

# Building agreements among stakeholders

**An ITTO project implemented by CIFOR found that resolving village-level conflicts over resource use in Indonesia is a long and difficult process**

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**Getting the measure of it:** Men from the village of Long Loreh receive training in participatory mapping. Photo: © E. Wollenberg

**W**HERE different groups compete for the same forest, escalated social conflicts, increasing social injustice, and even the willful destruction of forest resources can occur. Stakeholders typically negotiate agreements to overcome these problems. Facilitators of multistakeholder processes focus on factors that will lead groups to reach agreement.

Yet a focus on agreements can lead to inequitable outcomes and waste resources on what are often temporary arrangements. We report here on action research conducted by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) in East Kalimantan, Indonesia that indicates the need to understand agreements in the context of their longer-term political relationships and to emphasise better stakeholder coordination through the strengthened representation of interests, transparency and legitimacy of negotiations. This research was part of ITTO PROJECT PD 12/97 REV.1(F): *Forest, science and sustainability: Bulungan Model Forest* (also partly funded by the International Fund for Agricultural Development) which aimed to understand how to integrate social and silvicultural aspects of long-term forest management. A report on other components of the project appeared in an earlier issue of the *TFU* (11/2: 10–11).

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## **Village-to-village coordination**

Village-to-village coordination is a subject that has received little attention by researchers, yet is fundamental to multistakeholder land use agreements. We were interested to know whether the principles guiding more formal and

complex multistakeholder processes were relevant to inter-village coordination where there were fewer people involved, a greater familiarity among them, a deeper ethic of social interdependence, and stronger kin obligations. We directed our study at the process of inter-village boundary demarcation among 27 Dayak (primarily Merap, Punan and Kenyah ethnic groups) villages in the upper Malinau River watershed. The research was conducted over three years, during which time the project's resident field staff observed and documented the development of local conflict, facilitated participatory mapping by villagers, and monitored negotiations.

East Kalimantan provides an interesting case because of recent political reforms in Indonesia. As elsewhere in Indonesia, people are making a transition between the more top-down, authoritarian coordination by forest departments in the 1970s to 1990s, when conflict was rarely acknowledged openly, to coordination based more on dialogue, self-organisation, transparency, conflict management and higher citizen participation (diZerega 2000, Anderson et al. 1999). Decentralisation reforms are creating a high risk of rapid deforestation, disenfranchisement of the Punan, and ultimately the loss of opportunities for long-term economic gain by most local groups (Barr et al. 2001). As one of Asia's largest remaining expanses of continuous forest and home to the largest group of Punan in Borneo, it is vital that action is taken quickly. Decisions made in the next few years will determine who controls the land and how that land will be used in the medium term.

## **The nature of village negotiations and agreements**

In Malinau, decentralisation has created new economic opportunities through compensation payments to villagers

(for timber harvested by concessions) and new small-scale logging (Barr et al. 2001). With 95% of the district designated as state forest land, the potential benefits are considerable. Yet Kenyah and Merap swidden farmers, Punan hunter-gatherers, timber companies, mining companies and the local government all seek to claim forest and forest land for their own benefit. The possibility of earning significant income has made people determined to protect or expand their claims. Consequently, conflict over village boundaries and access to these benefits has escalated rapidly since 1999, when Indonesia's political reforms began.

We found that most village conflicts centred around claims to agricultural lands (swidden fields, wet rice fields and perennial gardens), which, according to customary rules, rightfully 'belonged' to the household establishing the plot, even if they fell within the territory of another village (note, though, that no land formally belongs to villagers according to Indonesian law, although villagers contest this on the basis of customary law and recent policies acknowledging customary land rights). Other sources of conflict included access to timber and valuable non-timber products like gaharu or birds' nests, and land containing coal deposits. Although conflicts had existed formerly, villagers noted that the intensity of the conflict increased when outside parties began offering compensation in exchange for resources.

## Participatory mapping

It was in this context that the project facilitated participatory mapping among villages between November 1998 and November 2000. Villages negotiated boundaries with neighbouring villages. A team of villagers facilitated by the project then identified and mapped village boundaries. Twenty-one villages completed negotiations and the mapping of their territories by July 2000.

We found that five aspects of inter-village relations were most important in reaching agreement: prior consultation, shared family relations, high financial incentives for both parties, benefit-sharing possibilities, and similar institutional capacities and power status<sup>1</sup>. More powerful villages often attempted to dominate a weaker neighbour, while weaker villages often passively resisted decisions by the more aggressive villages by refusing to acknowledge the boundary or attend meetings (Table 1). Punan villages were consistently disadvantaged in negotiations because of weak or no representation in meetings, a reluctance to negotiate with more powerful groups, and the lack of organised preparation within their villages. Village representatives who built a supportive constituency within their village and

with neighbouring villages were more likely to reach and maintain agreements.

Negotiations conducted transparently with written agreements were more stable than those that were not. However, by December 2000 nearly all villages requested to make changes even to previously stable boundaries. We attribute these demands to the increasing economic opportunities arising from timber during the latter half of 2000. The lack of a clear higher third-party institution with the authority to provide formal recognition of boundaries and control ad hoc revisions also made it possible for this fluidity to occur.

