



# Managing leftovers: Does community forestry increase secure and equitable access to valuable resources for the rural poor?☆



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## ABSTRACT

Community forestry claims to be a means for achieving positive environmental and community outcomes through the transfer of some rights, discretionary powers, and capacity to local communities. It is therefore closely identified with decentralization and devolution. The practical application of community forestry principles on the ground varies, however. The powers (re-)allocated to the community vary by their extent, substance, and content. In many cases, devolution and transfer of rights and decision-making pertains solely to low value forest products and management costs, while higher value and larger benefits accrue to other actors. In this case, institutionalized extraction is formalized and the possibilities of sustainable local management constrained. Since the higher valued resources are excluded from these systems and programs, community forestry becomes in essence an exercise in the “management of leftovers,” which is often unsuccessful. In addition, “formalization” of access can add constraints over the lower valued resources that the community had previously enjoyed. The paper details some of these processes in the cases of Nepal, Kenya, and Cameroon. For community forestry to achieve its aspirations, rights over available high value resources need to be effectively transferred to local communities and formalization needs to be limited or empowering. Further research is needed on the extent to which rights have been devolved over real primary resources, and on the institutionalized constraints to full management of primary as well as secondary resources.

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## 1. Introduction

Community forestry (CF) is defined by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations as “any situation that intimately involves local people in forestry activity.” Community forestry exists when the local community in an area plays a significant role in land use decision-making and when the community is satisfied with its involvement and benefits from the management of the surrounding forest and its resources. Community forestry aims to improve the livelihood of local people as well as the condition of natural resources on which they depend for their living (Community Forestry Conference, 2013). It is assumed that if local people are involved in decision-making processes concerning natural resources, they develop a sense of ownership and start using the natural resources in a sustainable and more optimal way. The involvement of local natural resource users will contribute to sustainable practices, leading to various positive outcomes for the direct users and natural resources.

Community forestry often deals with the communal management of forests for generating income from forest resources (including a large

potential array of forest products and services). By combining forest conservation with rural development, community empowerment, and poverty reduction objectives, CF is considered a promising rural development option. Community forestry is often implemented through the establishment of a revised legal and institutional framework, including modified forestry policy and legislation, the creation of new institutional forms and processes, and decentralizing control and decision-making to local levels.

A study published by the Overseas Development Institute (Johnson, 2008) shows that the technical, managerial, and financial requirements stipulated by community forestry or participatory forest management frameworks are often incompatible with local realities and interests. In addition, valuable natural resources create incentives for central actors to retain control, even when these actors sometimes claim to decentralize control, (Nelson & Agrawal, 2008). As a result, there are many examples of cases where, in spite of policy reforms purported to give direct control of valuable resources to local communities and local governments, local ability to manage the resources seem constrained. Although the reforms occur on paper, in practice, management and extractive rights are retained by central actors (Mfune, 2013).

Nelson and Agrawal (2008) posit that politics of patronage and rent-seeking motivate political actors to control highly valuable natural resources in order to reinforce privileged positions or to acquire personal wealth. These incentives affect the outcome of community-based

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natural resource management and level of decentralization and ultimately help explain control over resources. [Acemoglu and Robinson \(2012\)](#) refer to extractive political institutions or exclusive economic institutions, which are developed or established to obtain resources from the politically marginalized for political and economic elites.

Although there seems to be no systematic study of the relationship between forest product value, likelihood of local control, and formalization, some observers have identified a “tendency of PFM [Participatory Forest Management] not being implemented in forest areas of relatively high commercial value” (emphasis added; [Dove, 2011](#); [Mustalahti and Lund, 2010](#)). In addition, if forest communities discover, develop or improve resources, attempts will be made by others to capture those resources and competition will increase ([Dove, 2011](#)).

In spite of community forestry's stated aims, there is some evidence that powerful interests, both public and private (and sometimes in collusion), both obtain the lion's share of the benefit and avoid costs from community forestry. Communities may get limited benefits through access to low value products and incur increased costs such as management planning, patrolling, firefighting, reforestation, etc. These increased costs can be superior to the marginal benefits that they receive, resulting in an increase in extraction, not an increase in poverty reduction.

