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Storehouses and Safety Nets

DORIS CAPISTRANO describes how the many services provided by forests are essential to meeting the Millennium Development Goals and calls for reforms to realise their potential

Forests are a critically important resource for many of the world's extremely poor and disempowered people. Approximately 350 million, including around 60 million indigenous people, live in forested areas. Many – and especially those in fragile, remote or conflict-affected areas – suffer poverty, exclusion and injustice. Forests provide safety nets that keep many people from falling further into poverty – especially during times of drought, war and economic collapse – and their resources provide incomes that allow some to escape it.

Extreme poverty

Collecting, processing, using and selling wild and semi-domesticated plants and animals from forests provides, on average, 20% or more of the household income of most extremely poor people. Women and children tend to be heavily involved in livelihood activities which provide food,

fuel, fibre and other products – and seasonal employment when other options are not available. Forests yield over 3.3 billion cubic meters of wood – including 1.8 billion cubic meters of fuelwood and charcoal – and a variety of non-wood products of significant subsistence and commercial value. Up to 60 million people worldwide are employed in the forestry and wood industries. Forests are thus a vital resource for realising the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of reducing extreme poverty and hunger.

Vector-borne diseases

Forests are also critically important for achieving the MDGs on reducing child mortality, improving maternal health and combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases. They serve as a valuable storehouse of knowledge, biodiversity and genetic resources that are important for human health. Forests, particularly in the

tropics, provide habitat for at least half of the world's known plant and animal species. Clearing and logging them – and other forms of forest disturbance – can have positive or negative implications for many vector-borne diseases, including malaria.

Empowering women

Some two billion people, about a third of the world's population, rely on plants and animals – a large portion of them from forests and natural environments – as their primary source of medicine. Knowledge of medicinal plants and animals and their uses is often held and kept alive by women. Securing women's rights and access to forests resources, giving women due recognition and a fair share of the benefits from their knowledge, and providing them with capacity-building support to add value to their forest-related livelihood activities, can all enhance women's status, build their assets and help realise the MDG of empowering women.

Climate change

Forests are vital to ensuring environmental sustainability, a goal essential to achieving all the other MDGs. More than three-fourths of the world's freshwater comes from forest catchments. With about half the world's terrestrial organic carbon stocks, forests and woodlands play a major role in the global carbon cycle – and thus in accelerating or decelerating global

climate change. Apart from these critical ecological functions, forests provide important cultural services, including a sense of place, identity and security for communities in and around them.

Unfortunately, much of the forests' contributions – through provisioning, environmental regulation and supplying cultural goods and services – are ignored or discounted in development planning and day-to-day resource use decisions. Forestry is generally accorded a low priority compared to other resource sectors. Forests continue to decline in many parts of the world, especially the tropics, under pressure from logging, road and infrastructure-building, agricultural expansion and other forces. Distortions in perceived costs, benefits and trade-offs from alternative land uses and ineffective cross-sectoral coordination mechanisms have resulted in over-exploitation and under-investment in forestry.

Forestry and agro-forestry have a vast unrealised potential to serve sustainable development and poverty reduction goals. Yet, many forest-related policies unfairly discriminate against the poor and prevent them from investing in sustainable forest management and in their own development. The more valuable forests are, the more likely it is that the poor will lose access to them, as better-off and more powerful groups seek to control these resources and influence their governance – including forest-related institutions, policies, practices and decision-making processes.

Basic information

Forestry in developing countries is typically plagued by institutional capacity weaknesses, lack of basic information necessary for effective forest management and weak or inconsistent legal and regulatory frameworks. It is also constrained by serious governance challenges, of which corruption is the most pernicious and deep-rooted.

Corruption, and its insidious effects on governance, hits the poor hardest. It undermines efforts to make forest use sustainable and equitable, and renders most regulations and control mechanisms worthless. Its manifestations in forestry include give-away logging concessions, illegal logging and smuggling operations, large-scale encroachment on forestlands, and fraud and tax evasion schemes. It is reflected in the lack of accountability of government agents, corporations and powerful actors who often receive preferences and subsidies at the expense of poor people who depend on forests for their livelihoods. The lost revenue in taxes and royalties due to forest-related corruption totals at least \$10 to 15 billion a year, and this does not include associated ecological and social costs. It is a drain of much-needed resources that could have gone to development and poverty alleviation.

Realising forestry's considerable potential contribution to meeting the MDGs rests largely on reforming policies and strengthening overall forest governance. Policy experiments over the past three decades have shown that when enabling conditions exist and institutions and property rights are clear and function well, forests can be used more sustainably and their benefits shared more equitably among stakeholders.

Initiatives that improve poor people's use and control of forest resources have been important entry points for governance reforms

Community forestry and pro-poor forest policies, for example, have resulted in around 25% of the world's forests being managed and controlled by local communities. Decentralising forest management – though often problematic and conflict-ridden, particularly during its early stages – can encourage laws and regulations that are more responsive to local stakeholders and can help communities increase their share of benefits from logging concessions. Initiatives that improve poor people's use and control of forest resources have been important entry points for governance reforms, despite the tendency of powerful groups to want to dominate. Coupled with capacity building, networking among the poor and marginalized, and partnerships with allied groups and key actors, such initiatives can help level the playing field and form the basis for more lasting poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

Opening opportunities

Yet the forestry sector will need more than incremental innovations if it is truly to make progress in meeting the MDGs. Indeed, it will require a concerted and proactive approach to policy and governance reforms, centered on securing poor people's forest rights, strengthening their capabilities, and opening opportunities for them to compete in the market for forest products and services. Key elements of this reform agenda must include clarifying and enforcing forest tenure and access regimes, reducing regulatory burdens and hidden taxes on poor people, supporting local enterprises consistent with sustainable forest use, rooting out corruption, enforcing just laws, and protecting poor people and communities from unjust partnerships that harm their interests and their forest resources. Only when unnecessary constraints on poor people are removed, will they be able to chart their own path out of poverty and towards the sustainable development envisioned in the Millennium Development Goals ■

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