Women, Forests, and Adaptive Collaborative Management

The Center for International Forestry Research has implemented a program called Adaptive Collaborative Management of Forests (ACM) for more than five years. At its most extensive, we worked in 11 countries (Nepal, Indonesia, Philippines, Kyrgyzstan, Malawi, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Madagascar, Bolivia and Brazil); and activities continue in eight. One of the striking elements of this work has been our success at involving women (and other marginalized groups) in our work with communities.

Our central method is participatory action research; and we have made an effort to attend to equity issues from the start. On each site there was at least one ACM facilitator whose role involved both action with communities and other stakeholders, and research on that action. It was a challenging task, to which most facilitators rose. Indeed, the more demanding the context and the problems, the more motivated and successful the facilitators appeared to be.

Although there is not space to describe the entire effort, I would like to provide some sense of the kinds of involvement and change that occurred.

In the area of Mafungautsi forest reserve, in Zimbabwe, women had been uninvolved in formal forest management. Activities pertaining to forests were deemed men's sphere. After representatives from the communities were invited to participate in "training for transformation" (building on the empowerment work of Paulo Freire), women's attendance and participation in formal meetings went up dramatically. The women also became involved in user groups, focused on particular natural resources. One of the most successful was a broom grass user group, which examined their experience with two harvesting methods (using participatory systems modeling techniques), looked at the implications for sustainability, and developed a new broom design that would favor the more sustainable method. These women have been able to improve sustainability, income generation, and their own empowerment in community affairs.

In several villages in Nepal, forest user groups that manage community forests met to consider their visions for their forests. In this process they identified a number of problems, including elite domination of decision-making and benefit sharing, lack of transparency in management, and gender inequities; and they made plans to address these problems. They also developed indicators that would help them determine how well they were meeting their goals. Since many people, particularly women, were illiterate, it was important to use visual symbols to record progress. The phases of the moon were used, with a new moon meaning little progress, a full moon, full accomplishment of the goal. The structure of meetings was also changed, so that more decision-making took place in smaller, neighbourhood meetings composed of people of similar caste and ethnic group, where women felt freer to speak their minds. During the course of this process, women became more willing to speak out and more regular attendees at community meetings. In short, they became more involved in decision-making and actions pertaining to community forests.

In Guarayo, Bolivia, a large forest management project was underway in the indigenous territory where ACM was operating. This project had paid little attention to gender in its efforts to train

villagers to manage their forests for timber, considering women somewhat irrelevant for timber management. However, with careful analysis, three interesting issues emerged. First, “modern” timber management was as alien to men as it was to women. Neither sex was familiar with doing inventories, keeping records, or administration. Only wielding a chainsaw was beyond women’s capabilities. Second, the withdrawing of men’s labour from household work for logging and other timber management tasks had the potential to seriously and adversely affect women’s lives. All the tasks that men normally did would fall to the women. And finally, women’s views of the value of the forest differed from men’s. Women were interested less in the forest as a source of timber; more in it as a habitat for the animals that formed a significant part of family nutrition---making an intriguing link with the concerns of environmentalists.

Other intriguing results came from Zimbabwe, where women’s preference for behind the scenes influence rather than explicit power made researchers reconsider their assumptions; or where the involvement of NGOs in community action resulted in women’s gaining access to land, something that had not been theirs traditionally; from Brazil, where the diversity of women’s roles --and the inappropriateness of one-size-fits-all “development”-- was vividly portrayed through contrasting Acre and Maranhao; from Campo Ma’an National Park, in Cameroon, where enforcement of rules against hunting, a male activity, had serious adverse effects on the women who had sold the game.

This body of research has produced a rich treasure trove of material on women’s roles and on ways that women and other marginalized groups have been seriously involved in externally facilitated collective action. Our forthcoming book elaborates on the examples presented above (see Colfer, Carol J. Pierce, Ed. "The Equitable Forest: Diversity, Community and Resource Management", scheduled for publication in April 2004). This approach is an effective way to involve women meaningfully in formal management efforts; and to recognize the traditional roles they have always had in informal management of forests.

By: Carol J. Pierce Colfer, e-mail: c.colfer@cgiar.org , Center for International Forestry Research, Bogor, Indonesia