

Policy that works for forests and people no. 12



Bosque del Pueblo, Puerto Rico

How a fight to stop a mine ended up changing forest policy from the bottom up

Alexis Massol González
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Acronyms

CANARI	Caribbean Natural Resources Institute
CIBC	Community Institute of Biodiversity and Culture
DFID	Department for International Development
DNER	Department of Natural and Environmental Resources
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development

Preface

To maintain and enrich human values, before anything, and likewise to grow in the awareness of doing one's patriotic and historic duty. To avoid, by every possible means, grandstanding and fighting over power. To practice democracy to the utmost, without losing sight of firmness and the larger picture. To know that everyone counts, no matter his or her age, knowledge, colour or nationality. To seek consensus where it matters, and where it does not. To be certain that what one does is important, but never forget what remains to be done. Today we dream; tomorrow we make the dreams come true; then we dream again, to make what seemed impossible come true.

Alexis Massol González, 2006

Foreword

In 1999, James Mayers and I published '*Policy that Works for Forests and People*'. Offering an analysis of experiences in many countries, we showed how forest use can change for the better if forest policy processes combine four ingredients well: (a) civil society concern; (b) political commitment; (c) financially viable institutional roles; and (d) knowledge – partly evidence, but mostly good ideas.

A couple of years later, I met Arturo Massol Deyá at a conference on participatory forestry organised by the Caribbean Natural Resources Institute. Arturo's story of 'policy that works' in Puerto Rico was the most compelling and exemplary that I had heard to date. Major changes in forest policy, planning, funding and practice have been inspired by a Puerto Rican community organisation, Casa Pueblo. Arturo told of a community whose vision of *autogestión comunitaria* – resilient and self-reliant development – has influenced neighbouring communities, younger generations and state authorities.

Casa Pueblo shows how the real world of sustainable development is rooted in local institutions – civil society groups and networks of many types, as well as local government and entrepreneurs. It is bottom up, participatory, complex, and informed by many perspectives. But the world of 'Development' and aid remains centralised, top down, and exhibiting a lust for simple models. Furthermore, the literature is dominated by initiatives driven by powerful players – notably the aid system operating in poorer countries in the case of tropical forestry. Puerto Rico is largely invisible to the aid system (despite many people suffering from poverty) yet it has produced a significant model in Casa Pueblo.

In a modest way, IIED hopes that this international publication of Casa Pueblo's story will offer an independent validation of their approach – and a little more confidence to reach even higher goals.

Stephen Bass
Senior Fellow
IIED, London.

Executive Summary

In most forest policy processes the central actor is the State, with other stakeholders playing lesser roles as catalysts, supporters, or sometimes impediments. But forest policy can also be driven from the bottom up, by community initiatives and stakeholder demands. This case study tells the story of a small community-based organisation in the mountains of Puerto Rico that has spearheaded a remarkable process of national forest policy change over a period of 25 years. The story is important because it provides much guidance on what makes such bottom up policy processes effective.

Like many parts of the developing world, Puerto Rico, a Caribbean island territory of the United States, has a culture and institutions that have been deeply influenced by its colonial history. From the arrival of the Spanish in 1493 through the takeover of the island by the U.S. in 1898, the State assumed authority and ownership over most natural resources, and the situation changed little as self-government increased over the last century. Forest was cleared for agriculture and subsequent industrial development and urban expansion, with only a few critical areas strictly protected through forest reserves. Meanwhile, people's relationships with forests became more and more distant, and poor planning decisions, affecting the island's hydrological resources and biodiversity, became increasingly common. By 1980, disregard for the importance of forests and watershed services was so great that the government decided to raise revenue by opening the mountainous centre of the island to open pit mining. This marked the start of a grassroots campaign to change forest policy, which continues to this day.

The possibility of open pit mining within the community's watershed spurred a small group of people in the rural town of Adjuntas to establish an organisation, the *Taller de Arte y Cultura de Adjuntas*, known as Casa Pueblo, to fight the plans. Through persistent and carefully designed advocacy over a period of more than five years, the group overcame local apathy and official hostility to reverse the government's decision, only to see the threat re-emerge a few years later. Casa Pueblo's second campaign, from 1992 until 1996, started from a stronger base of both experience and public support and resulted in the passage of a national law prohibiting open pit mining.

