



Poverty alleviation through community forestry in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam: An assessment of the potential

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Abstract

Introduced (as compared to traditional) models of community forestry have developed rapidly in Cambodia and Laos in the last decade, and were recently begun in Vietnam after a pilot phase. What is the potential of these community forestry models to deliver livelihood improvements to participants? This is an important question for two reasons. First, some donors are placing high hopes on community forestry to support poverty alleviation in the Mekong Region. Second, community forestry has generally under-performed in poverty alleviation worldwide. Existing and planned models must be examined to understand to what extent they can fulfill their goals and how they can be improved.

Among various theoretical preconditions for successful poverty alleviation through community forestry, this article focuses on two: (1) the degree to which poverty alleviation is a guiding force in the establishment and implementation of community forestry; and (2) the compatibility of government commitment to poverty alleviation through community forestry with other goals being pursued by the government. How do the three case study countries perform with respect to these preconditions?

With respect to the first precondition, it is found that although all three country programs now espouse poverty alleviation as a key goal, other state goals (e.g., compliance with donor organization recommendations, decentralization, devolution, resource conservation) were the guiding motivations in the establishment and early implementation of the programs.

With respect to the second precondition, programs in all three countries are at least partly undermined by a tendency to favor government, the military, and concessionaires in the appropriation of timber rents, and to exclude people living in or near forests from access to these rents. However in each country there are factors that potentially enable a turn toward poverty alleviation through community forestry. In Cambodia there is less central government control than in Laos or Vietnam. Laos has a high level of forest resources per capita. Vietnam has an exceptionally strong record in poverty alleviation that can be linked to its emerging community forestry program.

The article recommends three core policies to fully realize the potential of poverty alleviation through community forestry: (1) control illegal logging and forest sector corruption; (2) locate community forestry sites where there are abundant forests; and (3) boost forest income through improved access rights, tenure, and benefit sharing, and removal of anti-poor regulations.

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1. Introduction

In Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam traditional community forestry has existed for centuries. Traditional community forestry management continues until the present day, largely in remote areas where ethnic minorities are the dominant population. Since the early 1990s there has emerged in the Mekong region a new, “introduced” model of community forestry. Introduced community forestry is here defined as a system of forest management presented from outside the community by the government, by an international agency, or by a local NGO, or some combination of the three. This article focuses on the latter model, and for that reason, the term “community forestry” will be synonymous with “introduced community forestry” in the rest of the text.

In all three countries, community forestry has grown rapidly in recent years, and poverty alleviation is one of the stated goals of each program. It is important to ask to what extent community forestry can realistically serve as a vehicle for poverty alleviation in the region. Why? First, because some donor institutions serving the three countries are placing high expectations on community forestry to contribute meaningfully to national poverty alleviation initiatives. Second, because the record to date of achieving poverty alleviation through community forestry has been unsatisfactory (Fisher, 2003, p. 18). If community forestry is to serve well as a vehicle for poverty alleviation in the region, then its potential for doing so must be examined, and course corrections must be made where weaknesses are identified.

The article is structured as follows. The second section explains the methodology employed in researching this topic. The third section examines features the three countries share in common. The fourth, fifth, and sixth sections examine the unique characteristics of each country. The seventh summarizes the results and makes policy recommendations.

2. Methodology

Ideally, an assessment of the poverty alleviation potential of community forestry would be based on primary research at a sample of sites. No such empirical research has yet been conducted in Cambodia,

Laos, and Vietnam. This paper therefore takes an indirect approach. It analyzes what the secondary literature can tell us about this topic. The paper analyzes the potential for poverty alleviation by examining to what extent theorized preconditions for meeting this goal are fulfilled.

What are the ideal preconditions for fulfillment of poverty alleviation through community forestry? Among the seven imaginable preconditions are the following:

- (1) The government has a fundamental and authentic commitment to poverty alleviation (by whatever definition) to poverty alleviation through community forestry.
- (2) The government is able to exercise this commitment because the goal is consistent with other state goals.
- (3) The administrative apparatus, enabling legislation, and rules and regulations governing community forestry adequately support poverty alleviation.
- (4) There are sufficient financial means to support the establishment and implementation of community forestry.
- (5) There is an adequate level of political and organization power at the local level to enforce entitlements and to exclude unauthorized claimants to forest resources.
- (6) Equity institutions at the local level are sufficiently strong to allocate project benefits to those who are most in need.
- (7) There are sufficient forest resource endowments at project sites.

