

Forest-friendly development

Development of forest areas, particularly in the mountain regions of NWFP, is faced with the two-key challenges of poverty alleviation and environmental conservation

By Babar Shahbaz & Dr Tanvir Ali According to State of the World's Forests, published by FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation), only 2.36m hectare of land in Pakistan is under forest cover, which constitutes 3.1% of the total land area in country and is extremely inadequate. Pakistan has one of the highest rates of deforestation in the world. FAO estimates that the forest area of Pakistan decreased from 2,755 thousand ha in 1990 to 2,361 thousand ha in 2000, with annual decline of 39 thousand hectares.



Forest depletion has emerged as one of the most serious environmental issues for Pakistan, accompanied with many other environmental and economic effects such as land slides, soil erosion, floods, soil degradation, displacement of people etc. The ongoing trend of deforestation has a negative impact not only on production and protection functions of the forests but also on the livelihoods of those who live in and around forests.

The UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in 1992 led to the general adoption of a concept of sustainable development based on an equilibrium between three components: economic development; conservation of the environment; and social justice. Forests featured prominently at the conference and have remained high on the international agenda ever since. In the pursuance of the "Forest Principles" and of Chapter 11 of Agenda 21 adopted at UNCED, initiatives were launched around the world to define the notion of sustainable forest management in more specific and operational terms. UNCED, also referred to as the Rio Conference, served to catalyse debate and action on forests--redefining for what, and for whom, forests are managed.

The issues of poverty reduction and of forest degradation both rank highly on the international discourse. Attempts have been made to link the two together in a 'downward spiral'--poverty is seen as a cause of forest loss, and forest loss contributes to maintain or even increase poverty. There is nowadays a broad consensus about the multi-dimensional and dynamic character of poverty. Growth is, therefore, not the only route to poverty reduction, and aspects related to distribution of assets (for example land), vulnerability and human development are proving equally important. This is reflected in the generally accepted definition of poverty given by the World Bank: "Poverty is a pronounced deprivation of well-being related to lack of material income or consumption, low levels of education and health, vulnerability and exposure to risk, and voicelessness and powerlessness."

The above definition of poverty underlines the fact that poverty is not only income and/or food-based. This welfare aspect of poverty has to be complemented by 'asset' poverty, which emphasises on the importance of access to various assets. Following this line of thinking, a current approach that attempts to go beyond income and food and to include multidimensional characteristics and causes is that of sustainable livelihoods approach adopted by London-based Department for International Development (DFID), according to which: "A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and

recover from stresses and shocks, and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base."

The five forms of capital required for sustainable livelihoods are:

] Natural Capital: Natural resources such as land, forests, water, wildlife and pastures.

] Human Capital: Health, nutritional levels, educational standards and skills

] Social Capital: The set of social relationships in which people can draw to expand livelihood options. These include kinship, friendship, membership of organisations etc.

] Physical Capital: Privately owned assets that can be used to increase labour and land productivity (such as farm animals, tools and machinery) and public owned economic infrastructure (roads, electricity etc) and social infrastructure (schools, hospitals etc)

] Financial Capital: Cash (income and savings) and readily convertible liquid capital.

Forests are important natural capital. Past development efforts have primarily focused on building natural capital. However, equal attention has not been paid to how assets such as forests are used in combination with other natural assets and other livelihood assets to sustain livelihoods. This has resulted in gaps in our understanding of the contribution of forest products to sustainable livelihoods and thus poverty reduction.

The issue of poverty in the mountain areas of Pakistan in general and NWFP in particular, is relatively serious. These areas are among the least developed in the country. Harsh weather conditions, remote geographical location, scattered population across many small villages, undeveloped physical and social infrastructure, under-developed markets, and inadequate investment in financial and human capital have been among key defining characteristics of the poverty problem in these areas.

The mountain communities largely depend on natural resources to earn their living. Therefore, poverty in these areas is causing depletion of forests. Poverty pressure on households near forests and rangelands compels them to cut trees and overgraze fragile areas.

Forests are amongst several possible sources of livelihood means for the poor people living in these areas. The mountains of NWFP are home to millions of rural poor, and their future livelihoods are being threatened by rapid degradation of natural resources, and this could also have serious implications in terms of downstream flooding and siltation. Many studies have suggested that, unless concerted action is taken immediately, poverty, hunger, and decline in resources will continue to aggravate these mountain areas. The important contributing factors are rapid population growth, insufficient growth in per capita incomes from both agricultural and non-agricultural sources, and mismanagement of a fragile environment.

