



Linking Social Movements

How International Networks
Can Better Support Community Action
about Forests

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Introduction

...the power of voluntary action rises not from the size and resources of individual organizations, but rather from the ability of the voluntary sector to coalesce the actions of hundreds, or even millions of citizens through vast and constantly evolving networks.

David Korten 1992: 40

How can international networks effectively support social movements? In 2003, CIFOR reviewed the experiences of nine international networks in community forestry in seven countries to reflect upon the lessons they had learned over the last two decades (Colchester et al. 2003).¹ The study found that networks have contributed to community forestry through sharing information, building awareness and providing resources or services to national groups. By bringing together strategies and experiences from around the world, the networks increased awareness of community forestry in global circles and created space for communities to assert their rights. The networks contributed to a social movement in community forestry at the international scale, complementing social movements at the national and local scales.

We define social movements here as a “sustained challenge to powerholders...by repeated public displays of that populations’ numbers, commitment, unity and worthiness” (Tilly 1999: 257). Social movements occur through complex, multiple, and often informal networks engaged

in social conflict and evolve through ongoing constructions of identity and meaning (Melucci 1996). Networks have been shown to support social movements as catalysts, structural units of movements, sources of information and resources, and by helping to reframe people’s understandings and norms (Diani and McAdam 2003). The international community forestry networks in this study shared with local organizations a broad set of values and aims of seeking to improve the rights of forest dwellers to forests and the benefits from them, especially vis-à-vis more powerful groups like the state and corporate entities (Colchester et al. 2003).

But how well did these networks support local social movements in ‘community forestry’? An important conclusion of the study was that international networks faced severe challenges in building relations, channels of communication and collaborative work with national and local groups that promoted and reforms in forest tenure. Why? The study noted that the international networks lacked knowledge of local settings, found it hard to respond flexibly

¹ The networks reviewed were Coordinadora Indígena y Campesina de Agroforestería Comunitaria (ACICAFOC), Forest Stewardship Council’s Social Working Group (FSC-SWG), IUCN’s Working Group on Community Involvement in Forest Management (IUCN-CIFM), World Rainforest Movement (WRM), Rural Development Forestry Network (RDFN), Forest Action Network (FAN), Regional Community Forestry Training Centre for Asia and the Pacific (RECOFTC), Asia Forest Network (AFN), and the Forests, Trees and People Programme (FTPP). Countries included Mexico, Brazil, Cameroon, Uganda, India, Indonesia and China. The David Korten quote was excerpted from original report (p. 22).

to local demands and relied on electronic and written communication that were often not accessible to local people. Differences in language, styles of communication, culture, capacities and resources widened the gap further. The networks tended to rely on single national or regional focal points that were over-committed and quickly became bottlenecks to flows of information. National non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or networks often spoke on behalf of local groups, without necessarily being accountable to them.

As Khagram et al. have noted (2002), social movements occur most successfully among groups with strong interpersonal relationships, intense regular contact and structures that involve the institutions of everyday life such as schools and churches (McAdam et al. 1996, McAdam 1988, McCarthy 1996). Facilitating factors include face-to-face interactions, shared identities with a primary group (McAdam et al. 1996, Mueller 1992, Johnston and Klandermans 1995, Schwartz and Paul 1992); a common opposition or grievance or opportunity (Morris 1992, Taylor and Whittier 1992); and “dense social networks and connective structures” that “draw on consensual and action-oriented cultural frames” (Tarrow 1998: 10). Our study and others (Tarrow 1989) suggest that such conditions are difficult to achieve across international boundaries where cultural

and geographic distances become constraints. Differences in “social location” among parties such as farmers, national NGO members and members of international groups can also inhibit the formation of social movements because of differences in identity, meanings, people’s access to resources and the tactics available to them (Mueller 1992).

Yet most networks in our study felt that strengthening their ties with local social movements was important for them to be effective. This raised the question of how international networks *could* better link with local groups despite these constraints. With support from the Ford Foundation, CIFOR augmented the study by offering modest follow-up funds to the networks reviewed to help them improve their links at the local level, especially through more face-to-face collaborative work or improved channels of communication. We hoped that the resulting experiences would not only help local initiatives but might also provide insights to networks wishing to better support local social movements.

