



Simple Rules for Catalyzing Collective Action in Natural Resource Management Contexts

Carol J. Pierce Colfer

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Gender Workshop in Lubuk Kambing, Tanjung Jabung Barat, Jambi

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Section I: Before you Start

This section deals with learning about the local setting, the fact that we are dealing with systems, and the existence of “emergence.”

Rule No. 1: Learn about the local setting first – You’ll need to understand something about the people and their conditions before you try to bring about any kind of change. You can make major errors out of ignorance if you assume that local people have the same motivations as you do and that they behave in the same way.

You need to understand something about their personal motivations and values, how they think people ought to treat each other, what differentiations they make within their own group and in relation to outsiders. How do they perceive themselves? What kind of world do they have and want?

How do the various kinds of people earn their living? How important is cash compared to subsistence? Who does what and how does the way one makes a living link up with other social factors (like status, income, power)?

Who has authority (the agreed upon *right* to decide things) within this group? Who has power (the *ability to act* and affect the actions of others)? What is acceptable use of authority and power, for these people?

Who else is important to take into account? Are there nearby villages? Different ethnic groups? Powerful timber companies or conservation project personnel? What is the relationship between the community (or different groups within the community) and these outside groups? How does (and might) the community or community groups make beneficial use of these links?

In answering these kinds of questions (and many

more that you will come up against as you look into these), you can use the methods of cultural anthropology–ethnographic analysis, participant observation, and some complementary methods like participatory rural appraisal (PRA).

Rule No. 2: Things are interconnected. We talk about social systems, and what we mean by that is that fiddling around with one thing in people’s lives will have an effect on other parts of people’s lives. Often this effect is not obvious before we start fiddling. External changes, over which no one in the community may have any control, can also result in changes in the local system. This is one reason that it’s important to learn about the local setting first. Use of holistic, anthropological methods can help you anticipate *some* of the effects of change—whether initiated by you, by local people, or coming from outside. But it will not be possible to anticipate all of the effects of such changes. Knowledge is inevitably incomplete, partly because of inherent complexity in social systems and partly because things change all the time.

Another useful tool for anticipating the effects of change is causal loop diagrams (from the field of system dynamics). Drawing out causal loops, showing which things contribute to which other things, can help you bring your (and others’) passive internal knowledge out into the open visually.

You can do this alone, or, better yet, bring together groups of people to discuss and help you draw these causal loops. The process of discussion is useful for gaining shared understanding among groups of people from very different backgrounds and with differing interests about their shared systems. A final step, which requires more expertise than most of us have, is developing a system dynamics model of the system. This step can push the shared understanding further and can allow actual testing of the implications of various scenarios. But it’s

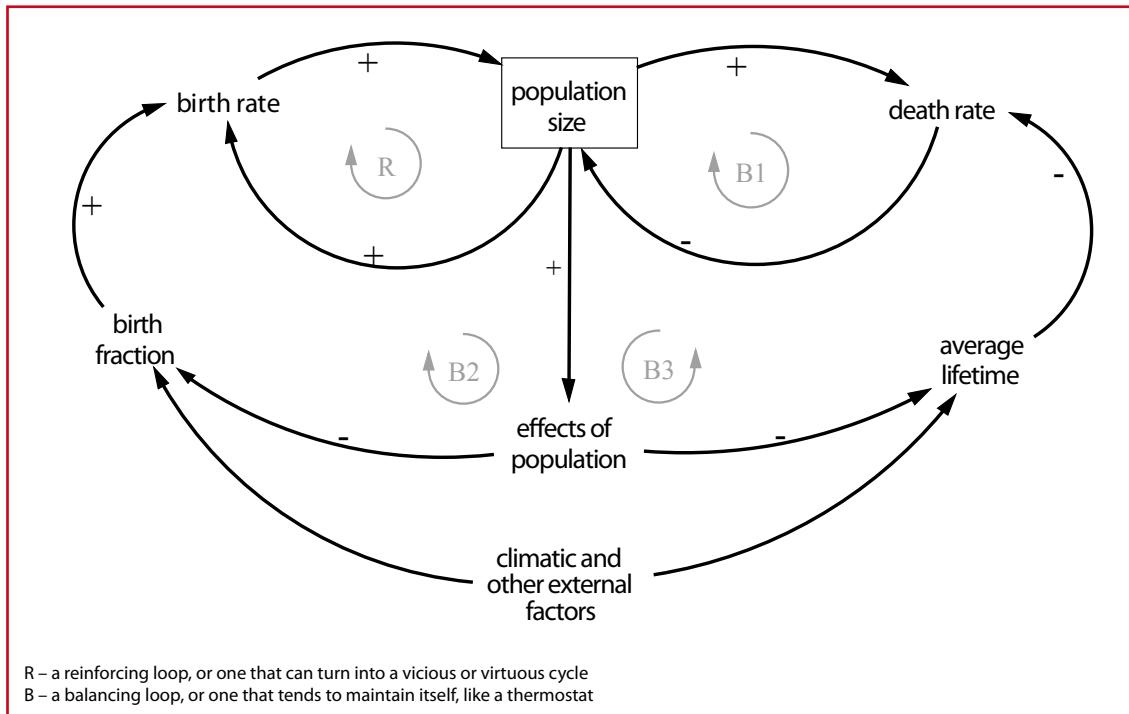
important to remember when using this method that “all models are wrong.” The process—of enhancing our understanding—is normally as important as the final product (the model).

