

research evidence for policy



Researchers and locals discussing forest resource management issues in Pina, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, Pakistan, January 2008. Photo: Siddhi Manandhar.

Mediated policy dialogues to address conflict over natural resource governance

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Case studies featured here were conducted in Nepal and Pakistan

Policy message

- Different actors have different interests in managing natural resources, so conflicts frequently arise over how to govern them.
- Mutual trust between government agencies, local people, and other stakeholders is vital for effective and inclusive governance of natural resources.
- A continuous dialogue, facilitated by an independent group such as researchers, can develop and strengthen mutual trust and collaboration among the stakeholders.
- Developing mutual trust and common understanding of others' positions requires openness and constant engagement, constructive dialogue, and concerted efforts among the actors.

- Mistrust and conflict between government departments and local stakeholders form a major barrier to effective natural resource governance in South Asia. In Pakistan, mistrust between forest officials and forest users has led to tension in joint forest management programmes. In Nepal, differing perspectives and mistrust on land reform among political parties, the state, and local people have made it difficult to make progress on land reform. In both countries, state agencies are often viewed as opposing people's rights. To overcome this problem, facilitation through a neutral mechanism for engagement and dialogue with the state, political decision-makers, and local actors is needed.

Conflicts hindering resource management

- Conflict among state agencies, political parties, and local actors in South Asia has created problems in managing natural resources efficiently and ensuring sustainable livelihoods for local people. Various groups of stakeholders may have different perspectives and interests. For example, one branch of the state (the forest department) may aim to protect forests in order to conserve wildlife and biodiversity; private contractors may wish to exploit it economically (for example by logging and extracting non-timber forest products); while local people rely on the forest for timber, fuel wood, grazing, and medicinal

plants as their livelihood base and are culturally and spiritually attached to the forests and their products. On the surface, these interests frequently appear to be irreconcilable. The situation will be worse if the various stakeholders do not communicate with each other and adopt entrenched positions in support of their interests.

In Nepal, land reform is a constant source of conflict between political parties, landlords and landless, the government, local people, and advocacy groups. One of the main sources of conflict is the different interpretations of land reform by different actors. The land reform debate entered a new phase once it became an inte

Featured Case Studies

Joint forest management in Pakistan

In Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province (former North West Frontier Province), the conflict between state forest authorities and local people over forest resources has hampered joint forest management programmes supported by donor agencies (see for example Shahbaz, 2009). NCCR North-South researchers, in conjunction with local NGOs (Sustainable Development Foundation and Dehi Development Foundation), brought together key actors to overcome mistrust and disputes over joint forest management programmes. The NCCR North-South researchers first contacted the key actors individually and discussed the contested issues. They then facilitated a series of roundtable workshops with both sides to gain confidence. Consequently, during the final phase of the dialogue process, the villagers started negotiating with the forest department officials to form Joint Forest Management Committees in their area.

Land reform in Nepal

In Nepal, major political parties and land advocacy groups hold contradictory positions on land reform. This obstructs the land reform process agreed in the country's Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Interim Constitution – a process that aims to address Nepal's highly skewed land ownership (where 20% of the population control 80% of the arable land) and improve the livelihoods of poor and marginalised people (Upreti et al., 2008).

This dialogue series enabled the players to examine rationales, understand others' views, and hear experts' opinions. The NCCR North-South researchers presented various models of land reform and the related complications. Women's entitlement to land, a major contested issue, was extensively discussed. These meetings, dialogues, and reflections helped greatly to develop mutual trust among the key actors. The land reform issue is still under debate and will take time to resolve.

- gral part of the country's Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2006. Then different concepts such as “radical land reform”, “transformative land reform”, and “scientific land reform” came into the debate and divided political actors. Because of the positions of political decision-makers, the land reform agenda has become a source of conflict and tension at the local and national levels.

- The results of such conflicts include policy paralysis, poor resource management, a degrading environment, continued poverty, and social unrest. In Northwest Pakistan, for example, decade-long efforts for participatory forest management were not able to achieve their intended objectives because of the conflicts, tension, communication gaps, and mistrust among the stakeholders. In Nepal, the conflict has caused the keenly awaited land reform agenda to be sidelined, and, mistrust and suspicion among advocates and opponents of particular types of land reform have mounted.

