

# Shifting the balance of power

Local communities are often threatened by the activities of outsiders, and all too frequently their needs and opinions are ignored. This often leads to conflict. The 'Levelling the Playing Field' project has explored how local communities can compete on an equal footing with more powerful groups, such as plantation companies and government ministries. According to an independent evaluation, the project has successfully developed a system of mediation that can shift the balance of power in forested areas.

**'Levelling the Playing Field has shown communities how to defend their heritage for the common good.'**

**Independent evaluation**

The 4-year project, jointly managed by CIFOR and the Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD), helped to broker environmental agreements among local communities and more powerful players, such as government ministries and private companies, at six sites in Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. In each country, a local university was involved in the research.

'Although the issues varied from site to site, the approach was always the same,' says project leader Philippe Guizol. 'It involved giving local people the skills and confidence needed to work together and negotiate partnerships with outside groups.'

Local people were encouraged to identify their priorities, develop small-scale projects to gain experience in acting collectively, and establish democratic organisations to represent their interests. They then entered negotiations with the

companies or government departments managing local resources, such as plantations or mangrove forests, and the negotiations led to written agreements on how to manage the resources in future, and how to share the benefits.

The project significantly improved forest management and local incomes at several sites. Take, for example, the impact in four villages in Java where Perum Perhutani, a state-owned company that manages 600 000 hectares of teak plantations, has a major influence on local land use. In the past, the company had tried to work with local villages, but with little success, largely because the villagers had little or no bargaining power and were reluctant to make their voices heard.

The project encouraged farmers' organisations to negotiate a new deal with the company. This involved establishing new rules, defining the rights and duties of each partner, and



agreeing how to share the benefits from the teak plantations. Three of the four villages now receive 25 per cent of the timber revenues, whereas in the past they received nothing. In one village without teak forests, a different sort of partnership was established, involving the hotel group Accor Indonesia, along with the local farmers' group and the plantation company. Accor is now paying for the planting of trees on barren land, and when these are harvested, the profits will be divided three ways, between Accor, the farmers' group and Perhutani. Accor intends to use the profits to set up an education fund for scholarships and replanting. Good public relations for Accor? Yes, but it is a good deal for the villagers too.

The project developed an approach that could be used to create fairer relationships between local communities and developers in other areas. It has also provided some interesting insights into the dynamics of collaboration, says Guizol, and the importance of acting at the appropriate time.

'In Java, at the Perum Perhutani site, we arrived at just the right time,' he says. 'Both the local people and the company were fed up with conflicts over the plantations and the company was keen to engage constructively with

local villagers. At times such as these, it's important to act swiftly, rather than delay, for example, to do more research.'

The independent evaluation concluded that the research at all six project sites sent out the same message: that sustainable forest management is only likely to be achieved with the participation of local communities. If there is conflict, it is much harder to manage forests and plantations well.

Guizol says the methodology developed by the Levelling the Playing Field project could prove particularly useful if, as anticipated, countries rich in forests host a wave of projects designed to tackle climate change by reducing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD).

'If REDD projects are going to succeed,' says Guizol, 'then it's vitally important that local communities are not marginalised and that projects don't create conflicts by threatening their livelihoods. One way of doing that is through environmental mediation of the sort we've developed with Levelling the Playing Field.'

Web links: [http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/lpf/\\_ref/index.htm](http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/lpf/_ref/index.htm).



**01** Old teak trees (*Tectona grandis*) ready for harvest in Perum Perhutani plantations in Cepu, Indonesia.  
Photo by Christian Cossalter

**02** Teak plantation in Bangsal, East Java, Indonesia.  
Photo by Philippe Guizol

**03** Measuring mangrove areas in the Hutan Bakau Pantai Timur reserve, Indonesia.  
Photo by Petrus Gunarso