This article will focus on just the first two of these seven preconditions. Space does not allow examining all seven preconditions. Moreover, it can be assumed that the first two preconditions strongly influence the outcome of the remainder. The first two preconditions amount to being the “political will” component governing the character of community forestry. By and large, there can only be adequate administration and enabling legislation, financial means, ability to exclude resource claimants, and equity at the local level if the state wields its power to assure that these preconditions are met. The state can partly influence the seventh precondition by locating sites near abun-

dant forests, or by establishing plantations, though it cannot in a meaningful way increase its natural forest endowment.

In this article, poverty alleviation shall be defined as a successful lessening of the deprivation of well-being. Further, the term “poverty alleviation” is disaggregated into three sub-types that have special meaning in the context of forest resources. At one extreme, “poverty elimination” means the use of forests “as a source of savings, investment, accumulation, asset building, and permanent increases in income and welfare” (FAO, 2003, p. 61). At the other extreme, “poverty avoidance” and “poverty mitigation” mean the use of forest resources as a source of subsistence income, and “to serve a safety net function, or as a gap filler, including as a source of petty cash” (FAO, 2003, p. 61).

3. Conditions the three countries share in common

There are common characteristics in the history of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam which tend to negate a strong role for poverty alleviation in community forestry. Among these factors are the following.

In the last several decades, the government of the three countries have exhibited (to varying degrees) strong central control of forest lands and forest resources. In connection with this, timber rents have been largely monopolized by the government, the military, and concessionaires. Because of environmental damage resulting from an unsustainable timber harvesting rates, the three countries have imposed logging bans. Partly in connection with a philosophical commitment to control of timber resources by the government, there has been a tendency to turn a blind eye to actual or potential local-level management of forest resources. This outlook persists in spite of a turn toward devolution of resource management in the last decade.

In all three countries, the implementation of community forestry is partly a response to encouragement and financing from multi- and bilateral institutions and from international NGOs that see community forestry as an opportunity to realize broad social, economic and environmental goals. In Cambodia and Vietnam, and to a lesser extent in Laos, the turn toward community forestry has been motivated by

recognition of state incapacity to administer and manage large areas of ever more degraded forests and associated watersheds. (From the government point of view, deforestation and forest degradation are largely the result of over-population and shifting cultivation, not logging.) From this point of view, one institutional impetus for community forestry has been administrative decentralization and devolution of resource management. Although resource management has been devolved in all three countries (to greatly varying degrees), forest lands continue to be owned by the state. Temporary usufruct rights are provided to local users.

Although the language of “poverty alleviation” is found in official documents on community forestry — and ever more so as years pass — the reality is that environmental concerns were dominant in the founding of community forestry programs in each country. Is this at odds with efforts to improve the livelihoods of community forestry participants? Not necessarily so, because there are clear cases where forest resource protection favors positive livelihood outcomes. This is especially the case where poverty avoidance and mitigation are achieved through conservation of natural forests that the poorest of the poor in remote areas depend on. However, there are clear instances where government efforts to favor biodiversity and watershed protection have needlessly undermined livelihood improvements. More importantly, if the guiding motivation of community forestry is *not* poverty alleviation from the outset, then the priorities and character of the program are shaped by other motivations that tend to become ingrained and difficult to alter in the future.

4. Cambodia

The first introduced community forestry sites in Cambodia were established by international NGOs (for example Concern Worldwide and the Mennonite Central Committee) in the early 1990s at a few pilot sites in two provinces (Takeo and Kampong Chhnang) (Sokh and Iida, 2001, p. 116; Braeutigam, 2003, p. 8).

Community forestry then grew rapidly. As of 2002 there were approximately 83,000 ha in Cambodia under introduced community forestry management, representing 0.7% of Cambodia’s total forest area

suitable for community forestry. This area of community forestry encompassed 57 initiatives at 228 sites, and comprises 404 villages and 415,000 people (3.6% of Cambodia's population). These sites are situated in 18 of Cambodia's 24 provinces, although most of these sites are concentrated in agricultural areas, where most of Cambodia's population is found (Fichtenau et al., 2002, pp. 5, 23–24). One quarter of the community forestry area (20,000 ha) is situated in Siem Reap and is administered through FAO's Natural Resources Management Project.

