Investing in collaboration to manage environmental resource conflict

Collaborating for Resilience

Summary

Conflict over environmental resources endangers rural people's livelihoods and can increase the risk of broader social conflict. Yet action to sustain shared resources can also be a potent source of community building. Investing in capacities for conflict management can help launch innovations that build resilient rural livelihoods and strengthen institutions for equitable environmental governance. Governments and development agencies should invest in such capacity and integrate collaborative dialogue about environmental resources into program and policy implementation.

The problem

Competition for natural resources has increased due to growing populations, urbanization, economic integration and resource-intensive patterns of consumption. At the same time, climate change is introducing new stresses on agriculture and ecosystems. For the rural poor who depend on common lands, forests, fisheries and water resources, the combination of growing competition and ecosystem change can increase poverty and vulnerability.

Some degree of competition or conflict is intrinsic to natural resource management. Community-based institutions have developed to manage local environmental resource competition; however, these institutions are typically inadequate to address more complex challenges involving diverse actors across multiple sectors and scales. Also, governance systems at subnational, national and international levels often lack appropriate mechanisms to ensure access to justice and public participation in decision-making about environmental resources. In the absence of such mechanisms, resource conflict can aggravate other social or economic divisions, contributing to broader social conflict. It can also undermine and reverse development gains in other areas, such as health, education and nutrition.

The importance of multistakeholder dialogue

Multistakeholder dialogue can be used to understand and address the roots of environmental resource conflict. The Strengthening Aquatic Resource Governance project demonstrated this in three ecoregions: Lake Victoria, with a focus on Uganda; Lake Kariba, with a focus on Zambia; and Tonle Sap Lake in Cambodia. These ecoregions are characterized by persistent poverty, high dependence on aquatic resources for food security and livelihoods, intense resource competition, limited ability of local stakeholders to effectively influence broader decision-making processes and policies, and significant new pressures that could lead to broader social conflict if not effectively addressed.

Working in partnership with government, community and civil society actors, the initiative applied a common approach to stakeholder engagement called "Collaborating for Resilience." In each ecoregion, collaborators assisted local stakeholders in developing a shared understanding of risks and opportunities, weighing alternative actions, developing action plans, and evaluating and learning from the outcomes.

As a result of this dialogue process, the initiative helped launch new efforts to increase community voices in private sector investment decisions and secure access rights for marginalized households in the face of competition. The initiative also helped strengthen community-based co-management, resource protection and public health. Significant outcomes include the following:

- **Improved attitudes toward collaboration and heightened dialogue among community groups, non governmental organizations and government.** In Uganda, for example, the lakeshore community of Kachanga demonstrated a new willingness to invest in community-led actions to address challenges such as water pollution after successfully mobilizing to build a shared latrine and biogas facility.

- **New and successful engagement with private investors.** Overcoming initial reluctance on the part of the regional chief, villagers in Kamimbi fishing village in Zambia, for example, have negotiated agreements with commercial aquaculture investors to maintain fishing grounds and access routes, as well as to secure local jobs.
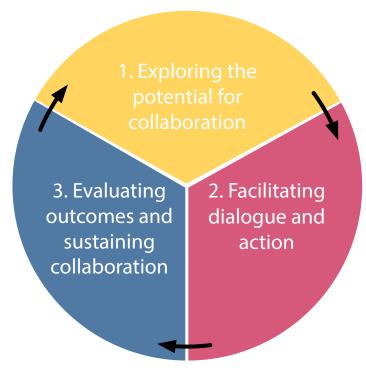

Figure 1. The action and learning cycle using the Collaborating for Resilience dialogue approach

- **Influence on government priorities in addressing the needs of local communities.** Floating fishing communities in Cambodia, for example, have partnered with government agencies to introduce innovative joint patrols to stem illegal fishing, and are working to gain approval for an experimental model of community-based commercial fish production.

