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**SUSTAINING THE FORESTS:
THE COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH IN
SOUTH AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

by Marcus Colchester

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Preface

The UNRISD research programme on the **Social Dynamics of Deforestation in Developing Countries** is concerned with analysing how deforestation processes are generated in different ecological and socio-economic settings and how they affect the livelihood of different social groups. The programme has included local level case studies in Brazil, Central America, Nepal and Tanzania, as well as eight studies of specific themes which cut across countries and regions. This paper by Marcus Colchester is one of these thematic studies.

By drawing on numerous examples from south and south-east Asia, the paper examines the social and political context in which forest communities operate, outlines the main obstacles to sustainable management of natural resources, and reviews the experiences of community-based forest protection initiatives.

It begins by outlining the dominant concept of sustainability which emphasizes basic needs provisioning, secure land tenure and control over resources, and popular decision making. It shows how in reality these conceptions are being overridden by national and international policies and development strategies. This is leading to increased poverty, social conflict and, frequently, accelerated deforestation.

The paper demonstrates how traditional systems of resource management of forest communities have proved far more resilient and environmentally appropriate. Many of these communities, struggling to assert their customary rights, have successfully opposed socially and environmentally destructive development schemes proposed by national and international authorities. However, population increase, market penetration and internal differentiation have also tended to produce numerous contradictory results.

These changing circumstances have required local communities to seriously examine their livelihood strategies and associated social actions. In some countries, positive initiatives have also been taken by national governments to promote community forest management. The paper concludes that successful community-based management depends on the existence or evolution of open, accountable and equitable systems of decision making at the local level, as well as on many external factors.

Marcus Colchester is a social anthropologist associated with the environmental journal **The Ecologist** and the World Rainforest Movement, which is based in Malaysia. He has previously worked with the human rights organization, Survival International, examining the impact of development processes on indigenous and forest-based peoples in Asia. The UNRISD project on the Social Dynamics of Deforestation is co-ordinated by Krishna Ghimire, with Solon Barraclough as senior consultant.

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Dharam Ghai
Director

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Acknowledgements

This paper brings together some themes of investigation and action which I have pursued over the past decade. Much of this work was undertaken while I was with the human rights organization, Survival International, and complements the work undertaken for the Forest Peoples' Programme of the World Rainforest Movement. I am especially indebted to the many NGOs, community groups and indigenous representatives with whom I have discussed their lives and perspectives during these years. I am particularly grateful to the UNRISD team for inviting me to prepare the paper, for the insightful comments of the unnamed referees and to Nicholas Hildyard and Larry Lohmann of **The Ecologist** magazine for their help and advice.

Abstract

The concept of sustainability as developed by the World Commission on Environment and Development emphasizes three basic principles when applied to rural communities - meeting basic needs, local control over resources and that communities have a decisive voice in planning. Popular movements add a fourth principle, that local communities should represent themselves through their own institutions. To varying degrees, these principles have been notionally accepted by development planners and conservationists, at all levels.

Yet, throughout the tropical forest belt, these principles are being systematically overridden by international and national policies and development programmes. This is leading to increasing poverty, social conflict and rapid deforestation.

Traditional systems of land use and traditional knowledge have proved far more environmentally appropriate, resilient and complex than initially supposed by outsiders. Forest peoples, struggling to assert their rights, have successfully opposed many socially and environmentally destructive development schemes proposed for their lands.

However, these societies are not resisting all change. Population increase and the internal dynamic for development has also created, sometimes serious, social and environmental problems. A review of community-based initiatives in South and South-East Asia shows how they have dealt with these challenges. In some countries, positive initiatives have been taken by local and national governments to promote a community-based approach.

Notable successes have been achieved but many other initiatives have failed, not only as a result of outside intervention. An analysis of the examples shows that, besides the four principles noted above, environmentally successful management depends on innovative political organization at the community level, to ensure equity, accountability and openness in decision-making.

*“If you have come to help me
You can go home again,
But if you see my struggle
As part of your own survival
Then perhaps we can work together.”*

Australian Aboriginal Woman (ANGOC, 1989:4)

Concepts of Sustainability

As made popular by the United Nations' World Commission on Environment and Development, the phrase “sustainable development” refers to the means by which “development” is made to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). Since the needs of future generations are undefinable and the future potential for wealth generation of species and ecosystems are equally unknowable, the term apparently implies that total biological assets are not reduced, in the long-term, through use.

In a rural context, sustainable use thus includes not just conserving biological diversity, fauna and flora, but also maintaining ecological functions such as soil quality, hydrological cycles, climate and weather, river flow and water quality. It also implies maintaining supplies of natural produce - game, fish, fodder, fruits, nuts, resins, dyes, basts, constructional materials, fuelwood etc. - essential to the livelihoods of local people.

It is important to distinguish between the WCED definition of sustainability, with its emphasis on human needs and sustaining livelihoods, and those subsequently adopted by many development institutions, whose more technical definitions of sustainability are in terms of ecosystems' continued production of goods or services or the maintenance of biodiversity (see, for examples, Pearce, Markandya and Barbier, 1989; ITTO, 1990a; World Bank, 1991). Many definitions strip the concept of “sustainability” of the social and political issues implicit in the notion.

As the WCED study acknowledges, achieving sustainability implies a radical transformation in present day economies. It requires a fundamental change in the way natural resources are owned, controlled and mobilized. To be sustainable “development” must meet the needs of local people, for, if it does not, people will be obliged by necessity to take from the environment more than planned. Sustainability is fundamentally linked to concepts of social justice and equity, both within generations and between generations, as well as both within nations and between nations (WCED, 1987; UNEP, 1989).

Achieving sustainability thus implies major political changes. As the WCED notes:

“The pursuit of sustainable development requires a political system that secures effective participation in decision-making... This is best secured by decentralizing the management of resources upon which local communities depend, and giving these communities an effective say over the use of these resources. It will also require promoting citizen's initiatives, empowering peoples' organizations, and strengthening local democracy.” (WCED cited in Durning, 1989b:54)

Such a notion of popular “participation” in development is very close to that adopted by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

“Popular participation is defined as the organized efforts to increase control over resources and regulative institutions in given social situations, on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control.”
(UNRISD/79/C.14, Geneva, May 1979 cited in Turton, 1987:3)

The WCED develops this concept even further in its discussion of indigenous and tribal peoples, of whom it notes:

“In terms of sheer numbers these isolated, vulnerable groups are small, but their marginalization is a symptom of a style of development that tends to neglect both human and environmental considerations. Hence a more careful and sensitive consideration of their interests is a touchstone of sustainable development policy.... Their traditional rights should be recognized and they should be given a **decisive voice** in formulating policies about resource development in their areas.”
(WCED, 1987:116, 12, emphasis added)

The same principles are echoed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), which, in its “Guidelines for the Management of Tropical Forests” notes that: “the people who live in and around tropical forests should control their management” (IUCN, 1989).

In the same vein, the Tropical Forestry Action Plan states that one of its basic principles is to promote the: “... active organized and self-governed involvement of local groups and communities in forestry activities, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable and on women and on commonly shared resources”(FAO, 1989).

Forest Communities

In South and South-East Asia, perhaps the majority of 200-300 million people who live in close association with the forests are socially and culturally distinct from the ethnic majorities outside the forests whose economies have largely developed in lowland areas of permanent - typically irrigated - agriculture. Even if, historically, some of these lowland societies once

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