Rule No. 3: Emergence exists. This is a big word for a simple idea: that sometimes events or actions happen from internal interactions within systems. I borrow this simple example from Dennis Meadows, a well known system dynamicist and management consultant. When he was introduced to give a speech recently, the large audience began clapping. He smiled, thanked them for their appreciation,

and asked them to bear with him for a moment, and please clap in unison. Within a few moments, they were all clapping to the same beat. But when he asked them how they had been able to do that, they were unable to answer. No one stood up and gave them instructions, or beat a drum, or in any way helped this mass of people to carry out this request—they were just able to do it, presumably via observation and small individual adjustment and cooperation. The audience’s ability to clap in unison on demand is an example of an emergent action.

The ongoing interactions among people and

Figure 1. Causal Loops Showing Simple View of Population Dynamics



between people and their environments result in emergent events. Things happen, from the interactions among parts of systems, and we may not understand how they have come about. This is another reason that we cannot predict all the effects of what we do. There is nothing specific we need to do about emergence, but it is useful to realize that it exists, and not be too surprised when things just come together unpredictably to produce an unexpected result (Rules No. 22).

Section II: Catalyzing Collective Action

By the word, catalyzing, I simply mean “to bring something about,” “to serve as the missing ingredient to make something happen,” “to provide the spark.” This section deals with the action part of these lessons, but it is in fact no more important than the more conceptual and attitudinal lessons provided in the other sections.

Rule No. 4: Respect and work with existing local institutions. Every society has existing institutions, whether they be based on kinship, common interests, occupation, or any number of other organizing principles. People in every society do things together, based on some link that they recognize as important locally. Part of your job is to find those institutions. Such institutions represent a store of social capital, mutual trust, existing communication patterns, and friendships that can be built upon.

You can identify these by noting what people do together in groups. In Kalimantan, for instance, women form short term groups that work on each other’s rice fields, in rotation; in Sumatra, Muslim women meet every week for Koran readings. In Java, Kenya, Bangladesh, and many other areas, women form rotating credit groups. Men in Bali come

together to manage their irrigation systems; men in some Latin American countries may meet regularly just to drink together and enjoy each other’s company. Men and women in the US join groups concerned about conservation, participate in local school boards, and join garden clubs. Such groups can be ethnically based, like the *Punan Customary Society (Yayasan Adat Punan)*, a group of hunter gatherers living in East Kalimantan who recognize their marginalized position in society and want to do something about it; or it can be based on caste (cf. similar groups of “untouchables” in India).

Any such groups, whether formal or informal, can serve as a basis from which to build collective action. The advantage to working with existing groups is that they represent an ongoing expenditure of people’s time. Working with them does not require people to develop new communication patterns (at least initially), and it reduces the number of additional meetings people must attend. Finally, it represents an acknowledgement of the value of a part of their existing way of life. Such acknowledgement can be very important for developing or strengthening people’s self-confidence—also important for bringing about effective collective action.

This process of finding local institutions will probably be a key step in determining who you will work with (though sometimes people are invited in by a particular group, or their “target group” is mandated by their funding). You will want to select a group that is amenable to working with you, and with goals you can relate to. It may also be important to select groups that reflect the diversity in the community, to strengthen equity. Starting with one group and adding others later is another possibility.

