



# Community-Based Forest Management Within the Context of Institutional Decentralization in Honduras

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**Summary.** — Many developing countries are increasingly shifting responsibility for natural resource management from central to local government authorities. This essay analyzes a case study toward decentralized forest governance and community-based forest management in the municipality of Lepaterique, Honduras, with a special focus on the multiplicity of actors and goals, and the complexity of institutions involved in natural resource management. The study emphasizes that institutional democratization and political accountability of forest authorities and community representatives to local populations are essential if decentralized forest governance is to succeed in integrating the potentially conflicting resource interests and in achieving a more equitable distribution of powers and benefits.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is a popular trend in many developing countries toward increasing decentralization of natural resource management from central to local government authorities. In theory, decentralization can increase democratization of natural resource management by allowing local populations to make decisions on the control and use of local resources. Development of natural resource management to local governments may also provide local communities with new revenues and contribute to the more equitable distribution of benefits. With decentralized natural resource management, local people may feel a greater sense of ownership of rules for resource use and be more engaged in their implementation, monitoring, and enforcement. Decentralized resource management is also considered to make it easier for marginalized groups to influence environmental policies. On the other hand, local governments may be more subject to bribery and political pressure from local resource users, or they may be captured by political elites who promote hierarchical relations instead of demo-

cratic participation and political accountability (Kaimowitz, Vallejos, Pacheco, & López, 1998; Larson & Ribot, 2004; Pacheco, 2004; Ribot, 1999; Smoke, 2003).

Beyond these general arguments, there is, however, little empirical evidence on “whether decentralization is good for forests and the people who depend on them” (Kaimowitz *et al.*, 1998, p. 45). As noted by Andersson (2003, pp. 5–6), relatively little is known about the

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everyday effects of decentralization on the local governance of natural resources and the livelihood opportunities of local resource users. The purpose of this essay is to analyze the processes of decentralization within the social and political dynamics of community-based forest management in the municipality of Lepaterique, Honduras. Lepaterique has recently gained an international reputation as a successful model of decentralized forest management. It has been presented as a prototype of municipal forest governance and a success story of sustainable community forestry (Oseguera de Ochoa, 1999, 2000; Vallejo, 2003, pp. 77–78; Vallejo & Ferroukhi, 2004, p. 87). In acknowledgement of Lepaterique's promising experiences of forest management, the Central American process, initiated by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), of defining the criteria and indicators of sustainable forest management has come to be known as the "Lepaterique process" (Blas, 2001). During this process, increasing the ability of municipal authorities to manage natural resources and involving local communities as active partners in the planning and implementation of forest activities have been defined as key outcomes of increased efficiency, equity, and democracy in forest management in Central America (Alvarado, 2001; Ferroukhi, 2003; Santos Zelaya, 2003).

As noted by Kellert, Mehta, Ebbin, and Lichtenfeld (2000), achieving the goals of community forest management is a complicated and organizationally challenging task. Successful community forestry requires reconciliation of multiple and sometimes conflicting interests, as well as careful blending of formal and informal institutions on diverse social scales. By examining the management of Lepaterique's forests from the perspective of multiple actors and multiple interests, this study aims to show that the involvement of local resource users and local institutions in forest management is a much more complicated process than is generally represented by those promoting decentralization and community forestry.

Following the definition provided by Ribot (1999, p. 27), decentralization is understood here as the "devolution of central state assets and powers to local or private decision-making bodies:" representative local governments, local administrative branches of central government, nonstate organizations or private individuals and corporations.<sup>1</sup> The main focus in this essay will be on the role of municipal

governments and local representative actors in decentralized forest governance. As remarked by Larson (2002), decentralization is often understood in natural resource management literature as the devolution of responsibility for resource management to "local people," with little attention given to local governments and local institutions (Bray *et al.*, 2002; Kellert *et al.*, 2000; Wily, 1999). Many countries throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America are, however, shifting natural resource management responsibilities from central state agencies to municipal governments (Andersson, 2004; Crook & Manor, 1998; Kaimowitz *et al.*, 1998; Ribot, 2003; Smoke, 2003). In this context, it is important to analyze the role of municipal governments and local authorities in natural resource governance and find means to make these actors accountable resource managers.

Although many publications on natural resource management champion the role of communities in bringing about decentralization, participation, and collective action, they give little consideration to the heterogeneity of actors within communities and to their diverse ways of perceiving and using natural resources. Recent studies in political ecology have focused attention on the diverse means by which power is wielded in the struggles for access and control over natural resources (Klooster, 2000; Leach, Mearns, & Scoones, 1999; Nygren, 2000; Paulson, Gezon, & Watts, 2003).<sup>2</sup> The recognition of this complexity indicates that empowering local people to manage natural resources is more than simply devolution of authority over natural resources from the central government to "a" community (Agrawal & Gibson, 1999; Schröder, 1999). The far more challenging task is to understand the patterns of social differentiation and political fragmentation within the localities and the vigorous infighting of differently positioned stakeholders. Consideration of the complexity and fragility of the concepts of "community" and "locality" is essential if decentralized forest management is to benefit more than a powerful minority (Li, 2000; Nightingale, 2003).

This study also shows how the use of natural resources is mediated by a set of interacting and overlapping institutions, both formal and informal.<sup>3</sup> These institutions, operating on multiple scales, shape the patterns of resource management and thus progressively modify the political landscape over time (Batterbury & Bebbington, 1999; Leach *et al.*, 1999). As noted

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