Communities are left to make ends meet with “leftover” resources (limited value non-timber forest products (NTFPs), seedling production, bee keeping, etc.). This makes their participation problematic — making it very difficult for them to remain engaged without becoming poorer. Through CF, forest communities can end up with “rights” over low valued, unclaimed resources — often resources that they had governed previously. Community forestry activities which depend on access limited to low value products often struggle to be successful and create incentives to overvalue these products and invest in them. This can lead to unsuccessful development projects since the actual higher value product, often timber, is either not accessible to them or their access is not secure ([Dove, 2011, 1993](#)). Development practitioners trying to support local communities in these cases overestimate the transformational value of secondary products in order to justify continued community involvement. Strenuous efforts are often made to increase the value of NTFPs and their estimated value is often significantly exaggerated ([Dove, 2011](#)). For example, beekeeping or the marketing of wild fruits are frequently promoted, while these products are economically insignificant in relation to timber, trophy hunting or ecotourism. These resources are not enough to develop the community or conserve the forest.

As the local poor's rights are restricted, their incentive to conserve is diminished and they are more likely to degrade the forest ([Dove, 1993](#)). Thus, the common view of the rural poor as a cause of degradation is a self-fulfilling prophecy — limiting their access because they are viewed as a source of degradation also limits their incentive to conserve, thus increasing their potential negative impact. If poor local people do not benefit in proportion to the forests' potential as forest, they will have increased incentive to convert it into something that they can benefit from, such as farms.

The main hypotheses of this paper, to be verified in the case studies, are:

- In many cases, devolution and transfer of rights and decision-making through community forestry pertain solely to low value forest products and management costs, while higher value and cost savings continue to accrue to other actors. Because access to higher value products is limited, poor forest dwellers and the programs that support them are often obliged to search for new sources of income or go to extraordinary lengths to add value to the second-best opportunities that have no other claimant and have limited economic growth potential.
- The process of formalization of rights and access through CF often results in additional restrictions and control of local communities instead of increased empowerment and discretion. In addition “formalization” of access can add constraints (more limited access,

fees and taxes, management costs, etc.) over the lower valued resources that the community had previously enjoyed.

- If resources that communities do have control over increase in value, external political and economic interests will be attracted, will attempt to take control, and often will marginalize forest dwellers.
- Community forestry is often part of a process that reinforces, instead of reverses, the political economy of forests use, which favors other actors.

[Fig. 1](#) is a heuristic device to help illustrate the hypotheses. The basic question we wished to answer is: does community forestry increase secure and equitable access to valuable resources for the rural poor?

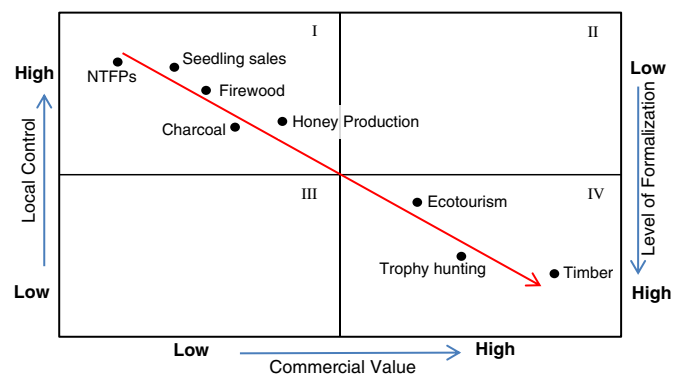
## 2. Methods

We look in some depth at the CF programs of three countries – Nepal, Kenya, and Cameroon – in order to test our hypotheses. Since there seem to be many cases where the benefits from community forestry to local communities are negligible (see [Nelson and Agrawal \(2008\)](#), for example), we focused on countries where there are significant high value timber resources to test our hypotheses. If in these cases, significant progress has been made on providing local communities with secure access to high value products, then these demonstrate progress, negate our hypotheses, and could provide an example of how community forestry can be designed and implemented for poverty reduction of rural areas.

We identified three countries where community forestry is practiced with high value timber resources. We look at the situation in Kenya where forest cover is limited but can be productive, and community forestry is fairly recent. The rich humid tropical forests of Cameroon have for some time been partly managed under a community forestry policy. Finally, in Nepal, community forestry on hillsides has a long and mostly positive history and we look at two aspects of this case – the competition for hillside forests that have become more productive and the situation in the richer forests of the valley Terai area.

In this paper we mainly examine the commercial value of forest products. Services and non-tangible benefits are not treated. We understand local control to be the ability of local populations to manage, exclude outsiders, harvest, market, and benefit from local forest resources. Formalization is viewed here as the process by which organizations standardize behavior through rules, procedures, and training and related mechanisms. It makes visible and explicit the structural relationships between institutions. Community forestry can be a means by which the State exerts control and can extract rents from the local level.

Leftovers are typically the things that remain after something has finished or ended. In the case of CF, we take this to mean the forest



**Fig. 1.** Illustrative graph showing the hypothetical relationship between local control, value of resources, and formalization for selected forest products.

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