



Collaborative dialogue to support local institutions in natural resource co-management



Summary

Co-management of natural resources entails sharing authority and responsibility among government agencies, industry associations and community-based institutions. Policymakers and development agencies have embraced the approach because of the potential to improve the effectiveness, efficiency and equity of management efforts focused on common-pool resources such as forests, pasturelands, wetlands and fisheries. Yet even in places where the need is clear and the policy framework is well-designed, conflicting stakeholder interests and disparities in power and capacity mean that co-management approaches can be difficult to implement. A structured dialogue process can support local institutions to participate more effectively by providing an inclusive platform for resource management decisions, building trust and catalyzing collaborative actions.

The problem

Co-management today typically requires mediating among resource users who are geographically dispersed and have vastly different economic and political influence. Traditional management institutions that have developed over generations to manage local problems of resource allocation and conservation are often ill-equipped to handle the more complex dynamics of competition among groups who lack common social bonds, particularly when these interactions bridge

multiple sectors and scales. Internal divisions and power struggles can also weaken community-based management institutions, even when there are formal provisions to ensure representation of marginalized groups. Understanding the distinct interests of the different stakeholders and the power dynamics among them is key for arriving at appropriate, productive co-management relationships.

Where pressures on the resource base are intensifying — whether from a growing local population, new arrivals and seasonal resource users, or expanding market demand and commercial uses — building trust among competing users can be especially challenging. In the absence of a forum for dialogue that all parties view as legitimate, these challenges can quickly undermine policies and program investments intended to foster livelihood security, economic development and environmental conservation.

Strengthening community voices through multistakeholder dialogue and action planning

The Strengthening Aquatic Resource Governance project worked to address these challenges of trust and legitimacy in co-management institutions through inclusive, multistakeholder dialogue. Using an approach called Collaborating for Resilience, project partners engaged in action research with key actors to develop a shared understanding about the sources of resource competition and conflict, debate options for addressing these, and launch collaborative actions to support livelihoods. Research teams worked in three large lake systems: Lake Victoria in Uganda, Lake Kariba in Zambia and Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia. They helped prepare community groups to participate in the dialogue process and worked to ensure respect for the principles of active listening, robust debate and collaborative decision-making. The process included an examination of differences in power among key stakeholders, as well as pathways to influence, including how communities could strengthen linkages with government agencies and private sector actors in order to draw the support needed to respond to their most pressing priorities.

In Zambia, for example, fisheries extension officers and the Kamimbi village management committee struggled at first to address conflicts over fisheries and land along the lakeshore between artisanal fishers, commercial fishers, aquaculture investors and tourism operators. By focusing on local perspectives, the dialogue process gave the Department of Fisheries a structure and a rationale to

consider governance questions previously not in its scope, such as the role of traditional authorities in land disputes affecting fishing communities. A joint analysis of the routes to influence made clear the importance of bringing the Zambian Environmental Management Agency into the process in subsequent stages. This move proved critical to adding legitimacy to the process, and provided a chance to demonstrate to all the gains from proactively addressing resource conflict. The experience also yielded lessons that national agencies could apply to co-management and environmental impact assessment in other areas.

Community-led initiatives that emerge from a dialogue process can be quite innovative, surprising development planners and management authorities. In Uganda, the beach management unit — a local co-management body that lacked much influence in community affairs — was revitalized when its leaders lent support to the priority of improving local health and sanitation. In Cambodia, after community groups in floating villages on the Tonle Sap Lake campaigned successfully for expanded access to fishing grounds, they began spearheading initiatives to diversify livelihood opportunities, improve fisheries law enforcement and pilot community-based commercial production. In each of these experiences, regular face-to-face interactions helped to clarify varied positions and interests, increase trust, develop a common vision for livelihood improvement, and channel collaborative action around community priorities. These interactions also helped build capacity in local institutions to contribute to broader resource management policy goals.



Photo Credit: Ryder Huske/Peoples Television, Inc.

Addressing pressing needs like water supply and sanitation can build commitment for broader challenges of co-management; Kachanga village, Lake Victoria, Uganda

Recommendations

Policies promoting natural resource co-management can establish goals, outline roles and responsibilities of existing institutions, provide a basis for forming new institutions, and identify mechanisms of enforcement and decision-making. But policies alone cannot resolve local disputes, establish trust among competing resource users, or ensure that they will view co-management institutions as legitimate and capable. Neither can policies alone ensure that poor resource users will have an equitable voice when confronted with more powerful stakeholders. Rather than ignoring these tensions, government officials and program implementers should structure dialogue processes that explicitly address competition, trust and power relationships. Doing so can strengthen both the legitimacy of decision-making and the capacities of collaborating institutions to address future sources of conflict. Key recommendations are as follows:

1. Use multistakeholder dialogue to bridge communication gaps.

While decentralization policies may promote local authority and initiative in principle, there is often a need to overcome barriers to effective communication. This includes creating a safe space within dialogue processes for perspectives that are critical of government performance, as well as cultivating a readiness on the part of government agencies to learn from local initiative in revising policy goals or implementation strategies. Communication channels that directly link community actors and government officers at higher levels are especially important. These provide a means to access support from relevant agencies, and a way to identify local innovations that can be scaled out to other places.