Rule No. 5: Respect and build on local knowledge. Just as local institutions represent a treasure trove of under-used potential lying in wait in



Women in Lubuk Kaming, Jambi collectively planting rice during planting season

local communities, so does their knowledge. Much of my work has been in tropical rain forests, where the local people are quite likely to know more about their environment than the scientists who come to either study or manage it. Local people often have extensive knowledge—based on long term personal experience and observation, combined with explicit lessons from their parents and elders—of the kinds of plants and animals in the area, their interactions, their patterns of behavior in different seasons and at different ages, their uses for human beings, and more.

Local knowledge is not always as obvious as it is among groups living in rain forests, but it exists everywhere. Even in contexts where outside scientists may have a deeper knowledge of particular aspects

of the environment, local people will have key knowledge about their own uses of and wishes for their environment, and patterns of human behavior that can contribute to or detract from future uses of the environment. Getting a sense of the amount of local knowledge available; from whom; and figuring out how to gain access to it, will be important tasks for the would-be catalyst of collective action.

Rule No. 6: *Identify and work toward shared goals.* Once you've identified the groups you want to begin working with, you will need to facilitate a process whereby they determine what their goals are. My favorite approach ("future scenarios analysis") focuses group discussion on a time some years in the future, and elicits the people's preferences for their future, their ideal future.

In many cases, due to differences in power within groups or different norms of interaction, it may be necessary to separate women from men, marginalized groups from dominant groups, the rich from the poor—so that the less influential people will feel free to speak their minds. It can be dangerous for people with less power to speak up in the presence of those with more power.

Separate discussion groups can easily be formed, with each group identifying their preference for the future. The groups then come together again, in plenary, and discuss their conclusions. This can be a powerful way to strengthen mutual understanding between groups, to clarify ideas within groups, and to identify commonalities, complementarities, and conflicts.

In the process of determining these goals, it is important to stress the community's or group's responsibility. In many communities, outsiders have come and made promises (often unfulfilled) about all the things they were going to do for the community; you do not want to fall into that category. Only if the goals are truly theirs will they be willing to go to the probably significant trouble of acting collectively to achieve them. And given the phenomenon of emergence (Rule No. 3), you don't want to be held personally responsible for the group's possible failure to achieve their goals.

Rule No. 7: Start with easy goals. The primary reason to “start simple” is to allow the group to gain experience and build confidence. As mentioned, selecting groups that typically act together already gives us an advantage in that the members of the group are familiar with each other (No. 4). However, in many cases, they will have been doing familiar things, tackling problems for which they have an established routine—burying people, running an existing irrigation system, reading religious treatises,

maintaining local roads. Usually their ideas for an ideal future will require new actions, new links with other individuals and institutions, and many other new and unfamiliar behaviors. Approaching a comparatively short term goal with a high probability of success first will give them skills and confidence to pursue something more difficult.

Rule No. 8: Build in mechanisms for assessing progress. Once a goal has been established, the members of the group will need some way to measure their progress, to know whether they are continuing to make progress toward their goal or not. One mechanism that we have used successfully is “criteria and indicators.” These are part of a hierarchical system of thought, involving principles (at the most abstract), then criteria (which are desired conditions), with indicators (ideally measurable indications of success). The temperature on a thermometer can be an indicator of our state of health or of the adequate functioning of our heating system; the level of rice in a basket can be an indicator of the adequacy of the family's rice supply at any given time; the number of birth control pills bought in a community can be an indicator of family planning use; etc. For any goal, we can develop indicators of progress. And these can be monitored, to make sure we are making progress. If we are not, we need to think about what is preventing the progress, and re-assess our strategy. The absence of such monitoring is often a prime constraint in efforts to improve conditions.

If we do not know that our efforts are bearing no fruit, we may continue doing things that do not have the desired effect. In Indonesia, for instance, where Soeharto's government had virtually no effective monitoring (or feedback) mechanisms about its policies, the government kept on pushing paddy rice cultivation in areas where it was simply not appropriate—a complete waste of many people's

valuable time, energy, and money. Local groups can easily do the same thing, if they do not know they have gone astray for long periods of time. Routine, planned monitoring of progress provides a platform to discuss the problems and come up with alternate strategies before long periods of time have elapsed. Such lags can result in dissipation of people's energies and interest in solving the problem or pursuing the goal.

