



STRENGTHENING OF LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT THROUGH BROAD PARTICIPATION OF LOCAL PEOPLE

TRANSBORDER WILDLIFE ASSOCIATION (TWA) – ALBANIA

Community Empowerment Facility Lessons Learned

In the pre-Communist period, every village in Albania had its own forest and pasture areas, in part owned by the families and in part by the whole village. During the 50 years of Communism, all forest and pasture areas were turned over to the State who determined the management and exploitation.

The project, which involved the transfer of State-owned forests to the peasants of Lozhan Commune and protection of their user rights, represented a new approach to natural resource management aimed at reversing degradation of forest land. It involved the active participation of the community in 16 villages in the Lozhan Commune (Korca District), and was the first in the country to effect land transfer up to registration and certification stage. It focused on the attainment of a new land tenancy system and land acquisition: some 4,347.5 ha of State forest land were transferred to local people, providing more than 200 families with legal access to forest land for ten years, renewable for a further ten years.

This result was achieved through a land literacy campaign and a community capacity-building process carried out by the organization. The communal forestry plan in use by the villagers can be an effective and supportive model for replication in other parts of Albania. The community participated in the final evaluation of the project and gave opinions on its management and future plans for sustainable development of the area.

During the establishment of the communal forest, as a result of their using the forest land, the farmers became more and more conscious of the importance of forest maintenance. They

gradually became aware that their survival and development depended on protecting the forests' natural resources. TWA is confident that a significant improvement will be seen in the state of forest land as a result of people's involvement and motivation.

Actors in change:

- The community, comprising some 200 families (850 people), received legal titles to forest rights for 10 years, renewable for a further 10 years.
- The Council of Lozhan Commune and elders of the 16 villages took part in the decentralization of forest resources.
- The Korca Forest Service transferred forest land to the Lozhan Commune.
- TWA gained valuable experience and improved relationships with local people.



The problems encountered during project implementation, were related to the definition of the old forest confines, the distribution of the commune forest land, and its registration. Proposals for resolving problems were made by all concerned and managed by TWA in a transparent and participatory manner.

Other constraints were related to the actual communal forestry policy which was too centralized and lacking in laws and regulations governing communal forests.

WHAT HAS BEEN LEARNED?

Community participation in decision-making:

Active community participation in decision-making processes is fundamental to successful forest land reform. The aim to alleviate poverty in the rural areas is unrealistic without the participation of local people in the project implementation and monitoring processes. They have pertinent and appropriate knowledge regarding the natural resources and local traditions; they also have the will, the energy, and the right to make decisions about their future. Therefore, it can be concluded that encouragement of local people's participation in local-level decision-making is pivotal to achieving success.

Women's involvement

Women are directly involved in agricultural activities, grazing, collecting animal feed and leaf litter from the forest, as well as gathering twigs and medical plants, but, by tradition, they are not directly involved in decision-making processes. Underestimating their key role in society could generate conflict both inside and outside the family. Women have been actively involved in the implementation of this project.



Avoiding political influence:

In Albania, more than in other country, the promotion of people-centered organizations

without the influence of the political parties is very important. The process of electing a genuine village commission free from political influence, involving local people, was crucial.

CSO as facilitator:

It was important for TWA to be well equipped with facilitating tools as independence, transparency, honesty and commitment were key elements to building up trust with the local institutions and communities. This was an important first step prior to commencing the transfer of forest land.

Building up trust through family and neighbour groups:

During the process of electing their representatives, it was observed that villagers lacked mutual trust. Representatives were therefore solicited from groups consisting of the extended family or close neighbours.

Establishing a CBO:

A Forest Users Association was formed which developed management plans and trained their members in forest management. The association gave the community a leading role in the management and rehabilitation of natural resources.

Institutional collaboration:

The convergence of institutional interests assumed a catalytic force in implementing the project. Government institutions, local organizations and community groups had to resolve a number of differences. Close collaboration and sharing ideas and experiences was fundamental to achieving positive results.

