

B I O D I V E R S I T Y

D E S E R T I F I C A T I O N

# Inter-Regional Project for Participatory Upland Conservation and Development in **Africa, Asia** and **Latin America**

- › COLLABORATIVE  
MANAGEMENT
- › ENVIRONMENTAL  
SUSTAINABILITY
- › GENDER ISSUES
- › POVERTY ALLEVIATION
- › SUSTAINABLE  
AGRICULTURE AND  
RURAL DEVELOPMENT
- › WATERSHED  
MANAGEMENT



*Ministero degli Affari Esteri*

## Background and rationale

It is by now generally recognised that the most promising approach to sustainable natural resources management calls for integrating activities for conservation and development through the people's participation and encouraging collaboration among different institutional and social stakeholders. At the end of the 1980s, however, institutions concerned with watershed management still required field experience on the development of participatory processes. In spite of the fact that "participation" had long been

Map for community development plan



a favourite among Official Development Aid (ODA) slogans, not much validated experience on this issue was available at the beginning of the '90s in the context of the FAO-Italy Programme. Moreover, the specific experience of the Forestry Department and the Italian Cooperation in participatory watershed management at the time was not sufficiently extensive to serve as a reference for diffusion and mainstreaming. Also, in those years more and more attention was being paid to the experience stemming from the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) on Rapid Rural Appraisal and Participatory Rural Appraisal, which provided interesting examples and sources of inspiration for more "ODA-friendly" participatory processes. Finally, the international debate behind Chapter 13 of UNCED's Agenda 21 and its subsequent follow-up (the "Mountain Agenda" forum) raised increasing interest in sustainable development of upland and mountain areas, also among decision-makers and experts involved in the management of the FAO-Italy



Programme. Within this framework, in 1991 the Italy/FAO Inter-Regional Project for Participatory Upland Conservation and Development (PUCD) was approved as one of a four-project package financed that year by the Italian Cooperation and executed by the FAO/Forestry Department. The Project started in 1992 and, until 1997, was implemented in selected areas of Bolivia, Burundi, Nepal, Pakistan and Tunisia (Rwanda benefited from PUCD intervention until 1994, but due to security reasons the Project had to be closed and Tunisia was therefore included). From 1998 to 2000, the Project was further financed in Bolivia, Tunisia and Nepal, to be continued afterwards only in Bolivia, where it was active until Spring 2002.

The Project was conceived as a pilot process-oriented initiative aimed at using practical experiences to develop methodological lessons on integrated and participatory watershed management. At the national level, project management was based, to the greatest possible extent, on the principles of action-learning. The interregional nature of the Project was meant to harmonise actions and to validate, on a comparative basis, the participatory and integrated watershed management approach. Total funds amount to more than 13 million euros.

## Goal, objectives and expected outputs

Throughout its four phases, PUCD project's overall objective was to promote a participatory and integrated watershed management approach to ensure the sustainable development of upland and mountain areas.

Its specific objectives were the following.

- Start-up and consolidate a cluster of participatory and integrated watershed management pilot experiences in specific upland locations of the countries concerned.
- Progressively incorporate the participatory and integrated watershed management approach into national policies for rural development and natural resources conservation, and into decentralised planning systems of the countries concerned.
- Disseminate information on the methods, techniques and tools validated by field experience, through technical publications, training and communication activities and materials.

An interesting feature of PUCD was the articulation of its specific objectives around three strategic levels of action: micro (local), meso (national) and macro (international), from activities in the field to awareness raising and training, and finally to policy making. This allowed field experience to be capitalised through a gradual shift toward the institutionalisation process and the formulation of legislation.

## Implementation and results

Implementation of national components was as follows: Bolivia received assistance for 10 years, Nepal for 8 years, Burundi, Pakistan and Tunisia for approximately 6 years and Rwanda only for 2 years due to security reasons.

A Coordination Unit was officially established in 1994 and was operational until 2000. Within the





framework of a flexible Project Document (ProDoc), yearly work-plans were prepared by each National Field Team (NFT) through participatory assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation and re-planning exercises. These involved a variety of local stakeholders such as communities, grassroots organisations, the private sector, Government agencies, local authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other development institutions.

The role of each NFT was essentially to facilitate this process and ensuring that the lessons learned could be applied both within and outside the project areas. The small budget available to directly support field operations (ranging from US\$ 50,000 to US\$ 80,000 annually for each field component, not including staff remuneration) was used to catalyse the mobilisation of additional local resources, including materials and labour from the local communities, and additional funding from local line agencies, NGOs or other international projects.

Especially at the beginning of the Project, it was deemed necessary to gain an understanding of the areas of implementation, before launching the participatory process. Therefore, some preliminary activities took place: reviewing available information (complemented, when necessary, by the rapid assessments of specific environmental or social issues); tentatively selecting the communities and sites within each Project area and preliminary visiting, to validate the selection of communities.

