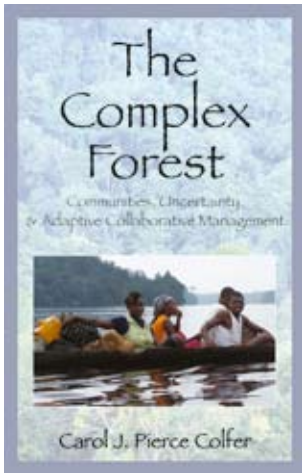


## Reflections on community collaboration



In 1998, a team of CIFOR researchers concluded a lengthy research project developing and testing Criteria and Indicators (C&I) for sustainable forest management. They had good reason to be pleased: the research helped to give a more precise meaning to the term 'sustainability', and provided some tools to measure it. But the satisfaction was tempered by the knowledge that C&I would do nothing, in themselves, to address the problems faced by forest-dwelling communities. What was needed, they realised, was a fresh approach to forest management.

Since 1998, some 90 researchers, working at 30 sites in 11 countries around the world, have pioneered a new process known as Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM). This involves communities, local governments, non-government organisations and other forest users managing forests collaboratively, and analysing the process, reflecting on it, and adapting it to suit changing needs and circumstances. The results of this research are synthesised in *The Complex Forest – Communities, Uncertainty, and Adaptive Collaborative Management*, written by CIFOR anthropologist Carol Colfer.

So what has the ACM research achieved? 'At some sites, and in some countries, the impact has been immediate and obvious,' says Colfer. 'For example, in the communities

where we worked in Nepal, the lower castes and women now have a much greater say in decision-making processes which affect forests than they had in the past. The same is true in our Zimbabwe sites.' In study villages in Indonesia, ACM has improved local people's ability to negotiate successfully with policy-makers for better control and

access to forest land, and in sites in Cameroon and Bolivia ACM has played an important role in reducing conflict in and around forests.

When the project was established, the research team identified seven conditions or issues which they thought might have a bearing on the success of the ACM approach. Contrary to expectations, they discovered that ACM seemed to work most effectively in sites where there was no formal process of devolving powers, for example for forest management, away from central government to the local level. One of the most thought-provoking observations was that ACM seemed to work best in the most difficult and chaotic settings – for example, in places where there were high levels of national and local conflict.

But other factors proved even more crucial than the seven conditions examined. Colfer found that many of the differences in impact between sites could be explained by such things as the motivation and skill of individual facilitators, and their integration into the wider team, or 'community of practice'. Indeed, if she has any regrets, it is that not enough time was spent training facilitators in some countries and strengthening their ties to the larger team.

*The Complex Forest* suggests that researchers have succeeded in coming up with a process that can be used anywhere in the world to help communities and others work together to achieve common goals. Furthermore, the flexibility of ACM means that it can be used in many different situations. 'There is no reason why you couldn't apply ACM to any natural resource,' says Colfer.

This is a book which should appeal to development specialists, academics and anybody who wishes to work in a collaborative way with local communities. As *Choice*, the journal of reviews for academic libraries in the United States, put it: 'This outstanding book addresses a growing global human-resource conflict through the application of adaptive collaborative management techniques, bureaucratic flexibility, and local-level problem-solving.'

Learning and acting together is the driving force behind Adaptive Collaborative Management. An ACM meeting in Gunung Leuser, Indonesia. (Photo by Yayan Indriatmoko)

