Designing natural resource management projects that support local representation and accountable governance

If they are to yield effective, equitable outcomes, natural resource management projects need to work with representatives who are responsive and accountable to local people. This brief presents practical suggestions on how projects can avoid some of the most common pitfalls in tackling the thorny issue of governance.
Supporting decentralised governance and local representation

All too often, natural resource projects are designed without regard for how local people’s needs and interests will be represented on decision-making bodies during planning and implementation. Even project designs that have built-in participatory mechanisms, such as community-based user groups or resource management committees, can have detrimental impacts on local people’s representation – if these mechanisms ignore or undermine local elected representatives. Without effective representation of local people, projects risk silencing the voices of those whose support is so critical for long term success. Worse, projects can endanger local people’s natural resource rights and create inequalities and conflict within communities. The figure below illustrates some potential consequences of a project paying inadequate attention to local governance issues.

Why are governance failings so commonly seen in natural resource projects, such as those focused on biodiversity conservation, sustainable forest management and carbon forestry? There is no denying that taking concrete steps to support governance can involve facing complex problems, taking tough decisions, and investing a considerable amount of time and money in understanding and managing local-level governance negotiations. Many project designers and implementers will be tempted to take shortcuts and compromises on governance in order to meet deadlines and budgets. In addition, many intervening agents (including donors, government agents, NGOs, and project designers and staff) lack the skills and training required to identify and support such decentralised governance in their projects.
So, what knowledge and approaches do we need to appropriately address natural resource governance? Which groups represent local people and how should natural resource projects work with them? This brief reports on recent research that provides useful pointers on these questions. The lessons and guidance provided here are based on recent handbooks produced as part of the Responsible Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI, 2016a; RFGI, 2016b).

What does local decentralised governance require?

What does local decentralised governance require? The first step in supporting local democracy is understanding what decentralised governance entails and identifying which aspects a natural resource project should seek to support. The following five elements can be considered the basic elements of any such approach:

- **Responsiveness** of leaders to the people; leaders’ decisions respond to local needs and aspirations.
- **Representation** of leaders to the people; their decisions represent or reflect the aspirations, needs and legitimacy of the people.
- **Accountability** in terms of people being able to sanction leaders for their actions by rewarding or punishing them (e.g. by voting or protesting).
- **Public domain** is the set of powers under public authority, i.e. the powers of government (executive, legislative, and judicial).
- **Citizenship** is the empowerment of citizens to influence their leaders by sanctioning them or holding them accountable, and the choice to exercise that power.

Ensuring representative and accountable local decision-making in natural resource projects requires working with, and supporting, locally elected governments and other legitimate institutions. Local governments are permanent institutions (rather than temporary project-based committees) that offer a long-term governance structure. Furthermore as local governments exist everywhere inside national territories, they can be the basis for scaling-up successful natural resource management initiatives.

It needs to be recognised however that many local governments cannot really be called accountable to the people they represent. In many cases local governments are more accountable to central government, donors and international NGOs than they are to local...
people. While decentralisation policies in many countries have transferred responsibilities for natural resources and land use from central to local government, these local authorities often lack the resources and capacity to take on their rights and responsibilities. Natural resource projects therefore need to empower local authorities and assist them in becoming more accountable to local people.

Other than local government, there will likely be numerous other institutions present with a degree of influence on natural resource use that a project may choose to involve in its decision-making mechanisms. These actors, considered ‘non-representative’ as they have not been democratically elected, include, for example hereditary customary chiefs, traditional authorities, NGOs, and private sector businesses. Another set of governance actors would be committees and groups created by and for projects. All of these non-representative authorities usually operate in parallel to local governments, and come with their own limitations. Unaccountable to local people, some may also be corrupt. However, in some cases, customary chiefs and well-structured, closely monitored project committees can be more representative and accountable than dysfunctional elected local governments. Yet, no matter whether they are representative or not, these institutions should not be used by projects to circumvent (even corrupt or weak) local government. Projects which do so miss an opportunity to strengthen the local authority and risk undermining the long-term development of local democracy. Projects therefore need to carefully select any ‘parallel institutions’ to engage with on decision-making, and delineate the responsibilities given to them.