At that point, the group became directly involved in forest policy issues. It first demanded the establishment of a locally managed forest reserve on the land that had been allocated for mining. Largely through demonstration of enormous public support, it succeeded in convincing the government to establish the Bosque del Pueblo (People's Forest), the country's first new forest reserve in 40 years, and to enter into a collaborative agreement to manage it. Since that time, despite limited contributions from the government, Casa Pueblo has been able to effectively implement an ambitious management plan for the forest, including programmes in forest rehabilitation and conservation, provision of visitor services, and environmental education, along with innovative mechanisms for stakeholder participation and oversight.

With the establishment of the forest reserve, some of the group's most important initiatives from a national forest policy standpoint were still to come. These have included successful advocacy for a law mandating the creation of biological corridors linking forest reserves along the island's central spine; the creation of a national conservation fund for the purchase of critical watershed lands; and the development of an integrated conservation and management plan encompassing ten municipalities including Adjuntas and linking five forest reserves. The policy results of this unceasing advocacy can be summarised as follows:

- *An increased recognition of the need to conserve secondary forests for their provision of critical environmental services:* since the establishment of Bosque del Pueblo, six new forest reserves, largely comprised of secondary and urban forest, have been established.
- *A shift from an isolated focus on forest reserves to whole watershed and ecosystem approaches:* recent legislation has resulted in the establishment of biological corridors for the movement and protection of flora and fauna, and in the acquisition and protection of critical watershed areas.
- *The adoption of participatory planning and co-management approaches that involve a range of stakeholders besides the state:* the Bosque del Pueblo experience has set a precedent for community participation in managing state forests in Puerto Rico, and more importantly in substantially changing the way that the government works with others.
- *Acceptance of the responsibility of the state to adequately finance forest and watershed protection:* in addition to establishing the US\$20 million national conservation fund, the government, which had for years provided the minimum contribution possible to forest management, now pays Casa Pueblo and other co-management partners a negotiated annual management fee.

All Casa Pueblo's work is grounded in its commitment to processes of *community self-realisation*, aimed at overcoming the sense of helplessness, dependency and marginalisation experienced by many poor rural communities. Its focus has been on Adjuntas, but it has also drawn wider circles of "community", encompassing neighbouring towns, Puerto Rican civil society generally, and strategic alliances with like-minded groups outside the island's boundaries. Its relation to the state has been more distant, and part of its ideology is based on a belief in civil society's obligation to monitor and when necessary oppose the actions of the state.

In analysing some of the keys to Casa Pueblo's success in transforming forest policy, the following points stand out:

1. Bottom up policy processes need to start with making forest management meaningful to people, by:

- focusing on human development and quality of life issues: clean air and water, learning and education, pleasure and recreation;
- highlighting forests' role in providing environmental services such as water supply and quality;
- offering new economic opportunities based on sustainable forest use to economically marginalised rural areas;
- making it easy for people to be part of forest planning processes.

2. Ways that grassroots actors can overcome power imbalances and secure a place at the table include:

- preparing proposals and arguments scrupulously to forestall claims of inadequate technical capacity at the community level;
- demonstrating public backing, and in so doing drawing in the politicians;
- maintaining a moral high ground to avoid accusations of bias or corruption;
- taking control of the debate whenever possible rather than falling into a pattern of reacting to the government's positions;
- having trustworthy and effective intermediaries to assure that communication does not break down.

3. Making participatory management work requires:

- giving new management agreements the time and flexibility to evolve;
- employing participatory management approaches that are both economically efficient and technically sound;
- continuing to bring in new stakeholders to widen the circle of participation.

4. Achieving environmental objectives can be helped by:

- thinking beyond protected areas to ecosystem-wide and whole watershed management approaches;
- pushing not only for discrete victories but for lasting legal changes;
- drawing on the resources of the private sector, who are important recipients of forest environmental services.

Perhaps the most important key to Casa Pueblo's success has been the strength of its vision of economic development based on self-reliance and equitable and sustainable resource use, combined with social development through the use and strengthening of local cultural values and practices. It sees various forms and levels of change as being mutually reinforcing: changes in public policy depend on and contribute to socio-cultural and ideological changes, changes in livelihood patterns and opportunities, and changes in the management of natural resources. This vision has sustained its work over 25 years, helping it to effectively refute widespread perceptions and arguments that community-based resource management initiatives are not effective. By making forest policy a priority for people, it has driven a long-overdue change in forest policy, towards one that can make a greater contribution to Puerto Rico's sustainable development.

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