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Seat of power?

THE CORRIDORS of power are located mostly in parliaments and palaces and the central business districts of major cities, and not many of us get to walk them. But policymakers, including those in the forest sector, increasingly talk of decentralisation, the process of transferring power from a centralised source to local governments, local communities and other stakeholders.

In forestry, a commonly stated objective of decentralisation is to increase the control that local people have over the management of the forest resource—and their share of the benefits extracted. So are forest tracks destined to become corridors of power? From the evidence so far, this seems unlikely. According to a count conducted for a recent workshop on decentralisation in the forest sector (see *TFU* 14/2 and also page 7 of this edition), up to 60 countries have experimented with decentralised approaches in recent years. But participants at the workshop concluded that "a form of decentralisation that truly empowers local communities or even local governments has not yet occurred in many countries".

Attempts at decentralisation in the forest sector have been particularly common in Asia and the Pacific. Ferguson and Chandrasekheran (page 3) surveyed 21 countries in the region and report on the mixed results that have been achieved. They conclude that "decentralisation is not a panacea, nor is it always efficient or equitable. It is a possible way of improving democratic governance and, in doing so, it may assist poverty alleviation and/or sustainable forest management, but it is not in itself a sufficient measure". They note that in some cases where power has indeed been transferred, many of the abuses of centralised control have simply shifted to local institutions, and there have been moves to recentralise some functions of government.

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Cover image Bangkloy village, Thailand. *Photo: A. Compost*

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Ferguson and Chandrasekheran also suggest that decentralisation should not be rushed: done too quickly, it can overwhelm the institutions it is supposed to empower. In fact, in some places where the centralised monitoring and control of forest resources has been withdrawn prematurely, decentralisation has been blamed for an increase in illegal logging. This issue was taken up in a workshop held in conjunction with the 36th session of the Intenational Tropical Timber Council last July (see page 15 for a report of the session). The workshop brought together members of the Council's Civil Society Advisory Group and Trade Advisory Group to find ways in which civil society, the timber trade and other stakeholders could combat illegal logging and associated trade. The final statement of the workshop, which is published on page 32, makes some wide-ranging recommendations, including for increased involvement of indigenous and other communities in forest-related decision-making, and more support for community forest enterprises.

Many people see decentralisation as an extension of community forestry, whereby people living in or near the forest gain greater access to and control over the resource. Privatisation—the process by which functions formerly run by government are delegated to the private sector—is something of a different case, and there is debate among academics about whether this constitutes decentralisation or not. Regardless, the process of privatisation can have major implications for how the forests are managed and how the revenues they generate are distributed.

The private sector plays a major role in forest management In Latin America and the Caribbean. Tomaselli and Tuoto (page 8) describe a survey they conducted as part of an ITTO project to identify examples of successful private ventures in sustainable tropical forest management. They found that governments have tended to underestimate the cost of sustainable forest management, which therefore has to be met by the private sector. "As the private sector is often not willing … to pay the full bill, the result is less money to implement [sustainable forest management], and growing informality (illegal logging)." Encouragingly, Tomaselli and Tuoto are still able to report that "a significant number of [private-sector] forest operators are doing their best to achieve sustainable forest management."

The continued willingness of operators, both private and community-based, to practice good forest management will depend in large measure on their ability to sell their products at good prices. Richard Murphy (page 12) writes about life-cycle assessment (LCA), which attempts to account for the environmental impact of a product throughout its entire life. In the case of timber, this would be (theoretically at least) from the germination of a seed, through the growth, harvesting, transformation and service-life of the timber, to its eventual disposal. Since timber usually does pretty well in this kind of assessment compared to potential substitute products like aluminium and plastic, some in the timber sector predict that LCA will become a useful marketing tool. But there is a dearth of such assessments for tropical timbers; unless this is addressed, LCA could become yet another area in which tropical timbers fall behind their temperate cousins.

Finally in this issue we describe the start of formal negotiations for a successor agreement to the International Tropical Timber Agreement, 1994 (page 17). In the scheme of things, international organizations are rarely seats of power. Rather, the task of organisations such as ITTO is to facilitate international relations through dialogue and the funding of pilot projects. Over time, this process can help establish international norms, increase the exchange of information across cultural and other barriers, and raise awareness of the international impacts of national actions. It can also help increase the capacity of national and sub-national institutions and communities to enforce forest laws and to maximise the benefits that can be gained from the management of the resource. But it probably won't help much in determining the extent to which decentralisation can address problems affecting tropical forests and their users: in the end, this must be done by each country, probably by trial and error and hopefully in peaceful and constructive ways.

Alastair Sarre