

BAYNES, JACK [S16-P63]

Governance and Power Relationships: Their Effect on Community Forestry Organisations and Local People in the Philippines

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This paper examines the effectiveness of partially devolved forest governance on the success of timber tree establishment and harvesting for community forestry in the Philippines. Devolution of power has long been considered to be a 'magic bullet' in the governance of community forestry organisations (CFOs). However, poor governance which involves unequal power relationships between state agencies, forest user groups and rural people, produces unequal access in decision-making, sharing of authority and responsibility. This engenders local resistance from those who feel excluded and marginalised in the process. Drawing on Bourdieu's notion of 'symbolic violence', we examine how unequal power relationships between State and local agencies have facilitated destruction of mature and newly planted timber plantations. Studies of a harvesting and a reforestation project found that the adverse effects of poor governance occurred at two tiers, first at an upper level between the government and CFOs, and second, at a lower level between CFO's and local people. Poor governance at upper levels has triggered both symbolic and physical violence on and from community members who remained marginal to the benefits of harvesting and reforestation. We conclude that a key requirement for sustainable management of community-managed forests is to expand benefit sharing to non-CFO local people. Our findings highlight the importance of lower-tier levels of governance within CFOs and between CFOs and local people.