

Chapter 6

Regional Policy Dialogue

Introduction

The major findings and lessons learned from the case studies and Jhumia Network discussions were summarised through a series of discussions and consultations. Towards the end of the project, a Regional Policy Dialogue workshop was held in Shillong, India. Participants included a broad spectrum of people from the five countries with an interest in or responsibility for shifting cultivation. They included representatives of government agencies, farmers, international bodies, non-government organisations, academia, science and research institutions, local institutions, international donors and development assistance agencies, the private sector, and other professionals (Annex).

The workshop was organised by the

- International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Kathmandu, Nepal
- International Fund for Agricultural Development, Rome, Italy
- North Eastern Council, Department of Development of North East Region, Government of India, Shillong, India
- LEAD-India, New Delhi, India
- The Missing Link, Guwahati, India
- IFAD-North Eastern Region Community Resource Management Project, Shillong, India

It was inaugurated by Mr P. R. Kyndiah, Honourable Union Minister Tribal Affairs, Government of India, and Department of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER). Mr Peter J. Bazeley, Chief Secretary to the Government of Meghalaya, India, delivered the concluding remarks.

The participants discussed and agreed the overall findings and conclusions, and formally formulated the major policy issues and recommendations derived from the case studies and multilayered discussions and consultations. The text of the policy issues and recommendations document is reproduced below.

In response to the suggestion of Mr P. R. Kyndiah, these were encapsulated in the form of the 'Shillong Declaration on Shifting Cultivation in the Eastern Himalayas', which was adopted on October 8th, 2004. The text of the declaration is also reproduced below.

Policy Issues and Recommendations of the Regional Policy Dialogue Workshop

Preamble

There are common trends in shifting cultivation across the eastern Himalayas, which span six countries: Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, and Nepal. Policy lessons can be learned and exchanged at the regional and global levels, without romanticising the issues and by taking a hard look at changes needed to improve shifting cultivation.

Any policies related to shifting cultivation and land management in shifting cultivation will affect the livelihoods of millions of marginal farmers. Across Asia generally, more than 400 million people, most of them indigenous, are dependent on tropical forests, and a majority of these practise shifting cultivation. In all of South Asia, an estimated 10 million hectares of land are under shifting cultivation.

The aim of policies regarding shifting cultivation should not be to conserve the practice for conservation's sake, nor to scale it up to other communities. However, those who practise shifting cultivation should be allowed to maintain and build upon their practices and culture without having to face the consequences of an undeserved bias.

Shifting cultivation and its benefits

Shifting cultivation is a rotational agroforestry system, which is dynamic in space and time. It includes an agricultural and a forestry component, which are practised sequentially. There are various forms of shifting cultivation that are practised in the region, ranging from 'good' to 'bad', and from 'undistorted' to 'distorted' (changed as a result of negative pressures). The practice is not impoverishing as such, there are cases in all countries where it is currently practised in a sustainable and integral manner. However, there is a clear need for strengthening and improvement in other cases. Strengthening rather than replacement of shifting cultivation is recommendable, especially considering the benefits shifting cultivation has to offer. These benefits include the following.

1. Fallow forests are an integral and important part of shifting cultivation and are managed actively by farmers. They have evolved as part of the practices that are adjusted to the prevailing agroecological circumstances in the region. Where land tenure of communities and households is better secured, such as in parts of North East India and Bhutan, shifting cultivators conserve more forest and make it more productive than other farmers. Prerequisites for the existence of fallow forests are rotation (or shifting), a common property regime, and patches of preserved forest to enhance regeneration. The fallow forests are also referred to as the forestry phase of shifting cultivation.

Controlled burning is a necessary management practice to combine agriculture with a forestry phase. It makes the fallow forests manageable in terms of the

time and labour involved in removing the forest when the land is re-used for farming. If the forest could not be removed so easily, farmers might be less inclined to let it grow on their land in the first place. During the cropping phase, burning is essential for weed and pest management and fertility enhancement, enabling farming to remain organic.

2. Biodiversity conservation is benefited by the farmers' practices, indigenous knowledge, and customs that are associated with shifting cultivation. In other words, the strength of shifting cultivation to contribute to conservation lies in the diversity it creates. Shifting cultivation benefits biodiversity conservation through the following: a high level of livelihood dependency that creates incentives for conservation; abundant skill in mixed cropping, seed development, and in situ gene pool conservation; the creation of different successional stages through rotation; and richness of indigenous knowledge (and particularly traditional ecological knowledge) and cultural practices. Shifting cultivation can provide a less intensive land use system to complement conservation activities in protected areas in buffer zones and biodiversity corridors between protected areas.

