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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

Name

Just ecosystem management: linking ecosystem services with poverty alleviation

Principal investigator

Thomas Sikor, University of East Anglia

Partners

Chinese Academy of Sciences; Makerere University; TERI-University; University of California at Berkeley; University of British Columbia

Time frame

November 2010 to November 2012

ESPA regions

China, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa

ESPA themes

Biodiversity, coasts, forests, health, political economy, water

Objective

This project promotes 'just ecosystem management' as a new conceptual framework, through research examining socioecological tradeoffs and justice dimensions in the management of ecosystem services.

Summary

In case studies across China, India, Nicaragua and Uganda, researchers are exploring how issues of justice affect the ecological and socioeconomic outcomes of policies intended to conserve ecosystem services. Questions such as what represents a fair tradeoff, or who should receive benefits, participate in decisions and be recognised as a stakeholder, are ubiquitous in management decisions and conflicts over resources — but usually remain implicit. When stakeholders don't address these questions directly, the social dividends from healthier natural resources may not reach those who need them most. And stakeholders may not lend the required support to investments in ecosystem services. To advance the concept of 'just ecosystem management', the researchers are consulting with local and national policymakers and NGOs, and preparing strategy papers for the international community.

Doing justice to poverty and ecology

Conservation and poverty alleviation can go hand in hand, but only if issues of justice are addressed



According to many environment and development experts, China's Sloping Land Conversion Program (SLCP) was bad policy. The programme, which started in 1999 after disastrous Yangtze river floods, paid farmers on upland watersheds to convert crop fields to tree plantings as flood protection. Critics said the policy's top-down structure reverted back to the bad old days of Chinese central planning, and noted that the compensation provided did not match the huge losses farmers suffered from the forced conversion.

Yet an ESPA-funded study in the Yunnan province of south-western China reports that the programme has been surprisingly successful, at least in some locations. Tree plantations in the study area have expanded rapidly and farmers planting low-maintenance forests have been able to take jobs or start new businesses, thereby diversifying their livelihoods. Nationwide, SLCP has converted 15 million hectares of cropland, measurably reduced runoff and erosion, and improved

socioeconomic wellbeing in participating areas.

Why did the scheme work? It gave poor farmers a fair deal. The emerging evidence suggests that a concern for social justice, not just watersheds, drove the programme; and despite the top-down design, it happened to serve farmers' interests as well as the government's.

A central aim of ESPA is to better understand why poor people sometimes gain from improved ecosystem services — such as soil stability or flood control — but in other cases are left behind. The missing links, say this project's researchers, are issues of justice. Ecosystem protection benefits some stakeholders more than others. Management decisions involve and exclude different groups. When natural capital is accurately valued, it yields dividends to some people — but not necessarily the poor. For that, policymakers must start thinking about environmental justice.

The group, led by Thomas Sikor of the University of East Anglia, calls this 'just ecosystem management'. They are exploring the concept in three ESPA-funded case studies in China, India and Uganda, plus a fourth study in Nicaragua backed by other donors.

In the Chinese study, local people told interviewers that they aspired to get off the farm. To them, a just policy is one that offers them a safety net for this transition. The government wanted to fairly compensate farmers for preserving watersheds to benefit society. From the wide distribution of payments, researchers inferred another justice goal: safeguarding livelihoods of all poor upland farmers, not just those upstream of the Yangtze.

Notions of justice permeated a policy that, on the surface, simply aimed to protect watershed services. Responding to justice concerns, China's government eventually increased payments and allowed farmers to intercrop trees with agricultural crops. And fortuitously, the tree-planting payments satisfied the justice concerns both of government and of farmers.

More fieldwork in Yunnan will flesh out these findings. Other case studies are just starting, but by next year will bring examples from a wide range of contexts into the analysis. The Uganda study examines the Bwindi Impenetrable National Park, where efforts to draw tourism revenue from biodiversity have uneven benefits. The park authority and NGOs have tried to channel park profits back to local communities, but at the same time indigenous people have been forced off the land and excluded from ritual sites. An important dimension of justice is recognising when certain cultural groups have part of their identity at stake in decisions about ecosystem management.

In Orissa, India, researchers are studying how changes in coastal mangrove forests affect people's livelihood options — and where impacts fall unequally. And the study

in Nicaragua, located at the Bosawas Natural Reserve, examines who can access services from forests, who decides the rules of access, and who benefits.

The team is also taking a global perspective on questions of justice in ecosystem management. Issue papers examining justice in biodiversity, disasters, forests and water are now under review for a special issue of the journal *Development and Change*. And the team has begun a series of debates in London on environmental justice in international development.

To translate understanding to policy — and a better life for poor communities — all case studies have built in regular consultations with local and national stakeholders. Researchers have briefed agencies and NGOs, and the studies will culminate with policy papers and workshops to discuss results and highlight recommendations.

Most of all, the group wants to bring explicit discussions of justice to the table. As seen in Yunnan, if environmental policies are to succeed in alleviating poverty, they may have to find the overlap between differing ideals of justice.

Next steps

The team's issue papers will evolve into strategic analyses, detailing how to address justice worldwide in five of ESPA's themes: biodiversity, coastal ecosystems, forests, health and water. At a mid-term workshop in Orissa, a field laboratory will help researchers from different backgrounds exchange concepts and perspectives.

Justice thinking bridges disciplines, and the strategy papers will reflect and model this for the international community. Finally, as the four case studies and national policy workshops wrap up, policymakers and NGOs will be more aware of justice dimensions in their decisions and be better prepared to manage ecosystems in ways that meet the needs of the poor.

NEW KNOWLEDGE

- Justice concerns are already embedded in environmental policy. Case studies show that ideas about just management permeate the actions and arguments of governments, NGOs and communities — but these ideals often remain implicit and may generate unrecognised conflicts.
- There is no single conception of justice. Various stakeholders understand tradeoffs and apply ideas about justice differently.
- Policy discussions must put differing notions of justice on the table. Clashes or overlap in different groups' perceptions of fairness or tradeoffs may often determine whether an intervention can succeed in enhancing natural resources and alleviating poverty.



CREATING IMPACT

- This project promotes the innovative concept of 'just ecosystem management' — based on the insight that justice issues are the missing link between protecting ecosystem services and ensuring that the poor benefit.
- Fieldwork in China, India, Nicaragua and Uganda is gathering evidence that more explicit thinking about justice could help policies on ecosystems and poverty succeed. Regular consultations with local and national stakeholders have drawn attention to hidden conflicts over justice and prepared them to change the way they handle these arguments.
- To expand their reach, the research team is writing strategic analyses of justice in biodiversity, coastal ecosystems, forests, health and water; some preliminary issue papers have been submitted for publication in a special journal issue. This lays the ground for change across the developing world by explaining why and how justice matters, spreading the 'just ecosystem management' framework and modelling how justice thinking can bridge disciplines.

The Ecosystem Services for Poverty Alleviation (ESPA) research programme funds high-quality, cutting-edge research to improve our understanding of the way ecosystems function, the services they provide and how they can contribute to poverty alleviation and enhanced wellbeing. This provides the evidence and tools to enable decision makers to manage ecosystems sustainably and in a way that helps improve the lives of the world's poorest people.

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