The national community forestry program is under the direction of the Forestry Administration (FA). The FA has direct responsibility for sites on production forest lands, whereas the Ministry for the Environment has responsibility for sites in protection forests.

Cambodia's community forestry system faces various problems that pose a challenge to the aim of improving the livelihoods of participants. Among these problems are: the sites are located almost wholly in degraded forests; the income benefits to participants are very low and benefit sharing arrangements are lacking; there is a tendency toward conflict at the sites related in part to unclear and insecure tenure and lack of land use planning; government finances and capacity to support the system are very weak; and forest sector priorities have been so skewed in favor of timber rent appropriation by the rich and powerful that it brings into question whether the government could give serious attention to the needs of the poor.

A survey found that two thirds of all the initiatives are located in areas with either no or little forest, or heavily degraded forests. Approximately one fourth of the initiatives are in forests said to be only slightly degraded or undisturbed forests, though in fact these forests were degraded. No sites are located in undisturbed forests (Fichtenau et al., 2002, pp. 23, 24, 26).

The objective of existing community forestry sites is to protect what few forests exist and to rehabilitate degraded ones. The use of these forests is limited to the collection of NTFPs and firewood, so income generation in the medium term is likely to be very limited (Braeutigam, 2003, p. 41).¹ The "sub-decree

on community forestry" enacted in 2004 stipulates that participants in community forestry may barter, process, transport, and sell NTFPs, though participants may only begin to harvest NTFPs five years after approval of the site's management plan. Moreover, participants (excluding customary users) must pay royalties and premiums on forest products they harvest (RGC, 2003, pp. 5–6). McKenney and Tola, (2002, p. 97) have noted that the low level of income in community forestry presents an important challenge because if stakeholders foresee minimal potential benefits, then they will have less incentive to invest the time and effort necessary to maintain effective management of those forests.

Research conducted in 2002 at 27 of the 57 then existing initiatives found that various kinds of conflicts had occurred at 20 of the sites (Fichtenau et al., 2002, p. 35). The four categories of conflict encountered were: (1) among villagers either within a specific community village or with a neighboring village; (2) with outsiders (e.g., the military, commercial enterprises, agricultural or forestry concessions, local authorities); (3) concerning fishing and mangrove issues (e.g., use of illegal fishing equipment or use of mangrove for charcoal); and (4) motivated by miscellaneous reasons, including distrust of forest authorities and preference for work on the basis of the household rather than a communal approach (Fichtenau et al., 2002, pp. 35–36, 60).

The development of community forestry in Cambodia is undermined by severe lack of financial resources and institutional and human resource capacity, and continues to depend heavily on the support of foreign donors and NGOs (Henderson, 1998; Braeutigam, 2003, p. 2; Sokh and Iida, 2001, p. 115). Many projects are in operation without ongoing evaluation or monitoring (Sokh and Iida, 2001, p. 113). Extension for community forestry is fragmented and limited in scale (Braeutigam, 2003, p. 1). According to Braeutigam (2003, p. 32), priority issues for the development of community forestry at the field level are to "clarify land tenure, to strengthen the capacity of community forestry groups and associations, to document and build upon field based initiatives to show effectiveness of CBFM and to formulate clear planning processes and procedures."

Dating back to the early 1990s, there has been rampant logging of Cambodia's forests conducted by

¹ A case study by Sokh and Iida (2002:9) documents a decline in participant interest because of low tangible benefits from community forestry in Cambodia.

high-ranking politicians, the military, Cambodian entrepreneurs and foreign logging companies. A logging ban was enacted in 2001. Nonetheless, illegal logging continues until the present. Although the government has been strongly criticized by the *World Bank* (1999), by NGOs (*Global Witness*, 2001), and by an independent external review of the forestry sector (*Shields*, 2004) for its inability or unwillingness to act decisively to bring forest sector problems under control, the plundering of remaining natural forests has continued. These practices have had direct negative impacts on the rural poor inasmuch as some of the logging eliminates or damages forests that the rural poor depend on (*World Bank*, 1999; *Tola and McKenney*, 2003; *Shields*, 2004, p. 36). There have also been substantial indirect effects. Millions of dollars that should have been steered into the national treasury through royalty collection were never captured, negatively affecting vital services like health and education (*World Bank*, 1999). Moreover, because of corruption in the forest sector, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund withheld external budgetary support to the country (*World Bank*, 1999).