Increasing number of poor people has little option but to expand the area under cultivation to marginal and forest lands. Indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources such as forests, not only by locals but also by outside interests, and many development activities have added to resource degradation leading to problems such as soil erosion, loss in land productivity, and pollution of the environment.

Shifting the focus of development efforts from resources and products to people and their livelihood outcomes lies at the heart of the sustainable livelihoods approach. Previously, little attention was given to resolving mountain development problems. Today there is a rising tide of expectation after centuries of isolation. There is much enthusiasm and willingness to work for a better future. There have been several initiatives in the recent past, by government and local communities, to improve livelihoods and conserve the environment in their mountain areas. The results have varied depending on the degree to which mountain 'specificities' have been incorporated and the appropriateness of institutional mechanism used for their implementation. Yet the challenges of poverty alleviation and sustainability of livelihoods are becoming more serious, primarily due to the overall

inaccessibility and fragility of resources and environment in these areas, but also on account of the socio-political and economic marginality of mountain people and the unsuitability of institutional and related armaments often taken in development initiatives. Nonetheless, there are some success stories amidst a plethora of failed experiments; and it is necessary to look at both chart out appropriate approaches and strategies for the future.

The forestry sector in Pakistan is among the best remaining colonial artifacts. The department that was created in the nineteenth century continues to be centralised and top-down in management operations, insular in outlook, and bureaucratic in nature. Most of the forest policies until recently, besides being scientific in intent and purpose, have viewed local population as the prime threat to the forests. Recognising the limitations of this approach the forest department in NWFP initiated an institutional reform process through the creation of an Institutional Transformation Cell (ITC), revision of the Forest Act of 1927, a forest policy for NWFP and the creation of a Forestry Commission to advise the forest department. Many new sections have been created eg "CD/GAD (Community Development/ Gender and Development), HRD (Human Resource Development) etc. The concept of community participation was introduced through "Joint Forest Management" around 1996 for the first time in Pakistan. Moreover the devolution/decentralisation plan has added an additional dimension to the forest reform process

The efforts of private sector and NGOs to restore natural resources and improving social capital have been quite successful. For instance, Kalam Integrated Development Project was started in 1981 with Swiss assistance. A key part of the project was the formation of community-based organisations thus helping communities to organise themselves for collective action. The German aid agency GTZ initiated a social forestry project for natural resource management on self-help promotion in NWFP in 1992, which is generally termed as Siran Forest Development Project (SFDP). The project was aimed at the participation of local communities along with forest department to form joint forest management committees. It was the success of SFDP that encouraged the Federal Government to modify the Forest Act of 1927 with what is known as Hazara Protected

Forest Rules, 1996. This modification mandated the formation of Joint Forest Management Committees (JFM), including operational guidelines and production-sharing agreement with the provincial government.

The role of forest resources in meeting increasing human needs and the deteriorating plight of mountain forests during the past two decades have caused intense national and international debates and raised concerns in the mountain regions. However, attention and interventions have so far focused mainly on resource degradation, loss of biodiversity, and the effects of loss of forest cover on the regional and global climates. Inadequate attention has been paid locally, nationally, and internationally to the serious implications of diminishing forest resources for local people who depend on forests for their livelihoods. However, recently the Swiss-based National Centre for Competence in Research (NCCR North-South) in collaboration with Pakistan's Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) has initiated a research project to analyse the institutional changes in forest management and their impact upon rural livelihoods in NWFP.

Development of forest areas, particularly in the mountain regions of NWFP, is faced with the two-key challenges of poverty alleviation and environmental conservation. The omission of economic considerations from both forestry and economic policy planning and practice has resulted in a situation where sustainable forest management is not economically attractive to communities.

There is an urgent need to provide economic incentives for communities to become involved in sustainable forest management. The very resources that form the major sources of income and livelihood for forest-dependent people are environmentally vulnerable. The overuse and exploitation of these resources endanger not only the ecological balance but also threaten sustainability of livelihoods. Sustained efforts in this direction are urgently needed, as poverty and environmental degradation are found to reinforce each other.

For poverty analysis and poverty reduction interventions to be effective, it is important to understand the multiple livelihood

assets and livelihood activities in order to understand the multiple sources of vulnerability faced by the poor, the multiple ways in which their lives are affected by structures and institutions, and the varied ways in which development interventions may strengthen or weaken these livelihood activities.

In addition to recognising these activities, using livelihoods approaches requires an attempt to understand the processes that underlie poverty, and the social, cultural, political, and institutional contexts in which poor people live. Although the individual, household, and community are the primary levels of analysis, livelihood approaches seek out the relevant interactions at micro, intermediate, and macro levels.