The purpose of this paper is to summarize the results of the networks’ efforts and highlight the lessons learned. As the activities are not strictly comparable, we seek to stimulate ideas rather than draw definitive conclusions.

Putting Ideas into Practice: Four endeavors to link international and local networks

Two networks participated in the follow-up work: the World Rainforest Movement, (WRM), a global network of citizen's groups based in Montevideo, Uruguay, and the Forest Action Network (FAN), a regional network based in Nairobi with a focus on eastern Africa. The networks each received USD 10,000 and conducted the work from about March to September 2004.

WRM was initiated in the mid-1980s and aims to provide an alternative voice to "official" forest processes to enable civil society and forest dwellers' to better defend their rights from threats such as commercial logging, mining, plantations, and shrimp farming. The network shares information, coordinates NGO advocacy and mobilizes public opinion to change policy. The World Rainforest Movement's extra support enabled them to increase their flexibility to respond to local groups' needs at the local, national and international levels. In particular they increased their face-to-face interaction with local people's organizations, supporting what McAdam et al. (1996) call micro-mobilization, where interactions are highly personalized and people organize through their primary groups, such as local community institutions. Their work in Brazil, Peru and India is summarized in the first three accounts below.

FAN was founded in 1995 to coordinate the East and Southern Africa region for the Forest Trees and People Program of the Food and Agricultural Organization. FAN works to improve local control over natural resources and related policies in the region through advocating policy change, networking, facilitating multistakeholders' dialogues and providing information services at different scales of intervention. FAN used

their extra support for this activity to create community resource centers where people could access internet and email. Participants were from communities where FAN had already mobilized action in previous projects. With the resource centers, they hoped to overcome the differential access to technology, especially internet and email communications, that constrains many local groups' access to information, networking and choices of action (Oliver and Marwell 1992). This case is described in the fourth account.

We describe each case below.

(1) Support for national and local strategy-building and activism (WRM - Brazil)

WRM supported three meetings of the Alert against the Green Desert in and among the four states of Minas Gerais, Bahia, Espirito Santo and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. The meetings aimed to facilitate the exchange of ideas among communities in different sites, create a place for setting priorities and making plans, and mobilize local action. Alert held meetings at the national, regional (within Brazil) and state levels.

The Brazilian government is currently supporting development policies that encourage expansion of large eucalyptus plantations. However, the plantations have had a poor record of benefiting local communities. Companies have restricted local people's use of the land, pulled up their seedlings, destroyed their houses, threatened and arrested people, used intimidation by armed police, seized and destroyed tools, bought up unproductive farmland intended to be given to the landless in a land reform program, and

destroyed the quality of local drinking water and fish supplies. These initiatives started in the 1960s during a period of military rule and established a pattern of large-scale plantations, which have been greatly resented by the poor and landless and by marginalized indigenous peoples whose rights in land were at that time not recognized by the State. Alert against the Green Desert is a civil society network that links communities affected by large-scale eucalyptus plantations and the many organizations across Brazil that support them.

As the international link, WRM's unique contribution was to support:

- **Information sharing:** WRM representative informing participants about similar struggles against large-scale tree monocrops in other parts of the world. Final document of meeting shared in different languages to other parts of the world.
- **Media attention:** WRM invited international journalists from Finland, a major investor in pulp mills and made presentations to international bodies highlighting the injustices.

The local networks reportedly valued the meetings highly. WRM noted that if resources are limited, it is most useful to invest in one well-prepared big national meeting, as they did in Minas Gerais in May 2004. The national meeting helped to catalyze local and regional activities demonstrating opposition to the companies' inequitable access to land and other resources.

(2) Capacity building about policy and developing strategies collectively (WRM - Peru)

This activity supported three workshops by regional indigenous organizations in the Peruvian Amazon to collectively analyze problems related to forestry law, concession system and widespread illegal logging, and



WRM and local NGO Racimos hear from indigenous leaders about the impacts of the Peruvian Forest and Wildlife Law and illegal logging on their communities in Madre de Dios, Peru (May 2004). Sharing and networking information in the workshop was assisted by use of audio visual aids, including an LCD overhead projector (Photo by T. Griffiths).

to develop strategies for addressing those problems at the community, federation, regional, national and international levels.

