



Poverty Alleviation and Tropical Forests—What Scope for Synergies?

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Summary. — This paper explores the “state-of-the-art” of the two-way causal links between poverty alleviation and natural tropical forests. Microimpacts of rising poverty can increase or slow forest loss. At the macrolevel, poverty also has an ambiguous effect, but it is probable that higher income stimulates forest loss by raising demand for agricultural land. The second question is what potential forest-led development has to alleviate a country’s poverty, in terms of producer benefits, consumer benefits and economy-wide employment. Natural forests widely serve as “safety nets” for the rural poor, but it proves difficult to raise producer benefits significantly. Urban consumer benefits from forest, an important target for pro-poor agricultural innovation, are limited and seldom favor the poor. Absorption of (poor) unskilled labor is low in forestry, which tends to be capital-intensive. Natural forests may thus lack comparative advantage for poverty alleviation. There are few “win-win” synergies between natural forests and national poverty reduction, which may help to explain why the loss of tropical forests is ongoing. This may have important implications for our understanding of “sustainable forest development” and for the design of both conservation and poverty-alleviation strategies. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. INTRODUCTION

How much can forest research and development (R&D)—the generation of new knowledge on both forest commodity production and on the broader principles of natural resource management (NRM)—contribute to the simultaneous goals of poverty alleviation and biodiversity conservation? This paper gives an overview of the literature on this topic, and draws on ongoing research at the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), particularly in Latin America. It also puts forward some hypotheses on expected synergies and contradictions between environmental and developmental forest objectives. I argue that, for the case of tropical forests, the very optimistic outlook on “win-win” potentials in the Brundtland report and from RIO 1992 was based on the inadequate implicit diagnosis that poverty is the cause of forest destruction. This, in turn, has raised overly optimistic expectations on the scope for integrating forest conservation and development objectives. Forests may sustain poor people and help them survive, but degrading and converting forests may also be an important but not always “unsustainable,” pathway out of their poverty.

In several respects, natural forests may have a poor comparative advantage for alleviating human poverty. The contradictions tend to outweigh the synergies.

The structure of the paper is the following. Section 2 provides basic definitions in regard to both forests and poverty. Section 3 reviews some of the thinking on the poverty–forest interaction over the last decades. Sections 4 and 5 examine the impact of poverty on forests, at the macro- and microlevel, respectively. In Sections 6 and 7, we are interested in the reverse causality—identifying recent poverty trends in tropical developing countries (Section 6) and the potential of tropical forests for poverty alleviation (Section 7). Section 8 reviews the

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main arguments of this paper, while Section 9 looks at main policy lessons for both conservation and poverty-alleviation strategies.

2. KEY DEFINITIONS AND CONCEPTS

This paper focuses on natural tropical forests, rather than on modified systems such as plantations or agroforestry, due to the prime importance of natural forests for biodiversity. Following FAO, "deforestation" is defined as a radical removal of vegetation, to less than 10% crown cover. Deforestation implies costs, and it is basically an *investment* in future alternative land uses. In turn, "forest degradation" refers to all other interventions with biodiversity-loss impacts (logging, fires, overgrazing, overhunting, etc.); rather than an investment, degradation is mostly a rent cashing-in of the "subsidy from nature."

Poverty is by definition extremely complex, multidimensional, and linked to many variables. The links to land use and deforestation are thus in many cases indirect, i.e., connected to a third set of intermediate variables. Following Reardon and Vosti (1995), I distinguish between two interrelated concepts of poverty. "Asset poverty" is related to producers, which entails binding restrictions on the choice of economic activities, crops, investments, technologies, etc.¹ "Welfare poverty" is related to absolute restrictions in (monetary and nonmonetary) household consumption, e.g., *vis-à-vis* the simple poverty line of US\$1 per-capita suggested by the World Bank. "Poverty" to me thus retains a strong economic component. I also define it as an absolute concept, neither a matter of households' "self-perception" nor of their welfare relative to other groups; the latter phenomena are rather related to income distribution and inequality.²

3. THE FOREST-DEPENDENT POOR

In the tropics, extensive forest areas often coincide geographically with a large number of poor people that depend on forests for their livelihoods.³ They may, on the one extreme, be native forest dwellers that have a long, culturally-rooted tradition of extracting a broad range of commodities from vast forest areas. At the other end of the spectrum, one finds immigrant newcomers that opportunistically take advantage of selected forest resources, but

are most interested in the soil under the trees to cultivate crops and raise livestock. Some of the forest-derived benefits are converted to monetary income, e.g., by selling logs, charcoal or resins. Others, such as firewood, vines or fruits collected for household consumption remain a "hidden harvest," the value of which is often difficult for economists to quantify (IIED, 1995). Finally, some poor use the forest as production input, such as slash-and-burn swiddeners for long fallow systems or herders in the Sahel for grazing (Warner, 2000). There is by now a large literature that documents how natural forests worldwide serve as "the poor man's overcoat" (Westoby, 1989, p. 58), providing vital safety-net functions for rural livelihoods in terms of risk safeguarding ("famine foods"), health (medicinal plants), filling income gaps and balancing nutrition.⁴ There is also evidence that poor households derive a relatively larger share of their income from forests and wildlands than better-off households within the same community (e.g., Cavendish, 1997).

Access rights of poor people to the forest tend to be open or informal, difficult to protect against external interests, and sometimes conflictive between on-site users. When powerful actors from outside, such as logging or mining firms, commercial farmers or ranchers find it profitable to exploit the forest for their own purposes, conflicts of interest arise and poor forest-dwellers' benefits are endangered. The forest-dependent poor become poorer; protecting their access is thus vital to their current well-being. This is a story that we recognize from many forest areas where externally induced development processes are advancing. From this perspective, it would seem straightforward that "the fate of the forest" and "the fate of the poor" are linked in an interdependent and harmonious manner.

The *static* argument that the forest-dependent poor are made worse off when they lose forest access is thus very important for "poverty prevention." But it says little about the *dynamic* potential of natural forests to actively reduce poverty over time, i.e., to produce more benefits for the poor. In some cases, the poor may only have been "allowed" to use forests without interference from powerful groups because of these forests' poor financial returns. The same vital time distinction has to be made for the impact of poverty on forests. The simplistic view states that forest degradation is "a short-term solution" to poverty (Schmidt

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