Collaboration between stakeholders in sustainable forest management

New research on sustainable forest management (SFM) initiatives in Russia and Sweden has indicated that the main challenges to SFM are combining top-down and bottom-up approaches to management, coordinating the different sectors involved and including all actors and stakeholders.

By its nature, SFM requires collaboration between stakeholders ranging from international policy makers to local people who use or live in the forest. The model forest (MF) concept, developed in Canada, encourages such collaboration. The study analysed four examples of MF initiatives in boreal forests: two in Sweden and two in Russia. The aim was to understand opportunities for collaboration between multiple levels and how it contributes to SFM. Researchers conducted 188 interviews with stakeholders including MF co-ordinators, landowners, NGOs and private business. The analysis focused on three key features:

Motivations for development of sustainable forest management - All four initiatives had the broad objective of implementing SFM at the local or regional level through stakeholder partnerships. At a more practical level there were a range of motivations, which were influenced by the challenges faced in the specific areas. In Russia the motivation for one initiative was to protect pristine forests from harvesting, whilst in the other it was to sustainably support timber for international companies. In Sweden both initiatives were motivated by the need to establish a platform to address local conflicts over land use.

Governance System - This includes the structures and processes through which partners make and implement decisions. These differed between the two countries. The MF projects in Russia were long-term and developed as a result of foreign donors interested in Russian SFM or strong local champions. Decisions were made after approval from the donors and local people participated through public hearings, forest clubs and by obtaining grants for activities such as ecological festivals. To promote sustainable development, specialists were trained on solving problems related to SFM. In contrast there was limited executive decision making in the Swedish MF initiatives and a large number of short-term projects and activities were initiated by stakeholders. In one initiative local champions legitimised a range of local activities and in the other a large number of committed representatives from stakeholder groups were the instigators.

Networks among different partners - The study distinguished between three types of system or network. Firstly, there was a bottom-up system with strong integration among local stakeholders and a distant interaction with collaborators on a national and international level, as found in one of the Swedish initiatives (Foundation Säfsen Forests). Secondly, there was a top-down system where decisions are made at the national and international levels with involvement of experts on a temporary basis as seen in Russia (Pskov MF). Finally, there is a combined top-down and bottom-up system with strong interaction between national and local levels and strong involvement of regional stakeholders. This mixed system was seen in both Sweden (Vilhelmina) and Russia (Komi).

The difference between the MF initiatives raises a number of questions as to how to maintain SFM. For example, can the Russian initiatives that are supported from abroad adapt to local conditions in the long run? Is dependency on local champions in Sweden a potential vulnerability, especially if these entrepreneurs retire or have other reasons for abandoning the process? To answer these questions and assess the adaptive capacity of SFM initiatives there needs to be further applied research with participation of local and national actors in the long-term development of the multi-stakeholder collaboration.


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