In some cases, monitoring is hindered by a lack of literacy. In Nepal, the ACM team used the various phases of the moon to indicate progress or lack thereof in their attempts to do things like learning their rules for their community forest, increasing the number of women in decision-making roles, increasing the number of toilets in a hamlet, etc. After the community had set its goals, made its implementation plan, and spent a few months trying to do what they'd promised to do, they met again to assess their success. In their discussions, a new moon meant no progress, progressively fuller moons meant increasing levels of success, and a full moon meant completion of the task they'd set for themselves.

A fundamental reason that formalizing the monitoring process in this way is important pertains to the centrality of sustainability. If a mechanism has been learned, for ongoing assessment, I believe communities have a better chance of continuing to work in this way after the project and facilitator are gone.

Rule No. 9: *Focus on opportunities.* Many people start with the assumption that we need to identify the problem(s) and go from there. My own view is that there are usually so many problems that this can be a rather self-defeating approach. One can become completely demotivated. If we begin, instead, by looking for opportunities, there almost

always are a few. Such opportunities can relate to the small goals suggested as first steps in Rule No. 7; or they can be part of any step in the process of working with communities and other groups. Look for smart, motivated people concerned about what you're concerned about; look for natural leaders whose skills are not being used; look for potential links with outside agencies that can help you and the community; look for possible donors. There may be some under-employed young people who would welcome the chance to work with you. There may be a problem in the community that is exactly what a researcher you know is trying to address. These are the kinds of opportunities I mean. They exist everywhere, and they strengthen the possibility of having successes, which in turn strengthens the possibility of building strength, commitment and enthusiasm in your group—leading to still more success. I'm not suggesting that we completely ignore problems, but rather that the search for opportunities has been under-emphasized, and can be the key to some quick and meaningful successes. It takes some creativity and alertness.

Rule No. 10: *Bring together local and outsider knowledge.* I have already mentioned the importance of local knowledge in any attempt to catalyze collective action (Rule No. 5). But it is also usually important to link this knowledge to the kinds of knowledge that outsiders have. This may be scientific knowledge or it may be knowledge of the wider world in the hands of traders or government officials or donor agencies or NGOs. Two-way exchange of different kinds of knowledge can be very productive, for both parties in the exchange. Policymakers, for instance, can make better policies if they understand the conditions in villages. Traders and villagers, exchanging information, may be able to fashion more equitable and profitable economic



Women's Subgroup in Gender Workshop in Lubuk Kambing, Tanjung Jabung Barat, Jambi

arrangements. Researchers and local people can learn much from each other's respective expertise.

Such exchanges work best when there is explicit recognition of the value of the local knowledge. In many places, local knowledge is put down by outsiders. When local people's knowledge is recognized as a valuable and useful contribution, this strengthens their self-confidence—again, leading to more effective collective action, especially when villagers must deal with outsiders.

Rule No. 11: *Make links among actors.* The ability to work collectively has always been important for human beings, and as noted above (Rule No. 1), people already do work together in most communities for some purposes. However, these days, it is usually important for local people to have connections to the world outside. Almost

all communities are linked to the outside world, whether they value those connections or not. And there are resources in the outside world that can be valuable to local people—if the process of gaining access to them can be managed by local people, to their advantage.

An important role for someone trying to catalyze much collective action is to begin the process of making such links. That includes at least identifying relevant links to the outside world (government agencies, NGOs, academics, other communities, networks, etc.), helping local people develop the self-confidence and negotiation skills they will need to deal with such outsiders, and serving as a facilitator in the early stages of their interactions. It may also involve helping local people learn to write letters, proposals, complaints, newsletters, and other

documents in language that will be understandable and acceptable to the outsiders.

Rule No. 12: *Leadership can emerge anywhere.*

Collective action requires leadership. It is important, if we are seeking equity in our efforts, to look beyond formal leadership roles, however, in this process. Formal leadership almost always has some role in collective action (if only to refrain from being a hindrance); but informal leaders are often more important—particularly when dealing with marginalized groups.

It is often important to discuss leadership ideas with people, since different groups can have different ideas about who can be a leader, what behavior is acceptable in a leader, what constrains people from becoming leaders, etc. It may be helpful to have a discussion about the advantages of having multiple sources of leadership and a flexible attitude about who can lead. Sometimes having an outsider (like a facilitator) exposing people to different ideas about leadership can open doors for people who have not had such roles in the past—thereby liberating a whole range of skills and knowledge that have not been used adequately before.

