



Dilemmas and challenges in forest conservation and development interventions: Case of Northwest Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Conservation and development projects are key instruments of international development agencies for natural resource conservation and rural development. However, despite some success stories, conservation of natural resources (particularly forests) in conjunction with socio-economic development – which is the precondition for sustainable development – remained a challenge in most of the developing countries. In Pakistan, too, natural forests in the Northwestern highlands continue to be depleted in spite of numerous interventions, by the international donors, to conserve the remaining forests. This paper uses a sustainable development perspective, and attempts to study the quest by the forest conservation and development interventions – initiated by the overseas development aid – regarding operationalisation of sustainable development as conceived by the projects' implementing agencies and thereby comparing it with local implementation context in terms of perceived impact/usefulness, and participation of stakeholders in the projects. This paper argues that, without considering socio-economic realities at micro (village) level, one cannot envisage the success of conservation and development interventions by considering only structural and meso (national/regional) levels. Forestry should be seen in a multi-stakeholder scenario where various actors have different claims and entitlements over forest resources. Major challenge for international development donors is to ensure a balance of power between stakeholders.

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1. Introduction

Widespread deforestation in many developing countries impelled the international development community to make huge investments in the form of conservation and development projects during the last two decades (FAO, 2007; Siry et al., 2005). In most of the countries such conservation efforts led to the emergence of participatory forest management policies for effective conservation and sustainable governance of forest resources. Consequently institutional changes, decentralization and joint forest management paradigms have become major trends in the forestry sector of most of the developing countries (Larson and Ribot, 2004; Lescuyer et al., 2001; Sunderlin et al., 2005). However transformation of forest management to a multiple stakeholder community-based approach remained a major challenge, and in many developing countries of Asia and Africa deforestation continues at high rate (FAO, 2007) though massive support has been provided by the international development agencies. Institutional reforms in the forest sector have long-term impacts so there is a need to carry out major evaluations of interventions and policies (Nilsson, 2005). The linkages, comple-

mentarities and trade-offs between development and environmental objectives of the conservation & developments interventions in the forestry sector has been studied intensely and many researchers believed that most of the interventions were futile in achieving their objectives (Marcus, 2001; Sunderlin et al., 2005) but still many development researchers and practitioners are concerned to explore the causes of ineffectiveness of such interventions by using alternative perspectives (Gray and Moseley, 2005; Grimbale and Wellard, 1997).

In the mountainous regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) province of Pakistan (formerly known as North West Frontier Province, NWFP) a series of conservation and development interventions had been initiated during the last two decades in response to massive deforestation in this part of the world (Bhatia, 2000). Provincial Forest Department, being the legitimate custodian of natural forests, remained nucleus of such activities (Ahmed and Mahmood, 1998). The intention of most of the interventions was to mitigate the problems caused by deforestation by involving and motivating local communities to plant trees and protect the watershed areas. Most of these interventions were supported by the international development (donor) agencies. Major policy shifts were also made to provide legal cover to the new (participatory) paradigm of forest governance (see for example Shahbaz et al., 2007; Simorangkir, 2006). With the exception of few projects, most of the interventions couldn't achieve

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their intended objectives and thus despite decade long conservation efforts and optimistic developments – including a conducive policy climate – the deforestation in the highlands of Northwest Pakistan continued (FAO, 2007; Shahbaz and Suleri, 2009). The issues of forest depletion in the KP and the impact of conservation projects has remained an emerging area of research during the recent years (see for example Ali et al., 2006; Simorangkir, 2006; Steimann, 2003).

Provincial Forest Department of KP is the mandated caretaker of the forests (as per constitution of Pakistan) and thus is a major stakeholder but there also exists a wide range of actors who do have a stake in the use of forest resources. The key stakeholders include; forest land owners/right-holders, landless forest users including graziers (known as *Gujjars*), the state (provincial forest department and federal government), private sector, civil society including community based organizations, traditional institutions, timber smugglers etc. (Ahmed and Mahmood, 1998; Rome, 2005; Steimann, 2003; Shahbaz, 2009). These stakeholders have different rights and claims in the forest. For instance, in many regions of the province, where traditional rights had existed regarding the access and benefit sharing of forest resources, the traditional forest owners and right holders have never accepted the state control over forests as they still claim ownership of the forests and perceive state as their competitor in the utilization of forest resources (Rome, 2005). However in most parts of Hazara division of the province the property rights have been defined relatively clearly. Nevertheless the local communities are not homogeneous and there exist various groups of actors within one community (see also Steimann, 2005) and these groups not only have internal conflicts but also many groups challenge legitimacy of the state (Shahbaz et al., 2008).

