

BOOK REVIEW

*Partnerships in Sustainable Forest Resource Management:
Learning from Latin America*

Mirjam A.F. Ros-Tonen

in collaboration with Heleen Van Den Hombergh
and Annelies Zoomers (Eds.)

Boston: Brill, 2006; ISBN 978-9004153-39-4; 336 pp.; US\$66.00

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Partnerships in Sustainable Forest Resource Management: Learning from Latin America represents the proceedings of a conference held in Amsterdam in 2003, examining globalization and the management of tropical forests. The partnerships described in each case study generally fall into three groupings: company-community, multi-sector, or political. The editors and authors strive to answer why and how we are missing out on opportunities to structure partnerships in an effort to foster local participation while at the same time alleviating poverty. The latter question is especially provocative considering that sustainable forest management and empowerment of communities has been presented as contributing to “pro-poor, socially just and environmentally friendly forest governance.”

The authors in this compilation argue convincingly that insufficient attention is currently being paid to how many of the partnerships’ under investigation in this volume are structured or to the overall analysis concerning possible outcomes of these business relationships. It was suggested that communities and local groups need to establish from the outset the potential benefits of partnerships to all parties involved.

This would involve discussing how benefits will be distributed within the community and between partners; who will be responsible for taking financial and environmental risks; and the need for conflict resolution guidelines for events as varied as how to resolve disputes over perceived objectives or to establish criteria permitting one partner to leave the project to explore more lucrative options. To this point I agree: development officers need to challenge community-based and partner assumptions prior to entering into a partnership. In sum, a multi-perspective needs-assessment is required prior to putting pen to paper, thereby legally initiating a relationship. This could be accomplished by tapping individuals from your community to answer how the partnership could, for example, potentially impact neighbours, relatives, socio-economically challenged community members who need the partnership to succeed, and even how it may influence the community’s wealthiest individuals.

Heleen Van Den Hombergh (chapter 4) reflects upon the minimum conditions of public-private partnership. She claims that the “most important basic principle is the basic right to a sustainable livelihood, which means that not

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only respect for the country's legal system, but also the socio-economic rights of the poor should serve as a basis." She goes on to state that partnerships aiming to create sustainable development should not threaten the "survival in the countryside of the poorer categories among the 'beneficiaries', without alternative livelihood options being available." As a result, "the environmental but also the socio-economic benefits of interventions for a variety of rights and stakeholders (especially the poorest) should be properly thought through and not taken for granted" (101). I would argue that this is an essential first principle of partnerships, and one that is examined in *Partnerships in Sustainable Forest Resource Management*. Yet despite the obvious nature of such a statement many of the authors grappled with the issue of poor economic development and its current lack of effective guiding principles.

In chapter 12, for example, Otsuki suggests that there are five central elements necessary for communities to gain the maximum benefit from partnerships and development projects:

1. Adaptive management at the institutional level to deal with changing socio-economic circumstances and environmental conditions,
2. The creation of strategic partnerships with donors, industry and non-governmental organizations, where community learning is a central element,
3. Partnerships with research institutions to map traditional ecological knowledge, and address technological limitations, again, where community learning is included,
4. Involvement of community members from rural areas and urban centres, and
5. Market-oriented product development.

This idea of adaptive management is based on the learning cycle and is a central theme in the book. One strategy presented by Fairhead and Leach (chapter 5) discussed how to help deal with the issue of how to plan for an uncertain future. Their prescription is to use studies based upon traditional ecological knowledge and vegetation histories to help establish what is on your land base and how it came to be that way. In his chapter on extractive reserves, Sergio Rosendo describes the importance of adaptive management, which "assumes incomplete knowl-

edge about ecosystem complexity and treats management as experiments from which managers can learn and then readjust management practices and institutions accordingly." He goes on to emphasise the importance of adapting to one's changing environment (e.g., political, economic, geographic) which is necessary for dealing with environmental, social and cultural influences

This compilation is presented as an academic exploration of issues that is also intended to provide a much needed learning tool for political and economic leaders who find themselves in similar circumstances. There are sections that would be especially relevant for development officers, community planners, and others involved in community development. It appears that the editors are hoping to perpetuate a trend in which indigenous communities become increasingly resilient and better able to adapt to changing environmental and social conditions in an effort to improve upon the analysis of positive and negative trade-offs that will flow from partnerships.

While I would generally recommend this book, *Partnerships in Sustainable Forest Resource Management* has a few notable weaknesses. First, all of the authors and editors work in institutes and universities located in the Netherlands, the U.K., Germany and the U.S. necessitating the question: how would the perspectives of academics based in Latin American countries differ and perhaps add to the analysis of those presented in *Partnerships in Sustainable Forest Resource Management*? Also a number of the case studies made for challenging reading because the book was written primarily for an academic audience, forcing readers perhaps not versed in the language of 'partnership', 'alliance', 'coalition', or 'network' into unknown waters. Yet attempts at contextualizing these concepts were made in an attempt to better assist the reader in understanding their importance, especially when they impact regions such as Latin America where devolving power and responsibility to the private sector and civil society has become a guiding ethos. Finally, the editors failed to properly establish for the reader the existing socio-political scene for the book, even if helpful summaries detailing important events and environmental challenges were presented at the beginning of each chapter in a somewhat repetitive fashion.