Participation in Resource Management: Rhetoric and Reality

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SUMMARY OF A LECTURE

1. The recognition that participation of resource users in the management of their own resources is not only desirable but essential is of relatively recent origin.

We can identify three broad approaches to resource management over the past fifty years, and they are differentiated from each other principally by the role of the state. These three approaches are the classic or paternalistic, neo-populist and economistic.

The classic approach derives from the colonial period. It assumes that there is an environmental problem (defined and measured by the state and its agencies), and that there are environmental solutions (similarly designed). Often resource users themselves are blamed, and "over-population", ignorance, and a lack of commercialisation are often quoted reasons. Soil and water conservation (SWC) techniques are then imposed and coercion sometimes with agricultural extension are the means by which the wishes of the state are carried out. Unfortunately, this approach has survived the colonial era and can be found (perhaps without the pejorative and racist overtones) and can be found in many contemporary states.

The neo-populist approach became the dominant one to rural development from the late 1970s and the central role of participation in effective environmental policy became established at this time. The resource users, their opportunities and constraints and their production system as a whole occupy the central focus and starting point for the design of interventions. Therefore, policies and projects have to embrace complexity, context and uncertainty. The admis-

sion that our understanding and measurement of land degradation and conservation are subject to a great deal of imprecision is awkward since now "expert" opinion can be challenged by the resource users themselves - and they, for all we know, could be wrong too! The key words for implementation are decentralisation, dialogue and local problem solving.

The neo-classical approach is something of a recent counter-revolution to the dominant neo-populist approach. The major assumptions are that present technologies for effective management exist (or can come into existence), but that the present structure of incentives prevent farmers from adopting them. Therefore the role of the state is to ensure that taxes reflect true environmental costs, to regulate market-like pricing systems and to set standards. It should also get rid of distortions in prices imposed by governments. Apart from clarifying and making more secure existing property rights over land, trees, etc., this approach takes a realistic view of the limitations of the ability of the state to intervene effectively, and assumes that the free market will provide incentives - rather than the state regulating environmental management through prohibition and policing. Thus, participation does not arise as an issue since individuals will respond to market signals and make their own choices - or so the theory goes.

2. Some institutional implications.

a) The classic approach relies upon a centralised state and prohibitive legislation (eg. byelaws, land use planning). The research station is the only source of legitimate technical knowledge. The job of extension agencies is to get the farmers to manage resources properly. Outcomes are usually dismal because implementation is expensive, particularly in terms of policing; technologies are often technically inappropriate and fail thereby destroying the government's credibility; and technologies are often labour intensive or exclude people from their livelihoods (eg. Reserve Forests, compulsory destocking).

b) The populist approach also suffers from institutional problems. Bureaucracies are not set up to enter into dialogue with large dispersed populations over complex and varied and technical matters. Dialogue and decentralisation spell loss of control, complexity and imprecision - not characteristics endearing themselves to bureaucrats at all levels. Projects and programmes have to be designed with rolling plans over a long period and it is usually difficult to justify them through conventional cost benefit techniques - the costs depend on what local people decide for the programme, and the benefits are imperfectly quantified and uncertain. Participation is expensive for the state unless they <u>really</u> allow local people to manage their own resources and to bear the organisational cost of doing so.

c) The neo-classical approach appears to make contradictory institutional demands. At the same time the state must set standards and be a "fair referee" in ensuring the market operates properly and reflects environmental costs, but it must also avoid rent seeking of its functionaries and not be subject to political and professional agendas of the members of its institutions. This is an heroic assumption indeed.

3. Identifying decision paths for environmental managers.

It is useful to identify how resource users take decisions since it throws light upon the alternative perspectives of the three approaches described above. Figure 1 (p 248) provides an idealised decision path for decision makers. It is a simplified and reductionist perception-diagnosis-action model. Each stage of the decision making process can be viewed through the different perspectives and priorities of the three approaches described above.

a) Definition and perception of the problem. Clearly resource users views of their environment are not just technical. Examples from this seminar include notions of "holy ground", the "good life" and "land is coming up" (Östberg describing the views of the Burungi in Tanzania). Usually technical comprehensions are understood as metaphors such as health, heat/cold, etc. Also these metaphors of

meaning are not confined to developing countries. Definitions of degradation are often contested between state and local users (eg. the definition of a "weed" in Indonesia).

b) Measurement of the problem. Here, state and local users are usually in dispute. The prime example is the "overstocking" problem in Africa. The radical revision of our understanding of erosion processes and their causes in the Himalaya is another cautionary tale.

c) Diagnosis of the problem. While the state may make a purely technical and environmental diagnosis, local resource users frequently have other views. For example the Kikuyu and other African peoples diagnosed their problem not as soil erosion requiring bench terracing but as instant over population caused by their displacement by white settlers onto steeper and less resilient land. A Basotho farmer may watch a gulley eat back into her land but diagnose the problem as a lack of income from all sources (including wages from the gold mines in South Africa), and therefore correctly allocate their household labour not to plugging the gulley but to ensuring the flow of non agricultural income.

