
India: Alleviating poverty through participatory development

The Report considers that since most of the post-1991 projects in India have not been completed, it is not possible to evaluate them. Nevertheless, it points out that implementation progress is considered satisfactory, but performance among different states varies. During the two decades in which the Bank has been involved in the forest sector in that country, the design and implementation of its projects have allegedly improved substantially. Additionally, according to the study, the Bank has contributed to the implementation of India's forest strategy -which is said to have considerable congruence with the Bank's 1991 Policy- by providing funds for the forest sector.

From 1992 onward the Bank has begun to concentrate lending in selected states more open to reforms, which the OED views as a positive step towards the implementation of the projects. It is stated that none of the seven ongoing forest projects in India is at actual or potential risk.

According to the Report, the Joint Forest Management (JFM) strategy adopted by the Bank in India since 1992 is aimed at increasing the stake of local communities in the management and utilization of forests, and at creating alternative sources of employment to reduce the pressure on forests. In JFM villagers cooperate to protect forests in exchange for share in the usufruct and final harvest. Even if the overview of JFM is positive, the study admits the existence of conflicts and constraints in its implementation, that vary according to the specific project. Some state projects have also been criticized for inadequately addressing social, ethnic and gender issues. The post-1991 projects provide allegedly for greater NGO participation, especially to assist the Forest Departments.

India is the country with the highest poverty rate in the world, and a high ethnic and cultural diversity. A large percentage of Indian tribal poor people live in and around the forests. The study underscores "the high degradation pressure the poor exert on forests". It considers that the Bank's forest strategy has the potential to contribute substantially to poverty alleviation. One of the main contributions of the Bank to India's forest sector has been to help change the attitude of the Forest Department towards working with the poor in forest protection and regeneration and collaborating to build consensus for a new strategy to this regard, although it admits that "the reluctance to delegate decision-making power to the communities remain". The Review says that "the Bank has only very recently considered articulating forest development as a part of its rural development and poverty reduction strategy", but that the Bank has neither expressed nor monitored the potential role of sustainable forestry for poverty reduction.

The Report considers that the impact on forests of projects in other sectors supported by the Bank have been positive. It admits, however, that forest sector projects have not been included in a wider agricultural and poverty alleviation strategy. The impact of agricultural lending on the forest sector has generally been positive. For example, support for agricultural intensification have facilitated the production of large quantities of food crops from a stable land area, thus reducing pressures on forests. Non-lending services have also made important contributions. For instance sector work on the best use of water resources could lead to more efficient irrigation and further increase agricultural output, thus also decreasing pressures from forest lands.

The OED team considers that current Bank projects supporting plantations of eucalyptus and other fast-growing species on forest lands, are a mistake. What the team suggests is that "popular species for farm forestry, such as poplar and eucalyptus, should not be grown on forest lands, which should give more priority to multi-purpose and usufruct-based trees." On the issue of plantations in general, the report points out at the advantages and drawbacks of different types of plantations in diverse situations and environments and annexes a separate contribution of one of the country team members (Saxena, N.C.), highlighting the reasons for considering that the World Bank's recommendation that industry grow trees on degraded forest lands would in fact exacerbate problems (Annex F).

Although the intention of increasing women's participation is present in the Bank's projects, gender issues have continued to receive little attention and even lesser implementation. In many cases their usual tasks become more difficult having, for instance, to walk further distances to gather fuelwood. Their participation is hampered by a number of issues such as, for example, that meetings are scheduled in the evening to suit men, but at times when women tend to be cooking. The report stresses that the problem is not attributable to the Bank itself, because the gender issue is deeply entrenched in Indian society and that "a gender revolution through forest projects in India, however desirable, would be too ambitious."

The report emphasizes the importance of non timber forest products (NTFPs) for the poor. The regenerating forest areas have increased the physical output of NTFPs. In spite of that, marketing issues have not been adequately tackled and the benefit from increased production has not as yet trickled down sufficiently to the poor. In spite of their potential for poverty alleviation being enormous, Bank projects have insufficiently dealt with the issue of how to make NTFPs more useful for poverty alleviation.

In its summary, the OED report concludes that "the Bank has largely lived up to its 1991 Forest Strategy in India."

From our viewpoint, the main conclusions from the India study are:

- that the Bank's 1991 policy is seen as correct, and in line with India's current forestry strategy;
- that forest conservation -even in a highly populated and poor country as India- is not antagonistic with integrating the needs of the poor to sustainable forest management;
- that the issue of how and where to promote tree plantations needs to be analysed under the specific circumstances of each locality;
- that participation and "ownership" are essential for sound and equitable forest use;
- that the Bank's forest strategy has the potential to contribute substantially to poverty alleviation in India;
- that Forest Departments need to change their attitudes away from the view that their mission is to protect forests against people and in the direction of working in partnership with people;
- that the Bank can positively contribute in promoting the rights of women;