Shifting cultivators have the knowledge and skills to provide many environmental services such as conservation of soil and water, biodiversity and gene pools, and also carbon sequestration. This potential could be used to provide permanent forms of income and employment.

3. Shifting cultivation farming systems are a storehouse of innovative products of commercial value as well as of innovative organic farming practices, which increases the potential for economic development.

Niche products enable farmers to move towards commercial farming without compromising on the main principles of shifting cultivation. Less common crop and livestock species of commercial value are one of the benefits that shifting cultivation has to offer, but government support is required for marketing, production, processing, value addition, securing intellectual property rights, credit, and ensuring premium pricing for the organic produce.

Farmers keep shifting cultivation organic and productive through their in-depth knowledge of soil fertility management, crop requirements and weed management; prevention of soil erosion through contour bunds and minimum tillage; agroforestry practices; and controlled burning. Shifting cultivation is superior to sedentary agricultural alternatives in this context, because there are few external inputs required and untapped opportunities are still present.

4. Local institutions are a vital element of shifting cultivation for resource management, equitable access to resources, and a social safety net. Important local institutions include customary resource tenure systems; traditional knowledge systems; fallow forest management at the landscape level; community mobilisation for fire management and communal action; and local

governance and authority. Shifting cultivation farmers have ample traditional knowledge. Much of it can be scientifically validated.

Traditional organisations and institutions have an important role to play in the proper management of shifting cultivation areas, even though not all are necessarily democratic or equity oriented. This role can be enhanced if they are given authority and are embedded into the national government set up. The modern state has its own role to play in development, including in the re-development of distorted or degraded shifting cultivation areas.

Adverse policy environment

Shifting cultivation faces an undeserved bias resulting from the common assumption that it is a destructive practice, although there is a body of scientific evidence that underscores its many benefits. Examples of the adverse policy environment affecting shifting cultivation are the following.

Fallow forests are an integral and important part of shifting cultivation and are managed actively by farmers. However, public opinion of shifting cultivation is focused on the slashing and burning, while no attention is paid to the replanting and regeneration of fallows. Outsiders and governments often see fallows as 'open access land' or 'waste lands', and they allocate fallow land to other purposes. This has led to the shortening of cycles in the remaining shifting cultivation land, and permanent loss of access for the shifting cultivators.

In practising (traditional) agroforestry and moving to commercial production, albeit of traditional crops, shifting cultivators are doing what governments want: agroforestry and economic growth. Yet not enough credence is given to them, and government approaches are geared towards replacing shifting cultivation, rather than integrating alternatives into existing good practices.

The introduced sedentary options of farming and plantation forestry have been adopted wherever they were appropriate, but are also extensively promoted in less appropriate upland areas. This often results in loss of environmental resilience. The allocation of land for these purposes reduces the land available for shifting cultivation, while productivity and economic returns are not assured. This increases the vulnerability of shifting cultivators to market risks, and results in marginalisation of the practices.

Current regulations on the use of chemicals and fertilisers, as well as those on seed supply, are often a disincentive for organic farming and a threat for the integrity of the shifting cultivation practice. Formal research and development interventions related to seed supply systems are undermining traditional seed supply arrangements. Regulatory frameworks are biased against local land races. This creates procedural problems for conserving them and undermines the potential for local communities to benefit from intellectual property related to agrobiodiversity. Strengthening traditional seed supply systems requires re-examination of policy regulations on crop variety testing and release systems.

In order to access credit, land is often taken as collateral. In the case of common property regimes, however, land cannot be used as collateral, and access to credit is often impossible.

While in most countries there is no specific policy to deal with shifting cultivation, the practice is affected by a diverse range of policies varying from forest, agriculture, and hydropower to rural development and indigenous and tribal policies. Current policies and legislation are not consistent and are often not supported by informed decision-making. Often policies are political and do not reflect ground realities. While there are examples of favourable policies, in general the thrust is against the practice either in the policies themselves, their legislation, or their implementation.