As a consequence of the 2000 Forest and Wildlife Law in Peru, timber concessions began operating on titled and untitled indigenous peoples' lands in the Peruvian Amazon, resulting in serious land conflicts. Our field studies showed that in their keen pursuit of timber, the concessionaires and illegal loggers have used fabricated agreements, false promises, gifts of strong alcohol, logging by adjacent concessions, and attempts at forced displacement showing a blatant disregard for indigenous peoples' rights. Local communities and federations have been insufficiently aware of their rights or the basic provisions of the Forest Law.

WRM in coordination with the local NGO Racimos de Ungurahui worked with three indigenous organizations—ORAU (Organización Regional de Aidesep de Ucayali), FENAMAD (Federación Nativa del Rio Madre de Dios y Afluentes) and ARPI-SC (Asociación Regional de Pueblos Indigenas de la Selva Central)—to strengthen local people's understanding of national policies and make them more aware of these rights.

WRM using their international links facilitated:

- **Capacity building** - WRM provided information about national policies and the nationally and internationally recognized rights of indigenous peoples. They assisted local groups to engage in advocacy measures through the media and a letter campaign.
- **Identify local priorities and communicate them upwards** - They helped local people to evaluate the laws and to share their own insights and priorities for forest zoning processes. They also carried out a participatory survey with community organizations in three Departments
- **Dissemination** - WRM published an article on WRM website and circulated in local newsletters and international networks of the Amazon alliance.
- **Media attention** - WRM helped local groups prepare press releases and public statements.
- **Letter campaign** - WRM helped local groups prepare formal letters to the government.

Although the WRM had worked with Peruvian indigenous peoples' organizations through its international networks for over 15 years, this had rarely involved joint work at local and community levels. WRM found a huge demand for capacity building at the local level. They noted that after these joint activities, the collaboration between WRM and local federations had strengthened. The face-to-face contact and collaborative strategizing established a foundation for better relations. The indigenous organizations and forest communities requested more technical and financial assistance to establish regional programs and teams to undertake community training and legal support for the communities. Communication by phone, fax and email increased after the workshops.

(3) Building awareness about policy impacts; tracking the impacts of the World Bank (WRM- India)

WRM facilitated local, state and national groups to explore the impacts of the World Bank's forest projects in India, including Joint Forest Management and activities claiming to support tribal development. They did this by carrying out an interactive survey in villages, meetings with activists and dialogue at state and national levels in Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh. WRM exchanged the resulting information in a meeting with World Bank staff in New Delhi.

The World Bank has been one of the largest supporters of forestry projects in India, including Joint Forest Management. There has been, however, an increasing concern by WRM and others that JFM and development strategies supported by the World Bank further marginalized tribal groups and reduced their livelihood opportunities. At the invitation of several Mass Tribal Organizations and NGOs such as Samata, Sanjeevini, Velugu Association, Yakshi and the Society for Integrated Development Studies, WRM offered to work with local groups to document the impacts of a current World Bank project in Andhra Pradesh, and to assess the possible impacts in three other locations. WRM perceived that local activists could be more effective in negotiating the terms of the proposed projects if they were aware of the standards by which the World Bank is supposed to operate.

Talking to community members in the Adivasi Mundari village in Jharkhand, Central India (July 2004). Discussions about World Bank-assisted forestry plans in Jharkhand, other States in India and how they compare to World Bank projects in other countries, was facilitated through support by a local translator and coordination with a much respected Adivasi leader with ties to the communities throughout the area (Photo by T. Griffiths).



As an international organization, WRM assisted by providing:

- **Independent evaluation:** WRM collected views of tribal organizations, leaders and community members about the impacts of the World Bank's Andhra Pradesh Community Forest Management Project on tribal communities.
- **Alerted national activists:** WRM brought the issues about the World Bank's impacts and plans to the attention of national activists.
- **Dissemination of information:** WRM shared information from the Andhra Pradesh study with the other states and with World Bank staff, compiled an information alert for forest networks in India; produced article in *Forest Voices*, the Indian National Forum of Forest Peoples' and Forest Workers' newsletter; produced an article for WRM Bulletin; shared information generally with communities, activists, and support organizations at state and local levels
- **Fund raising:** WRM co-drafted a funding proposal for monitoring IFI policies and programs with National Forum of Forest Peoples' and Forest Workers'
- **Subnational linkages:** WRM supported a tribal person in one state to attend a meeting in another state
- **International linkages:** WRM helped support a tribal leader to present his experiences in a meeting on traditional knowledge in Costa Rica in 2004.