As a facilitator, it is important to be analytical about your own role. Your friendship and attention may affect how the community members feel about many different things, including their assessment of the leadership potential of individuals. In this context, it's important to remember the dictum: Do no harm.

Section III: Some Principles to Keep in Mind

In this section, we delve into some of the values on which our work is based. These are not scientific

principles in and of themselves; they are firmly based in values. But they *are* principles that I have found to be important in our efforts to catalyze collective action.

Rule No. 13: *Seek justice, via understanding.*

Most people working in the fields of development and conservation believe, at some level, that justice is preferable to injustice. We have a sense that if people are treated fairly, they are more likely to act responsibly and cooperatively—and that is what I have found in my own work. Yet communities are not necessarily just within, nor are they necessarily treated justly by outsiders.

A facilitator of collective action has a responsibility to be alert to injustice in the conduct of his/her work. Are there people within the community whose voices are not heard? Are there inequities in the distribution of benefits from local resources that are patently unjust? Are people with wealth and power walking all over people with few resources? These are the kinds of important questions you should ask yourself, and keep in mind when trying to stimulate collective action. The better you understand the context in which you work, the more likely you will be to a) note the inequities, and b) do something about them.

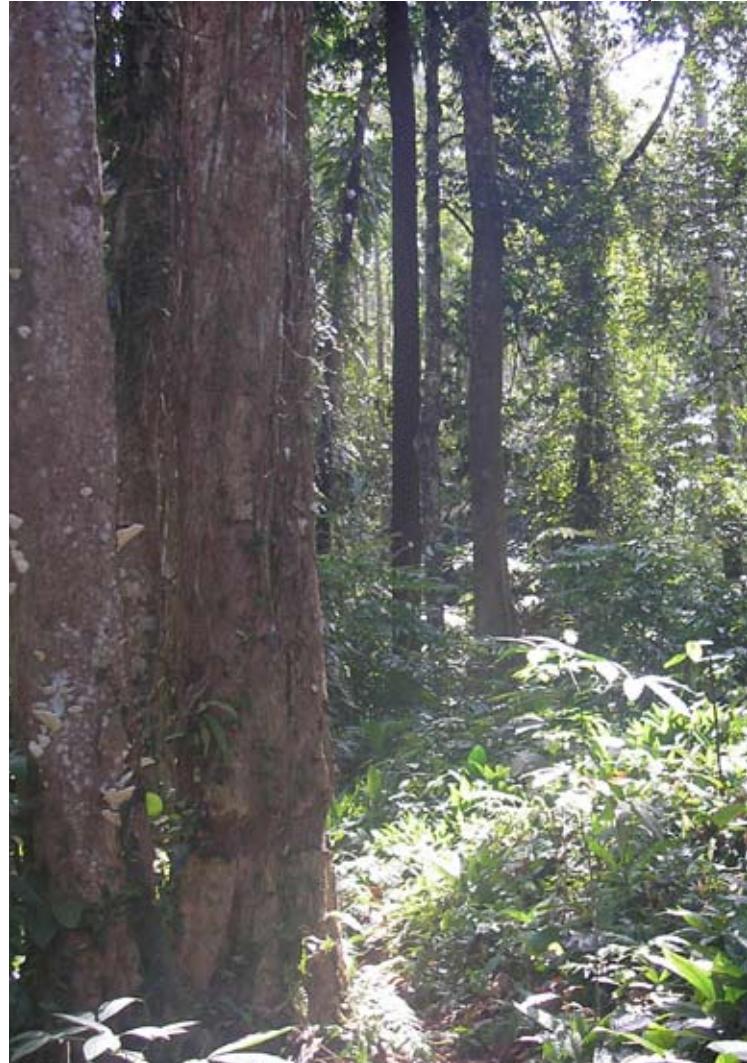
Obviously you cannot address all such issues—how much you can do will also depend on the interest of community members to address the issues—but you can probably avoid exacerbating existing inequities, and you may well be able to make progress in righting some longstanding wrongs (through improved collective action).