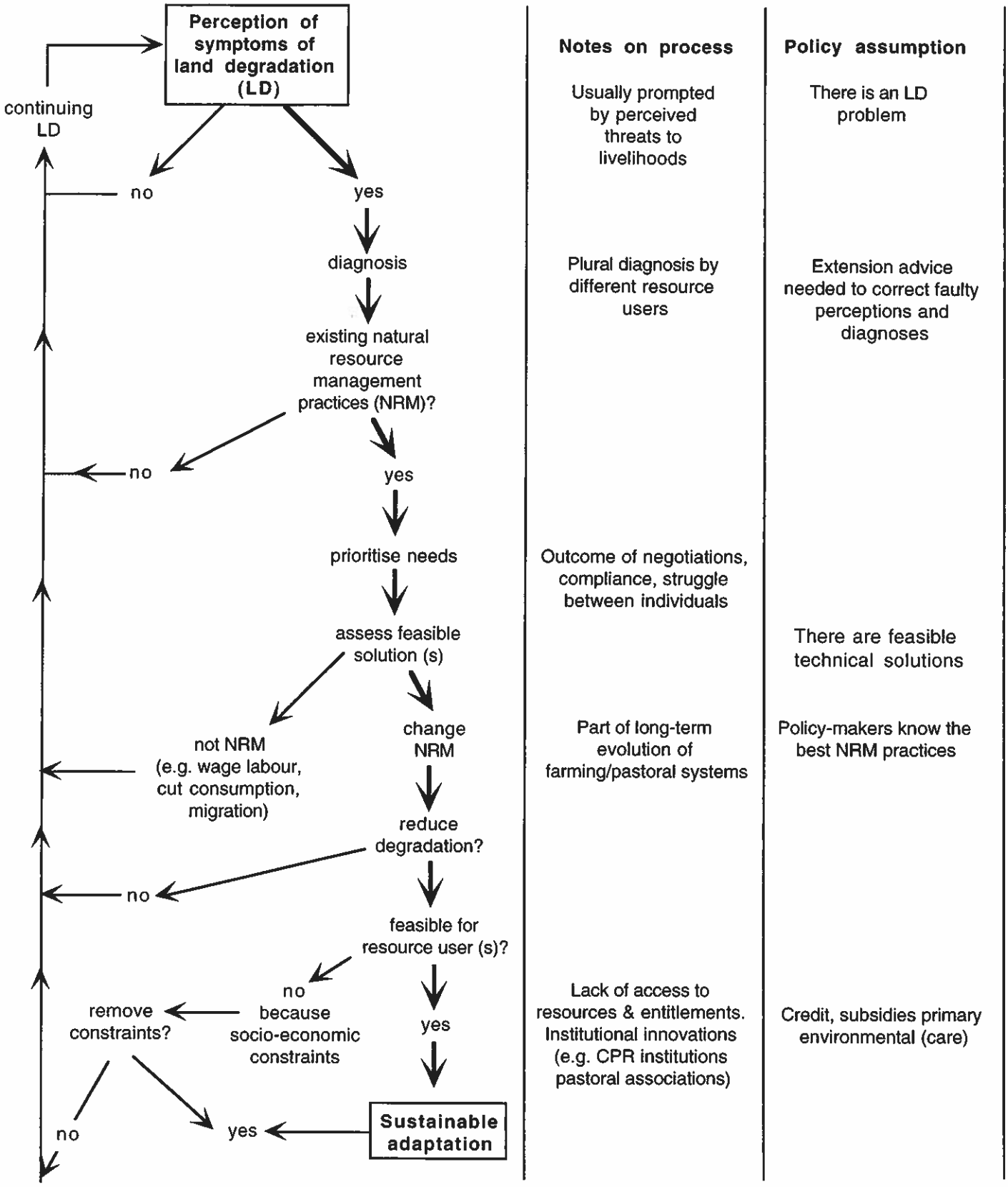
d) Search for solutions. This search may reflect differing priorities of men, women, children, senior and junior members of the household. An understanding of this search should recognise that the characterisation of a joint utility function disguises conflict within the household particularly between men and women. The costs and benefits of different solutions are viewed differently by people of different identities (gender, age, ethnicity, caste, etc.). Externally calculated costs and benefits usually cannot specify whose costs and benefits. Outcomes are decided locally by domestic and community politics. These indeed may lead to environmentally harmful outcomes.

e) Choice of solution. Certainly the choice of solution in the classic approach is less rational than the project cycle suggests. While the project cycle is a normative planning technique which should arrive at a solution through rational means, reality suggests that the cycle is actually followed in reverse. The solution is selected first to satisfy the prejudices and interests of the powerful, and then the cycle is

worked backwards to legitimate the choice and to sanctify it with the appropriate cost-benefit ratio.

4. Conclusion.

Effective environmental management is the outcome of what people actually do, the day-to-day decisions they make about how they use and manage their resources. Our perspectives of these decisions are coloured by the general approach to environmental management we take and to the role we see the state should take in this process. However the institutional rather than the technical presents most problems.


Perception of symptoms of land degradation (LD)
continuing LD
no
yes
diagnosis
existing natural resource management practices (NRM)?
no
yes
prioritise needs
assess feasible solution (s)
not NRM (e.g. wage labour, cut consumption, migration)
change NRM
reduce degradation?
no
feasible for resource user (s)?
no because socio-economic constraints
remove constraints?
yes
no
yes
Sustainable adaptation
Notes on process
Usually prompted by perceived threats to livelihoods
Plural diagnosis by different resource users
Outcome of negotiations, compliance, struggle between individuals
Part of long-term evolution of farming/pastoral systems
Lack of access to resources & entitlements. Institutional innovations (e.g. CPR institutions pastoral associations)
Policy assumption
There is an LD problem
Extension advice needed to correct faulty perceptions and diagnoses
There are feasible technical solutions
Policy-makers know the best NRM practices
Credit, subsidies primary environmental (care)