As in Peru, WRM found that local people had little information about policies or proposed projects. Communication and coordination of social movements across states is impeded by lack of resources, capacity and time. They also found that networking was best done face-to-face. They concluded there is a strong need for a monitoring team to work with local communities to assess project impacts.

WRM's experience in India confirmed that effective linkages between international networks and the local level could be established without working there, provided communications were bridged by local activists who were themselves well connected with national and international networks.² Local activists were also effective bridges because of the trust they had built with local people through their longstanding work in support of the communities or from their kinship or ethnic

² Local activist connections to international networks were sometimes infrequent and occasional, but without exception collaboration was based on the activist's trust and value in the activities and purpose of the international network. The local activists that played a liaison and translation role for WRM networking work in India had all heard of the WRM and respected its work.

ties to the tribal communities. Crucially, the local activists fluency in several languages helped facilitate translations.

(4) Improving villagers' access to internet (FAN - Kenya)

This activity aimed to provide better quality and timely information to local communities on current forest management trends, markets and forest resources via access and training to internet services. The project reflected a growing global interest in providing communities with better access to computer and internet technology. FAN's experience points to some generic issues people are likely to face in trying to make internet available in remote rural areas to villagers.

FAN has been working with forest communities in Kenya to build their capacities in anticipation of a new forest policy in 2004 that would support community participation. In this endeavor, they sought to provide practical information to communities. Their experience in one community showed that people were eager to learn more about sustainable forest management. FAN had been actively working with communities in Njoro, and in Taita Taveta they built on the prior efforts of Plan International, who had established a community-based organization and an office.

In this case, FAN's contribution as an international network was:

- **Provision of technology and equipment:** FAN provided desktop computers and world-space receivers in community resource centers in Taita Taveta and Njoro.
- **Training:** FAN provided training in each location on how to use computers, internet explorer, the World Wide Web and how to use email. Participants were mostly community leaders.
- **Building policy awareness:** FAN provided conventional written materials on community forestry and sought to increase community leaders' awareness about the Forests Bill 2004 Bill.

FAN reported that the villagers in Njoro would have benefited from visits to places like Gambia or Tanzania where community forestry was already practiced. There was thus a potential role for FAN to play in making links between local groups in different countries.

The project generated important lessons relevant to others interested in promoting use of the internet. One practical lesson was the need for more careful site assessments and understanding of local people's capacities and interests before implementing a project. As in many remote rural locations, Taita Taveta lacked an internet service provider. FAN was unaware of this before they purchased the computers and conducted the training. Luckily, villagers were able to use their skills in the local post offices.

As FAN had been less active in Taita Taveta, people there were less aware about community forestry concepts and the Forest Bill 2004. FAN needed much more time and funding than they initially anticipated to expose them to policies, institutional arrangements, benefit sharing, conflict management and tree management practices.

In both sites, low literacy levels among participants and the need to use Swahili rather than English made it difficult to teach computer terminology and concepts.

FAN found that the age of participants affected their ease of working with the technology and their interest in community forestry. Youth were interested in learning the technology, but used it to look for information on jobs, fashion, and European football teams. For many older participants it was their first contact with a computer and they were not as motivated or at ease with the technology. Ironically though, it was the older participants who had more of an interest and involvement in community forestry. FAN concluded that they should have targeted groups who were already registered as community forest associations to make sure that participants were motivated to use internet for forest purposes.

Another major lesson was the need to use an integrated approach to technology provision and communications. As noted above, the technology made little sense in communities that were still unaware of the new forest bill and implications of community forest management. FAN concluded there was also a need to conduct more training with villagers to help them create their own website, and gather marketing information on line. Exposure to other areas like Tanzania and Gambia would have been useful for those familiar with the bill, but not its practice.

