forest products (e.g. fuelwood, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), the incremental volume of timber) and
2) indirect benefits derived from wage employment for forest management works and collection of fines and user fees.

The implementation of the uniform JFM policy led to differing outcomes in the four communities in Khammam and Medak in terms of powers and benefits.

Khammam communities

Both communities faced constraints in exercising their powers in making and implementing management decisions and in benefiting fully from JFM due to domination by the forest department officers in the making and execution of forest management plans. The community members participated in forest works as wage laborers, received low payments, and eventually stopped protecting the forests from illegal loggers because of a lack of support from the forest department. In both communities, the executive committees did not collect user fees or fines.

Accordingly, both communities experienced a gradual decline in direct benefits due to forest degradation. Both communities, however, experienced small improvements through limited wage payments and reduced needs to pay bribes to the forest department.

Table 1. Main characteristics of Khammam and Medak communities.

Communities	Forest endowment	Community size	Caste composition
Two communities in Khammam	Abundant	Small (about 40 households)	Homogenous (one caste group)
Two communities in Medak	Scarce	Large (from 200 to 350 households)	Heterogeneous (four caste group)

PHOTO: MOEKO SAITO-JENSEN

Goat herders near the forest.

Medak communities
Contrary to Khammam, both communities in Medak exercised substantial power in making and implementing management decisions, as they developed and enforced own rules for forest use and protection.

In one of the communities, however, the executive committee eventually collapsed due to internal conflicts over benefit distribution. As a result, only the other community experienced significant improvements in terms of forest regeneration and increased access to forest products. This community also experienced increased indirect benefits at the group level in terms of wage payments, reduced needs for bribes, user fees paid by individual members and fines collected mainly from neighboring communities.

The implementation of the uniform JFM policies led to variable results in the different communities. The two communities in Khammam experienced hardly any change in the allocation of power and only limited improvements in benefits. The two Medak communities experienced significant changes in the allocation of power, but only one of them managed to turn this into significant increases in benefits.

Analysis of the results
Our cases showed that the actual benefits for communities largely depended on the extent to which they were able to exercise power in making and implementing decisions for managing resources. The following community attributes were identified as key sources of this ability. These attributes interacted with one another and other attributes to produce specific outcomes.

Resource scarcity
The resource scarcity in Medak motivated the communities to take collective action to protect their resources, whereas the communities in the resource abundant Khammam showed less motivation for protecting their forests.

Community size
The larger-sized communities in Medak had a stronger voice in negotiating their power and benefits with the forest department than the smaller-sized communities in Khammam.

Community composition
Community heterogeneity is often seen as an obstacle to collective action (Baland & Platteau 1996). In our case, the heterogeneous Medak communities took collective action contrary to the homogeneous communities in Khammam.

This, however, does not preclude that community composition can be important in other communities.

Education level
The formal mandates for the committees required a basic capability to read, write and calculate. The relatively high educational levels of the Medak community members enabled them to carry out these mandates. The lower literacy rates among the Khammam community members formed constraints for them to carry out these mandates.

Internal power relations in the communities
The way communities made decisions and distributed benefits affected collective action. The case of the collapsed committee in one of the communities in Medak illustrates that if some segments within communities perceive adverse impacts from management rules and benefit distribution, then they are likely to resist and erode collective action.

We also identified an additional key factor in influencing communities' power and benefits:

Motivation and interests of external actors
The extent to which the forest department and the involved NGOs were motivated for and interested in supporting the communities had significant impact on the allocation of power and benefits in the studied communities.

PHOTO: JENS FRIIS LUND

Women carrying firewood.

The above results show that not only the attributes of communities but also the motivation and interests of forest department officers and NGOs interacted in dynamic ways, and produced both expected and unexpected outcomes of CBNRM.

Concluding remarks

Based on the case, we argue that law and policy reforms are an essential first step to legitimize increased powers and benefits for local communities under CBNRM initiatives. Yet, we caution that they are not enough to ensure these prospects to be realized in practice. This is because dynamic interactions of community attributes (such as resource abundance, community size, community composition, education level and internal power relations) produce specific policy outcomes in terms of communities' powers and benefits. And because external actors, such as government officers and NGOs, have a key role in leveraging and limiting communities' powers and benefits.

Policy makers and researchers should therefore pay careful attention to the diversity in the attributes of communities and their power relationships with other actors, and devise flexible implementation strategies that incorporate this diversity. For example, in communities with low literacy, the CBNRM design could be revised to allocate more training to these communities or to simplify forest management plans. If external actors such as the government and NGOs are found to be less motivated to support communities, reasons should be identified and appropriate strategies should be devised to leverage their motivations. CBNRM initiatives should facilitate regular monitoring and evaluation of the implementation processes and outcomes to identify context-specific challenges and modify implementation strategies accordingly.

To learn more about this study see: *Saito-Jensen, M. and Nathan, I. 2011.* Exploring the potentials of community based natural resource management for benefiting local communities: the case of Joint Forest Management in Andhra Pradesh. Society and Natural Resources 24(11): 1142-1156.

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