Governing natural resources for effectiveness, equity and sustainability: what matters?

The governance of natural resources – such as fisheries, forests and grazing land – often fails to deliver adequately on sustainable use, justice and improved livelihoods. Decision-making structures and processes determine the management of resources and who benefits from them. How can governance approaches become more effective and fair to enable improved sustainability and livelihoods over time?

Key Messages

Improving effectiveness

1. Greater cooperation and coordination is essential between actors, including within and across government.

2. An ecosystem-based approach could encourage greater coordination, plus recognition of multiple ecosystem services and of potential trade-offs from policy. Transparent processes for resolving trade-offs are needed.

Improving equity and livelihoods

3. Governance systems must be deliberately designed to deliver on fairness and poverty alleviation.

4. Intermediary organisations can help build trust between resource users and government actors. Their participation often depends on project funding, so adequate sustained support should be given.

5. Governance approaches should address distribution (who bears costs and benefits), procedure (who participates and how) and recognition (whose voice, rights, values and priorities are heard and respected) to be equitable and just.

Improving sustainability

6. New approaches should consider existing systems, including local rule-making structures.

7. Inclusion of adaptive management and active learning processes can acknowledge the inevitability of change to natural and social systems, and anticipate the adaptation of governance systems in response.

What is natural resource governance?

Governance refers to decision-making about how resources are managed and who can benefit from them. For renewable natural resources, this means governance affects the condition of resources and the wellbeing of people who depend on them. Governance happens at many interconnected levels, including by groups of people within a local area and at sub-national, national and international levels.

A useful definition of the governance of natural resources is:

> … the norms, institutions, and processes that determine how power and responsibilities over natural resources are exercised, how decisions are taken and how citizens – including women, men, youth, indigenous peoples and local communities – secure access to, participate in, and are impacted by the management of natural resources.[1]

Governance is different from management as the term refers to the people and structures that make decisions about management measures. The two are closely connected. Box 1 sets out the main governance approaches found in relation to natural resources, illustrating the diversity of approaches and range of actors involved.

Community forestry meeting, Nepal
Photo credit: Maksha Maharjan

Making natural resource governance more effective, equitable and sustainable

Despite the many approaches and arrangements that exist, all too often natural resource use is not sustainable, and livelihoods of the poor are not adequately improved. Governance systems are not held accountable and there is a lack of transparency in decision-making. The following recommendations are distilled from decades of research into natural resource governance. They are informed by a systematic mapping of literature, interviews with 23 projects funded by ESPA and a workshop with a range of government and non-government partners and sectors.

Improve effectiveness: coordinate policy, planning and action and address trade-offs

Many actors and parts of government may be involved in governance, at multiple levels, sectors and jurisdictions. This is because the biophysical boundaries of natural resources often do not align with administrative boundaries and there are often multiple uses made of a resource. Time constraints, limited resources and differences in objectives and working practices mean that coordination between actors and structures may be limited. A fragmented approach to governance may result, leading to duplication and missed opportunities for more effective management. This fragmented approach may lead to benefits from ecosystem services being undermined, with trade-offs in use and policy failing to be recognised and resolved.

1. *Improving effectiveness in the governance of complex ecosystems requires greater cooperation and coordination between actors, including between parts and levels of government. Mechanisms and incentives are needed to enable this to happen, which could include the identification of 'champions' for coordination and the formation of working groups.*

2. *An ecosystem-based approach could encourage greater coordination, as well as recognition of multiple ecosystem services and the identification of potential trade-offs resulting from policy. Transparent processes for resolving trade-offs should be established.*

Improve equity: utilise inclusive design processes and systems

Ensuring that all stakeholder groups have an equitable voice in governance structures and processes is a challenge. Powerful interests, including government, the private sector and wealthier members of a community, often dominate. Legislation allowing the involvement of other actors often keeps more power with government, which has more resources, including knowledge and funds, than communities. People with more money and higher social status may be more able to secure a place in the system and places for people who will support them. This means that people of certain ethnicities or poorer people may have less chance of being heard. Women are less likely to be on user committees than men in many situations.