- **Engaging new sources of support to scale out innovations.** U.N. agencies and the Ministry of Water and Environment in Uganda, for example, are working to respond more effectively to the priorities of lakeshore communities in health and sanitation. Likewise, the Zambian Environmental Management Agency is extending the dialogue approach to strengthen community voices in environmental impact assessment processes. And in Cambodia, the Fisheries Administration has committed to supporting evaluation of local conflict management initiatives in order to draw lessons for broader policy implementation.

Figure 2. Three ecoregions of the Strengthening Aquatic Resources Governance project, with focal countries highlighted

Gathering of village leaders, Kachanga village, Uganda

Recommendations

Policy initiatives and program investments that strengthen natural resource management, boost agricultural livelihoods, catalyze rural enterprise or build capacity for climate change adaptation can achieve more lasting benefits if built from a basis of collaborative dialogue.

A structured process of multistakeholder dialogue can open new opportunities for joint action and settle disputes before they escalate. It can also help shift longstanding relationships, such as those between government agencies and traditional authorities. And it offers a way for new players, including outside investors, to address local concerns and minimize risks.

Government officials and development agencies should work to build local capacity for conflict management and collaboration over environmental resources. Specifically, they should take the following steps:

1. **Be ready to listen and respond to local priorities.** Outside investments may deliver few results if not matched by local actors' belief in the value of collaboration. Participants will only see collaborative processes as valuable if the outcomes bring direct benefits as defined by the communities concerned. Addressing local disputes often requires support from higher levels of administration, so building capacity within government agencies to convene and facilitate dialogue is critical. Successful examples of this type of collaboration can also strengthen mechanisms of government accountability over time.

2. **Recognize that policy change can aggravate conflicts when instituted without adequate stakeholder involvement.** National policy initiatives that are implemented from the top down, such as promotion of Nile perch exports in Uganda or maize production in Zambia, can leave fishing communities marginalized from decision-making, contributing to local tensions and conflict. A rapid attempt to introduce new rules, such as the post-reform fishing regulations in Cambodia, can also shortcut local input and build resentment. On the other hand, reforms can provide a particularly opportune moment for local innovation if national agencies can engage effectively with local communities, adapt, and respond to their priorities.

3. **Work jointly with local stakeholders to understand the institutional and governance context.** Engaging multiple stakeholders in this type of joint assessment is important to identify risks and appropriate areas for support. It can reveal critical gaps between policy design and implementation, or highlight ways in which government institutions may frustrate rather than assist dispute resolution. And it can help identify new pathways for local voices to influence more powerful actors in government or the private sector.

4. **Promote women's voices and decision-making roles.** Gender inequities often mean local women's concerns are suppressed or sidelined in debates over natural resource management and other development priorities. Supporting individual change agents in government, civil society and the private sector who are prepared to advocate for women's voices and concerns can help shift institutional priorities and open new pathways to institutional change.

5. **Strengthen civil society organizations.** Achieving effective stakeholder involvement in policy or institutional reform decisions depends on robust civil society organizations. Such groups are often uniquely well-positioned to initiate a dialogue process if they have legitimacy with communities and experience working with government actors at different levels. Identifying groups who play such a bridging role and helping to strengthen their capacities in conflict management can complement investments in more formal institutional mechanisms for dispute resolution.

6. **Invest in collaborative dialogue.** Supporting the local innovations that emerge from dialogue means reorienting many of the conventional practices of project management. Blueprint plans, fixed timelines of activities and centralized decision-making must give way to adaptability, joint problem assessment, and a diversity of actions by different groups. Investing in collaboration, therefore, requires a tolerance for uncertainty and risk, as well as a readiness to learn. Participatory monitoring and evaluation efforts can yield lessons about the dynamics of conflict and collaboration over time, providing opportunities to adjust program investments and scale up the most promising innovations.

"We're using dialogue to achieve good outcomes for everyone. Now we have strong collaboration with NGO partners. We consult regularly to address local problems. Before we were in conflict, but now we understand each other, we reach agreements together … That's an important achievement."
  - Kaing Khim, Deputy Director General, Fisheries Administration, Cambodia

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Kaing Khim

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