Mediated dialogues to build trust:

- One way to overcome this problem is to improve communication among the various actors. This involves constant engagement and open discussion as well as listening to, acknowledging, and respecting the opinions of the other side while exploring alternatives. Such dialogue helps overcome mutual suspicion and mistrust.

Who should convene such discussions? A government agency may be a poor choice, as the government is often party to the dispute, so is not seen as neutral. And different government departments may stand on opposing sides. An independent, neutral facilitator, trusted by all, is necessary to bring the disputing sides together.

Researchers or research organisations can play the following roles in helping overcome conflicts over natural resources:

As a facilitator: Research organisations are widely recognised for their open attitudes and impartiality. Hence, they are in a position to facilitate the debate and discussions.

As a provider and analyser of evidence: Research organisations have the capacity and skills needed to gather and analyse evidence that can be used as a basis for decision-making. Often evidence-based discussion and dialogue produce results, and the parties in conflict accept the outcomes.

As a provider of a neutral platform for engagement: Obtaining the desired outcomes from the dialogue, meetings and discussions requires a neutral environment (venue, space, assistance, etc.). Research organisations can provide such a neutral platform for engagement and dialogue.



Local people discussing land issues during a visit of Constituent Assembly members in Siraha district, Nepal, July 2009. Photo: Siddhi Manandhar.



Community members presenting their experiences on managing forest resources through discussion and dialogue in Pakistan, January 2008. Photo: Siddhi Manandhar.

By designing a series of debates and dialogues among the stakeholders, the facilitator can help them understand each others' positions and explore different options to solve the problems.

NCCR North-South developed and tested the mediated policy dialogue process to assist conflicting parties to overcome problems in joint forest management in Pakistan, and in land reform in Nepal.

Definitions

Dialogue is constructive engagement between two or more parties to forge a mutually acceptable solution to a problem. It involves informed conversation and communication on a specific issue with the aims of developing mutual trust, forging cooperation, and devising concerted action to address an issue of contention or conflict.

The Nepal Research Group is a loose network of researchers from the Human and Natural Resources Studies Centre of Kathmandu University, the Central Department of Geography of Tribhuvan University, the Community Self Reliance Centre, and the South Asia Regional Coordination Office of the NCCR North-South.

The Pakistan Research Group is composed of researchers from the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, the University of Agriculture, Faisalabad, and the Development Study Group of the Department of Geography, University of Zurich.



Dialogue on women's land entitlement between researchers and members of the High Level Land Reform Commission in Kathmandu, Nepal. Photo: Siddhi Manandhar.



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Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

When the state itself becomes party to a conflict over natural resources, it is difficult for it to act as a mediator to resolve the conflict. Hence, a neutral party is needed to facilitate dialogue, develop mutual trust between different stakeholders, and enable better governance of natural resources.

Managing natural resource conflict is an integral part of natural resource governance. A mediated policy dialogue using a neutral facilitator is a good way to bring the actors in a natural resource conflict together. Such a dialogue provides a space for key stakeholders such as state bureaucracies, political parties, users, and local communities to collectively address challenges and improve resource governance.

There is no easy way to overcome the multidimensional problems involved in resource management. Each situation is different and must be treated individually, based on constant engagement, discussion, and exploring options through a mediated process.

Dialogue mediated by neutral facilitators such as researchers/research organisations helps build and strengthen trust, enhance communication, promote engagement, and open attitudes.

Facilitation of a mediated dialogue requires continuous engagement, a neutral venue, and an open environment as well as constructive debate and concerted efforts among the actors.

Further reading

Suleri A, Shahbaz B, and Geiser U. 2008. *Stakeholders of Natural Forests in North West Frontier Province of Pakistan: Typology, Influence and Conflicts*. Sustainable Development Policy Institute Islamabad and Sama Publishers Karachi, Pakistan.

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Upreti BR, Sharma SR, Pyakuryal KN, and Ghimire S (eds.). 2010. *The remake of a state: Post conflict challenges and state building in Nepal*. Kathmandu, Nepal: South Asia Regional Coordination Office of the NCCR North-South, and Human and Natural Resources Studies Centre, Kathmandu University.

The National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South is a worldwide research network including seven partner institutions in Switzerland and some 160 universities, research institutions, and development organisations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Approximately 350 researchers worldwide contribute to the activities of the NCCR North-South.

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