An initial participatory appraisal was then launched in the selected sites. The main objective of this appraisal was to support community members in better assessing their situation and

identify the most important and urgent goals to be pursued through collaborative action. Most of the information collected was generated by interaction among small groups of participants and members of the NFT. Task-sharing was based on the participants' individual interests, competence and preferences. Participatory appraisals ended with a one- or two-day participatory planning workshop (or a series of shorter meetings) during which participants were given feedback on the information gathered during the exercise and tentative community action plans were drafted. Ideas for action developed during the participatory planning workshop were subsequently reviewed by project management and field staff and interest groups through a participatory feasibility analysis, aimed at assessing the extent to which these ideas were technically, economically and socially viable. Detailed terms of reference for joint implementation were then negotiated among local actors, leading to the definition of collaborative implementation agreements. In all PUCD field projects, the responsibility for implementing the agreed activities was largely entrusted to interested community members. They provided most of the labour and the local resources needed for the initiative and were in charge of day-to-day management. The role of the Project and other institutional partners was almost always limited to providing selected services or inputs, such as capacity-building, technical assistance, micro-credit, selected materials and transportation. This approach was instrumental in achieving two basic objectives regarding the process of participatory implementation: empowering communities and ensuring social sustainability. To achieve these objectives, all PUCD National Components made significant efforts to facilitate the formation and development of



grassroots organisations, including small, informal interest groups. Other core strategy issues included meeting basic needs, promoting environmental awareness and building capacity for natural resources management. Meeting basic needs also required setting up activities not directly related to natural resources management: income-generating activities, improving local infrastructures, and strengthening health, sanitation and education services. The Project paid special attention to initiatives promoting the economic independence of women, decreasing their work-load and improving their living conditions. However, natural resources management was the core component of the PUCD implementation strategy. This included two main areas of activity: improving farming systems and managing Common Property Resources (CPRs). The former consisted mainly in "conservation by use" activities that sought to reach a



sound balance between environmental and economic needs. In most cases, finding the appropriate trade-off between these, sometimes contrasting needs entailed a long-term action-learning process. Four main types of actions and inputs facilitated this process: training, incentives, on-farm trials and extension activities.

Initiatives for managing CPRs were more or less directly associated with the improvement of farming systems. Three main types of activities specifically focusing on CPRs can be identified: the regeneration of public forests and range-lands, including the devolution of management responsibility to local communities; the control of the effects of erosion, such as landslides and gullies, which were causing major agricultural and property damage; and the management of streams through small-scale, community-based civil works. Participatory implementation also involved the progressive testing and validation of organisational and

technical solutions to problems identified through participatory planning. This problem-solving process would not have been possible without a steady flow of information allowing stakeholders to monitor implementation, evaluate its progress and outcomes and plan a new implementation cycle based on evaluation findings. To this end, all NFTs developed some form of participatory monitoring, evaluation and re-planning (PME) at the community level. Towards the end of its second phase, the PUCD project increasingly focused its efforts on institutionalising the experience gained at the local and the national level. To this end, the promotion of ownership by local communities and

*Bolivia, slash and burn with soil and water control biological techniques*



institutions, and the creation of an enabling policy environment, became the main goal of the Project implementation strategy. This process included: building local stakeholders' capacity to autonomously conduct the cycle of iterative planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and re-planning at the community level; creating, among local institutions, a group of professionals and field workers sensitised to the participatory and integrated watershed management approach; establishing or strengthening forums for negotiation and decision-making involving all watershed stakeholders (grassroots organisations, local Governments and their agencies, NGOs, international projects, the private sector, etc.); and promoting the incorporation of methodological elements validated by the Project into national or regional (sub-national) policies on natural resources management and sustainable development.

## Lessons learned

The PUCD experience shows that participatory processes for sustainable development and natural resources management should not exclusively focus on rural communities and grassroots organisations. Rather, all stakeholders at local and national levels should be involved in a power-sharing scheme, based on negotiations and conflict management. Given the complexity of these processes, no single approach or method can be said to be the most appropriate. A variety of approaches and methods are to be pragmatically used and adjusted according to specific circumstances. Integrated development usually means collaboration among different sectors (agriculture, natural resources conservation, health, education, etc.). Though inter-sectoral collaboration



*Tunisia, discussion in the field*

has not been neglected, in the PUCD project integration has attempted to incorporate development and conservation goals into a comprehensive sustainable development strategy. This approach has led the Project to promote an open-ended search for a socially acceptable and environmentally sound trade-off between short-term actions, aimed at improving people's livelihoods and social welfare, and long-term actions, aimed at protecting the resource base from over-exploitation. This has involved abandoning both the vision of social development as a process independent from environmental concerns and the concept of conservation as a goal abstracted from people's economic, social and political conditions. In fact, the Project addressed natural resources and social capital, so as to produce immediate benefits for the people and preserve both at the same time, to allow future generations to enjoy the same, or more, benefits. Finally, field experience has led the Project to address watersheds more as geo-political territories (defined on the basis of their governance and social dimensions) than as hydrological units (as in conventional watershed management initiatives). This shift from an "hydraulic" to a "territorial" approach required that the scope of watershed management be redefined. In fact, Project experience suggested that watershed systems cannot be analysed or managed only through the methods and tools of natural sciences, which in the past have inspired engineering-led watershed conservation policies. Rather, a political ecology approach is needed to holistically tackle the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development.