Poor-quality resources
There seems to be a tendency to give communities control of degraded forest areas and retain the more productive resources for joint management or concession arrangements, as in the United Republic of TANZANIA's village land forest reserves. The Derre Forest Reserve in MOZAMBIQUE is managed by a community-based organization that has good relations with NGOs and the State, but the only benefits for the community are a few subsistence goods. Attempts to involve private companies in the commercial exploitation of forest resources have failed because the timber density is too low and the community is too poor to develop markets or add value to products. Communities need good-quality forest resources that they can exploit, and support in managing those resources to generate income in ways that are sustainable.

The shadow of the past

The foundations of many African tenure systems were laid in the early decades of the twentieth century by European colonial administrations that decreed the State as the owner and manager of forest land and resources.
Traditional tenure systems and community rights to land and resources were not officially recognized; instead, governments assigned communities patches of land for subsistence. Forest people lost access to the land and resources they regarded as their own, and could not participate in forest management planning or implementation.
Post-independence government policies did little to change tenure systems, and sometimes compounded their effects by tightening State control over all resources, either for conservation or to generate revenue and boost national economies. Local communities continued to be left out of forest management and decision-making, resulting in increasing poverty and hardship, resentment and – given governments' difficulties in enforcing forest use regulations – community encroachment and illegal harvesting in reserve and other State forests. Forest resources deteriorated and local people lost their sense of ownership and interest in forests and their resources.

The way forward for Africa

Although governments are recognizing the need for change, and a range of innovative systems are being applied in Africa, the forestry sector has not yet adopted the concept of reforming tenure as a way of promoting sustainable forestry management and socio-economic development. Most African forests are still controlled by central government, with ownership and management rights usually transferred to other stakeholders only when it is obvious that the State itself cannot protect forests from further degradation. More efficient and equitable management does not yet seem to be an aim in itself.
Successful tenure reforms described in the case studies allocated sufficient time to the change process, identified and built the capacity of all stakeholders, and established monitoring systems that allow learning from experience. A well planned implementation process helps to build stakeholders' sense of ownership over resources, which is a far more effective incentive for sustainable forest management than is the goad of restrictive regulations, no matter how efficiently they are enforced.
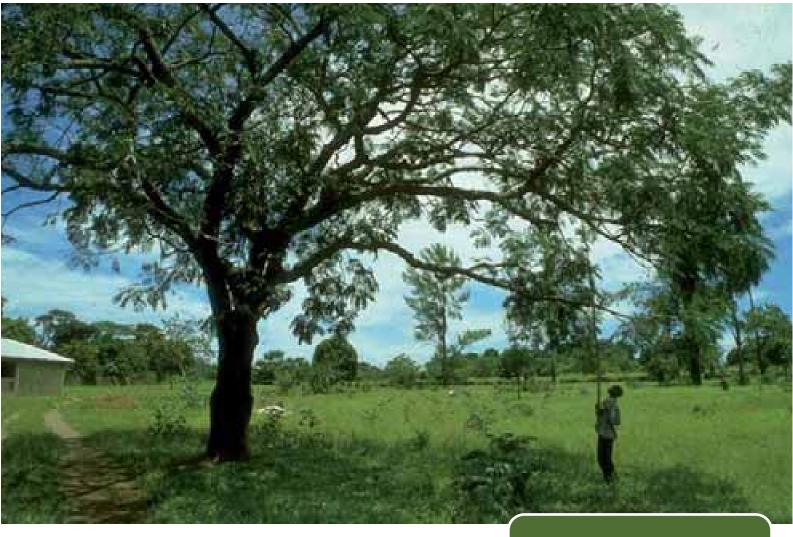The following paragraphs outline some of the priority issues to consider in future forest tenure reforms in Africa.

Reaching the marginalized
A tenure system cannot benefit poor and vulnerable people unless they are involved in all stages of its planning and implementation. Sufficient resources must be provided to ensure that stakeholder dialogue includes disadvantaged groups and helps them to gain and retain tenure rights.

Capacity building

Stakeholders must be aware of tenure policy and laws and require greater capacity to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Capacity building is especially needed to help forest communities and small forest owners design management plans, carry out resource assessments and market forest products; to help local authorities comply with innovations, e.g. respond to land titling requests; and to help all stakeholders negotiate with one another. Government extension services and other traditional capacity builders can call on the assistance of NGOs and the private sector, which often have better resources and facilities and are closer to stakeholders.

Incentives and benefit sharing

For tenure reforms to work, they must provide benefits to the local people and institutions involved in forest management. Ownership rights must be legally recognized, so that local managers can negotiate, make claims and receive compensation. Benefits from community forestry must reach communities through transparent and accountable systems that can be monitored. Communities should also have a say in how benefits are distributed, and investment is required in the financial and development planning capacity of village institutions.

Policy, law and governance

The participation of all stakeholders in the development of policies and laws is essential for the sustainability and success of a tenure system. This means using more participatory approaches in forest administrations and ensuring that marginalized groups have a clear voice. Policies that are harmonized across all sectors can work towards common goals for sustainable development and poverty alleviation. Appropriate legislation defines the responsibilities and authority of all the government ministries involved, at the local, regional and national levels. Policies, regulations and procedures should be clearly expressed, as simple as possible, and adapted to the various local capacities, conditions and needs.

Adapting old systems to new situations

Ghana's Taungya was introduced in 1928 to help restore forest cover, solve the land shortage problems of farmers living near forest reserves, and provide the Forestry Department with labour for forest plantations. The weakness of the system was that it gave tenant farmers access to land, but not ownership of the trees they planted on that land, which discouraged sustainable forest management.

A few years ago, the Taungya system was overhauled, in consultation with farmers, landowners, local communities and NGOs. Under the modified system, tenant farmers own the products of their forestry plantations, and receive 40 percent of the outputs.

The modified Taungya system has become part of the government's strategy to alleviate poverty and restore forest cover. Since 2002, an estimated 60 000 ha of land in degraded forest reserves has been replanted, jobs have been created for women and men, food production has increased, and dialogue between the Forest Services Division and forest communities has improved.