
Community-Based Forest Management is not only possible, it is essential

The conservation of the world's forests requires the adoption of a series of measures to change the current model of destruction. Now that both the direct and the underlying causes of forest degradation have been clearly identified, the next step is to take the necessary measures to address them.

At the same time, a new forest management model should be adopted that will ensure their conservation. In this respect, it is important to note that in most of the countries of the world, there are many examples of appropriate forest management, in which environmentally sustainable use is assured while benefiting local communities. This type of management is generically known as "community-based forest management," although it adopts different modalities in accordance with the socio-environmental diversity of the places where it is developed.

Considering the above, it is obvious that in order to ensure the conservation of the remnant forests of the world --and even the restoration of vast areas of degraded forests-- work must be undertaken from two different standpoints. One, by eliminating the direct and underlying causes of deforestation and the other, by returning responsibility for forest management to the communities who inhabit them, considering that they are the ones primarily concerned in the conservation of this resource.

Therefore, in theory, the solution of the forest crisis is within reach. However, experience shows that for community-based forest management to become effective, a series of problems, both external and internal to the communities need to be solved.

The solution of most of the external problems is the responsibility of governments. In fact, they are the ones who must create the basic conditions to ensure this type of management, implying a radical change in the policies followed for many years now. In the first place, this implies ensuring secure tenure of the communities over the forests. This change is not easy for the governments to make, given that it involves ceding power over forest resource use thereby affecting the interests of both state agencies themselves (for example, Forestry Departments), and also of the companies (both national and transnational) that are presently benefiting from State concessions.

Although securing community land tenure is a necessary condition, in general it is not enough. The State should also remove a series of obstacles hindering community management, while providing all the support necessary for it to become generalised. Such measures range from simplifying bureaucratic formalities and reducing tax burdens, to research and support in marketing forest products.

For their part, the communities themselves must adequately solve a series of fundamental issues, such as questions of organisation and administration, ensuring democratic, participatory and transparent management of community-managed resources. In many cases, they will need to recover traditional knowledge and/or adapt it to the new situation, while promoting equitable participation --in particular in decision-making-- by the community as a whole. In many cases, this involves addressing the gender issue and training at all levels.

The NGOs accompanying these processes must also clearly define their role and limit themselves to supporting the communities, avoiding taking up a leading role which is not theirs and which, in the end, does little to strengthen the communities. At the same time, they must recognise the transitory nature of their assistance, seeking to transfer their knowledge as soon as possible to the communities themselves to enable them to become independent from external assistance and to take up all the functions involved in forest management.

However, perhaps the main aspect to be highlighted is that community-based forest management is not a technical issue --without this implying that technical aspects should be ignored-- but a political issue. For it to become reality, it is therefore necessary to get organised, coordinate efforts, share information and develop campaigns so that the governments adopt policies generating the necessary conditions for forest management to be returned to the communities. Community-based forest management is not only possible, it is essential.