In spite of this grim picture, there are some signs of hope. The Forest Sector Independent Review recommended abolishing the concession system (*Shields*, 2004, pp. 12–13) and this might happen because so many concessionaires are in debt. Community forestry in Cambodia has received a lot of attention as a potential alternative or complement to forest concession management (*McKenney and Tola*, 2002, p. 86). In the Forestry Administration, community forestry has grown from being a mere unit to being a separate office (*Shields*, 2004, p. 68).

5. Laos

Community forestry was initiated in Laos in the early 1990s.² The first initiative, called “Joint Forest

Management,” was begun in 1993 in the Dong Khapo State Production Forest with funding from the Lao Swedish Forestry Program (LSFP). In 1995, the Forest Management and Conservation Project (FOMACOP) was begun in Savannakhet and Khammouane provinces with support from the World Bank, the Finnish International Development Agency, and the Global Environmental Facility (*Braeutigam*, 2003, p. 46). Other projects begun since then include the Forest Conservation and Afforestation Project of the Japanese International Cooperation Agency in Vang Vieng, the Industrial Tree Plantation Project of the ADB, and the Training and Model Forest established in Vientiane by GTZ (*Braeutigam*, 2003, pp. 56–58). As of 2003, community forestry in Laos occupied 150,000 ha of forest or approximately 1.3% of total forest cover (*Braeutigam*, 2003, p. 63).

In Laos, community forestry has been focused on production forests and on benefit sharing arrangements for village access to a portion of timber wealth, though there are also projects focused on NTFP benefits and reforestation.

In contrast to Cambodia, the central authorities have a strong role in promoting and administering community forestry, with support from a limited number of international organizations and NGOs (*Braeutigam*, 2003, p. 2). The main responsibilities for community forestry lie with the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), and with the National Agriculture and Forestry Extension Service (NAFES). The Department of Forestry (DoF), the National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) and the Department for Land Planning and Management play a supporting role (*Braeutigam*, 2003, p. 50).

The FOMACOP project has received much attention in documentation and discussion of community forestry in Laos both because of the large area it occupied (90% of the total area dedicated to community forestry) and because of controversy surrounding its implementation. During its pilot phase (1995–2000) forest management plans were prepared and executed in production forests covering approximately 100,000 ha and including 41 villages in Savannakhet and Khammouane provinces (*Braeutigam*, 2003, p. 54). According to the chief technical advisor (CTA) of the project, at the end of the implementation phase, the harvesting and sale of timber on a low-intensity and sustainable basis had generated net rev-

² The government of Laos prefers use of the term “village forestry” to “community forestry.” Its aversion to the term “community forestry” is because it is commonly used in Thailand, where it refers to a people’s movement (*Matsumoto*, 2003:127). Use of the term “community forestry” implies more local autonomy in resource management decisions than the government is willing to concede.

enue of US\$ 3400 for each of the participating villages. Approximately one quarter of this revenue was channeled back to sustainable forest management and to the 33 Village Forestry Associations, and the rest was allocated for village development activities. According to the CTA, even though the proportion received by villagers seems modest, it provided an income that was relatively high compared to the general income level in the region (Katila, 2000, p. 3).

In spite of a promising start to the age of community forestry in Laos, there are conditions which appear to limit its potential for poverty alleviation. These conditions are: change from a model where villagers have a high degree of forest management involvement to one where villagers have a lower level of involvement; unfavorable risk factors and forest quality; land allocation policies that have tended to undermine rather than improve the livelihoods of people reliant on forest resources; insufficient funds and capacity; and, as in Cambodia, rampant corruption and illegal logging that directly or indirectly undermine prospects for poverty alleviation through community forestry.