Main impacts of adverse policy

Given the negative perceptions of shifting cultivation, the underlying premise of all policies is to replace the practice with permanent, settled agriculture or other settled land-based activities. Such an approach is insensitive to the tenets and strengths of shifting cultivation. The replacement of shifting cultivation by permanent agriculture or forestry activities results in:

1. Reduction of the total area available for shifting cultivation and subsequent shortening of the fallow phase, resulting in reduced productivity and food security,
2. Transformation of tenurial regimes from common property in which everyone gets a share, to private property, resulting in landlessness and poverty,
3. Increased dependency on external market and political forces for which communities and their institutions are little prepared or supported, increasing their vulnerability, and
4. Environmental degradation in areas where the traditional shifting cultivation practice has been distorted and acceptable alternatives have not been found.

These are the effects on the livelihoods of millions of farmers in the eastern Himalayas who depend on shifting cultivation.

Principles

The following principles were followed to lead to the main recommendations.

1. The existing prejudice against shifting cultivation must cease. Shifting cultivation should be considered as a potentially constructive tool for development, rather than destructive for environment or livelihoods.
2. The changes in shifting cultivation communities are inevitable. These changes, however, should come from within the system. We need to build on and facilitate technological and institutional innovations and change processes.
3. An adaptive management approach is required to develop shifting cultivation. This approach is focused on transformation rather than replacement of existing practices; it recognises traditional knowledge and practices as well as social sensitivity.

4. Scientific research is required to validate and document existing good practices and traditional knowledge of shifting cultivation farmers. Support for the farmers' innovative processes needs priority. This will provide do-able options for the improvement of shifting cultivation as well as other farming systems in similar agro-ecological conditions. Agricultural extension and training should be focused on these options.
5. Fallows should be recognised as forests on agricultural land, whereas now shifting cultivation is considered to be farming on forest land. Fallow forests are used as an integral part of the system, and cannot be allocated for other purposes like (permanent) afforestation, wasteland development, protected areas, or resettlement programmes.
6. Shifting cultivators should be rewarded for their role in biodiversity conservation, and should have more control over biodiversity conservation efforts in their areas.
7. Controlled burning by shifting cultivators as a means of fertility enhancement, and weed and pest control should be recognised as an important management practice.
8. Locally existing niche products are the key to economic development in shifting cultivation. Government support should focus on enterprise development with these products by providing facilities for marketing, processing, value addition, and credit. The produce should be certified as organic. The rights of shifting cultivators to use and market any produce from the fallow forest (like non-timber forest products) should be recognised.
9. Common property resources are a basic tenet of shifting cultivation. Customary institutions provide access to the sources of production to all community members. Community land management systems need to be studied instead of focusing on privatisation; communal land management innovations are required to strengthen existing communal tenure arrangements and complement private tenure. This will help to avoid land speculation, and promote social capital and other benefits.
10. Alternative ways of providing access to credit should be developed for shifting cultivation farmers. For example, local institutions that regulate the common property could provide guarantees to the bank on behalf of the loan taker.
11. Local customary institutions should be strengthened, capacitated, and formalised. They should have appropriate synergy with the state and be embedded within it, rather than being replaced by parallel government bodies at the local level. Gender sensitisation, representation, and equity issues should be addressed. They must collaborate with the local/state level government for policy formulation and implementation with regard to shifting cultivation. Cooperation between the levels should be facilitated to reduce conflicts, and the policy process must be supported at the national level.
12. Capacity building should be sensitive to the role of women (and gender aspects in general) in shifting cultivation; women focused capacity building programmes are required.

13. Population dynamics need to be understood while developing policy; too often the impression is created that it is the shifting cultivators themselves whose natural population growth is causing land shortage and shortening of cycles, but immigration and reduction of land through other reasons plays a considerable role.
14. Inter-collaboration of all government departments related to land use (e.g. agriculture, forests, environment, soil conservation, and horticulture) is required as shifting cultivation cuts across all these. The same is true for academic institutions.
15. Regional collaboration mechanisms are important to share and exchange knowledge on good practices and innovations in shifting cultivation within the eastern Himalayas.
16. Existing policies are not all bad and there are examples of favourable policies that have led to positive development of and improvement of shifting cultivation management. The same is the case for technological alternatives, but the overall tendency is negative. Large investments have not all been in vain, but their effects should be evaluated taking the above-mentioned insights into account.

