



## Is Community-Based Natural Resource Management an Alternative for China?

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China's western provinces have long provided the natural resources (timber, minerals, power) essential for industrial and urban development in coastal provinces. Between the 1950s and 1990s, forest ecosystems in south-west China were subject to state logging concessions, which resulted in significant forest degradation. After the 1998 Yangtze River flood which took thousands of lives in eastern provinces, China implemented [two ambitious programs](#) in western provinces: a national logging ban (Natural Forest Protection Program 天然林保护工程) and a farming ban on sloping land (Sloping Land Conversion Program 退耕还林). While these programs were well-intended, their top-down nature resulted in [certain negative impacts](#) on local people, especially those living in highland villages in the west. Those dependent on logging lost their income source, and many farmers lost their land. In many cases, the loss of viable livelihoods has pushed people into poverty and even more intensive resource use. When top-down state policies prove inadequate to ensure livelihoods while protecting the environment, what is an alternative for natural resource governance in China?

### Community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) as an alternative

Internationally, CBNRM, a bottom-up, rights-based approach emphasising community participation in decision making, has been a popular approach for solving natural resource management issues. It was first promoted in the 1970s due to the failure of state and private power to deliver good outcomes in natural resource management. From the 1990s many large international agencies started to embrace the concept (see for instance the [UN's Equator Initiative](#)). CBNRM has become orthodoxy for many international donors and shapes the way many agencies, particularly environmental NGOs (eNGOs), implement their projects locally. Globally, a CBNRM approach provided certain benefits to address natural resource problems for local communities, such as [cases in Kenya and Australia](#).

CBNRM was introduced to China by international donors in the 1990s. It has been practiced by international and domestic eNGOs in various forestry, grassland and wetland management projects. Domestic eNGOs often receive funding for CBNRM projects from international donors such as the Ford Foundation and Oxfam. Based on my research I argue that a CBNRM approach emphasising institutions, participation and empowerment is an effective alternative for resource management and can bring positive changes at the local level. However, there are significant constraints on the practice of CBNRM in China. Environmental problems are often shaped by larger-scale government policies, and the complex relations between Chinese government actors, international donors, eNGOs and local communities constrain bottom-up initiatives. Below I use an example from Yunnan to further elaborate on the successes and challenges of CBNRM in a rural Chinese context.

## **A community-based conservation and development program in Yunnan**

The example I use is a watershed management program implemented by a domestic eNGO in the Lashi Lake area of Yunnan, populated by ethnic minority groups. This area, similar to many parts of western China, was subject to a state logging concession for many decades. At the local scale, the Lashi area also bore the cost of nearby Lijiang's growing tourism industry: in the 1990s a vast area of farmland and pastureland was permanently submerged due to the construction of a dam to ensure the tourist city's water security. As a result of these national and regional land use policies restricting local people's access to natural resources, Lashi villagers were forced into more intensive resource use, including intensive fishing and illegal slope-land farming.

In response, a domestic eNGO set up [a watershed management program](#) with the support of an international donor to address the depletion of fishery resources, soil erosion and increased runoff, declining forestry resources, and poverty. The program adopted a participatory approach and set up several village committees for community members to discuss and facilitate village affairs regarding conservation and livelihood development. Establishing management institutions through a participatory approach is often adopted by eNGOs to achieve empowerment in CBNRM projects. To protect the environment and provide livelihood opportunities, the program also included an agroforestry component which promoted fruit production in one village. Other components of the program included livestock breed improvement, medicinal plant cultivation, eco-tourism development, awareness raising, and capacity building through a women's night school.

In many ways this eNGO program was highly successful. Soil erosion was ameliorated thanks to the agroforestry project. Together with the national logging ban, the eNGO's initiatives raised awareness of the impacts of logging. Villagers were also empowered through the program: women living in upland Yi villages learnt Mandarin through the NGO program and were able to go out to work in nearby villages, while others were exposed to a variety of new crops and agricultural techniques. The initiatives also helped villagers to improve their economic situation: cash income increased between 4-10 times within a decade of the project due to a variety of new livelihood activities, including fruit farming. To a certain extent the program demonstrates that the principles of CBNRM (local institutions, participation and empowerment) can be applied in rural China to the benefit of rural communities.

## **Challenges of CBNRM projects in China**

There are nonetheless significant challenges associated with CBNRM projects. Many of these are not specific to China. For instance, despite awareness-raising activities, some villagers continued to log illegally. CBNRM often portrays indigenous communities as guardians of the forest, and ignores such illegal practices. Further, CBNRM projects often impose conservation responsibilities on villagers in a way that excludes certain development opportunities, creating a "[rhetorical poverty trap](#)" that ties local communities into a commitment to protect the forest. In the case of Lashi, the eNGO strongly discouraged Yi villagers from relocation. The majority of villagers may actually prefer to move to the city, but CBNRM emphasises local in-situ development.

China's particular political and administrative environment poses additional challenges to CBNRM. [Elsewhere I have discussed](#) the complex and ever-changing relationship between international donors, different levels of the Chinese government, eNGOs, and the local community which complicate such bottom-up initiatives. In Lashi, the eNGO's watershed management program was initially welcomed by local government due to the presence of the international donor: Chinese local officials are attracted to work with eNGOs due to their financial resources. But later on, conflict between the donor and a central

government department became a major obstacle to the program's implementation. The eNGO was also involved in a well-known anti-dam campaign, so the Yunnan provincial government, an enthusiastic dam supporter, made it increasingly difficult for the eNGO to operate locally. These complex, politically-charged relationships greatly influence the fate of local CBNRM projects in China.

In addition, CBNRM projects must contend with the impacts of large-scale, top-down government initiatives. The resource use problems in Lashi were not an isolated case; they were the result of historical logging policies, the dam project supplying water to Lijiang, the national logging ban and the sloping land farming ban. While implemented in the name of development or environmental protection, these programs negatively impacted the local ethnic minority population and the security of their livelihoods. Therefore, in China, a CBNRM approach can certainly address some of the symptoms of these top-down policies by providing benefits to the local community. What it cannot do is to change the causes which lie far beyond the local.