

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

Myanmar society has long been under the strong centralized control of the State. Shifting from a centrally-planned to a market-oriented but state controlled economy system after the 1990s, a new forest policy was formulated in 1992, covering both the conservation of bio-diversity and the establishment of commercial forest plantations for sustainable production by both the state and private sectors. In 1995, the Forest Department introduced the concept of community forestry, which takes into account the participation of local people in forest conservation. Community forest programs have since been introduced as an integral part of a rural development program aimed at improving forest management and helping to alleviate poverty. However, initially local people, especially those in remote areas impacted by these development programs, did not trust these so-called decentralization initiatives, or the attempts to establish community forests.

The purpose of this study was to develop a clear understanding of how people in the a local Pa-O community have adapted their livelihood strategies in the context of a state-led development and forest conservation program called the community forestry initiative, and how they have negotiated with the external and more powerful actors in order to develop livelihood security in the context of a changing agro-ecosystem within the community. Although state forest policies have attempted to decentralize powers to this local community for managing the forests, they have also created much uncertainty in the lives of the local community, due to the top-down management approach used. This chapter presents the major findings of the study, provides theoretical discussion, outlines the implications for policy development in the future and gives recommendations, plus will offer some suggestions for further study.

6.1 Major Findings of the Study

As a form of community development program, community forest initiatives (CFIs) have been implemented by the State and by forest NGOs to meet the daily needs of local people in terms of forest resources such as fuel-wood, timber, NTFPs and fodder, plus help with income generating activities in order to reduce the pressure on forests and improve local livelihoods, at the same time protecting and managing the community forests – as community-owned areas. The CFI in Myanmar is a turning pointing in terms of the strategy towards forest management at the local level, because the role of local people was not previously considered with respect to forest management.

When the project was implemented, the villagers were not aware that the community forests had been handed over to them and that they were meant to manage and protect the forests themselves thereafter. It was very hard for them to believe that these forest estates had officially become theirs and that it was meant to be their responsibility to protect and manage their forest, even after they had been granted permits. So, one reason they were not willing to protect the community forests was due to the confusion over responsibilities and their unwillingness to accept ownership over them. In a country where forests have been traditionally planted, owned and managed solely by the State, local people have significant doubts over receiving ownership of the community forests and land. FREDA's project implementation method was also very outputs-oriented, and although the participation of local people was considered, with several discussions and meetings held with village representatives, the role of the villagers was not placed at the center of the process; instead, FREDA managed the entire implementation process but with the help (in the form of labor) of the villagers. FREDA adopted a top-down management approach across almost all the project steps, including planning, implementation and benefits-sharing (from the community forests), so these steps were undertaken with little or no involvement from the community.

Added to this, the local Pa-O community has its own forest classification system in term of ownership, whether individual, communal or religious-based ownership, one which it has used for many generations. Ironically, the State's concept

of community forests is similar to the communal forests set up by the community, which are recognized as common property among the whole village. The Pa-O have their own customary laws on the use of these communal forests, but FREDA's community forests are not recognized under these customary laws and only partially include local people in the decision-making process. FREDA ignored customary laws and implemented the community forest program as a brand new concept, one externally imposed.

Local institutions can be an important factor in helping to empower villagers in the conservation and management of their own community forests, and the role of a local organization should be to use its ability to effectively manage a community forest for all the villagers involved. In the case of the Pa-O community, FREDA set up a local organization called the management committee, the aim of which was to establish rules and regulations on how to manage, protect and utilize the community forests. However, the management committee itself turned out to be powerless when it came to protecting and managing the forests because the committee members, including the headman, did not accept the forests as their own, even after FREDA handed over community forest certificates to the village. Due to the unclear ownership rules, there has been no control in terms of benefits-sharing from the forests products. Villagers cut the trees down without asking for permission from the management committee, which itself does not stop them doing so because the members do not want to put their friendships at risk. Furthermore, the management committee's members (as organized by FREDA) are those closest to FREDA and are former PNO members, and so not a single villager is represented from the poorer household groups. As a result, whenever an action is taken or opinions are voiced at meetings with the villagers, the poor householders remain unheard, though the number of poor households in the village is twice that of the better-off families. So, as well as failing to pay attention to the flow of benefits passing to the local people, FREDA has failed to garner an equal voice from the different social groups in the village, resulting in uneven participation across the different household groups - even though all the household groups participated in setting up the forests at the start. In light of the above, most villagers are not willing to protect the forests but exploit the products they produce for short-term benefit and on a daily basis.

