

THE OUTSIDERS IN "COMMUNITY"

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Before setting off to the field for pre-dissertation research this summer, I had envisioned some of the possible challenges around broaching issues of participation in community-based forestry. Most community forestry fellows are ostensibly aware that distrust of outsiders, conflict between community members, and a lack of resources are issues that we are likely to face in our respective community research endeavors. At the same time, I wonder how much of this awareness is limited to a discrete understanding of such factors, without grounding in broader historical contexts and/ or a critical understanding of power imbalances? I ask these questions because they are issues that I foresee dealing with on a continuous basis. In fact, the very language of "stakeholders", "community" and "participation" potentially obscures and/ or excludes groups that are already systemically marginalized in U.S. society and who might be negatively impacted by, no doubt well-intentioned, community-based forestry efforts. This piece is an initial attempt to highlight some of the challenges and problems with terms such as "stakeholders", "community" and "participation", as noted from my own experience this summer. I hope it will serve as a forum for debate amongst this group of fellows, so that we might continue to learn from and engage one another.

Setting the context

I spent this summer in Josephine County's Rogue Valley, Southern Oregon, trying to learn more about Latino forest workers and their involvement in community-based forestry. During the latter half of the 20th century, this area thrived on an economy based on logging, pear production and millwork. Over the last decade, however, various conjunctures (environmental policies banning old-growth logging and clear-cuts, outsourcing timber services, an increasingly competitive global market in pear production) have resulted in a dramatic loss of jobs and livelihoods. In addition to these economic shifts, the Oregon state budget was slashed dramatically, with education, health and social services the first to suffer cuts. It is in this already economically and socially challenging context that members of the Latino community, many of whom are undocumented, try to make a living.

The Medford area is, in fact, a critical hub for Latino labor recruitment. At the same time labor violations are rampant and range from not paying wages to substandard housing and on-site safety. The long-term effects of pesticide exposure, over-work, under or irregular pay, and lack of proper training also threaten basic human rights. Many of these violations, of course, relate directly to peoples' undocumented status and their reluctance to report poor working conditions. In forestry work, moreover, many workers feel obliged to their contractor (likely a family relation or friend). This is especially since re-forestation/ tree planting is the most sought after work (\$10-12/hr compared to field/farm work which pays \$6.50/hr). Even if/ when labor violations are reported, enforcement is impeded by an outright lack of agency capacity. For the entire state of Oregon, there are only 3-4 labor compliance officers! And these officers are also responsible for all licensing of farm and reforestation labor contractors. A similar lack of capacity is reflected in other state agencies. Oregon OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Agency), for example, has only 2 qualified compliance officers for pesticide regulations/ violations. The cuts to the state budget mentioned earlier only compound this lack of capacity and make for paper laws without any meaningful enforcement. The potential for human rights violations should be evident under such circumstances. Given labor violations on public lands, which ostensibly have federal contracting/ inspection officers, one can only guess that the situation on private lands (which don't have any inspectors) is even worse.

Hollow words?

In this context, who is the “community” in community forestry? What does it mean to be a meaningful stakeholder when one’s claims to basic rights (such as pay for work, health care, access to employment) are compromised by citizenship status? While decisions on how to manage forests impact all people who depend on natural resource related work for a livelihood, involvement or participation in community forestry is not necessarily premised on one’s labor. While my initial idea had been to focus primarily on community forestry and participation in decision making over land-management, these issues did not emerge explicitly. The majority of people I spoke with, however, did voice concerns about receiving wages, affordable health care and their fear of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Rather than seeing such topics, as somehow outside the scope of community-based forestry, it seems crucial to bring questions of labor and immigration to the table.

Why is this so important? The fact is that policy-making around community forestry is very much on some agendas. I had the opportunity to attend a meeting, for example, with a group of people interested in forging a bill concept around Oregon Quality Jobs. The proposed bill concerns ecosystem restoration and management and aims to provide year-round, full-time jobs to local communities. Once again, the question of what “community” means or who constitutes the community surfaces. The fact that no Latino representatives were at this particular meeting speaks not so much to intentionally exclusionary practices as to deeper socio-structural barriers that hinder the meaningful participation of already marginalized groups. What, for instance, are the possible consequences (for different groups of people) of full-time, year-round work, in the context of a larger capitalist economy? What people might be displaced and at what costs? The language of “stakeholders” and “participation” thus sometimes ring hollow. In my experience, stakeholders are not simply different groups with distinct perspectives, where all voices are heard. There are radical power imbalances in this society (given the historical legacy of racism and dispossession in the U.S.), which also are reflected in community-forestry arenas. There are people at stake and there are stakeholders- the two are not always commensurable. The present challenge regards addressing day-to-day livelihood issues and work towards policies and processes that facilitate socially just access to and management of public lands. At present, the people I spoke with in the Latino community do not seem to have the capacity to engage in this debate.