3. *Deliberate effort should be made in the design and operation of governance systems to deliver on fairness and poverty alleviation. A system that allocates and recognises the rights of all resource users should be considered.*

4. *Appropriate opportunities should be given to all stakeholder groups within resource-user communities to engage effectively in governance. They may need dedicated training and support over time to contribute effectively and ensure their voices are heard.*

5. *Intermediary organisations, such as NGOs, can often play a useful role in building trust between resource users and government actors. However, their participation often relates to project funding and so should be adequately supported over a sustained period.*

6. *Creating equitable and just governance approaches should address the different dimensions of equity and justice, including distribution (who bears costs and benefits), procedure (who participates and how) and recognition (whose voice, rights, values and priorities are heard and respected).*

Box 2 provides an example of how and why different governance approaches are associated with different outcomes and perceptions of fairness.

Co-management on Lake Victoria
Photo credit: Fiona Nunan

> **Despite the many approaches and arrangements that exist, all too often natural resource use is not sustainable, and livelihoods of the poor are not adequately improved.**

Box 2: Learning from natural resource governance approaches in Tanzania

In comparing four prominent resource governance systems in Tanzania, Patenaude and Lewis (2014)[2] found that the systems that were most successful at improving ecosystem health and reducing poverty were those in which decisions were made at local levels and where people believed that access and benefits were fair. The systems were: Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM), Joint Forest Management (JFM), Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) and *ngitili* enclosures, a traditional land husbandry technique practised by some Sukuma pastoralists.

Ngitili and CBFM demonstrated the attributes of local decision-making and fairness. Where decisions were made at higher levels, community ownership was lacking and there was limited understanding about why decisions were made.

The authors recommend the following to inform Tanzania's REDD+ (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) approach:

1. A decentralised approach would promote democratisation. It should not be driven by the objective of reducing government expenditure.

2. The system must commit to fair benefit distribution.

3. There must be cooperation between agencies, across programmes, and between actors and administrative levels.

4. Governance structures should build on existing traditional systems, to support buy-in by communities and simplify the operation of the governance system.

The authors conclude that there should be flexibility in governance design and implementation, so that systems reflect local contexts and preferences.

Useful guidance and toolkits

Barrow, E. *et al.* (2016) *Responsive Forest Governance Initiative (RFGI) handbook II, implementing improved natural resource governance in practice: an action learning handbook for sub-Saharan Africa.* Dakar: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

Pomeroy, R.S. and R. Rivera-Guieb (2006) *Fishery co-management: a practical handbook.* Wallingford: International Development Research Centre, CABI Publishing.

Springer, J. (2016) *Initial design document for a natural resource governance framework.* Natural Resource Governance Framework Working Paper No. 1. Gland, Switzerland: International Union for Conservation of Nature/Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy.

Credit

About the ESPA Programme

ESPA is a global development research programme established in 2009 with funding from the Department for International Development (DFID), the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). ESPA is one of the most comprehensive research programmes exploring the linkages between ecosystem services and human wellbeing. ESPA aims to provide new worldclass research evidence demonstrating how ecosystem services can reduce poverty and enhance wellbeing for the world's poor.

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Improve sustainability: locally specific, adaptive governance

It is challenging to keep operational and effective governance arrangements in place over time in situations of diverse interests and constrained resources. This suggests that understanding of the local context is essential, including of the local rules and systems already in place before new governance arrangements are introduced. With such knowledge, there is greater chance that arrangements will be locally specific, and developed and shaped by those involved in the social and natural resource systems. To maintain effectiveness, systems and structures must have potential to change over time in response to evolving circumstances and new information – they should be *adaptive*.

7. *The design of new approaches should take into consideration existing systems, including local rule-making structures.*

8. *Inclusion of adaptive management and active learning processes can acknowledge the inevitability of change to natural and social systems, and anticipate and allow the adaptation of governance systems in response.*

More information can be found on the findings of this systematic review and the literature that it draws on in:

Nunan, F., M. Menton, C. McDermott and K. Schreckenberg (forthcoming) 'Governing for ecosystem health and human wellbeing', in Schreckenberg, K., G. Mace and M. Poudyal (eds) *Ecosystem services for poverty alleviation: trade-offs and governance.* London: Earthscan.

References

1. Campese, J. (2016: 7) *Natural Resource Governance Framework Assessment Guide: Learning for improved natural resource governance.* Natural Resource Governance Framework Working Paper. Gland, Switzerland: International Union for Conservation of Nature/Commission on Environmental, Economic and Social Policy.
2. Patenaude G. and Lewis, K. (2014) 'The impacts of Tanzania's natural resource management programmes for ecosystem services and poverty alleviation', *International Forestry Review* 16(4): 459-473.

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