Added to this, to get the willing participation of the local people, every step in a community forest initiative is supposed to be process-oriented rather than output-oriented. The role of the local people; their desires, involvement in discussions and decision-making on benefits sharing should be at the center of the process of establishing a community forest. Contributing physical labor such as for land surveying, choosing the tree species to plant and clearing the land, as well as participation in activities such as formulating rules and regulations on management and use of the community forests etc., all of these are important for the entire process to work properly. Initial participation includes empowering the community to gain an awareness of the situation in the forests and to have a strong desire to understand the whole process, as well as to take responsibility on critical activities such as management, protection and benefits sharing over the course of initial discussions. Without gaining initial sign-on from the local community, the objectives of the community forests cannot be achieved. In such a process-oriented approach, the role of state agencies, such as in this case the Forest Department or FRED A, should be on the side lines – acting in a support role and helping the community based on its desire to establish the forest itself. In other words, the role of the forest NGO should be as a supporter of the community, it should not take a central leading role.

Also, the local people in the study area have adapted their household livelihood strategies in accordance with the changes to the pine forest agro-ecosystem that have come with deforestation. The adaptability of their strategies is closely related to the households' differential socio-economic status. In the upland community, access to cultivatable land is limited because of land degradation, the prohibitions placed on clearing forest trees for cultivation and the decreases in soil fertility. The villagers have thus diversified their livelihood strategies in order to solve their food security problems, plus in response to the differential access to and control over land. With differential access to land, each household has had to adopt a variety of livelihood strategies. For the poor, food security is their first priority, and so limited access to land means they have to look for other natural resource-based survival strategies and off-farm activities. When FRED A initiated income generating activities such as agro-forestry practices and home garden activities - by providing fertilizers and the seeds of income generating fruits, the better-off and medium-

income households participated in those activities as a negotiating strategy to improve their livelihoods. Now, with the improved road having been constructed to the market town, the villager's are concerned more with agricultural production than with forests, because the agricultural production of crops is able to earn them a greater income.

6.2 Theoretical Discussion and Findings

Having provided the major research findings, I will now discuss these research findings in relation to the theories developed as a result of other academic studies, and in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the livelihoods of the Pa-O community, plus the way its has participated in the community forest project for livelihood purposes.

Decentralization is generally accepted as a key strategy for ensuring participation. Agrawal and Ribot (2002) define decentralization as any act in which a central government formally cedes powers to actors and institution at lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy. This study considers the Government's introduction of community forest initiatives as representing the decentralization of forest management, as, according to the community forest instructions, forest management authority is transferred from the central Forest Department to the lower level forest authorities such as the township and district forest officer and the village management committee. This finding corresponds with the arguments of Ribot (2002), who provides the term 'de-concentration' to describe the transfer of power to lower-level central government authorities, or to other local authorities who are upwardly accountable to the central government. In other words, decentralization (or administrative decentralization) occurs when power is devolved to appointees of the central government. Although the community forest program in Myanmar does not create a new administrative unit, the township and district level administrative units (the Township and District Peace and Development Councils) and the forest officers have the right to approve or turn down CF applications made by local people. In this manner, the community forest process can be seen as administrative decentralization or de-concentration. According to the CFIs, local people have the right to manage, protect and exploit their community forests for 30 years. CF members (the user group) have the right to extract from the community

forests in accordance with the rules and regulations stipulated in the CFIs. Thus, the State's community forest policy can be seen as representing political or democratic decentralization in forest management. During the implementation of the community forests in the study village, the role local people had within the decision-making process was minimal in terms of activities such as formulating rules and regulations and demarcating the boundaries of the community forest, as well as erecting the signboards. As a result, the community forest process can be said to be more reminiscent of de-concentration or administrative decentralization, rather than political or democratic decentralization.

My research findings share the ideas of Lin (2005) regarding empowerment of the local community for these community forests and for ensuring long-term sustainable use. Lin (2005) argues that a lack of outside knowledge, low education levels and poor social status due to poverty make the local community more vulnerable, which means they have to rely on guidance from the leadership with regard to official and legal actions. Since the information sharing, field operations and decision-making procedures are very much centralized, the individual members of the CF lack initiative, so there is apparently a need to raise the capacity of individual members in terms of participation, equity, negotiation skills and responsibility sharing. He advocates that a local empowerment approach should be rigorously sought, targeting the most socially and economically deprived groups within the community. This community empowerment approach should include providing technical skills training and access to credit schemes, promoting social recognition and local representation, exploring and integrating indigenous knowledge, regularizing common property regimes and protecting community rights. The basic requirement when building strong community-based forest management systems and decision-making structures is to respect and make use of indigenous knowledge and experience, and to accept local decision making. As Anan (1998) claims, a type of conservation policy is urgently needed that pays more attention to community rights and participatory management, in order to strengthen the dynamism of local organizations and encourage their participation in forest conservation measures.

