



Over 70 per cent of Africans depend for their livelihoods and survival on natural resources. A young girl watches over the family's cattle in Burkina Faso. (Photo by Daniel Tiveau)

## A fresh approach to rural development

Good news doesn't sell newspapers, so it's probably not surprising that most of the press coverage about rural Africa tells a harrowing story of poverty, conflict, widespread disease and faltering economic growth. In many places, this is indeed the reality. But there is another side of Africa that attracts less attention, and this was the Africa which a range of development and research agencies – led by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and including CIFOR – were keen to highlight when they launched *Nature, Wealth and Power: Emerging Best Practice for Revitalising Rural Africa* at the 2002 Earth Summit, held in Johannesburg.

'We were concerned that some of the good lessons coming out about rural development were being ignored, and we wanted to get away from all the Afro-pessimism,' recalls Jon Anderson, a policy adviser to USAID. *Nature, Wealth and Power* provided a new framework for evaluating rural development and progress

towards achieving such pressing goals as the alleviation of poverty. It also highlighted some telling examples of rural communities improving their livelihoods and restoring the environment.

During the years since the Earth Summit, this framework has been used to analyse rural development problems and formulate strategies for the future in Uganda, Senegal and Madagascar. Now it is helping to change the way people think about development in Mali and Burkina Faso, largely as a result of a series of workshops co-organised by CIFOR and USAID. The Mali workshop was held in Bamako in February 2004; the Burkina workshops in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso in February 2004 and June 2005 respectively.

'People often look at the issues of environment, economy and governance in isolation, but we need to look at all three together if we are to solve the problems that face rural communities in Africa,' says Daniel Tiveau, CIFOR's regional coordinator for west Africa. 'Nature, Wealth and Power has proved to be an excellent tool for doing that.'

In Africa, over 70 per cent of the population depend for their livelihoods and survival on natural resources, which provide them with food, grazing, building materials and much else. Natural resources are also a major source of wealth for governments and business. However, poverty in rural Africa remains widespread, largely because resources are frequently mismanaged and rural people remain disenfranchised. Alleviating poverty depends, crucially, on better and fairer resource management. This will only happen when there is better governance. For people living in rural Africa, that means improved access to, and control of, natural resources.

At both workshops, separate meetings were held with different constituencies. For example, in Burkina there were meetings for government technical staff, for NGOs, for researchers, for farmers' organisations, and for development agencies. Tiveau believes that at this stage it was important to keep these groups separate. 'If we'd had them all mixed together the more powerful constituencies would have dominated,' he says. 'Some of the most vibrant meetings involved the farmers. By doing it this way, they were able to make their voices heard – something which is rare.' Afterwards the organisers were able to transmit the views of the farmers to the other constituencies. The workshop also helped to initiate better communications between government ministries, among whom there is frequently little consultation.

Tiveau hopes that the Nature, Wealth and Power dialogue will make a positive contribution to the decentralisation process currently underway in Burkina. 'We are trying to influence people involved in transferring power over natural resource use to the local level,' explains Tiveau. 'It's important that the mistakes made by central government aren't repeated.'

In Mali, the Nature, Wealth and Power process has had a significant impact. For example, around 200 communes in which USAID has a democracy programme have been using the framework to evaluate how natural resources are used and shared, and to plan for the future. CIFOR also organised

a Nature, Wealth and Power workshop in Cameroon to raise awareness among decision-makers.

According to Anderson, the conceptual framework provided by Nature, Wealth and Power has influenced USAID's strategies for agriculture and rural development. It has also had an impact elsewhere. For example, a major policy document, *The Wealth of the Poor*, a collaboration between the World Resources Institute, the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations Environment Programme, leans heavily on Nature, Wealth and Power for its conceptual foundation.

Nature, Wealth and Power is clearly an idea whose time has come. It may have started off as an African dialogue, but it is set to spread further afield. 'We've had lots of feedback from people working in places like Guatemala, Nepal and Cyprus saying that this resonates with them, and wanting to know if we're thinking of expanding our range,' explains Anderson. The plan now is to produce a new global version of Nature, Wealth and Power, building on the African experience. Meanwhile, CIFOR and USAID will continue to promote Nature, Wealth and Power in Africa. More workshops were planned for Burkina Faso and Guinea in 2006.



A Nature, Wealth and Power policy discussion with locally elected officials in Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso. (Photo by Daniel Tiveau)