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IS COMMUNITY FORESTRY ACHIEVING ITS OBJECTIVES WITH REGARD TO CONSERVATION OF FOREST RESOURCES ?

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Sri Lanka has a long history of community involvement in many of its reforestation and forest conservation projects. These projects have delivered important benefits to the forestry sector, including increasing forest cover, institutional development and betterment of livelihoods of poor farmers who participated in these projects. The objective of this paper is to draw from these projects some key lessons learnt that might be useful to consider for making future projects more successful.

It has been proved that the best approach to conserve the natural forest would be by the co-management of forest resources with the forest users. Most community forestry projects done in Sri Lanka have avoided the option of co-management of natural forests. Instead, they have embarked on options such as farmer woodlot schemes, buffer zone development and alternative livelihood development. Such indirect activities have not yielded the expected results in terms of conserving natural forests.

It is a fact that many forest areas in Sri Lanka require active management urgently to restore the productive capacity. There is a high possibility that it can be achieved through community forestry. Sri Lanka has a rich history of forest utilization and management by local communities. They have practiced collective gathering of, and sharing of benefits from, forest products, and maintain a strong traditional belief system based upon reverence towards their forests. Most forest fringes are inhabited by communities who subsist upon low levels of income earned through insecure livelihood activities. Although their dependency on forest for livelihood is low at present, they will be willing to join as local partners to manage these forests if co-management is going to bring improvements to their livelihoods. When the community has a strong sense of its relationship to the resource, including some established social rules for resource management, then the opportunity to establish private communal ownership may be good.

Considering the above scenarios, it is important to develop a protocol for co-management of natural forests. This must consider both the policies and ideologies of the Forest Department, together with the local community and resource context.

Key words: *Community forestry, Lessons learnt, Co-management of forests, Forest fringe communities, Livelihood development*