

8. CONCLUSIONS

Forestry represents the second-largest land use in India after agriculture. Forest communities are generally poor and dominated by tribal groups, whose traditional cultures and institutions often have strong links to the forest.

While most forest communities appear to be agrarian based, forests still play an important supporting role as a safety net during lean times. Fuelwood, fodder, and other nontimber forest products also provide seasonal subsistence. Commercial products such as timber currently play a small role in overall livelihoods, due to cultural factors, poor incentive structures, and general restrictions on trade posed by forest legal and policy frameworks. Although policies governing JFM at the national and state levels have evolved over the past 18 years to put more emphasis on forest livelihoods and poverty alleviation, the program's main thrust is still largely toward forest rehabilitation and conservation.

India is at an important crossroads with respect to its forest sector and community-based forestry programs. Forests are under intense pressure, mainly from human activities, with the current consumption of timber and fuelwood well above sustainable harvest levels. There appears to be great potential for increasing production to meet this supply gap, especially from forests managed by communities and farms. In addition, a number of nontimber forest products, such as medicinal plants and aromatic oils, are beginning to show economic promise.

The ability of communities to tap into these emerging opportunities is hampered by a complex legal framework, command and control regulatory approaches, insufficient understanding of community forest institutions, and poor access to efficient market channels. JFM still focuses largely on commercial plantation management under forest department jurisdiction, with communities providing protection services in return for better nontimber forest product access and a share of any timber revenue.

There appears to be a broad agreement among many stakeholders that continued evolution of JFM toward a model in which communities are more fully empowered with rights and responsibilities can both strengthen forest conservation and increase rural livelihoods. There is, however, no clear national consensus on how to implement this transition, how quickly reform should occur, or what the immediate and longer term policy and program priorities should be.

Despite many positive reforms by some states in recent years and a number of highly committed staff in both state and national forest agencies, in its current form JFM is unlikely to lift poor people in most forest communities out of poverty. Accelerated reforms must place forest livelihoods within a broader mix of livelihood opportunities, particularly by improving agricultural performance, building stronger partnerships, and improving budget and program collaboration between state forest departments and other rural development agencies. New approaches must strengthen community forest rights and responsibilities and open up more direct market channels for forest products. These broad policy thrusts need to be supported by more efficient and flexible regulatory, monitoring, and control systems and a transformation of roles and responsibilities among key actors, in particular state forest departments and communities.

Achieving and implementing a common vision for a more effective community-based forestry model will be challenging; it will require time, patience, and significant investments to build the requisite capacities. With bold steps and political will, however, a strong foundation can be laid to transform community forestry into a more productive and competitive sector of the rural economy.