The Sustainable Forestry and Rural Development (SUFORD) project, the successor to FOMACOP, was begun in 2003 and will serve as the basis for introducing community forestry to production forests nationwide (Brautigam, 2003, pp. 46 and 55). The SUFORD action plan states that it will prioritize poverty alleviation, that implementation will involve 105,000 villagers on 528,000 ha of natural forest, and the decision-making power of villagers will be increased, and that rich natural forests will be preferred (MAF, 2004, pp. 7, 8, 33). As currently implemented, however, the SUFORD project gives less management authority to villagers than existed in the FOMACOP model, and the benefit sharing formula places most of the financial risk on villagers. Moreover, some of the areas of forest included in the SUFORD project have already been logged, signifying that participants will have to rely on NTFPs, which generally provide lower incomes.

The reasons for these changes have not been formally documented, but they can be surmised as follows. First, the Lao government espouses strong central authority, and autonomous village-level decision-making contradicts this governance philosophy.

Second, strong timber access rights to villagers contravene a long-standing belief that the national government is the legitimate exploiter and manager of timber resources. (A corollary of this position is that all villages – not just those located near forests – will benefit when timber royalties enter the national treasury.) The Lao government's unease with the FOMACOP model is reflected in tensions that occurred during the 1995–2000 pilot phase. An aide memoire written by a World Bank employee accuses the government of inappropriately determining the buyer of harvested timber, engaging in rent-seeking, and of causing the loss of \$800,000 to the national treasury and of \$700,000 to project participants (Rajesh, 2000).

In the last decade approximately 5400 villages, or about half of all villages in Laos, have been subject to a national program of land use planning and land allocation (LUP/LA). The goal of the LUP/LA process is to provide tenure security for rural households, to encourage private investment, to reduce shifting cultivation by promoting sedentarized land uses, and to conserve forest resources (Brautigam, 2003, p. 48). Although not formally related to community forestry, LUP/LA is nevertheless an important related issue because some of the affected villages are in forested areas.

According to various studies implementation of LUP/LA in Laos has aggravated or even created poverty, especially for ethnic minorities, by depriving some people of formerly stable and sustainable livelihoods, reducing the area of land farmed, and providing inadequate support services (Hansen and Sodarak, 1997; Evrard, 2004, pp. 7–8; Gansberghe, 2004, pp. 3–4). According to Chamberlain (2002, p. 1), the LUP/LA has been one of the major causes of poverty in Laos through depriving some people of their land and customary land use practices.

In Laos, as in Cambodia, lack of capacity in government services is one of the main obstacles to successful implementation of the national community forestry program (Brautigam, 2003, p. 2).

In Laos, as in Cambodia, there has been rampant illegal logging in spite of the imposition of a logging ban, and in spite of harsh outside criticism from donor agencies. And as in Cambodia, uncontrolled logging has had negative impacts on the livelihoods of the rural poor.

Certain characteristics of Laos's community forestry program, the character of timber exploitation, and various other factors appear to undermine the prospects for future livelihood improvements through community forestry. It remains to be seen if the government of Laos will observe the spirit of the SUFORD action plan and allow community forestry to follow a course of development that significantly improves the management role and wellbeing of disadvantaged participants.

6. Vietnam

Vietnam gave legal status to community forestry in 2004. The system of community forestry in Vietnam is similar to that of Laos inasmuch as certain projects will entitle participants to a portion of timber wealth through benefit sharing arrangements. However, similar to the situation in Cambodia, forests in Vietnam on which community forestry is practiced will in most cases be degraded.

Community forestry in Vietnam is closely tied to the government's longstanding Forest Land Allocation (FLA) program, which until recently only allocated such lands to households or individuals. Recent changes to the Land Law enacted in 2004 will allow the allocation of land (including forest land) to communities, not just to households or communes as in the past. This means that larger tracts of land can be allocated to villages and hamlets in remote rural areas. This legal change, along with a new regulation on benefit sharing, establishes the legal basis for community forestry in Vietnam. Community forestry potentially increases the forest resource "pie" at the village level, and benefit sharing potentially increases the share of that larger pie available to the community.