Recommendations

1. Remove explicit policies and policy instruments that discourage shifting cultivation, and strengthen the implementation of existing beneficial policies.
2. Increase security of land tenure for shifting cultivators for both the agricultural and fallow phases through country specific measures by reconsidering the classification of shifting cultivation areas and categorising them as agricultural land with adaptive forest management in the fallow period.
3. Invest in research and extension to document and scientifically validate traditional shifting cultivation practices, increase their productivity and profitability, and enhance ecological and social benefits, providing formal recognition of the innovations practised by farmers.
4. Encourage market development and commercialisation of traditional and new niche products of shifting cultivation systems.
5. Strengthen and capacitate customary institutions for improved local level governance, management of community-based natural resources, and tenurial access and control.
6. Reorient existing credit policies to be sensitive and proactive to situations where common property regimes apply.
7. Encourage coordination among different government agencies that have responsibilities for aspects of shifting cultivation (esp. forestry, agriculture, rural development).

The Shillong Declaration on Shifting Cultivation in the Eastern Himalayas

Responding to the suggestion of the Hon'ble Union Minister of the Government of India on Tribal Affairs and Development of the North East Region, Mr P. R. Kyndiah, to propose a Shillong Declaration,

Recognising that Shifting Cultivation is key to production systems, both agriculture and forestry, for providing livelihoods to many ethnic and tribal groups in the tropical and sub-tropical highlands of Asia and Africa as well as Latin America,

Recognising that Shifting Cultivation is one of the most complex and multifaceted forms of traditional agroforestry practice in the world reflecting a robust traditional ecological knowledge,

Realising that Shifting Cultivation evolved as a traditional practice and is an institutionalised resources management mechanism at a species, ecosystem and landscape level ensuring ecological security and food security and thus providing a social safety net,

Being conscious of the diverse traditional institutions and tenurial systems pertaining to Shifting Cultivation in the eastern Himalayan region comprising Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, and Nepal,

Understanding that the institutional mechanisms ingrained in traditional Shifting Cultivation systems can ensure access to productive resources for every member of the community including landless people and the most marginalised groups,

Recognising that Shifting Cultivation is a way of life for a large number of indigenous, tribal, and other poor and marginalised upland communities,

Recognising that traditional Shifting Cultivation systems have been stressed by external and internal forces,

Having knowledge on existing policies on Shifting Cultivation in the countries of the Eastern Himalayas.

We, the participants from the eastern Himalayan countries, representing government agencies, farmers, international bodies, non-government organisations, academia, science and research institutions, local institutions, international donors and development assistance agencies, the private sector, and other professionals, concerned about Shifting Cultivation and shifting cultivators, regionally and worldwide, assembled in Shillong in Meghalaya, India from 6 to 8 October 2004 declare as hereunder:

- a) That Shifting Cultivation must be recognised as an agricultural and an adaptive forest management practice which is based on scientific and sound ecological principles.

- b) That it is imperative to provide an enabling environment in order to address the urgent livelihood and ecological concerns arising out of rapid transformations driven by development and other externalities including market forces.
- c) That it is imperative to empower shifting cultivators as practitioners of rotational agroforestry to become active participants in decision making and policy processes that impact them most.
- d) That it is essential to make existing research and extension services sensitive and relevant to the needs and challenges of Shifting Cultivation and shifting cultivators and simultaneously assimilate the traditional ecological knowledge of Shifting Cultivation into future research, development and extension processes.
- e) That it is necessary to recognise the traditional institutions and intellectual capital generated from traditional practices relating to Shifting Cultivation and ensure its protection in the legal and policy regime.
- f) That it is essential to provide interactive forums and environment for information access and sharing between multiple stakeholders at local, national, regional and global levels.
- g) That it is imperative to acknowledge that women usually play the most critical role in Shifting Cultivation both at the activity and the impact level and therefore any development intervention must be sensitive to this fact.

AND THEREFORE

The regional, national, and local policies for Shifting Cultivation need to be re-appraised and, where necessary, reformulated. For this purpose, the detailed recommendations of the 'Shifting Cultivation Regional Policy Dialogue Workshop for the Eastern Himalayas', 6-8 October 2004, Shillong can provide input.

WHERE ALL POLICIES AND ACTIONS SHOULD BE FOUNDED ON THE FOLLOWING GUIDING PRINCIPLES

To support decentralised, participatory, multi-stakeholder, interdisciplinary, eco-regional, and adaptive management approaches that respect human and cultural diversity, gender equity, livelihood security, and enhancement as well as environmental sustainability, where we value and build upon both traditional and scientific information and knowledge.

Adopted: 8 October 2004 at Shillong, Meghalaya, India

