

The elements of decentralisation

Forest-policy experts at a recent workshop¹ conclude that successful decentralisation requires considerable planning, capacity-building and stakeholder participation

DECENTRALISATION initiatives in the forestry sector need to recognise that:

- decentralisation is a complex and dynamic process that evolves over time, adjusting and adapting to changing contexts. It should be based on a thorough understanding of the specific political, institutional, social, cultural and economic conditions of each country;
- there is significant evidence that a form of decentralisation that truly empowers local communities or even local governments has not yet occurred in many countries;
- as the forest sector intersects with many domains of development and sectors of the economy, decentralisation in other related policy areas can have significant influence. Conversely, decentralisation in the forest sector may give the local community a lever with which to address their interests in other areas;
- it is critical to reach consensus through a consultative, multi-stakeholder process among various interest groups resulting in a clear understanding of roles, responsibilities, authority and accountability at various levels;
- decentralisation should be based on, as well as enhance, information flows, transparency and accountability at all levels;
- appropriate political conditions and provision of financial and technical resources are essential;
- it is not essential to devolve all functions of the forest sector at the same time. Decentralisation may

be accomplished in gradual, sequential phases in a mutually agreed and equitable manner at all levels;

- decentralisation can produce sustainable environmental benefits under the right circumstances, but it can also lead to significant environmental problems;
- gender considerations, the education of youth and children, particularly girls, and other equity concerns should be given more attention;
- there is a need to approach decentralisation from an adaptive perspective, monitoring, learning from experience, and revising plans accordingly;
- there is a difference of opinion about the inclusion of transfers of power to the private sector in 'decentralisation'; and
- countries, members of the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, regional organisations and other organisations and instruments provide opportunities through workshops, partnerships and programs to share information and experiences on decentralisation.

'The conclusions summarised here (and in the box below) are taken from the report of the Interlaken Workshop on Decentralisation, Federal Systems in Forestry and National Forest Programs, which was held on 27–30 April 2004 in Interlaken, Switzerland as a country-led initiative in support of the United Nations Forum on Forests. The report is available at http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/publications/pdf_files/interlaken/Final_interlaken_report.pdf. See TFO 14/2 for a summary of the workshop.

Capacity-building, technical skills and information

Capacity-building is a process of empowerment that operates at different scales—local and national governments, groups and associations, and individuals—and through a wide variety of means. It is a crucial element of successful decentralisation.

Decentralisation is a process of transferring power (authority, competencies, responsibility and resources) from a centralised source to local government units, local communities and stakeholders with the intention of enabling them to envision, plan and implement actions in forest management relevant to generating and sharing benefits from forests.

Countries are at very different stages of decentralisation and within these countries the contexts and stakeholders are likely to be very diverse. Consequently, needs for capacity-building, technical skills and information-sharing are likely to be quite varied. Effective capacity-building, resources and commitment will be necessary at both national and local levels.

It is clear that capacity-building operates as a catalyst of change at the level of political institutions and organisations as well as individuals. In the case of organisations, capacity-building should aim to

encourage cultures that are more sensitive to and supportive of decentralisation. In the case of individuals, it should focus more on skills and attitudes and building on existing knowledge and cultures. Importantly, it should also seek to promote a balance between rights and responsibilities as well as resourcing and financial commitments of the participating stakeholders.

Education is a key element but on its own does not constitute capacity-building. There is a need for a 'political will', which is an emergent property of the interaction of several types of capacities of individuals, organisations and networks. In this context, evolving constitutional, legal, institutional and political frameworks for decision-making are critical to the success of capacity-building.

Notwithstanding the diversity of actors, contexts and needs, the greatest support is likely to be needed by:

- local government units;
- local communities, communes and user groups;
- NGOs and extension agents involved in facilitating and educating about decentralisation processes;
- central governments, as they learn to open up space for empowered partnerships by stakeholders;

- parliamentarians, forest owners, associations and industry; and
- universities and training institutions as they reform curricula and methods to take into account lessons from decentralisation and new approaches such as community forestry, ecosystem management, process facilitation, etc.

These groups would require support in the following areas:

- articulation of their interests, mandates and responsibilities, etc., to effectively participate as citizens in democratic processes;
- planning and envisioning;
- implementation, coordination and networking, especially across domains and competencies;
- negotiation and conflict management;
- monitoring, reflection and adaptation of plans;
- financial management and accounting, especially with respect to benefit-sharing;
- management of participatory processes; and
- ability to listen, diagnose, learn, decide and act in groups.