

The Role of Collective Action in Securing Property Rights for the Poor: A Case Study in Jambi Province, Indonesia

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INTRODUCTION

This case-study presents a participatory action research (PAR) approach to analyzing decentralized forestry and natural resource management and land property rights issues, and catalyzing collective action among villages and district governments. The study focuses on understanding the current policies governing local people's access to property rights and decision making processes, and learning how collective action among community groups and interaction among stakeholders can enhance local people's rights over lands, resources, and policy processes for development.

The authors applied PAR in two villages, one each in the Bungo and Tanjabbar districts of Jambi province (Sumatra) to facilitate identification of priorities through phases of planning, action, monitoring, and reflection. PAR also helped participants decide what needed to be assessed, design further steps, and collect necessary information.

CONTEXT

Villages were selected based on their relatively strong kinship ties, medium levels of conflict between villagers and outside actors, high poverty levels, and proximity to national parks and forestlands. Villagers derived their incomes from small-scale rubber gardens, off-farm labor, timber and logging, and non-timber forest products. Production forest, protection forest, and national park are considered by the local community to be part of their traditional territory.

Before 1998, management of natural resources, including forestry, was characterized by strong control by the central government. In 2001, a new law gave districts greater autonomy to formulate their own policies and exert control over resources. The policy was intended to improve local people's management of and access to resources, but it was withdrawn in 2002 due to environmental degradation, failure to provide benefits to local people, and an uncertain business climate. In 2004, the government issued a law that clarified shared authority and re-instituted the hierarchy between central and district governments for dealing with various governance issues. However, struggles over power in the forestry sector continue.

DECENTRALIZED FOREST POLICIES, PROPERTY RIGHTS AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

There were no marked differences between the two districts in how they responded to the government policies and how they dealt with property rights and collective action. Both shared concerns over growing needs for more lands for development and clarifying property rights for local people, encouraging them to propose forestlands conversions to the ministry. However, NGOs and others have contributed to shaping local policies. For example, in one village, such interaction has contributed to internalizing principles of transparency, openness, and participation.

Local forest people expressed a strong need to secure their traditional farmlands and rubber gardens, whether outside or inside forestlands. Lands outside can be readily secured, but people may need to pay and wait for some time before obtaining such rights, and only a few go through this process. The central government has delegated to district offices affairs related to management and administration of lands outside forestlands and to educating people about the importance of legal security over lands. Efforts to secure lands for local people, whether within or outside state-claimed forestlands, face a complicated procedure.

Local land tenure insecurity is due to governmental frameworks that ignore the needs of forest-dependent people. Some regulations and ministerial decrees, for example, favor large-scale investment. Some national-level regulations gave local groups or cooperatives the right to manage or use limited amounts of forest, but their implementation has been problematic.

The government is currently embarking on new policies to promote property rights for local communities and the poor. While the programs offer opportunities for communities to engage in collective action and improve their wellbeing, questions remain as to whether their implementation will truly secure property rights and promote genuine collective action or benefit poor communities.



Action research may be an effective strategy for fostering collective action and maintaining the learning process that leads groups to be more organized and cohesive, and district government officials to be more receptive to stakeholders.

FACTORS STRENGTHENING COLLECTIVE ACTION

Trust and clearly delineated authority lead to effective collaboration among groups managing natural resources. In this study, trust developed through the creation of a mechanism wherein people could share their concerns openly and regularly. This led to improved understanding of local problems and willingness to work toward resolving land-use planning issues. Government officials also became more likely to abide by laws when a clear division of authority was laid out in the legislation. However, centrally designed legislation was only effective when developed and agreed upon by the various levels together.

FACTORS AFFECTING COLLECTIVE ACTION WITHIN GROUPS

Most participants agreed that individual group members have strong motivation to work collectively. Women's groups emphasized trust as an important factor in deciding to join a group. They considered trust and honesty crucial for a group to be strong and to reach common goals, build effective leadership, and sustain group cohesion. A sense of trust within groups made members more optimistic about reaching common goals.

COLLECTIVE ACTION TO AVOID ELITE CAPTURE

At higher levels of governance, some agencies applied pressure to assure prioritization of their programs and district development plans, resulting in fewer chances for funds to be allocated to needier parties. For example, one village head whose role should have been to mediate between the parties asked a group of farmers to pay a fee to him for the sale of their lands to a palm oil company. The group members united, stuck to their commitment not to sell land individually, and refused to pay the fee to the village head. They also used various means to overcome the village head's inappropriate behaviors, for example, by sending complaints to the subdistrict. By building relations with outsiders, making the misconduct obvious, and thereby forcing concerned elites to stop their actions, the group avoided elite capture.

COLLECTIVE ACTION TO PRESERVE PROPERTY RIGHTS

At the district level, the authors worked with officials to clarify areas of expertise and resource management options, and to improve both transparency and accountability. However, actual policy changes were modest—primarily increased willingness to work with district partners to resolve outstanding issues of forestland reallocation. Efforts to strengthen civil society as a means to contribute to policy formulation and more seriously monitor government have also been important for identifying and strengthening mechanisms for accountability. Facilitated community groups have shown the capacity to participate in decisionmaking for development, build alliances and networks, and reduce elite capture. However, it is also necessary to network with more powerful stakeholders to accomplish goals like more equitable access to land, preventing elite capture, increasing incomes, and improving women's status.

CONCLUSIONS, POLICY IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes that action research may be an effective strategy for fostering collective action and maintaining the learning process that leads groups to be more organized and cohesive, and district government officials to be more receptive to stakeholders.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- It is possible to catalyze collective action and strengthen local self-confidence and capabilities to interact with more powerful outsiders, negotiate effectively, and bring pressure to reduce elite capture of local benefits.
- The differences within and between communities are vast, and participatory action research within comparatively homogenous groups is one way to accommodate this diversity in local planning. By focusing on what communities can and want to do, a climate of confidence is built that can contribute to successful development and conservation outcomes.
- Participatory action research with government officials can build their willingness to listen to a wider variety of stakeholders and increase their respect for local community input and willingness and ability to manage adaptively and equitably.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- When implementing development programs, work with strongly motivated and already existing community groups, wherever possible. Provide local groups with access to networks of information and institutions.
- Invest more to support monitoring and supervision activities, and promote transparent and participatory forums for deliberations.
- Build capacity of local groups to grasp opportunities for improving livelihoods and informing development planning; enable them to increase their knowledge and skills in group organization and financial and resource management.
- Enhance coordination and shared learning among government units; apply transparent and participatory processes; and use a case-by-case approach to address land-use planning and forest reallocation issues.

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