



“Summary of article by Melissa Leach, Robin Mearns, Ian Scoones: Challenges to Community-Based Sustainable Development” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 6: A Survey of Sustainable Development. Island Press: Washington DC, 2001. pp. 326-329

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Community-based approaches to both environmental and development issues have been highly touted in recent years, yet results have often been disappointing to the implementing agencies and, most important, to segments of the communities involved. This article suggests that there are shortcomings in the underlying assumptions about “community” and “environment” and the relationships between the two. An alternative is offered, based on the notion of “environmental entitlements,” which incorporates the politics of resource access and control among diverse social actors.

Flawed Assumptions about Community-Environment Linkages

Community-based approaches to resource management are quite diverse, yet most approaches rest on a set of common assumptions about community, environment and their relationship. One is that a distinct community exists. “[C]ommunities are seen as relatively homogenous, with members’ shared characteristics distinguishing them from ‘outsiders.’ Equally fundamental is the assumption of a distinct, and relatively stable, local environment which may have succumbed to degradation or deterioration, but has the potential to be restored and managed sustainably.” (4) The community, so defined, is deemed to be the capable of acting collectively to restore and manage local resources, usually while satisfying its livelihood needs. The community is further assumed to have the goal of achieving harmony between livelihoods and resources, an equilibrium generally assumed to have existed previously until disrupted by other factors -- population growth, modernization, the breakdown of traditional authority, inappropriate state policies, etc.

While such assumptions offer a useful critique of more harmful practices, they reflect outdated social theory. “The assumptions about community and environment which they rest on are basically flawed, as is the resulting image of functional, harmonious equilibrium between them.” (5) First, communities are not homogenous nor even geographically bounded. They are diverse, with gender, caste, wealth, age, and belief systems often producing conflicting values and resource priorities. Second, those differences express themselves through power relations and institutions. Powerful actors do not necessarily act in the collective good and often reproduce and reinforce the unequal status of marginalized groups, such as women or poor people.

Similarly, the assumptions about the environment are often flawed, resting on static, linear and equilibrium models of ecological systems. For example, succession theory has guided management of rangelands and forests with its assumptions of linear vegetation development resulting in a stable and natural climax vegetation for any given ecosystem. Since the 1970s, the emerging field of “new ecology” has challenged this approach by examining variability in both space and time. The dynamic interaction of various factors “is thus less the outcome of a predictable pattern of linear succession, but more due to combinations of contingent factors, conditioned by human intervention, sometimes the active outcome of management, often the result of unintended consequences.” (6)

Such approaches to social and ecological processes produce different sets of questions:

- Which social actors see which elements of their changing ecologies as resources at different times?
- How do groups with different modes of livelihood or different roles within the division of labor use resources and view their value?
- How do different groups gain access to and control over local resources?

“Seen in this way, the environment both provides a setting for social action and is clearly also a product of such action.” (7)

Environmental Entitlements

“Whereas Malthusian perspectives, and conventional approaches to community-based sustainable development, tend to frame problems in terms of an imbalance between overall society/community needs and overall resource availability, an emphasis on social and environmental differentiation suggests that there may be many different, possible problems for different people. In mediating these differentiated relationships, questions of access to and control over resources are key. Hence, the perspective shifts to focus on the command which particular people have over the environmental resources and services which they value, and the problems they may experience should such command fail.” (7)

Economist Amartya Sen developed the concept of entitlements to explain that scarcity refers to people not *having* enough, rather than there not *being* enough. The same concept can be applied to the environment, recognizing that the lack of resources is only one of a number of possible reasons for people to lack secure access to the resources they need to sustain livelihoods. Adapting this framework, we can define key terms as follows:

Endowments refer to the rights and resources – land, labor, skills, etc. – people have.

Environmental entitlements “refer to alternative sets of benefits derived from environmental goods and services over which people have legitimate effective command and which are instrumental in achieving well-being.” (9) These can include direct uses of food, water, fuel, etc. as commodities; the market value of, or rights to, resources; and the benefits of ecological processes, such as the hydrological cycle or pollution sinks.

Capabilities are what people can do or be with their entitlements. For example, control over fuel allows someone to cook and remain warm.

Legitimate effective command refers to what Sen calls entitlement mapping and is crucial to community-based sustainable development. This implies a recognition that resource claims are often contested and that some people will not be able to make effective use of their endowments. “Legitimacy” refers both to statutory rights and to customary rights to resources.

“Through processes of ‘mapping,’ environmental goods and services become endowments for particular social actors; i.e., they acquire rights over them. Endowments may, in turn, be transformed into environmental entitlements, or legitimate effective command over resources. In making use of their entitlements, people may acquire capabilities, or a sense of well-being.” (9) The importance of such an approach is in understanding the mapping process itself, because this is the multi-staged process that structures access to and management of resources.

Such an approach quickly leads to a focus on institutions, understood in their complexity. First, institutions are not organizations. They are the rules of the game in society, with organizations acting as the main players in that game. Some institutions, such as laws, have an organizational manifestation, in this case government. Others do not, such as markets, marriage, money, etc. Understanding institutions in this way allows us to recognize that the law operates within a social context dominated by power relations, which can define access to resources.

Second, transaction costs in the institutional sphere can play an important role in resource use and management. If the transaction costs of state regulation of forest or grazing land are high, for example, those resources will be poorly protected; other institutional arrangements may be more effective.

Third, in contrast to prevailing community-based project models that focus exclusively on local institutions, “it is clear that people’s resource access and control, or the ‘mapping’ processes by which endowments and entitlements are gained, are shaped by many, interacting institutions.” (11-12) Some are formal and exogenous, such as the rule of state law. Others are informal and subject to relations of power, authority and trust among social actors. This approach recognizes that each actor’s perception of the “collective good” is shaped by his or her position in society, producing competing visions. This is in contrast to the assumptions of benign complementarity underlying most community-based resource projects.

Fourth, institutions at various levels shape resource use, including at the international level. International trade relations and donor agency policies affect local resource options, as do domestic macroeconomic policies and national laws, such as land reform. “[I]t is frequently the interactions between institutions which lead to conflicts over natural resources, or to competing bases for claims.” (12) This contrasts with the overemphasis on local-level institutional development and action in most community-based resource management projects.

“The relationships among institutions, and between scale levels, is of central importance in influencing which social actors – both those within the community and those at some remove from it – gain access to and control over local resources. ...[T]his perspective uses the insights of

landscape history, and of historical approaches to ecology, to see how different peoples' uses of the environment in this context act, and interact with others' uses, to shape landscapes progressively over time." (12)