Reversing unsustainable land use practices:

The transfer of user rights and the management of forest land from State to local communities represented a new approach to natural resource management. Communities were involved in participatory natural resource management aimed at reversing the degradation of natural resources, crucial to increasing rural productivity and alleviating poverty.

Community Empowerment Facility

Lessons Learned

HOW IT WAS DONE

- Identifying stakeholders.
- Strengthening collaboration among stakeholders; encouraging partnership; and, instituting accountability among groups.
- Carrying out study/survey of the socio-economic situation in the commune.
- Raising public awareness on commune forest policies and experiences.
- Involving community participation in decision-making processes to improve their livelihoods through access to natural resources.
- Involving women in the forest transfer process.
- Identifying forest users and forest land problems.
- Analyzing forest land problems and assessing the impact on relevant forest process.
- Identifying realistic opportunities for community access to forest and pasture lands.
- Analyzing the opportunity and design for a sustainable development management and strategy plan involving community participation.
- Encouraging and facilitating local people in the establishment of a community-based organization.
- Monitoring community forests and continuity strategy.

RESULTS

The effect of good forest management as a result of user rights is not seen immediately; the rehabilitation of fully degraded forests needs some years to impact directly on the community.

Prior to the project implementation, the forest productivity in the vicinity of the villages was poor because of degraded soil and little biomass from which to collect winter livestock feed and firewood. In fact, land degradation had been identified as a major issue in the commune area. Highly degraded lands had been further degraded by uncontrolled grazing, illegal cutting and poor management by the community. These terrains became quickly eroded and the landscape devastated.

Family life was in a critical situation; apart from being very poor, they suffered from lack of firewood, poor grazing and many other problems resulting from erosion of their lands. Family members were obliged to walk hours to find fuel wood, graze their livestock and collect foliage for winter feeding. As a consequence, there was little time for other agricultural or service activities which could have improved their livelihood.

As a result of the implementation of the project, families have now managed to enhance forest and pasture productivity, thus reducing soil degradation. This has also improved the quantity and quality of water resources.

Although the effects of good forest management are not immediately apparent, the project has already had an indirect impact on families as there is more forest biomass near their houses. There has been a reduction in land erosion and an improvement in the landscape which is attracting more visitors; this can help families to commence service activities. All these factors have drastically changed their lives and they are now more optimistic about the future.

During the last 2-3 years the annual growth of commune forest land has increased four to six-fold. Improving the productivity in forest and pasture lands will play an important role in family economic growth and poverty reduction over the coming years.

Sharing experiences:

In order to share information in the area, exchange visits were organized and supported by the Land Coalition between TWA in Albania and APLR in Georgia.



“The visit to Georgia was very important, we had the time and opportunity to share ideas, to get to know each other better, our activities for community mobilization and our struggles for the improvement of land reform in our countries. Experience and knowledge gained in Georgia will be shared with other CBOs in Albania.”

“The visits had a positive effect on the projects and represented the first step in the creation of a network in Eastern European Countries and Newly Independent States that will provide for collective empowerment.”

“In Albania and Georgia the new system has generated new problems. Peasants have access to land (an average 1.1-1.25 ha per household), but it is not as easy as appears. Access to land needs better farmer participation in decision making, better organization of the community in new agricultural collective forms, better land administration, better land use, better land policy, better access to other natural resources.”

“In Albania the CBOs, such as the Users Associations, are established in the base of Commune, some 5-15 villages. As a result of the APLR experience in Georgia, CBOs are established on village base. I support this and feel that the organization of villages on a community village basis is much better because the farm households have more initiative, accountability, participation and opportunity to participate actively in decision making to improve their life. Lessons learned in this project will assist farmers in their future struggle to establish their organizations on a village basis.”

“Better participation by the community and NGOs in formulating land policies improves the lives of poor people and gives them a future.”

By Stavri Pllaha, director of TWA

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www.landcoalition.org/program/cefp_twa.htm

PUBLICATIONS

“The Sustainable Future of Community in Gore Community” by Stavri Pllaha and Anesti Ceku, produced by TWA and ILC (available also in Albanian).