Rule No. 14: *Balance power.* Balancing power is not entirely within your hands, of course (Remember Rules No. 2 and 3). But the process of facilitation within communities, and between communities and outsiders, involves power quite explicitly. On

the one hand, your role is to serve as a relatively neutral outsider, facilitating a process. Yet, you have probably identified some serious injustices in interactions among actors. Whole groups of people may be disenfranchised, left without a voice in decisions that are central to their well being. So, you must also act in such a way as to strengthen the voice of those in need. It is, in fact, a delicate balancing act. If you expend too much effort trying to protect those in need, you will lose the power you have as a neutral actor to bring about better communication and cooperation among the parties. If you stress your neutrality exclusively, you are likely to reinforce existing inequities and contribute to injustice yourself. Do your best to remain on the balance beam!

Rule No. 15: *Facilitation is an invaluable skill.*

Part of your ability to remain on that balance beam involves your skill at facilitation. You need to be able to use facilitation skills to maintain a fair balance of power among participants in this kind of process. You need to make sure that everyone has a genuine opportunity to provide input. This may mean separating the actors into groups of like-minded folks first. It may mean coaching marginalized groups on negotiation skills or public speaking. It may mean using facilitation techniques like a talking stick (where only the person who has the stick can speak—with the stick being handed to extra quiet people to solicit their input), or some method that requires everyone to express him or herself one by one, or anonymous cards placed on the wall. There are many techniques, but they need to be learned and used in such a way that the ideas of the poor, the women, the lower castes, can also be heard throughout the process. And of course it is important not to disenfranchise the wealthy and the powerful.



Villager's farm lands in Sungai Telang, Jambi

Their ideas also need to be heard.

A special concern in the development of facilitation skills is the danger of what some call “*facipulation*”—facilitation in such a way that it manipulates people to serve one’s own ends. This is not ethical and is in fact counter-productive, since we are trying to initiate a process that is genuine and that can be sustained without us.

Facilitation responsibilities are heavy and one of the most important components in the process of catalyzing collective action.

Rule No. 16: *Build coalitions.* Building coalitions can be extremely useful in the process of balancing power. When weak people—and it’s important to remember that people we consider weak in fact have both subtle and violent methods of exerting their influence if really needed—are confronting powerful people, the former can be more effective if they deal in groups. Greater numbers can sometimes cope more effectively with greater power. This is the idea behind trade unions, cooperatives, and political parties, among other groups. Banding together can work for communities and user groups as well. In Nepal, the community forest user groups, established by the government, have formed into a network of user groups (called FECOFUN), specifically to support each other and bring pressure to bear on the government relating to the rules and regulations governing community forests. The *Punan* Customary Society (mentioned in Rule No. 4) is an example of an ethnic group banding together to influence government policy. In Jambi, there are groups of village representative bodies (like mini-legislatures) that have banded together to influence government actions. Building coalitions may be helpful in achieving your goals; and it bumps the stakes up a notch, involving catalyzing collective

action on a broader scale.

Rule No. 17: *Diversity leads to more creative solutions.* There is lots of evidence that the more diverse the group you are working with, the more knowledge and creativity its members can bring to bear in solving problems. A diverse group looks at an issue from various perspectives, and brings different experience to the table.

The implications of this rule, when working in communities, are that involving marginalized groups, whether women, lower castes, poor people, lower status ethnic groups, into a problem solving process will strengthen your collective ability to come up with innovative ideas and answers. This same principle applies in collaborative efforts between communities and other groups (such as government, NGOs, academics, and project personnel).

Rule No. 18: *Dealing with diversity involves significant transaction costs.* This is the caveat that comes with Rule No. 17. There is no question that there are significant advantages to involving diverse groups in your work. However, there are also some disadvantages: Communication among participants becomes harder; social capital is lower (initially); there are likely to be fewer collective actions that “come naturally” to the participants. There are bigger problems related to power differentials within the collaborating group. There may also be significant suspicion that must be overcome before collective action can occur. These problems can occur whether the effort is within a community or between a community and an outside group.

Don’t get me wrong: I do not think you should avoid working with diverse groups. I *do* think you should be prepared for some miscommunications, some suspicions, some slow-downs deriving from these inherent difficulties, as people become

accustomed to working with people with different knowledge, experience, languages, preferences, and interests.

Section IV: Some Guidelines

This section focuses on specific guidelines that I've found to be useful in working with communities on collective action issues.

Rule No. 19: Practice what you preach.

Suppose that you are trying to convince people in the communities where you work, local government officials, or personnel on a conservation project that they should deal more equitably with each other—as may well occur. They will not find such admonitions very convincing if you are treating your driver with disrespect, or paying higher salaries to the men on your team than to the women, or ignoring the input from 3rd world team members while routinely taking on board ideas from Americans or Europeans.

