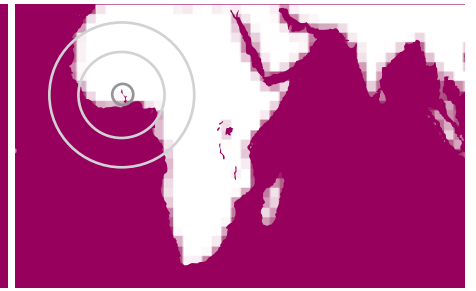


Do communities really need 'saving from themselves'?

Helping local resource users in Ghana to influence environmental decision-making



Environmental policies in most developing countries are rarely evidence-based. Rather they are influenced by assumptions such as natural environments are fragile and need protecting, the rural poor exploit and destroy natural resources using inappropriate technologies, and change is synonymous with crisis and irreversible degradation. Policies tend to focus on excluding people from environmentally sensitive areas or telling them about ways of controlling natural resources and preventing degradation. The tone is one of 'saving communities from themselves'. But recent research in Ghana, where the government is pursuing a policy of decentralisation, is challenging these entrenched views. It focuses on local-level democracy and helping resource users to better manage information so that environmental decision-making is much more responsive to their needs.

In Ghana...

Despite the process of local government decentralisation, very pessimistic trends in the environment and its alleged destruction by local resource users are still widely held opinions and these are reinforced by a strong notion of 'blame'. This was particularly true of two Districts in Brong Ahafo Region where poor rural communities were thought to be 'ill-equipped to manage their resources and what they needed was external and local elites to intervene on their behalf'.

In theory, decentralisation should help to empower local resource users to bring about a change in such attitudes. The various units which make up the system – elected district, sub-district and local representatives, district level departments that report to them, and the regional council providing capacity building and governance controls – come together to provide what is in essence a sound framework for the devolution of power. But in practice this framework has no real means of delivering accountability down the administrative system. Top-down planning still predominates with little attempt to create transparent planning processes. There is little demand for feedback and local government still responds mainly to the interests and agendas of national elites and central government.

It is against this background that researchers sought to better understand environmental policy processes, develop innovative methods that could help to empower local communities to champion their interests within this decentralised management structure, and so begin to challenge the conventional wisdom.

The main objectives of the project were to devise a publicly accessible information system for natural resources management to support planning that would draw on local evidence from the district; build networks of resource users who would analyse their situation and develop a programme of concerns and demands that could be put forward to policy-makers; and produce advocates who would be able to influence policy-makers.



Research is challenging these entrenched views so that environmental decision-making is much more responsive to the needs of resource users

Information for decision-making

Information is fundamental to sound natural resources management and the development of effective local-level democracy. But information for policy-making differs fundamentally from information for research. While research is able to use case studies that can be scaled-up and tested, administrative decision-making is based on comprehensive data on the whole area under a given policy domain. Establishing such a database was impracticable within the resources of this project and so researchers focused on developing an institutionalised process of collecting, analysing and updating information for policy-making rather than just assembling data according to a set methodology. A two-way flow of knowledge was envisaged – information from producer networks can be put to policy-makers, and policy-makers communicate their information to citizens.

Work began with general social surveys on the conditions of agriculture and charcoal burning, the main sources of income in the area. The survey eventually covered 84 remote communities in two Districts and has heightened awareness at the District level of the importance of information in decision-making. A GIS database was created together with district maps and an agreement that the District Assembly would take over and manage the database. The District Assembly also expressed interest in extending the area covered using its own resources.

Charcoal and yam producer networks

Building users networks can help to put demands on policy-makers. They can bring rural producers together to reflect on their situation and promote community-level environmental interests to counter the dominant views of local and national elites. Two particular interests emerged from discussions with local bureaucrats. Charcoal burning was the main source of income in the District but it also generated the most controversy. Yam farming too was important and complemented charcoal burning in terms of farm practices. The catalyst for forming the networks proved to be research – engaging with farmers in research work of direct interest to them, and reporting back to them on the findings.

General social surveys were conducted on conditions of agricultural production and charcoal burning in three settlements. Joint research was also established with a small number of farmers and charcoal burners to obtain a better understanding of natural regeneration of the land following charcoal burning. Inadequate data exist on this. The research showed that charcoal producers were selective in their cutting strategies and did not cut from community-designated forests. Most coppicing species were common and robust and rapidly regenerated with sustainable harvesting regimes of 4-6 years.

The effects of charcoal burning on the environment could not be separated from those of yam farming as most charcoal burners in the project area were also farmers. They preserve many small trees on their farms to provide stakes for the yams. A large number of these are burned during land clearance to prevent them competing with the yams for light and nutrients. After harvesting the yams, the burned trunks are cut for charcoal, but they soon put out new coppice growth and so rapidly regenerate.

This research showed that locally-adapted codes of conduct were already established in the various producer communities, and these were well-respected. It did not support the hypothesis that charcoal production under local conditions destroys the environment. In fact it demonstrated that the preferred option of policy-makers – charcoal woodlots – is unlikely to be a viable option. The environmental effects of clear felling and monocultures of alien species must also be questioned, particularly as this is a fire-prone area.



These findings were discussed in group meetings and at various workshops at District level. As a result the networks expanded rapidly to encompass a large number of settlements both within the District and with communities outside the immediate project area. Although this was a good beginning their impact on decision-makers and on the entrenched views of those who dominate environmental thinking in Ghana may take some time to develop. At present they are severely constrained by the inadequacies of the decentralised government structures. So in the short term, at least, local-level platforms – essential building blocks of the democratic process - may have limited ability to achieve policy influence, even when working effectively.

This is somewhat paradoxical as most of the district assemblies in the region rely heavily on revenues raised by taxing charcoal production. If the high revenue share from charcoal was indicative of unsustainable production, then this would be undesirable on both economic and environmental grounds. But research showed that existing production systems were sustainable on both accounts and this was due in part to the established farming systems. This has policy implications. Policy should focus on reinforcing the authority of producers to manage their resources in line with established local codes of conduct, rather than seeking to undermine them in favour of unproven and economically uncertain alternatives with some highly questionable environmental effects. Thus charcoal commended itself to the research as an environmental commodity of high importance, albeit one marked by a notable imbalance in public perceptions, and an absence of evidence-based policy.

Advocacy

The district level workshops, the numerous feeder workshops, and the network meetings provided the main formal vehicle for producers to put forward their viewpoints to district officials and elected representatives. Various other communications tools were used as well such as posters, newsletters and information sheets – all have contributed to the project's favourable profile in the Districts.

Encouraging signs

It is still too soon to say whether the approaches developed under this project will improve local livelihoods. The objectives were to bring about behavioural changes in the relationships between district officials and their constituencies. There are now positive signs that this is happening. Resource users are more assertive about challenging local government when facing hostility and 'a bad press' from decision-makers and the media. There also is good progress on the information systems that can provide the foundations for evidenced-based policy. But the full impact on the confidence of marginalised resource users to assert their interests in policy circles may only become evident in the longer term.

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Building resource users networks can help to put demands on policy-makers

Kojo Amanor
Institute of African Studies
PO Box 73
University of Ghana
Legon
Ghana
Email: ksamanor@hotmail.com

David Brown
Overseas Development Institute
Costain House
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7JD, UK
Email: d.brown@odi.org.uk