

Getting to common ground

Resolving conflicts over common pool resources



Conflicts over the management of common pool resources often arise because it is assumed, quite wrongly, that all those involved share the same understanding of the problems. To an outside observer the problems, and hence their solutions, seem self-evident. They reflect differences in material interests between stakeholders and these can be analysed in various ways. But this ignores the different perceptions that people have about the problems and so it is hardly surprising that the proposed solution does not always work out as intended. Bringing people's perceptions into the discussions between stakeholders is seen as an important step to building consensus and resolving conflict. But how can this be done so that it makes the differences clear and helps people to get to common ground?

A framework for understanding

Conflict is a common feature of many natural resource management regimes. But its origins can go beyond material incompatibilities and arise from a deeper cognitive level. Stakeholders draw upon their knowledge and understanding of resources and intuitively develop their own view of the problem which may be very different from that of others. A scientist will no doubt have very different

experiences and views to those of local people. Religious beliefs and moral conviction will also influence thinking as will ideas obtained from formal science and informal and 'folk' knowledge. Stakeholders' knowledge and understanding of the legal and institutional framework that governs most common pool resources will also have an effect.

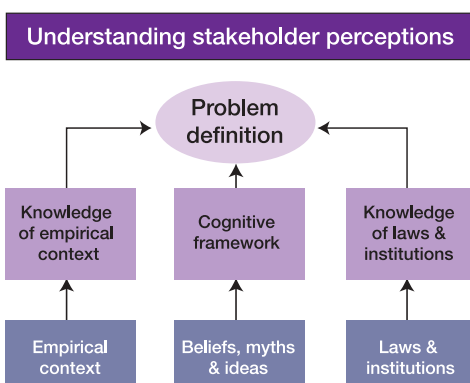
Defining the problem clearly is critical to the process of making policy and it is these different stakeholder perceptions, which provide a deeper explanation of conflict, that are often obscured in conventional policy dialogue. If stakeholders can be encouraged to reveal their different interpretations of key issues then the debate may be much more productive.

Previous research on this issue has produced an analytical framework for understanding stakeholder perspectives in contested natural resource management situations (see diagram). It suggests that knowledge falls into three realms – empirical knowledge; beliefs, myths and ideas; and laws and institutions – and it seeks to promote dialogue between stakeholders by making their differences clear.

From theory into practice

In order to turn this theoretical framework into a practical method a research project was set up to explore its usefulness for understanding field-level conflict over forest resources in Harda, Madhya Pradesh, India and to examine the opportunities and constraints for adapting and institutionalising it for policy dialogue.

Harda is an example of the 'self-evident' approach to problem solving. It is generally celebrated as an excellent example of effective, decentralised and participatory forest management. Since the early 1990s the Madhya Pradesh Forest Department has promoted the 'Harda model' of participatory forest management which channels development funding to wean local poor communities away from forest dependence and into forest protection and



development. Based largely on this and other similar experiences the World Bank funded a large forestry sector project in Madhya Pradesh in the 1990s.

While the Forest Department views Harda as a success, others, including local NGOs and CBOs believe that communities have not only failed to benefit but are actually worse off. This resulted in conflicts among different stakeholders at all levels and confrontational meetings that inhibited the process of reconciliation and understanding. The only thing that was clear was that the causes of this conflict were complex and they were not well understood.

The Madhya Pradesh experience has important implications for forest management throughout India. While participation has been widely documented the perceptions of local-level stakeholders have not been adequately studied. This study provided an opportunity to look in detail into the issues that arise with mature participatory programmes, and to provide policy-relevant suggestions that have wider applicability.

Field work

The seven research partners comprising the project team assembled to undertake the work was itself rather unusual in that the partner organisations themselves were stakeholders and potential target institutions for uptake activities. They were also closely associated with other on-going processes and policy dialogue in the forest sector in India and so they enjoyed relatively easy access to the relevant target institutions.

Field work focused on documenting stakeholder perceptions on participatory forest management and each stakeholder was studied over a relatively long period by a single organisation. The village level studies were conducted by a six-member team located in Harda for over a year. A sample of twenty-four villages was chosen for the intensive research, reflecting the diverse ecological and socio-economic characteristics of the district.

The analytical framework was converted into an empirically useable method for use in the field – a task that was inclusive and shared by all the research partners. This was one of the highlights of the research. In addition to standard qualitative

techniques, the Q-method was used. This provides researchers with a systematic and rigorously quantitative means for examining human subjectivity particularly on issues that are socially contested and argued about.

A set of 48 statements was carefully designed and translated into the local dialect to stimulate stakeholders. Some could read the statements for themselves while others had them read to them. Their reaction to each statement was recorded on a sliding scale. From their responses individual profiles were created and these were statistically analysed to extract typical profiles that capture the common essence of several individuals. Finally, these typical profiles were interpreted to provide an insight into the social discourses.

Engaging with stakeholders

Engaging with stakeholders was not easy. Both the heads of the local administration and Forest Department changed during the research and their interest in the research fluctuated especially during election times. One Mass Tribal Organisation (MTO) had reservations about the research because of the way it was funded. This was resolved to some extent by personal contact with the leadership of the MTO. Engaging with local MTO activists at the village level was easier.



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Interest nationally and in the state capital, Bhopal, was high because of the focus on Harda and also because the research coincided with a number of broader policy processes in which project partners were already playing key roles.

Communicating the project findings was done through meetings and workshops at local, state and national levels that were attended by local policy actors, NGOs, and politicians. At the village level, folk theatre was used. Feedback from these events was incorporated into the methodology.

Interestingly the research itself was confronted with questions. Perceptions about the project team influenced the ways in which local people received messages from the research and the extent of their engagement. Those who perceived the findings to be critical of their function adopted defensive attitudes. Those more distant from the local context were more receptive to findings, as they saw them as less threatening.

Findings

Experience with the framework methodology was very positive. A field manual was produced and training was used to promote the method and build research capacity in the sector. Research partners have already started using the method in other projects and so as key stakeholders in this research this has resulted in immediate uptake.

Experience so far suggests that the method has made only a limited contribution to actual conflict management since it was only one part of a wider process of negotiation over policy.

A good atmosphere between policy makers and their willingness to 'buy-in' to the process is essential for effective policy dialogue. When relationships are poor it is not possible in a short-term project like this to change them. It also raises questions about the legitimacy of externally funded research projects as part of on-going policy dialogue.



Nevertheless, the project did help the project partners to build experience in managing multi-stakeholder dialogues that can be an integral part of a policy process. The professional duality of the India-based partners – researchers and stakeholders in policy shaping – will be a considerable asset to improving the rigour of inclusive policy processes in the future.

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