Or suppose that you are trying to encourage a broad-based power-sharing arrangement with the folks you are working with, trying to get them to distribute leadership responsibilities among the group—an approach encouraged by many management specialists (see Rule No. 12). Yet you hang on to your own power and authority for dear life.

You might be trying to implement the monitoring arrangements in your communities suggested in Rule No. 8. But if your own management approach has no mechanisms for assessing your own progress, your words will seem hollow. This is a simple guideline that can be easily summed up with a familiar phrase: Actions speak louder than words. Don't under-estimate the power of example.

Rule No. 20: Listening can be more important than talking. This is an especially crucial skill at



Gender workshop in Sungai Telang, Jambi

the beginning of your work, while you are trying to understand the context in which you will work (Rule No. 1), but it remains important throughout the process. "It's hard to hear past an open mouth" is another useful phrase to remember. We are trying to work with people, to encourage them to take action. If we are constantly telling them what to do, how will they develop the skills they need to continue the process after we're gone? And how will they develop the self-confidence they need to make plans and decisions on their own? You can serve an excellent function if you listen well. In that way you can learn what people really want; and that will open up the opportunities that we need to be looking for (Rule No. 9).

Rule No. 21: Be patient. One of the most fundamental lessons that I have learned from our experience working with communities is the importance of patience. Patience is required because we are working with people and with the systems in which they operate. As noted in Rules No. 2 and 3, things don't always go as we plan.

Although sometimes a plan can be implemented with hardly a hitch and in a short amount of time, such occurrences are the exception, not the rule. Normally any attempt at collective action involves various barriers and constraints that must be overcome. As a facilitator you do not have the authority to force people to act (nor would you want to, if you're trying to catalyze collective action). The processes of jointly determining what people want, figuring out a plan that is acceptable to everyone, dividing up the tasks that need to be done, determining how the group will know when it's experiencing success or failure, and re-grouping to solve problems and adjust plans, repeatedly, all take time—even when things go smoothly. And things often *don't* go smoothly: a crucial cooperator will die, a community member you've all counted on will prove untrustworthy, your funding will be reduced, an AIDS epidemic will hit diverting attention from your efforts, a team member on your project will not do his/her job. All of these things have happened in my own experience alone. To do this kind of work, you will have to be patient (and creative in solving problems!).

Rule No. 22: Give up the love of control. This is a corollary of Rule No. 3. If the human and natural systems with which we work are characterized by emergent properties, the idea that we can truly control events is a chimera. It's unrealistic. We cannot escape surprises, and our task—besides implementing the kinds of steps outlined above—is to creatively find solutions to the problems that confront us. I've

found that the process of catalyzing collection action requires a kind of acceptance of uncertainty that is a bit alien to many researchers, extension workers, and project personnel. We tend to have an expectation that we can plan something, and that with sufficient care, things will go as planned. I have worked with very intelligent and capable people, good planners who have put their all into their work, including villagers—yet still things do not go according to plan. I have come to believe that we must work within an uncertain world; and try to adjust and respond in creative and persistent ways, moving iteratively and usually slowly toward our goals. And we need to encourage community members, government officials, project personnel, NGO workers, and others to do the same.

Rule No. 23: Try to find long term funding. All that I have said in this rule book implies a long term commitment to this process of catalyzing collective action. It takes time and an *uncertain amount* of time. If we truly respond to the needs and wishes of community members—as indeed we must if we want the process to sustain itself—then we cannot pre-determine even what the project will entail, let alone the amount of time it will take. This kind of uncertainty is very uncomfortable for donors (and others), making securing funding a difficult task. Our task must be to educate donors to the need for both flexibility and long term commitments; and carry on the best we can until they are convinced!

Now you are ready to start. Yours is an important endeavor. Good luck!

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Simple Rules for Catalyzing Collective Action in Natural Resource Management Contexts

This booklet is designed to help people interested in working with small groups (usually communities or groups within communities) to reach their goals. It has been written, building first on the global literature on community based management of forests and other natural resources; secondly, on a base of experience catalyzing collective action within communities in more than 30 communities in 11 countries, using the approach called “Adaptive Collaborative Management” (ACM); and thirdly, through experience trying to catalyze collective action in two communities in Sumatra. It assumes an interest in equity, justice, and respect, as well as effective action.



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