

Introduction

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In 1990, the World Bank reported on the results of an evaluation in which some 550 projects had been analysed, checked for their sustainability problems. Not surprisingly, only a fraction of the projects appeared to have achieved sustainability. Similar results have appeared from evaluations conducted by USAid and other international agencies, leading Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (World Development, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1992) to conclude that "Many factors - ecological, technological, macroeconomic, and so forth - can make a development project or program obsolete. Institutional factors almost always play a role, however" (my emphasis).

Certainly, the interest and priority devoted to institutional issues have grown and the analysis of institutional factors in project preparation and design has improved, not least following the growing interest in participatory issues, decentralization and empowerment of local structures. And increasingly are donor agencies requiring a checking of institutional sustainability as part of the overall feasibility studies routine. Still, the broad spectre of institutions and institutional problems may continuously be judged as being treated somewhat erratic, posing numerous problems during and after project/programme implementation.

This is at least the case in the environment and development field. Admittedly, the varied and many faceted nature of institutional issues are not easily dealt with nor easily analysed in actual research. Already the factors causing f.ex. ecological degradation are many and not well researched. Being a research field in which natural science as well as socio-economic factors are at play is complicating matters, and the needed holistic approaches and true inter-disciplinary studies are seldomly realized. Adding to the complexity is then the many faceted institutional issues, which easily can erode any in theory well justified effort in rectifying things.

Processes of soil erosion, changes in plant cover, depletion of water resources and changes in hydrological regimes resulting in natural resources degradation broadly all take place under natural conditions without human interference. But in a great number of cases have human activity and interference modified and usually accelerated all these processes, to the extent where the very basis for survival and existence is threatened, particularly in arid and semi-arid zones of Africa, resulting in widespread poverty and famine. Poverty and socio-economic stress again foster inappropriate cultivation and herding practices which often further processes of ecological degradation which again accelerate a negative downward spiralling development process.

Human-induced degradation occurs when land is poorly managed, often in situations where farmers in their fight for survival are forced to bring under cultivation more and more land, often grazing or fallow land generally unsuitable for agriculture. A number of technical solutions are offered to modify tendencies towards degradation, particularly agro-forestry and soil and water conservation measures, which may improve on vegetation and soil fertility and hence increase yields (a kind of "green" intensification process).

However justified from a purely technical point of view, such techniques are often unsuitable or not acceptable for socio-economic or cultural reasons, but in particular being eroded by institutional factors. Among crucial factors preventing appropriate forms of natural resources management appearing are lack of appropriate land tenure systems, lack of decentralized community structures and regulations ensuring effective self-management of the natural resource base, lack of marketing channels, price incentives, etc.

There is an ongoing discussion of tenure rights both specifically in relation to natural resources management in Africa, centred around private property, usufruct rights and various arrangements organizing the use of common pool resources, and generally regarding institutional incentives in economic processes.

It has been strongly argued that private property rights are a precondition for investments in land improving activities and sustainable developments. Against this, it has been maintained that private property rights will destroy the conditions of production of

f.ex. the pastoralists, and will only create new problems for other producers as well. Increasingly, it is argued that examples of appropriate natural resources management based on shared rights to soil, water and vegetation necessitate an adaptive approach, rather than a substitutive one, where combinations or "hybrids" between customary and more modern tenure and use rights systems are supported.

It is increasingly held that natural resources management cannot be carried out exclusively at the national level: a decentralization of both formulation and implementation is needed. Decentralized management units are supposed to benefit from more site-specific information and the involvement of the actual users of the natural resources in both decision and execution processes. However, it is uncertain the extent to which principles of decentralization can and should be carried out and how it should be organized. The physical properties of natural resources indicate that natural resources management organized at village level might be appropriate in relation to soil conservation, while water usage in certain cases might be better managed at, e.g., district level.

Another question concerns the involvement of users of natural resources. It is reasonable to expect that natural resources management cannot succeed without the active support of farmers and pastoralists whom the management will generally affect in a substantive manner. Yet, natural resources are typically the object of fierce competition among those groups - further accentuated by the process of ecological degradation - for which reason it is easy to imagine widespread social conflicts over increasingly scarce resources, again obstructing efforts in appropriate natural resources management. - Recent, often violent, conflicts between representatives of various production systems in Senegal, Mauritania, Mali and Niger are examples in point, where increased competition for scarce resources is at the roots of the problem.

Prices, price changes and price incentives are seldomly discussed in relation to natural resources management. They constitute, however, an important environment for efforts aiming at a better utilization of the natural resources. Generally, natural resources management has to be seen in a context of market processes and economic policies. When prices change, farmers might change product-

mix and production methods, and natural resources are, for better or worse, used in a new way. Thus, specific attempts at natural resources management have to take market developments and pricing into account.

The Ph.D. Researcher Course on Institutional Issues in Natural Resources Management, held 16 - 20 November 1992 (financed by Forskerakademiet, The Danish Research Academy), had as its main objective to initiate the discussion on some of the institutional issues and factors raised above, and their importance for improved management of the natural resources in arid and semi-arid areas of Africa.

As with previous researcher courses, networks of cooperation established around the Ph.D. Programme on "Political and Cultural Institutions in Development" associated with International Development Studies, Roskilde University, played an important role in organising and carrying out the seminar. In addition, a number of invited foreign guest speakers contributed heavily to the success of the seminar in sparking off an often (in)tense, but fruitful and constructive debate, illustrating the fact that things are often more complicated than what appear at first sight.