The revised Land Law that creates the legal basis for community forestry designates in its list of land users: "Residential communities including communities of Vietnamese residing in the same village, hamlet or similar residence with the same tradition, customs or in the same extended family, to which land is allocated or who are using land and have been acknowledged by the State with regard to their land use rights" (SRV, 2003, p. 7). This legislation is important because forestry experts recognize that the biggest single obstacle to the development of commu-

nity based forest management in Vietnam has been the lack of recognition of communities and their use-rights of forests and forest lands (Nguyen Hai Nam, 2002, p. 3).

The legislation on benefit sharing related to forests (known as Decision No. 178 of November 12, 2001) specifies the benefits from the sale of forest products to households and individuals to whom forest land has been allocated, leased, or contracted. Important in this legislation is that individuals and households will be able to get two-thirds or more of the total value of harvested products, including timber, with the remainder of the share going to the commune budget or other government entities (MARD, 2003). This is an improvement over past arrangements, where the economic benefits to individuals and households were non-existent, low, or poorly specified. Nevertheless, according to Vu Hoai Minh and Warfvinge (2002, p. 12) it remains to be seen if the legislation on benefit sharing can be a useful instrument for developing community forestry; it must be effectively adapted to varying circumstances in different parts of the country.

There are two main reasons for concern about the potential for successful poverty alleviation through community forestry in Vietnam. The first is the fact that some of the best remaining forest resources remain under the control of State Forest Enterprises (SFEs). Second, a variety of problems have undermined the capacity for governance and resource management at the local level.

Most of the millions of hectares of forest land allocated have been entrusted to SFEs, which must in turn devolve forest management to other users. Yet much of this land remains unused (NWG-CFM, 2000a, p. 26). The process of forest land allocation in many locations has been hampered by the SFEs' reluctance to give up its management power over forest areas to local households or organizations (Vu Huu Tuynh, 2001, p. 6). The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development years ago issued Decision 187, which should have forced SFEs to release forest lands to households and communities. Poor progress in implementing this decision has led the Politburo to issue Resolution 28, which calls for more rapid progress.³ The closure of timber extraction quotas for

³ Personal communication from Ross Hughes, February 2, 2004.

almost all SFEs has fueled illegal logging, which potentially undermines the revenue base for community forestry regimes.⁴

According to various observers, powerful influences from outside the village have undermined local authority and have constrained the ability of villagers to manage forests effectively (Gilmour, 1998, pp. 12–13; Tran Van Con and Nguyen Van Doan, 2000, p. 37). Traditional community forestry management institutions, though widespread, are perceived to have weakened (NWG-CFM, 2000b, p. 2; Pham Xuan Phuong, 2003, p. 9). Inasmuch as real devolution of decision-making power to communities is the essential foundation for improving livelihoods through community forestry (Fisher, 2003, pp. 18–19), this is an important source of concern. Sikor and Apel (1998, p. 18) point out that in areas where there are tense relations between state agencies and village residents because of past policies, it may be difficult to lay the groundwork for effective community forestry.

Nevertheless, there is also evidence pointing in an optimistic direction. In some communities the foundation for community forestry is strong in spite of past policy barriers. Various researchers have observed that traditional community forestry institutions in Vietnam are potentially an important base upon which to build introduced community forestry (Poffenberger, 1999, p. 22; Vu Long, 2002). Case studies conducted in three provinces (Hoa Binh, Nghe An, and Thua Thien-Hue) show that communities have been able to circumvent formal restrictions and have implemented their own system of community forestry with or without external support (Vu Hoai Minh and Warfvinge, 2002, p. 3). The communities at these case study sites have been able to convince local authorities of the soundness of their approach (Vu Hoai Minh and Warfvinge, 2002, p. 47). The study authors claim there are hundreds of cases of this kind of management all over Vietnam (Vu Hoai Minh and Warfvinge, 2002, p. 45). Moreover, at some community forestry pilot sites, there are indications of positive livelihood outcomes (Nguyen Huy Dzung and Vu Van Dzung, 2002, p. 50).

There is another reason to be optimistic that community forestry might succeed in supporting the goal of poverty alleviation in Vietnam. It has been excep-

tionally successful in its efforts to improve national wellbeing. It has reduced the rate of poverty from 58% to 29% of total population between 1993 and 2002, and has accomplished “one of the greatest success stories in economic development” (ADB et al., 2003 pp. 9 and 11). It is noteworthy that this success story has been based largely in the rural domain and the agricultural sector (Irvin, 1995, pp. 729–730; Dollar and Litvack, 1998, p. 5), that is, the context in which community forestry operates.