What was the importance of the international links?

How did an *international* network make a difference in each of these cases? What was their comparative advantage compared to other networks or organizations? Our review of the limited number of experiences above suggests at least five functions that international networks had in working with local groups:

Funding people to get together - The WRM cases showed the value of bringing people together to exchange information and develop strategies together. The local networks had the power to convene the groups necessary. WRM contributed the funds, resource people and sometimes the initiative. Local groups often lack the contacts and experience to raise funds and often need only small amounts at a time. International networks have a comparative advantage in raising funds from many sources and can allocate these as needed; in doing so they need to be sensitive to local groups' needs.

Knowledge of broader policy frameworks - Both FAN and WRM were familiar with policies in a number of countries, and had tracked them for some time, making it easier for them to identify salient factors in specific country situations and highlight emerging issues and challenges. Local organizations usually face higher transactions costs in acquiring this kind of information and may not have the same historical perspective.

Independent assessments and critique - International networks can conduct assessments that might be seen as more credible and neutral than those of local groups. They can help local organizations be self-critical. In some political contexts, international groups can also more freely critique national policies.

Wider repertoire of strategies and ability to increase capacities - International networks

have access to a wider range of information about strategies and capacities that have been tried or developed elsewhere that they can share with local groups.

Contacts for exchanges, media and campaigns - International networks have a wider range of contacts for facilitating exchanges across countries, as in the case of FAN. They can also help local groups identify influential or strategic international media contacts, as WRM did with the Finnish journalists. WRM has been especially active in mobilizing letter campaigns to companies outside the country.

Dissemination - International networks like WRM can have a powerful impact on the dissemination of local stories. They can bring excellent writing skills, an ability to turn out information quickly, an established and well-known website and newsletter, and a large network of contacts.

Confidence building - The involvement of an international network "on the ground" or their endorsement of a local social movement can confer a sense of greater collegiality, security and even status that enhances local people's confidence to speak out and act.

For each of these functions, the contribution of the international network was only realized in partnership with local and national groups. The main advantage of international networks was their broader scope that enabled them to collect information, develop strategies and capacities, and identify contacts outside of the usual scope of national or local groups. Although not reported in the cases here, we have learned from experience elsewhere that local groups also sometimes value international networks as being seen as more neutral and above the fray of national or local political tensions.

Why do these synergies usually not happen?

If the synergies between international networks and local social movements are so valuable, why do they so rarely occur? First, some international networks do not see it as their mandate to work with local groups. They feel they can have more of an impact working through focal points and larger scale organizations that have a wider reach. This has been the conventional wisdom among many international groups and may well be the more efficient and practical choice. The gains to be made on both sides suggest, however, that *some* international groups need to link more closely with local groups.

Second, the possibilities or need for collaboration are often not apparent to international groups unless they are active at the local level. This puts international networks into a Catch-22 situation where they can only become aware of local needs for collaboration if they are already active locally.

Third, the activities of local groups are often informal, unanticipated, urgent and small-scale. Raising funds for such activities can be difficult at short-notice, even for international networks. Donors often require logical frameworks or other accountability mechanisms that make it harder for groups to be responsive to newly arising needs. As suggested above, international networks that have funds that they can flexibly allocate in small amounts on a case-by-case basis will be best positioned to work with local groups effectively.

Fourth, international networks may also lack the flexibility to respond quickly to calls for assistance. With many requests, they may not be able to easily distinguish from a distance which causes are the most important.

Fifth, international networks may be concerned about stepping on the toes of their national counterparts or national counterparts may feel their international 'partners' are irrelevant to local causes. As the earlier study showed, however, national focal points or partners in many cases lack the local contacts themselves, and are usually vastly over-committed. National networks may still lack the contacts and wider picture that international groups can develop. International groups may well be ignorant of local conditions, but need to learn more about them to be more effective.

Finally, language barriers and cultural gaps can make it difficult, impractical or uncomfortable for international networks to link closely with local groups.

Organizations that can overcome these barriers seem to be able to better link to the local level, while not necessarily working at the local level. WRM demonstrated in their cases that the barriers can indeed be surmounted. Local level activities focus on information sharing and strategic coordination with local social movements to avoid the difficulties of international networks doing the work of the local social movement.