John Bruce, Director of Land Tenure Center, University of Wisconsin-Madison introduced the subject by stressing the diversity of land tenure or, as indicated in the title of his paper, "The Variety of Reform". Tenure structures are very much like a layer cake with a wide variety of rules, often legally rather confused systems, governing access rights.

For John Bruce two paradigms are being offered: on the one hand a replacement paradigm, on the other hand an adaptation paradigm. The replacement paradigm is very much associated with Structural Adjustment Agreements in which land tenure conditionalities are included and in which western private ownership-type tenure systems are introduced. The number of unsuccessful attempts at replacing indigenous tenure systems are, however, legio and the only valid solution, although not easy, is - according to Bruce -to advocate the return to indigenous tenure systems, which ought to be empowered in a decentralization effort.

Piers Blaikie, School of Development Studies, University of East Anglia, is very much in agreement with this. Indeed, the major project to pursue is to bring institutions back into the production system and taking the point of departure in how the users perceive problems.

For Blaikie there are three major lessons learned: first of all, we have to understand the users in order not to harm them. However well thought out, interventions from the outside are often detrimental to the situation we intend to rectify because the understanding of local conditions is insufficient. Therefore, we got to be aware in order not to damage the situation. Secondly, institutions are generally breaking down. We have to recreate them and in this to look for neighbouring well functioning structures. Thirdly, we do not need any more elegant models. We now need to go from abstraction back to reality, telling "theoretically informed studies" based on the concrete.

Nothing of this is easily done. A complicating factor is that the politically outspoken are most often also those in power, who are better off - and who are able to profit from existing regimes and uncertainties and who will gain the most from new interventions.

And, as Charles Lane from the International Institute for the Environment and Development (IIED), London, stresses, the pastoralists and the pastoral production system are on the losing side from nearly whatever angle we see the problems. The pastoralists are increasingly "left out", partly because it is so difficult to handle "a moving source". Instead, the sedentarized farmers are being given political priority by governments, and efforts in establishing improved natural resource management systems are nearly exclusively directed towards the farming communities. For Lane, this underlines "the urgency of the pastoral situation" as the pastoral production system has "a value in itself".

Very much in line with previous speakers, Charles Lane advocated community involvement in which dialogue would be the essential tool on the basis of which appropriate responses and frameworks could be proposed and eventually adopted. For researchers it was crucial to recognize that communities hold the "scientific" means and measures for solving problems.

Peter Bloch from Land Tenure Center stressed how concepts have a variety of uses and meanings. Common property, private ownership and property are examples of concepts where the meanings differ widely whether seen from the point of view of the different users (farmers and pastoralists) or whether seen from the donor community such as the Bank.

Bloch gave an illustration by outlining the commonly held hypothesis according to which title to land would improve security of tenure which again would further investments resulting in productivity increases which again would lead to less pressure on the land and hence less degradation. Not necessarily so, said Bloch. Every link of the chain is uncertain as to its bearings on the following link and the end-result. Most important, however, is that private titles to land are not that crucial. What matters is security, in whatever form.

- In the discussion, Bruce added that the private property concept originated in Europe and was driven by a rising national bourgeoisie in a specific historical epoch in which capitalism was constituted. Not so in Africa, where the concept is introduced from the outside, and is donor driven. Other conceptual problems raised by Bruce were how to delimit the "correct" area of intervention, how wide an area geographically, and how far back historically should we go in tracking origins of existing or claimed tenure systems?

Camilla Toulmin from IIED, London raised the question: How to increase productivity while maintaining sustainability? The answer, according to Toulmin - and in this she was again very much in agreement with previous speakers - was to improve on existing systems and indigenous technologies. Solutions should not be imposed from the outside.

Other speakers included Johan Pottier, Department of Social Anthropology, SOAS, London, looking into migration as a drought and hunger-coping strategy, Koy Thomson from IIED, giving an account of the current status of National Environmental Action Plans and their links to other plans and strategies, Trond Vedeld, NORAGRIC, Aas, Norway presenting a very interesting case from the Niger river delta in Mali, where violent conflicts over resource use have erupted recently, and Ole Therkildsen, the Centre for

Development Research, Copenhagen presenting a case on legitimacy and local governance. Interventions were also made by Leif Manger, University of Bergen, on managing natural resources in a Sudanese pastoral community, Jannik Boesen, Centre for Development Research, Copenhagen, on local water management in the Ismani rural area, Tanzania and Pia Frederiksen, Institute of Geography, Roskilde University, on household reproduction strategies in Kitui district, Kenya.

Also a number of Ph.D. projects were presented and discussed, such as by Kristine Juul on the Ferlo region in Senegal, Faustin Maganga on Babati district in Tanzania, and Lars Engberg-Pedersen on Burkina Faso. The presence of the foreign guest speakers very much contributed to the seminar meeting several of its objectives as the invited speakers gave valuable comments during the presentation of ongoing Ph.D. projects.

The Ph.D. researcher course on "Institutional Issues in Natural Resource Management" introduced the subject and gave ample illustrations of the difficulties involved in analysing the complex situation between nature and man - and institutions. A number of issues had, naturally, to be left out in order to maintain the focus of the seminar.

In order to continue and deepen the discussion and understanding of the complex issues at hand, a follow-up seminar is, thanks to another grant from Forskerakademiet, scheduled for 1 - 4 November 1993 with the title "Improved Natural Resource Management - The Role of the State versus that of the Local Community".