## Towards improved coordination

Boundary negotiations in Malinau highlighted the problematic nature of agreements as a focus of negotiations. The study suggests the need to instead focus on the longer-term coordination of different interests, especially the political base of coordination efforts and the skewedness of power relations underlying them, even among seemingly (to an outsider) homogenous community groups.

Although we initially encouraged parties to reach agreement about the location of their boundary quickly and described this as a 'successful' negotiation, we soon learned that many such agreements were short-lived and partial in their support. An agreement reached quickly enabled communities to conduct the mapping of their territory, but we fear this occurred too often at the expense of a more socially inclusive process that could have resulted in more stable results. We learned that we should have evaluated the process underlying how a village reached their agreement as a basis for proceeding with the mapping, not just whether an agreement had been reached.

## Power plays

**Table 1:** Difference in capacities and power status between two negotiating villages and nature of agreements reached.

Difference in capacity/power scores between two villages*	Agreement reached?		Stability of decision**	
	No	Yes	Stable	Not stable
0	0	6	5	1
0.5	1	7	6	1
1	2	2	1	1
1.5	1	5	2	3
2	1	1	0	1

\*0 = no difference, 1 = moderate difference; 2 = large difference \*\*Stability was only counted in cases where agreement was reached.

Our work supports the current pluralist position (Anderson et al. 1999) that stakeholder agreements are best thought of as partial and temporary. We found that the more intense the underlying struggle, the more fluid interests, agreements and coordination were likely to be. Building a supportive political constituency through consultation and transparent decision-making was key to achieving and keeping an agreement. A third party with authority and legitimacy above the level of the village would have

<sup>1</sup> We used *strength of leadership* (economic status of leader, eg food surpluses, quality of home construction, access to significant or regular cash income, possession of productive assets like rice mills or luxury items like parabolas; alliances with powerful external groups; support of leader by community; and level of leader's education), *cohesiveness of community* (economic status of community, eg see above; internal loyalties and mutual supportiveness; alliances with powerful external groups; skills and education levels; support of leader by community; and level of leader's education) and *access to information* (transparency of mapping process within village; and knowledge of their territory) as indicators of a village's institutional capacities and power.





**Top-down approach:** Villagers use overhead satellites and a global positioning system to pinpoint their location while surveying village boundaries.

Photo: © M. Van Heist

been helpful for setting criteria for the resolution of conflicts and for validating and enforcing legitimate agreements. A focus on managing conflict constructively would have been more productive than forcing an agreement.

In Malinau, only a handful of people in each village were involved in negotiating boundary decisions and these representatives, if the label is even apt, were weakly, if at all, accountable to their communities. Networks, communication and trust were frequently strong among selected leaders, or between leaders and companies, but often less strong between leaders and their constituencies. Decisions were usually made without consultation. A number of villages attempted to map their boundaries without even consulting their neighbours. These conditions made it difficult for conflict to be managed in transparent ways, which kept disagreements from being acknowledged and agreements from being implemented. Non-accountable decision-making is common in many village settings elsewhere (Ribot 2002) and abuses of power are likely to persist unless checks are put in place. Central among these checks is the need for better representation and transparent decision-making to negotiate decisions that constituencies will accept and support. In Malinau, decisions were less frequently challenged where community representatives were more accountable to their constituencies and had built a strong political base of support.

Conventional multistakeholder theory seeks to establish neutral conditions that enable fair negotiation. We agree that special effort is needed to encourage effective participation and the representation of weaker or disadvantaged groups (Edmunds & Wollenberg 2001). We suggest that, at a minimum, facilitators of coordination efforts pay attention to these power differences among stakeholders and assist weaker groups by distributing information to them earlier, giving them priority access to resources, and

facilitating their preparations for negotiations. More significant measures for longer-term empowerment could include community organising, assisting the mobilisation of resources and helping the development of strategic alliances between stakeholders. However, facilitators need to take care not to alienate more powerful groups while doing so.

## Beginning of a process?

Our experience in facilitating boundary demarcation in Malinau marked only the beginning of a long and multi-stranded process for achieving better coordination among the very diverse stakeholders interested in Malinau's forests. The research demonstrated the nature of coordination and agreement-making in Malinau and its current vulnerabilities. The base of political support for coordination is fluid and often fragile and there are few safeguards to ensure fair negotiations for weaker groups. The authorities for supporting and endorsing these processes are unclear. Very real gains have been made, however, in empowering local communities to begin the process of asserting claims to their territories and of establishing debate about rights associated with those claims. A process has been started that communities, government and companies are now keen to complete.

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*A detailed final report can be found in* Technical Report Phase 1 1997–2001 ITTO PROJECT PD 12/97 REV. 1 (F): Forest Science and Sustainability: the Bulungan Model Forest, 2002, Bogor, CIFOR. *This publication can be found on CIFOR's web page or requested from* N.Sabarniati@cgiar.org *at* CIFOR.