An important caveat needs to be highlighted here. A simple transfer of authority to representative, accountable institutions will not be sufficient. Experience shows that what works best is a transformative governance building process in which local people are engaged.
Guidelines for good governance in natural resource projects

The guiding principles presented here are derived from the large literature base on local governance and lessons generated from the thirty-three research case studies (please see the link in the “Further Reading” section below) conducted in thirteen countries under the Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI, 2016a).

Principles for working with elected local governments:

- **Choose democracy.** Actively choose to place public decisions with decision makers who are accountable and responsive to the local citizens by working through elected local government where it exists. Do not assume that local governments are any more corrupt or less efficient than parallel institutions such as NGOs, customary chiefs, village committees, private companies or central governments.

- **Strengthen weak local authorities.** Do not try to bypass poorly constituted or corrupt local governments. Where local governments are weak or unaccountable, strengthen them and make them accountable. Ensure they have sufficient and relevant decision-making powers and resources so that they are able to be responsive to local needs and aspirations. Use multiple means (and not just elections) to keep the activities of such authorities transparent and accountable.

- **Give local authorities negotiating power.** To represent citizens and to negotiate effectively, authorities need to have the right to say ‘no’ or ‘yes’ to outside interventions.

- **Don’t treat local governments as mere implementing or service-delivery agencies.** The power to deliver services that people need or demand is part of democracy. The power to deliver pre-determined services prescribed by projects or by higher levels of government is not decentralised democracy. Local governments cannot be democratic if they are only given the power to implement an external agenda without the power to respond to what local people want and need.
Principles for working with parallel authorities:

- **Keep these groups focused on private decisions.** Actors such as indigenous leaders and hereditary customary chiefs, NGOs and corporations should not make public decisions in a democracy, except where they have been elected to do so or have been delegated decision-making powers by democratic leaders.

- **Maintain the authority of local government.** When working on public decisions with groups or individuals outside elected local government, these parallel institutions should operate under the authority of, or through delegation from, a local democratic authority.

- **Promote equity.** When working outside local government, engage with a range of local organisations to ensure all classes, genders, orientations, castes, ethnicities, and ages are adequately represented. Level the playing field through practices and policies that affirmatively favour the poor, women, and other marginalised classes and groups.

Principles for working with citizens and local people:

- **Inform local people of their rights and powers.** Let local people know which decisions are public, which powers their local authorities hold, how local authorities use them, what services local authorities can deliver, what means of accountability they are able to exercise, and how they can access those means of accountability.
• **Empower local people to sanction government.** Support the rights of, and provide the means for, local people to influence and hold to account the authorities that govern them.

**Action learning for improved governance**

Projects will need to develop a variety of strategies and methods to address governance issues, as appropriate and relevant to the project site and country. The above-mentioned principles provide general guidelines and many other practical suggestions are presented in the RFGI handbooks (RFGI, 2016a; RFGI, 2016b). One approach that has been successfully applied to explore governance issues in natural resource projects is Action Learning. This approach involves a cyclical process of repeated reflection on a particular governance issue. Project staff can facilitate the process, bringing together stakeholders and rights-holders to discuss what they want to do about a particular governance issue, implement agreed actions, and reflect and learn from that implementation in order to improve and plan for further action. Thus for example, local government leaders may meet to discuss their dissatisfaction with the work of outside agencies and decide to start monitoring their projects and sanctioning any organisations that abuse their powers or mishandle resources. Or a group of pastoralists may come together to discuss increasing infringements of their traditional governance mechanisms and how to handle these in a collective manner.

**The bottom line:**

**natural resource projects are political**

It is important to remember that all natural resource projects are unavoidably political and will impact, in one way or another, local power relations. When project designers and implementers choose to work with a particular set of local institutional arrangements, they are making a choice as to whether, and to what degree, they are going to support local justice, rights and governance, and whether the decision-making process will be consensual and based on representation.

Project staff will need to be persistent and sensitive to develop locally appropriate and creative strategies for supporting and increasing local level governance. These outcomes are not achieved at once. They are a continuous struggle and may come and go. However, they are more durable when the institutional arrangements, empowered citizens and locally elected democratic authorities are in place to fight for these outcomes.
References


Further reading

- Related research papers: www.iucn.org/theme/forests/our-work/locally-controlled-forests/responsive-forest-governance-initiative
