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About this project

Name

Just ecosystem management: linking ecosystem services with poverty alleviation.

Principal investigator

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Partners

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Time frame

November 2010 – May 2013.

Objective

This project promotes 'just ecosystem management' as a new conceptual framework, through research examining socio-ecological trade-offs and justice dimensions in the management of ecosystem services.

Summary

In case studies across China, India and Uganda, researchers have explored how issues of justice affect the ecological and socio-economic outcomes of policies intended to conserve ecosystem services. Questions such as what represents a fair trade-off, or who should receive benefits, participate in decisions and be recognised as a stakeholder, are ubiquitous in management decisions and conflicts over resources – but usually remain implicit.

When stakeholders don't address these questions directly, the social dividends from healthier natural resources may not reach those who need them most. And stakeholders may not lend the required support to investments in ecosystem services. To advance the concept of 'just ecosystem management', the researchers consulted with local and national policymakers and NGOs, and actively supported a watershed protection project funded by a German NGO in China.



Doing justice to poverty and ecology

Conservation and poverty alleviation can go hand in hand, but only if issues of justice are addressed

According to many environment and development experts, China's Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) wasn't good policy. The programme, which started in 1999 after the disastrous Yangtze River floods, paid farmers on upland watersheds to convert crop fields to tree plantings as flood protection. Critics said the policy's top-down structure reverted back to the bad old days of Chinese central planning, with compensation that did not match the huge losses farmers suffered from the forced conversion.

Yet an ESPA-funded study in the Yunnan province of south-western China reports that the programme has been surprisingly successful – at least in some locations. Tree plantations in the study area have expanded rapidly and farmers planting low-maintenance forests have been able to take jobs or start new businesses, thereby diversifying their livelihoods. Nationwide, SLCP has converted 15 million hectares of cropland, measurably reduced runoff and erosion, and improved socio-economic wellbeing in participating areas.

Why did the scheme work? It gave poor farmers a fair deal. The emerging evidence suggests that a concern for social justice, not just watersheds, drove the programme; and despite the top-down design, it happened to serve farmers' interests as well as the Government's.

A central aim of ESPA is to better understand why poor people sometimes gain from improved ecosystem services – such as soil stability or flood control – but in other cases are left behind. The missing links, say this project's researchers, are issues of justice. Ecosystem protection benefits some stakeholders more than others.

Management decisions involve and exclude different groups. When natural capital is accurately valued, it yields dividends to some people – but not necessarily the poor. For that, policymakers must start thinking about environmental justice.

The group, led by Thomas Sikor of the University of East Anglia, calls this 'just ecosystem management'. They are exploring the concept in three ESPA-funded case studies in China, India and Uganda.

In the Chinese study, local people told interviewers that they aspired to get off the farm. To them, a just policy is one that offers them a safety net for this transition. The government wanted to fairly compensate farmers for preserving watersheds to benefit society. From the wide distribution of payments, researchers inferred another justice goal: safeguarding livelihoods of all poor upland farmers, not just those upstream of the Yangtze.

Notions of justice permeated a policy that, on the surface, simply aimed to protect watershed services. Responding to justice concerns, China's government eventually increased payments and allowed farmers to intercrop trees with agricultural crops. And fortuitously, the tree-planting payments satisfied the justice concerns both of government and of farmers.

The other case studies bring further examples from a wide range of contexts for how justice matters in ecosystem management.

In Uganda's Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, the park authority and NGOs have tried to channel park revenues back to local communities. Yet this has achieved mixed results in terms of reconciling the interests of local people with those of park authorities. This is partly because the proportion of revenues shared is very small, especially in comparison with the costs arising from diminished resource access and damage to crops from wild animals. For some groups, and especially the indigenous people who were previously forced off the land, such small benefits cannot compensate for either the material or cultural losses.

The India study examined issues of justice in terms of its distribution and also the recognition of local communities affected by the creation of two neighbouring protected areas in coastal Odisha. Remote sensing was combined with qualitative social research techniques to provide powerful evidence of the extremely precarious situation being faced by local people in and around Bhitarkanika National Park. Worsening mangrove cover over time together with restricted access, perverse governance arrangements based upon porous borders, corrupt officials, and no benefit sharing or consultative mechanisms, have created a situation that is not only unjust for people but also defeating the conservation objectives of the park.

To translate understanding to policy – and to make a better life for poor communities – all these case studies have built in regular consultations with local and national stakeholders. Researchers have briefed agencies and NGOs, and the studies culminated with policy papers, workshops and short films to discuss results and highlight recommendations. Most of all though, is a desire to bring explicit discussions of justice to the table. As seen in Yunnan, if environmental policies are to succeed in alleviating poverty, they may have to find the overlap between differing ideals of justice.

Next steps

The research team in China, led by Dr Jun He from the Chinese Academy of Sciences, is advising a watershed protection project implemented by the local forest department with funding from the German NGO Misereor. The project is focusing on building community capacity for rights-based rural development, providing training related to forest and environmental rights to the community as well as enhancing the development of agroforestry in the project site.

The researchers have taken first steps to test the theoretical ideas developed under this project through empirical research in Laos, and are developing tools for research and development practice in collaboration with the Wildlife Conservation Society.



New knowledge

- These case studies show that ideas about just management permeate the actions and arguments of governments, NGOs and communities. But these ideals often remain implicit and may generate unrecognised conflicts.
- There is no single concept of justice. Various stakeholders understand trade-offs and apply ideas about justice differently.
- Policy discussions must put differing notions of justice on the table. Clashes or overlap in different groups' perceptions of fairness or trade-offs may often determine whether an intervention can succeed in enhancing natural resources and alleviating poverty.

Creating impact

- This project promoted the innovative concept of 'just ecosystem management' – based on the insight that justice issues are the missing link between protecting ecosystem services and ensuring that the poor benefit.
- Fieldwork in China, India and Uganda has shown that more explicit thinking about justice could help policies on ecosystems and poverty succeed. Regular consultations with local and national stakeholders have drawn attention to hidden conflicts over justice and prepared them to change the way they handle these arguments.
- To expand their reach, the research team has compiled a book on justice issues in biodiversity, forests, health and water (published in July 2013). This lays the ground for change across the developing world by explaining why and how justice matters, spreading the 'just ecosystem management' framework and modelling how justice thinking can bridge disciplines.

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