



Excerpted from:

Forestry for sustainable development: the social dimension

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Forestry is uniquely positioned to make a major contribution to addressing the problems of environmental degradation and rural poverty, given the multiple roles that trees can play in the provision of food, the generation of income and the maintenance of the natural resource base. The concept of sustainability implies ideas about resource stewardship, on the one hand, and quality of life on the other.

“When all is said and done, conservation is about people. It is about the balance that must be struck between humans and nature and between generations. And if it is to be relevant to the developing world, it must address the needs of the poor and the dispossessed who ironically share their rural frontier with the earth’s biological wealth.”

(Wright, 1988)

The issue of sustainability assumes crucial proportions when confronted by the twin challenges of environmental degradation and rural impoverishment. In much of the developing world, conservation for the sake of conservation – environmental fundamentalism – has become an anachronism. There is an increasing awareness and acceptance of the fact that if the natural resource base is to be sustained, it must be done so in a productive manner which benefits the local population. Respect for natural resources must be accompanied by respect for human needs.

The growing recognition of the links between environment, poverty and sustainability has been an important step forward in development thinking. While this interlinkage poses a formidable challenge to those who worry about the future of the planet, it also offers an opportunity for integrated, multidisciplinary solutions – an approach often honoured with little more than lip-service in the past.

Sustainability for whom?

While everyone believes in sustainability, just what it is that everyone believes in remains open to interpretation:

“The concept is variously used to convey human needs, levels of economic production and consumption,

and the desirability of conserving natural capital. It is difficult to formulate a definition which is comprehensive but which is not tautological, and retains analytical precision.”

(Redclift and David, 1990)

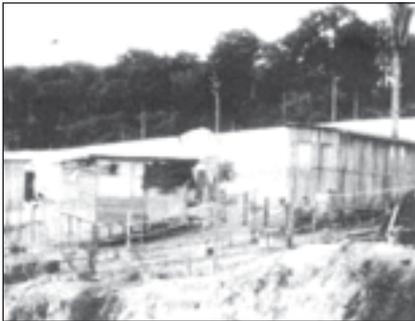
The fundamental premise of much mainstream thinking about sustainable development is a direct link between poverty and environmental degradation; however, the reality is really much less simple since both have deep and complex causes. A convincing argument can be

This article in the *Unasylva* issue on sustainability addressed social concerns that are prominent today – people’s involvement in forest management, clear property rights and the importance of forests to the poorest groups of people.

made that differential access to resources and the resulting affluence for some, in the form of overconsumption, may be linked much more directly to environmental degradation than is poverty *per se*, in either the North or the South (Lele, 1991).

Distinguishing between ecological and social sustainability is the first step toward clarifying some of the confusion. Sustainability should mean that the local population does not degrade its natural resource base, at least not irretrievably, but rather maintains or even improves it. For example, the definition

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The link between poverty and environmental degradation is complex: both have deep and multiple causes

favoured by the Brundtland Commission (WCED, 1987) refers to the maintenance or enhancement of resource productivity on a long-term basis which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. It should be noted, however, that this definition does accept that ultimate limits exist. In this context, it is necessary to go beyond the notion of sustainable yield and consider the dynamic behaviour of the resource in question, particularly in response to environmental conditions, human activities and the interactions between different uses or features of the same resource (Lele, 1991).

Sustainable development means increasing the potential of rural people to influence and control their future on a long-term basis



G. TORTOLI



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Sustainable forest management requires a delicate balance between protecting resources and providing opportunities for their use

Equally important from the perspective of social sustainability is the fact that the Brundtland Commission's report regards sustainable development as a policy objective, the end-point of development aspirations. But this also demands that the quality of human life improve somehow. Perhaps the simple definition of a "continuously improving quality of life" is best, since it allows for cultural gains as well as material ones and for a future of continuing hope (Jolly, 1989).

The uniqueness of forestry

Two aspects of the forestry sector's contribution to sustainable development distinguish it from others concerned with natural resource management (Miranda *et al.*, 1990). First, forestry has evolved from tree production to management

of vast and complex ecosystems, with a wider set of concerns – the provision of a broad range of forest products, revenue generation, community forestry and local environmental benefits. Added to this is the growing concern about global environmental issues and the increasing public interest in the role that forestry can play in addressing some of the more acute problems.

The second unique aspect concerns

The interests and needs of forest communities must be integrated into forestry development activities



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A decision to restrict access to non-timber forest resources such as food and fodder often has a direct negative impact on women

resource control. The forestry sector, in addition to lying within the control of both the public and the private domain, must also deal with all of the gradations of common property ownership. This requires a delicate balance between protecting the resource and providing opportunities for its use, especially by the poor. The sector must determine which areas of the forest and which aspects of forest resource management would best be devolved to local groups and which should remain under the control of government authorities. The critical issue in the determination of property rights is whether the responsible forest institution can promote and strengthen the vested interest of the local population in the forest resource while, at the same time, accepting the idea of joint management or even local control of the resource in question. ♦



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