My finding, that the local community failed to protect the community forests, agrees with the arguments of Kaung and Cho (2003), who state there is little or no consensus among the local communities and government authorities regarding the mutual benefits to be gained from the plantations in Myanmar. Moreover, within Myanmar, under a strong centralized state, people have for a long time been isolated from the international community and are thus used to top-down administrations; rural people are used to following orders and instructions. People under 50 years of age have no experience of a democratic society in Myanmar, and most rural people do not know how to involve themselves and participate in these (development) processes; therefore, they are afraid of challenges and responsibilities. In my research village, the villagers have been very passive regarding FREDAs community forest program, and most of them have not complained about the CF program and the benefits sharing regime formulated by FREDAs and the management committee. However, after the initial CF project period had ended - when the FREDAs foresters were not on site, the villagers began to violate the rules and regulations prescribed by the management committee - cutting down trees. There was therefore found to be no consensus between the local Pa-O community and the semi-autonomous NGO organization, FREDAs.

6.3 Policy Implications and Recommendations

The concept of sustainable forest management is often viewed from the perspective of forestry scientists, that is, in line with conventional forestry management. Therefore, forestry experts often start a forest business without paying attention to other non-forestry issues. However, effective forest management cannot be separated from other, related fields, those which affect the overall socio-economic development of a community. The objectives of sustainability, such as managing, using and protecting the community forest, can only be achieved as long as they are connected to those of sustainable agriculture. In order to do that, the socio-economic features of the local community living in and around the forests in question must be fully taken into account.

Strategies to improve local traditional farming practices, as well as create impetus for the local people to join in community forest protection processes, should

be implemented in a synchronized manner, and these should play an important role in influencing such factors as improving the policies connected with poor and disadvantaged groups, improving cultivation methods and enhancing capital for production. In an effective community management program, restraints should be eradicated, and the potential of the land and forests as well the fundamental strength of the households and community, should be promoted. Community organizations need to be strengthened, with attention paid to the role of the village in mobilizing local people's participation. At the same time, it is vitally important to gain people's confidence, to respect their cultural identity and customs and promote their ability to resolve their own problems.

When planning and implementing a community-based forest management scheme in the form of a community forest, an understanding and use of indigenous knowledge or traditional practices, and the customary laws and lifestyles of the people living in and depending upon the forest resources are important. It is not sufficient for the Government, and particularly the forest authorities, to simply lay down a policy initiative that on paper involves local people in the planning, implementation, decision-making and evaluation of such as community forest program. It is crucial, especially for the project implementing NGO, to get the local community actually *involved* in the above mentioned processes. The role of the village management committee is important in community forest management projects; hence, it should be well institutionalized, and should be equipped with the knowledge and skills in terms of problem solving, forest planning and management, needed to educate the villagers regarding forest use and other techniques, those which will enhance its capabilities.

A lack of social and facilitating skills among conventional local foresters in the implementation of community forests may lead to institutional failure and an inability to adapt to the changes in professional attitudes at the centers of authority. As a result, the role of foresters or forest NGOs implementing such a project should be focused on the long-term process-oriented rather than the results-oriented aspects – encouraging local people in engage state-initiated development projects such as community forestry programs.

6.4 Limitations of the Study

Due to the limitations on time and resources, this study has the following shortcomings. First, the upland Pa-O community in Tingyikyat contains a complex framework of differentiated households and socio-economic statuses, and each household that has participated in the state-initiated community forest project and become involved in the income-generating activities conducted by FREDA has used a different livelihood strategy. However, due to a lack of empowerment among the local people in terms of the concept of a community forest, the community still does not consider the forests as their own, and this has resulted in a failure to protect and manage them on their behalf.

Moreover, since the study was carried out in one upland village, I would like to suggest that the same research be carried out in other upland or lowland villages, in order to further examine the differences and challenges faced when dealing with local communities engaged in community forest programs, and to study the effects of community forest projects on changes in local people's livelihood strategies.