



# NEWS

## PARTICIPATORY FOREST MANAGEMENT



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Dear Readers,

The last decade has seen a sea-change in attitudes. Today it is hardly possible to conceive of any tropical forest being managed without some kind of involvement by local people. This can range from joint forest management schemes in which state foresters still play a dominant role to situations in which decision-making power is fully devolved to indigenous people. But what constitutes successful participatory forest management? Although popular and recognised as being the most promising way to ensure that forests are conserved while continuing to meet the needs of the poor, implementation of the concept of participatory forest management (PFM) is still lagging far behind the optimistic rhetoric.

As illustrated by the contributions in this issue from Africa, Asia and Latin America, effective PFM still faces many challenges. Examples from India show that, even after several years of implementation, many community members are unaware of the Joint Forest Management schemes in their villages. This lack of involvement is particularly true in the case of women, whose participation needs to be promoted more actively with training and exchanges of experience between communities. Successful implementation must recognise and work with traditional social structures. This means that there is no simple PFM model that can be copied from one project to another - rather it is necessary in every case to be aware of local power systems and to identify all stakeholders with their often conflicting agendas. In particular we need a better understanding of the costs and benefits of PFM to each group of stakeholders in order to be able to provide the appropriate incentives for them to participate more actively.

While there has been much focus on the socio-economic and institutional challenges facing PFM, we should not forget the more technical silvicultural issues. Many PFM projects begin with a focus on a relatively passive use of forest products, predominantly for subsistence. We now need to take the next step and help communities move towards more active forest management to meet both subsistence and commercial needs. The use of simple software and technology such as aerial photos can help to combine qualitative and quantitative information, providing resource information relevant to communities' needs at the same time as presenting it in a form acceptable to forest administrations.

The greatest need perhaps is for better communication. At the level of individual PFM projects this means better dialogue between scientific research and the often very detailed indigenous knowledge available amongst local people. At a regional level, networking of communities involved in PFM can help to ensure the sustainability of the system by providing support and locally relevant information. Finally, at the global level, as this issue shows, we are seeing a very rapid accumulation of PFM experience. It is essential that we continue to share this information, assess it constructively, and find more ways of making it available to the growing number of foresters and communities embarking on PFM activities.

Kate Schreckenbergh, Overseas Development Institute, United Kingdom

We are grateful to Kate Schreckenbergh for editing this issue of the ETFRN News. Please note the themes and deadlines for the next issues on the back cover and I look forward to receiving your contributions.

Willemine Brinkman

ETFRN Coordination Unit  
c/o The Tropenbos Foundation  
PO Box 232, 6700 AE Wageningen  
The Netherlands  
Tel: +31 317495516 - New!  
Fax: +31 317495521 - New!  
Email: [etfrn@iac.agro.nl](mailto:etfrn@iac.agro.nl)  
<http://www.etfrn.org/etfrn>

Cover illustration kindly contributed by  
Gavin Jordan, University of Central  
Lancashire, United Kingdom (see article on  
page 15)

Editor: Willemine Brinkman  
Guest Editor for this issue: Kate Schreckenbergh  
Editorial assistance: Evelyn Whyte