Lessons for networks

What lessons do these few experiences suggest for international networks? Acknowledging that networks have different mandates and histories, it will not be appropriate for every international group to try to “close the gap” by working more closely with local groups. As we indicate above, however, this can make it more difficult for them to know local priorities and can increase their irrelevance in the eyes of national or local groups.

For those who do see value in linking to the local level, the experiences here suggest the need to:

- Create opportunities for face-to-face contacts
 - Use the links to facilitate exchange of information “upward” and “downward” between the network and local groups.
 - Use the network’s comparative advantage in providing examples from other places to help people understand their own situations better (international policy comparisons, examples of people’s strategies and struggles in other countries, cross-visits).
 - Use the network’s comparative advantage of broader international donor contacts, media contacts and campaign targets in influential countries or organizations.
- Identify where national or local organizations need independent assessments and advocacy to strengthen their cause.
 - Focus on building local capacities through trainings and local federations to enhance the scale of impact.
 - Assess local situations carefully before committing to investments.
 - Help disseminate local people’s priorities upwards and share information widely through your website, newsletter and most important contacts.
 - Facilitate strategies with activities at the local, regional, national and international level, where warranted.
 - Create funding sources that allow you to be responsive to small-scale activities and urgent requests.

The limited experiences here suggest that it may not, however, be in the interest of international networks to develop local technologies or engage in expensive local investments without good knowledge of the location, even where those efforts focus on better communication. Overall, the WRM focus on sponsoring meetings and sharing information seemed to have had a larger impact for the same amount of funds. WRM’s activities also stimulated additional seminars, demonstrations, public hearings and dissemination of information that added to its overall impact.

Conclusion

We have summarized here the experiences WRM and FAN in Peru, Brazil, India and Kenya in seeking to support local communities' interests about forest issues. The experiences show that international networks *can* link to the local level when they want to and have a significant and strategic impact. In these cases, workshops and collaborative strategizing were a more efficient intervention than developing new technological options (computers and internet services) in terms of time and funds used relative to the impact achieved. Network effectiveness may require a careful balance between *linking to* versus *working at* the local level. WRM's experience supports the notion that micro-mobilization remains the cornerstone of social movements, and that the challenge to international groups is how to best link with local organizations and institutions in personalized, culturally synchronized ways. Improved access to technology may help, but is no substitute for these other kinds of interactions.

The four cases provide only a small glimpse into the possibilities for international networks' contribution to social movements. Due to the nature of the projects and this review, we were not able to examine the possible trade-offs or negative impacts the networks may unintentionally bring. International networks

may be culpable of co-opting agendas, speaking on behalf of constituencies to whom they are not directly accountable, working in an uninformed way, raising expectations or making promises that they cannot keep, and diverting local causes or priorities to those of international interest. Some people also argue that the resources allocated to international organizations could be more efficiently used in national settings. The potential strong and weak points of international networks need to be considered together.

Social movements use collective action to achieve meaningful change for a particular group at the right time and the right place. Although international networks are just one player in social movements, the experiences here firmly demonstrate that they have the potential to provide a wider range of resources, exchanges, capabilities, strategies and contacts to local and national causes. Through their involvement, international networks can increase the options available to local actors, making it possible for social movements to grow, coalesce and act when most needed. International networks are not always necessary for social movements to occur, but they certainly enrich the mix of possibilities.

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International networks in community forestry face challenges in linking with local social movements. We examine four efforts of international networks to overcome these challenges and better link with local people in Peru, Brazil, India and Kenya. The examples demonstrate that the networks created effective links by making funds available for meetings and local data collection; providing international analyses that helped people understand their own situation better; sharing strategies for media, policy and letter campaigns; helping to disseminate information about local people's priorities, providing independent assessments and building local people's confidence. Efforts to improve communications technologies required a better understanding of local conditions. Networks will be more relevant to local movements to the extent that they are regularly active at the local level, can respond flexibly to local needs and small-scale events, and work with an array of national partners. The effectiveness of networks in carrying out these tasks may require a careful balance between *linking to* versus *working at* the local level.

