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Assessing the Contribution of Community Forestry to Rural Development: A Comparative Study of Africa, Asia and Europe

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Abstract

Community forestry has been widely promoted as a potential approach to sustainable forestry. It is centred on the meaningful involvement of forest dwellers on forestry activities, with core aims to lifting them from poverty and to supporting rural community development. This is because a large number of poorest households dwell within and or near forests and are heavily dependent on the resources. It further emphasises on improving the communities' socio-economic well-being, promoting social justice, and giving better access to the forests to the people. Therefore, this practice is believed to trigger rural community development by empowering the rural people.

With such philosophies, community forestry has clearly a large potential to contribute to poverty alleviation efforts and rural development. Our case study results from different countries nonetheless suggest that community forestry has not yet signalled significant progress from the earlier forms of forest management. Our cases further reveals that while community forestry has provided some tangible benefits to forest dwellers, there is no clear signal that the programme has lifted them from poverty. The incentives gained commonly only include rights of access for collection of non-wood forest products, and less so for more valuable products, e.g. timber. In addition, our analysis vividly suggests that community forestry is structured with more complex binding contract systems causing hardships experienced by forest dwellers in accessing the forest resource and craft mere impact on rural development. Therefore, to achieve the initial objectives of community forestry, policy makers and forest managers should explore innovations beyond the current practices and genuinely provide more access for local communities on the forest resources.

Keywords: Access, community development, community forestry, empowerment, poverty alleviation