



## Sustainable livelihoods for conservation at grassroots level

Most conservation programs at the grassroots level initiated by government and non-government organizations (NGOs/CSOs) have been implemented in a project oriented approach, mostly characterized by ad-hoc facilitations (1-2 years), rigid funding accountability and unrealistic targets within a short time period. The approach might be suitable for infrastructure development but certainly not for empowering communities for conservation where the aim is changes in human behavior towards management of natural resources.

Nowadays, conservation efforts are not a matter of awareness campaigns but of empowering communities for better natural resource management. Mainstreaming conservation efforts at the grassroots level through extension and outreach programs will not be effective if the enabling conditions for empowering the communities to become independent, to produce sustainable livelihoods and have a voice are not provided.

A powerless community usually stems from poverty, either natural or structural. Natural poverty is the result of low-level quality of human and natural resources that hamper the community's productivity. Structural poverty is generated directly or indirectly by inappropriate governance of natural resources by the state. A powerless community easily becomes the object of extortion by a powerful community, which will further impoverish the powerless. Therefore, the community tends to ignore conserving its own habitat, resulting in the gradual degradation of the quality of life, plunging them into poverty and powerlessness.

Empowering community for conservation should help to cut the vicious circle of natural resource degradation, poverty and powerlessness. Community empowerment is the condition sine qua non of any development programme to strengthen community based natural resource management. The government programme for allocating 12.7 million Ha state forest area to forest fringe communities and the emerging opportunity for customary community to manage Adat forest following the Constitutional Court ruling No. 35/2012 etc. will not have any effect on the community welfare if the communities do not receive the adequate support from development agencies at the grassroots level to get empowered.

A key strategy to empower communities could be the development of new income generating activities (IGA) that reduce their dependence on extraction of natural resources. Communities who mostly rely on

extraction of natural resources are the most vulnerable to remain in poverty.

The best sustainable livelihoods options are IGA which are dependent on environmental services provided by the existing natural forest ecosystem, in this way communities are motivated to protect their forest. Examples of such IGA are honey bee culture, development of non-timber forest products, micro-hydro power, wildlife breeding and forest based ecotourism. The second best option is environmentally friendly agro-commodity based livelihoods having ecological functions alike with natural forest ecosystem, such as agar wood, rubber, coffee and pepper based agroforestry. Agro-commodity developments which transform the landscape into monoculture plantations such as oil palm and pulp plantations should be avoided.

Sustainable livelihood development has been widely implemented in many conservation projects but mostly end up with unsatisfactory results. The key challenges are: (a) the developed IGA only survives during the project; (b) If the IGA still grows after the end of the project, it is only used to complement the main income derived from natural resource extraction. To avoid this, conservationist have developed an instrument called the “Community Conservation Agreement”. This instrument was also proven unsuccessful as conservation development agents will leave the facilitation areas as soon as the project ends.

Developing grassroots sustainable livelihoods initiatives in remote areas is not an easy job given the variability of social capital and the limited economic infrastructure. There is no guarantee that a suitable approach in a certain site will be effective in another area. The general rules which guarantee the success of building sustainable livelihoods for conservation at grassroots level are the on-site presence of long-term (at least 5 years) intensive and innovative conservation development agents.

Unfortunately, this is often contradictory with the nature of general conservation development projects which are short and frequently managed from the city rather than in the field.

Without reforming the basic approaches, conservation development projects will only be wasting precious resources as the failures are predictable!



This infosheet is part of communication tools for the project of Tropenbos International Indonesia Programme in Productive Landscape, which is aimed, among others, to address landscape based development, landscape conservation planning, sustainable livelihoods for forest community and the enhancement of community based landscape restoration.

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Author: Dr. Edi Purwanto, Program Director of Tropenbos International Indonesia

Photos: TBI Indonesia



#### More Information:

Tropenbos International Indonesia Programme  
Jl. Jend. A. Yani No. 68J  
Bogor – West Java  
Telp. 62-251-8316156  
Fax. 62-251-8316257

[www.tropenbos.org](http://www.tropenbos.org)