2. Identify and enhance the capabilities of indigenous management institutions.

Too often, co-management initiatives introduce new management structures or decision-making bodies without first investing in understanding the strengths and limitations of existing institutions. Existing institutions may enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of local resource users and are often reservoirs of knowledge about the local social-ecological context. These factors can aid in making context-appropriate

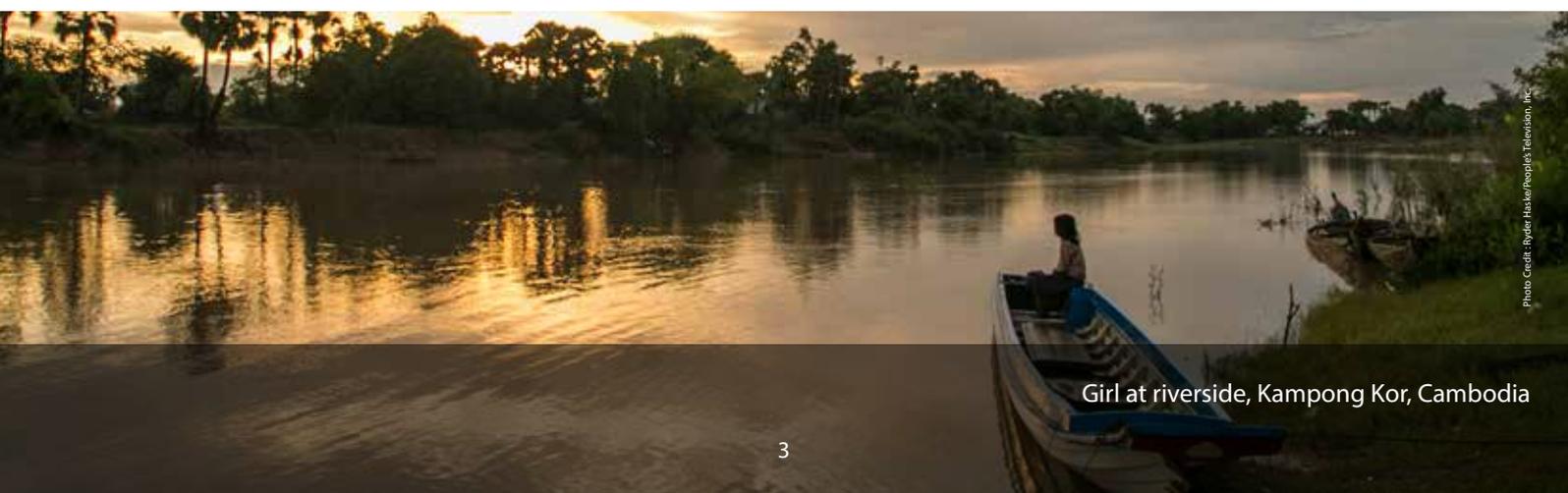
decisions about rules and practices for resource management. If local institutions have a strong voice in rule setting, they are also much more likely to support effective enforcement.

3. Build local ownership by relinquishing some control.

Government agencies become trusted promoters of co-management efforts when they empower and support local groups. At the same time, community groups can gain capacity as reliable and trustworthy partners, but only if they are properly supported, kept up to date, and given real powers of decision-making and action. Externally driven efforts, such as those dependent on international donors or nongovernmental organizations, tend to run out of steam when a project stops. In Lake Victoria, for example, researchers found that fisheries extension officers had stopped mentoring and training local management organizations once previous externally funded projects had ended. By contrast, an initiative at Lake Bangweulu, Zambia, involved traditional authorities early as bridging organizations between the government and communities, and as a consequence, fisheries co-management efforts continued long after the period of initial NGO support.

4. Strengthen equity and accountability in local institutions.

When local institutions are given expanded formal authority, it is especially important to find ways to preserve mechanisms of equity and accountability that are already in place — or to add them where they are absent. In Bhutan, for instance, co-management structures and national forest protection acts were developed on top of long-existing collective action institutions and strong traditional leaders at the village level. Although policies were changing, leaders of the traditional bodies chosen to ensure equitable distribution of access rights to timber and other forest products among villagers continued to be selected by the community even though they were officially appointed and paid a salary by the Forest Department. Because these local authority figures were already trusted, this system ensured a gradual trust-building between communities and the government agency. In China's northern plains, where



Girl at riverside, Kampong Kor, Cambodia

the coordinator position of a groundwater irrigation scheme rotates among different farmers in the village, the coordinator knows that giving obvious benefits to friends would invite “punishment” from the next individual in that position. Such an accountability mechanism makes individuals vested with decision-making authority less likely to abuse it.

5. Apply participatory monitoring and evaluation to tap multiple perspectives and adapt. Successful co-management efforts provide a way for local resource users to navigate the broader governance context in which management decisions are made. In addition to helping evaluate stakeholder relationships and routes of influence during the action planning stage, a dialogue process can help different actors reflect on steps they’ve taken so far, assess obstacles, and draw lessons for the future. Bringing in multiple perspectives can help identify options for adaptation that were not initially apparent. Researchers in Lake Victoria, for example, found that fishers — mostly men — and fish processors and sellers — mostly women — had very different views on future priorities for local management institutions. Researchers on the Tonle Sap Lake found that local residents not directly engaged in management innovations sometimes had the most valuable insights as relatively impartial observers. Reflecting jointly on such differences in perspective can help collaborators shift their strategies, seek support for capacity gaps, or reach out to new stakeholder groups to scale out their efforts.

“In the past, it was like voices in the dark. People could be speaking, and they don’t really correlate to one another. But in the co-management of today, it’s like we organized and we speak the same language. There’s that kind of harmony ... as opposed to the past where people just live on and don’t care about their next-door neighbor.”



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