

The project and the problem

The following distills key critical lessons from experiences of the Non Timber Forest Product – Participatory Forest Management (NTEFP-PFM) Project which supported communities and local government to develop PFM in 5 districts (Weredas) in the South West of Ethiopia within Southern Nations, Nationalities and Peoples Regional State (SNNPRS) between 2003-2013. This is one of the few remaining areas of wet high montane forest in Ethiopia, rich in important forest products for local people, and of key importance for biodiversity and environmental services. Many customary forest management practices still survive today despite concerted efforts to delink local people from forest use. The forest is under most threat from conversion to agriculture, both through large scale investment and smallholder conversion. According to the analysis by local communities the government ownership of the forest and criminalization of the use of most forest products has resulted in de-facto open access, undermining customary stewardship, increasing the incentives to convert the forest to agriculture and promoting illegal and uncontrolled use.

The learning journey to devolved forest management

The project has been a learning journey for all involved. Partly due to the breath of interpretation of what PFM is, there were numerous internal disagreements within the project with regards to what approach should be followed. One premise was that the way to save the forest was to reduce pressure on it through engagement of communities in forest conservation whilst satisfying needs through non forest sources (see the participatory conservation approach highlighted in the Figure 1). The other premise was that increased control and use rights for local people was key to motivating them to manage the forest (See community forestry approach highlighted in Figure 1).

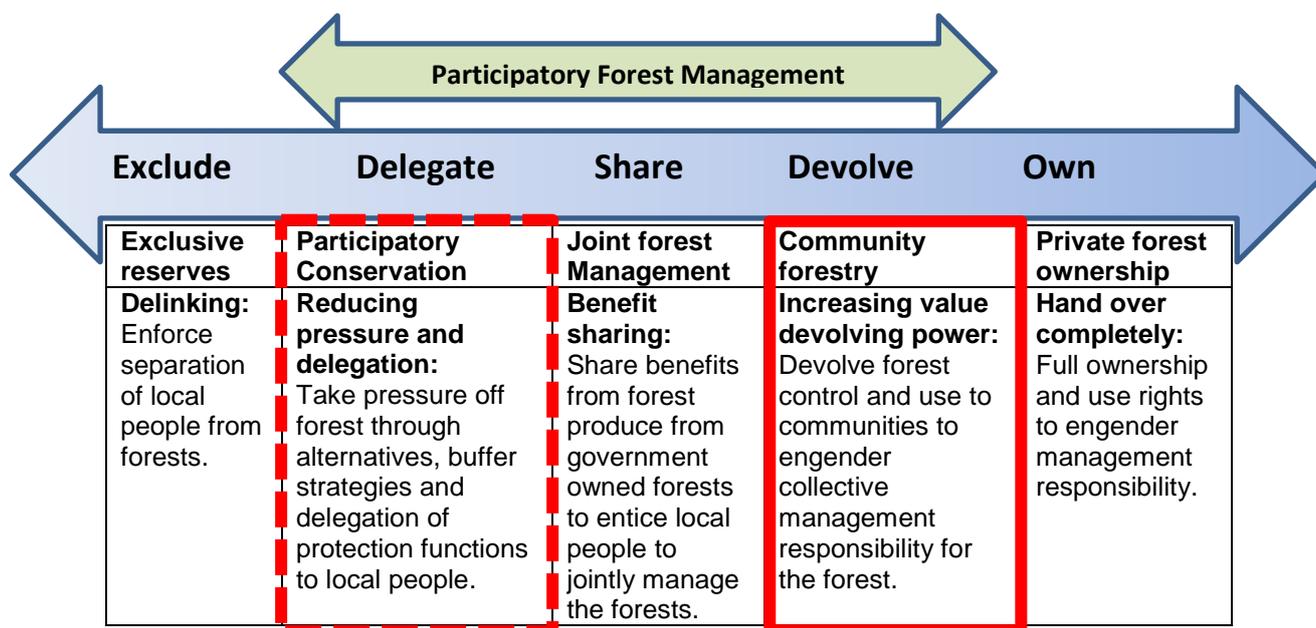


Figure 1. Devolution spectrum. PFM opens the door to a wide range of approach interpretations as it covers a broad spectrum in degrees of engagement and handing over power.

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Eventually the PFM approach evolved to focus firmly on seeing forest based incentives of local control and user rights as being the key to encouraging active community driven forest management (whether that is protection, development or utilisation). The link between communities and the forest was embraced as an opportunity to be strengthened and built upon, rather than a threat to be further weakened.

This approach can probably most usefully be defined as devolved forest management or community forestry. There was a high demand from communities for devolved forest management and PFM establishment process was streamlined and made much more community friendly so that it could be scaled up quickly in response to this demand. For around 56,000 hectares of forest, PFM agreements have been signed between communities and the government thereby handing over forest management control to the communities. Open access has been restricted, forest conversion almost halted and community initiated forest management investment is growing.

The building blocks of devolved forest management

An essential starting point of devolved forest management is ‘stepping into the shoes’ of local people and understanding the incentives that are important to motivate them to engage in sustainable forest management. In the project site through the use of participatory analysis methods, the key causes of unsustainable forest management were identified as unsecure tenure and lack of legal user rights.

Getting these key incentives in place and strong enough is key to releasing the forest management potential of local people – as illustrated Figure 2 and in the Figure 3 devolved forest management equation below.



Figure 2. In PFM sustainable forest management is the result of granting forest user rights on a solid foundation of secure forest tenure.



Figure 3. Devolved forest management equation.

Over the 10 years of the project there has been progress on getting some significant elements of the devolved forest management equation into practice, although some remain elusive.