7. Results and recommendations

This article has investigated the potential for poverty alleviation through community forestry in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. No empirical answer to this question is possible because, to-date, there has been no field research on the livelihood performance of community forestry in these three countries. Nevertheless, an educated guess can be made about past and future performance based on what we know about the projects underway for a decade (Cambodia and Laos) and in the process of beginning (Vietnam).

It can be surmised that, in Cambodia and Laos, the livelihood gains experienced have been largely in the domain of poverty avoidance and mitigation. In Cambodia, income benefits have been meager and focused on NTFPs. In Laos, although income is based on both NTFPs and timber, and although there have been management and benefit sharing arrangements that show potential for increasing income at the village level, implementation to date of the SUFORD model suggests the possibility of sub-optimal outcomes.

What can be expected in the future? The answer is premised on the notion that poverty alleviation (by whatever sub-definition) through community forestry is strongly conditioned by: (1) whether poverty alleviation is a fundamental goal of the program; and (2) to what extent poverty alleviation efforts are enabled or constrained by other state priorities.

In none of the three countries have community forestry programs been established or implemented with poverty alleviation as a fundamental and overarching objective. Instead, the programs have been created through a variety of factors that include donor agency pressure, concern about deteriorating environmental management, and trends toward decen-

⁴ Personal communication from Ross Hughes, February 2, 2004.

tralization and resource management devolution. The three programs are presently being conditioned and reshaped by the countries' and donors' growing commitment to poverty alleviation, but "the die has been cast" and it is challenging, though not impossible, to make decisive course corrections. In this respect, Vietnam may have an advantage because its program is still in the early stages of formulation.

The strongest constraint by far on poverty alleviation through community forestry has been the deeply entrenched legacy of government-led and large enterprise-led forest management. To the extent that timber rents continue to be monopolized by powerful actors who reside outside of forest villages, they are not used for poverty alleviation at the local level to the degree possible. Note that the high value of timber per unit area of forest, in comparison to NTFPs, means it has a key potential role in poverty elimination.

The contextual factors influencing the poverty alleviation potential of community forestry in each country diverge in key ways that are summarized in Table 1.

Cambodia has, on average, a low endowment of forest resources per capita. This deficit is aggravated in community forestry because of siting of projects away from abundant forests. Nevertheless, the government allows a degree of autonomous organization and involvement of NGOs not seen in Laos or Vietnam. This is one positive foundation for giving community forestry a stronger developmental orientation.

Laos has, on average, an abundant forest area per capita, but there are tendencies working against their use for poverty alleviation. The most important obstacle is an entrenched commitment to government-led and controlled forestry, and a strong bias against community-led timber management efforts.

Vietnam has, on average, a relatively low timber resources per capita, but has several factors that

favor poverty alleviation through community forestry. Among them are: a higher degree of local-level decision-making than in Laos (though far less so than in Cambodia); access in principle to timber rents through benefit sharing arrangements; and exceptional national performance in poverty alleviation dating back to the early 1990s.

The pendulum of history is swinging worldwide in the direction of a return to local control and management of forest resources. So the most relevant question might not be whether it will happen, but how it will happen, in each of the three countries. Wise leaders and policy makers should take this observation to heart. If there is a genuine desire to use forest resources to support national poverty alleviation strategies in a sustainable way, it may not be too late. There are three basic policy shifts that can help accomplish this goal:

- (1) The government should make a concerted effort to control illegal logging by powerful entities and end forest sector corruption. (This is especially relevant in Cambodia and Laos.)
- (2) Efforts should be made to locate community forestry sites where there are abundant forests. (This is especially relevant in the case of Cambodia and Vietnam.)
- (3) Income for the rural poor from forests should be increased through improved access rights, tenure, and benefit sharing, and removal of regulations that disadvantage the poor.

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Table 1

Key contextual factors for community forestry in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam

Contextual factors	Cambodia	Laos	Vietnam
Forest endowment per capita	Low	High	Low
Centralization of government control	Low	High	Medium
Formal timber benefit sharing	No	Yes	Yes
Overall success in poverty alleviation	Low	Low	High

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