

Natural resources and poverty

– poor people’s access to natural resources in the context of inequality

The rural poor depend directly upon natural resources for a large part of their livelihoods. This, combined with their limited and often insecure access to the very same natural resources, constitutes a conditioning element of their poverty.

Evidence from many parts of the world shows that the rural poor are facing increasingly insecure access to land, water and forests or, in the worst cases, are losing it completely. Sometimes such losses of access take place in a single stroke, affecting large groups of people at the same time, e.g. when a new protected area is established or when use rights to water are formalized or privatized as part of a legal reform process. More commonly, however, the process is incrementally taking place through what appears to be numerous individual transactions, each with their own personal trajectory of fortune and misfortune. Yet, they all take place in settings characterized by specific forms and levels of political, social, cultural and economic inequality. These patterns of inequality significantly influence the relationship between the involved parties, as well as the outcome of individual transactions and policy interventions.

Depending on the context, such inequalities may run along combinations of ethnic, gender, religious or family lines and are reproduced, deepened or diminished through relations and interactions between men and women, poor and non-poor, people of different ethnic and social origin. These relations and interactions, in turn, are shaped by and contribute to shape formal and informal institutions, including regularized extra-legal practices (e.g. of charity but also of corruption and abuse of public office).

“High levels of economic and political inequality”, the World Development Report 2006 argues, “tend to lead to economic institutions and social arrangements that systematically favour the interests of those with more influence” (World Bank 2005:2). This is unfortunate, both from a concern about poverty reduction per se – i.e. from a global and local fairness perspective – and from an economic point of view since disfavoured groups end up with unexploited talent and thus economic loss (e.g. Acemoglu et al., 2002; Easterly, 2007): “When personal and property rights are enforced only selectively, when budgetary allocations benefit mainly the politically influential, and when the distribution of public services favours the wealthy, both middle and poorer groups end up with unexploited talent. [...] These adverse effects of unequal opportunities and political power on development are all the more damaging because economic, political and social inequalities tend to reproduce themselves over time and across generations” (World Bank, 2005:2).

Hence, this research unit brings together a set of research activities which as part of their activities contribute to the analysis of rural poor people's access to natural resources from two inter-related perspectives:

- from an agency perspective, to understand the means and strategies through which rural poor people – as individuals and as social groups – seek to establish and secure access to natural resources as well as the meanings which access to natural resources may produce for the rural poor, not only in terms of constituting the material basis for their livelihood but also in terms of contributing to their social, political and cultural identity.
- from a structural perspective, to examine how and to which extent different patterns of inequality shape poor people's agency to gain (secure) access to natural resources as well as the outcome of their agency. This embraces both their direct relations with other e.g. non-poor actors and when such relations are mediated through institutions.

Currently, several policy interventions significantly affect the opportunities available to the poor and to the non-poor for gaining, expanding and securing access to natural resources. Among these are the efforts to strengthen private property rights regimes to land, in some cases at the expense of existing common property rights; the water governance reform work underway in many countries which tends to establish exclusive use – and in some cases private property – rights to water; and contradictory tendencies towards, on the one hand, designating forest areas for protection, while on the other hand, only partially enforcing existing forest policies restricting commercial exploitation and sale of timber. Depending on the context and the actual implementation of such policy interventions, these might work to the advantage – or disadvantage – of the poor.

Thus, through comparative research, the policy-related objective of this research unit is to:

- analyze the impact of on-going reforms for poor people's opportunities for gaining, expanding and securing their access to natural resources vis-à-vis the non-poor; and
- develop research-based recommendations as inputs for the formulation and implementation of policies related to access to and thus governance of natural resources promoted by national governments, civil society, and donor organizations.