Main progress, challenges and recommendations

Key progress made towards devolved forest management by the NTFP-PFM project

- Policy influence and participatory policy processes.** The project supported the regional government to develop a revised forest policy and regulations in a participatory process. The outcome of this process achieved more success regarding strengthening community tenure, but less successful to date in significantly strengthening user rights in PFM (see challenges). The process and methods used in bringing together government and forest communities to build understanding, analyse and negotiate the contents of the policy was an important achievement in itself, and can be replicated. It demonstrates how policy making can be practically democratised and that projects/NGOs can play a welcomed facilitation role in supporting government to develop enhanced policies for devolved forest management, indirectly influencing outcomes.



Devolved control on the ground. Around 56,000 hectares of forests in 5 Weredas (districts) are devolved to communities through PFM agreements. Getting to the agreement stage in terms of awareness raising, forest boundary negotiation and demarcation, management planning and institutional formation was a huge and complex task, skilfully facilitated in a way that kept community members in the driving seat of the process and thus having a high degree of ownership of outcomes (See Photo 1).

Photo 1. In the photo above, top, a community member presents their forest management plan. When asked what they like most about the plan the response is, 'It is our own plan, developed by us'.



Going one step further in consolidating community tenure and complementing PFM agreements, collective forest land title certificates have been awarded to communities in one of the Weredas, Gesha Wereda (See Photo 2).

Photo 2. This collective forest land title given to a community – moves much further along the devolution spectrum towards full ownership by stating, '*Households and individuals who are allocated forests and forestland are entitled to exploit production forests, exchange, transfer, lease, inherit, and mortgage the land - use right*'.

Key challenges remaining for PFM in Ethiopia

A fundamental risk to PFM is that communities' motivation may falter if they feel they are being promised devolution, but actually receiving little more than delegation of forest protection within PFM. This 'shortfall' will become more apparent when the projects supporting PFM end. Some reasons for this shortfall may include;

- **Professionals reluctant to fully embrace devolved forest management.** Even after almost 20 years of PFM in Ethiopia, there is still a gap between what actually motivates communities to manage natural forests and what a shrinking but still an influential majority of natural resource professionals espouse as the best way to protect the natural forest. This has manifested itself in almost schizophrenic and inconsistent application of PFM principles. The reasons for professionals to not fully embracing all the key ingredients of devolved forest management are complex. They may include;
 - Training and professional practice being heavily skewed towards a conservationist mode of dealing with natural forest, without sufficient focus on governance, socio-economic and silvicultural aspects.
 - Insufficient trust by government that communities will be able to use natural forests sustainably.
 - A reluctance to relinquish real power over the natural forest resources to communities.

The foundations – progress on tenure, more to do on use rights. Linked to the above, the enabling environment for devolved forest management reflects the dichotomy in the application of PFM principles – delegation versus devolution. The legislation does not clearly, consistently and sufficiently incentivise PFM to meaningfully and securely transfer power over the forests. Communities welcome the greater level of control, but elevated management responsibilities without commensurate user rights in PFM is a rather hollow ownership. A particular problem is the continued criminalizing of wood use for sale in PFM forest project sites. This will undoubtedly limit the motivation of communities to maintain trees, and plant indigenous trees in the forest in the long run, as well as limiting the ability of communities to perform silvicultural practices that will keep the forest ecologically vibrant and economically productive. Instead, it will promote the continued uncontrolled and illegal use of wood.

Key recommendations to advance PFM

Not only scaling up on the ground but scaling deep within government. Enhanced donor and PFM related implementing organisation coordination to refocus efforts on leveraging more for institutionalisation of PFM. Strategies to achieve this could include;

- **Evidence of efficacy;** Through pilots and action research, rigorous monitoring and evaluation, policy briefs, media exposure of PFM on radio and TV, multi-stakeholder workshops, domestic and foreign study tour exposure of senior decision makers to see evidence of the undisputable efficacy of PFM. This will help develop belief and buy-in amongst senior government officials about the rationale and principles of PFM and how it does work.
- **Voice and power;** Supporting the strengthening of community PFM organisations so that they have a voice at Regional and Federal levels and creating appropriate processes, platforms and forums for exchanges with decision makers. The NTFP-PFM project has proven that influence through support to processes, such as policy development, can be acceptable and welcomed by government if framed correctly.
- **Motivation in government;** Supporting government to strengthen mechanisms to mainstream PFM into their work programmes, including performance targets and more direct accountability to PFM community organizations.
- **Professional Orientation Skills;** PFM requires a whole raft of new skills which foresters are often not sufficiently trained in; facilitation skills, natural forest silviculture, forest enterprise support, etc. But maybe more fundamentally a reorientation is required on the fundamental rationale and principles of devolved forest management. Approaches could include professional on the job trainings, curriculum development and field immersion strategies.

Project Funding Agencies



European Union, Environment Budget



Royal Netherlands Embassy, Ethiopia



Royal Norwegian Embassy, Ethiopia

Project Partners



The University of Huddersfield: With 18 years' experience of field research, project management and consultancy / advisory work on natural resources in Ethiopia.



Ethio-Wetlands and Natural Resources Association: The first Ethiopian NGO to focus on forest and wetland issues. It has worked with most of the donors in the country and has run projects in three of the country's eight rural regions.



Sustainable Livelihood Action: A European Economic Interest Grouping which focuses on capacity building to support local NGOs and organisations in developing countries. Its staff have over 25 years of experience in Africa, Asia and Latin America.



Southern Nations, Nationalities & Peoples Regional State

For further details see: www.hud.ac.uk/wetlandsandforests/