The forestry sector of Northwest Pakistan is, therefore, an interesting case to analyze the efforts and intentions (in the form of conservation and development interventions) of the international development community for sustainable forest governance with reference to the local perspective. This article presents empirical evidences from a research project that examined the intentions/activities of conservation and development projects in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan and comparing these with the local perceptions (at village level).

1.1. Theoretical framework

Conservation and development projects are major instruments of natural resource protection and local development, and the study of nexus between natural resource conservation and socio-economic development has remained an overarching theme of development research (Gray and Moseley, 2005; Marcus, 2001; Sunderlin et al., 2005). Precise theorisation on the relationship between forest conservation and socio-economic development is contested (Wunder, 2001), however the need for holistic understanding of linkages and trade-offs between environmental and development objectives has been emphasized by the researchers (Grimble and Wellard, 1997; Mahanty, 2002). Development practitioners and researchers agree that degradation of natural resources (particularly forests) affects the livelihoods of those who are fully or partly dependent on such resources (Sunderlin et al., 2005); therefore the natural resource conservation (and management) is being used as a tool of rural development and vice-versa. Since the Brundtland report (WCED, 1987) and the UN Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the notion of sustainable development has become the guiding theme in most of the environmental literature. The rise of sustainable development concept triggered the idea of development vis-à-vis conservation (Gray and Moseley, 2005). Integrated conservation and development projects have evolved as part of global agenda to achieve the goals of sustainable development (Mahanty, 2002) and participation of local communities in the governance of natural resource is a significant feature of such internationally supported programs throughout the

world (Larson and Ribot, 2004). Nevertheless, various researchers have indicated the constraints in the implementation of global agenda of forest conservation vis-à-vis sustainable development (Leach et al., 1999; Nilsson, 2005; Ribot, 2004), and strong disconnections are observed between the intentions of the global development agencies and the local implementation context (Marcus, 2001). It has been argued that governance of the natural resources (particularly forests) is influenced by a complex interplay of various actors and institutions operating at multiple scales – from micro (village) to macro or national and global level (Leach et al., 1999). For example an environmental degradation phenomenon (such as deforestation) can not only have local and regional contexts but also global dimensions, because various actors and processes work at different levels (Beratan, 2007; Leach et al., 1999).

This paper considers the implications of these insights on sustainable development perspective of conservation and development programs and aims to add to the emerging discussions on this area of research by drawing on the case study of the forestry sector in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. By using a sustainable development perspective, the paper attempts to study the quest by the forest conservation and development interventions – initiated by the overseas development aid – regarding operationalisation of sustainable development and thereby comparing it with local implementation context in terms of perceived impact/usefulness, and participation of stakeholders in the projects.

2. Methodology

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (former North West Frontier Province) was purposely chosen because it has maximum forest cover than other provinces and territories of Pakistan. About 40% of the country's natural forests are located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province and almost 17% of the total land area of the province is covered by forests (Ahmed and Mahmood, 1998). Within the province most of the natural forests are located in the mountainous districts viz. Chitral, Upper Dir, Lower Dir, Swat, Shangla, Malakand, Buner, Kohistan, Battagram, Mansehra, Abbottabad and Haripur. The province covers an area of 10.17 million hectares with a population of approximately 15 millions. It is located on both banks of the river Indus and is bounded by the Himalaya, Korakoram and Hindukush Mountains in the north and Afghanistan in the north-west. The major apprehensions of the rural areas of the province are poor infrastructure, poor health and educational facilities, limited access to economic opportunities, high illiteracy natural resource degradation, geographical isolation, natural disasters (earthquakes, floods), low HDI etc. (Halle et al., 2004; Steimann, 2003; Shahbaz, 2009). For these reasons overall incidence of poverty in the rural Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is substantially higher than that for the country as a whole (Halle et al., 2004).

The main objective of this research project was to identify and analyze the efforts and intentions of the international development community for sustainable forest governance (in the form of conservation and development interventions) and comparing them with the local context. Therefore all of the completed (or ongoing) conservation and development projects/interventions related to forestry in the highland districts of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province during the years 1997–2008 were taken as population of the study. In the first step of data collection an inventory was prepared by getting information from Planning and Development Department of the provincial government, websites of the governmental and non-governmental organization, and international donor agencies. Information was reconfirmed through personal visits in the study area and telephonic calls to different departments and organizations. A structured questionnaire was used as an instrument to collect information regarding intentions and activities of each project/intervention in the perspective of sustainable development and forest management. After examining the validity and reliability of the

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