Great Planting Disasters: Pitfalls in Technical Assistance in Forestry

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ABSTRACT. Social forestry, in contrast to traditional forestry, is intended to meet biological/environmental, procedural and equity goals. Social forestry projects may not fulfill this multiplicity of goals either because priority is given to a single goal or because various factors including the structure and norms of implementing institutions and the distribution of local power overwhelm procedural and distributive intentions. Thus, despite participatory and equitable project designs, social forestry projects may result in the distribution of benefits to the rich and costs to the poor and products that either have little local value or lose their value over time. Factors leading to these outcomes are explored and countervailing measures considered.

"Regardless of how well all other rural development efforts may succeed, a Sahel without trees is dead." Fred Weber (1982)

In the mid 1970's a new development fashion emerged which, in the breathless enthusiasm that accompanies all such fashions, was touted as being capable of simultaneously addressing problems of environmental degradation and rural poverty. Social forestry, that is, forestry practiced with and by rural people to meet their needs, was to avoid the environmental and social damage associated with industrial forestry.

Since the 70s the number of projects labeled as social forestry has increased rapidly. Information extracted from Birla Institute of Scientific Research (1984), Roberts et al. (1986), and USAID (1982) shows that since 1971, 44 percent of the funds committed by nine international donors to 91 forestry projects have been earmarked for what could roughly be described as social forestry. Between 1977 and 1986, 44 percent of the lending and 28 percent of the projects in the World Bank forestry portfolio involved social forestry (Spears, 1987). In some cases, such as Betagi Village and the Mahiti Project discussed below, social forestry has succeeded in serving the rural poor. Other projects provide benefits to the rich and costs to the poor. There are no data that indicate with certainty which way the balance is tilted. However, evidence from the experience to date does allow us to explore the factors that might skew benefits away from the poor. This article briefly traces the emergence of social forestry and examines the choices that affect who benefits and who loses in social forestry and the likelihood that the project may turn out to be a white elephant, of value to no one.

From Industrial Forestry to Social Forestry

Although forests have been managed systematically all over the world for millennia, professional forestry traces its institutional origins to the founding of a Meisterschule in the German Harz Mountains in 1763 (Mantel, 1964). Since its inception the practice of professional forestry has revolved around the protection and sus-
Social forestry evolved in Asia as an alternative to traditional professional forestry in response to three general factors—a recognition of the limits of bureaucratic action, the development of national interests in integrating marginal populations into the polity, and the emergence of rural interests in strengthening their security in claims to land and its products (Romm and Fortmann, 1987). The earliest advances were made in India where forest policies became increasingly responsive to the needs of rural people over time, until in the Fifth Five Year Plan (1975–1980) funds were allocated specifically for social forestry (Shingi et al., 1986; Wiersum, 1986). In the mid-1970s international donors picked up on the Indian innovation and began to fund social forestry due to the convergence of four factors. First, in the midst of a general “energy crisis” wood was recognized as an important source of energy, leading to the discovery of a “fuelwood crisis.” Second, research on women’s role in development and the new emphasis on basic human needs focused agency attention on household issues such as the need for fodder, fuelwood, and other “minor” forest products and on the deterioration of land on which women and men produced the household food supply. The third factor was concern over the environmental effects of large-scale logging and the loss of biological diversity associated with plantation forestry. Finally, in places such as the Sahel, the failure of plantation forestry due to inappropriate species choice, poor planting techniques, and the retention of benefits by the government led to an on-the-ground search for what would work in the face of immediate and dire necessity triggered by the drought.

Both bilateral and multilateral donors hopped on the social forestry bandwagon for a variety of reasons. After the virtual abandonment of industrial forestry with the 1972/73 advent of its policy of New Directions emphasizing the poorest of the poor, USAID was pushed into social forestry by a groundswell of field personnel’s concerns with basic human needs and the environment. Additional momentum sprang from an out-of-court settlement of a 1975 lawsuit by environmental organizations (EDF v. AID) resulting in the institution of environmental regulations and the requirement that USAID refrain from environmentally unsound activities. The Canadian International Development Agency’s social forestry program was swept along by concern over the environment, the growing climate of enthusiasm for social forestry, and the influence of the philosophy of John Bene (Bene et al., 1977). In 1978 social forestry’s coming of age was signaled by the theme of the 8th World Forestry Congress—“Forests for People.” The keynote address by one of the architects of FAO’s industrial forestry for development strategy, Jack Westoby, repudiated the earlier orientation because it benefited indigenous and expatriate elites while degrading the environment and neglecting the potential for meeting local needs and increasing rural welfare (Westoby, 1978).