



TECHNICAL NOTE

Participatory Natural Resource Management (PNRM) and Democratic Outcomes

Opportunities and Challenges

Participatory natural resource management (PNRM) is a form of collective action bringing together natural resource users and communities, interacting with government, to make coordinated decisions about rights and responsibilities to use and benefit from natural resources.

PNRM has often been used as part of USAID biodiversity and environmental programming. More recently, it has become increasingly important for governance considerations in climate change programming and [Nature-based Solutions](#) (NbS). Taken together, PNRM activities are now a noteworthy component of the global development assistance portfolio.

PNRM is also closely linked to democratic governance. A recent USAID [systematic evidence synthesis](#) on linkages between PNRM and democratic outcomes surfaced critical patterns and trends, particularly on the role of power, politics, and socio-cultural norms within PNRM and their impact on democratic outcomes. This technical note draws upon this recent assessment of over 150 articles published between 2005-2020, along with the principles of [thinking and working politically \(TWP\)](#), to identify opportunities and challenges for PNRM programming to advance environmental and democratic governance objectives.

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POWER RELATIONS AND POLITICAL DYNAMICS



OPPORTUNITIES

Accommodating differences between formal and traditional governance

PNRM can develop mechanisms for multistakeholder exchanges to help to bridge differences between interests and values, facilitate the distribution of power and authority, and support broader collaboration.

Engaging local NGOs to help to fill the “implementation gap”

Support for local NGOs and the bridging functions they serve in PNRM can help enhance the development of more positive state-society relations, particularly at the outset of PNRM.

Addressing issues and reforms that are part of larger national political debates

PNRM spotlights the need for defined and secure land and resource rights, which can often lead to broader legislative and political reforms, serving as an influential force in national political debates.

Providing a platform for government-community dialogue and dispute resolution

In regions with low levels of state legitimacy, PNRM with transparency and accountability can fill the role of “honest broker” for dispute resolution and conflict management.

Highlighting issues of equity and inclusion in international environmental initiatives

PNRM’s centrality in global initiatives like Reducing Emissions for Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) encouraged participation for women, Indigenous people, and marginalized groups.

CHALLENGES

Adapting to centralized top-down decision-making

Despite decentralization policies, many central governments retain key aspects of decision-making and control over high-value resources and revenue, limiting the effectiveness of PNRM.

Monitoring shifts in power in the context of institutional change

PNRM reconfigures institutional arrangements and the way that power is shared at multiple scales. When powerful individuals or groups engage in “scale-jumping” to redefine their roles, each new institutional platform is potentially a site for elite capture, self-dealing, and corruption.



THREE QUESTIONS FOR THINKING AND WORKING POLITICALLY IN PNRM

While PNRM faces constraints from structural power dynamics, options to address challenges can be explored by addressing three key questions:

1

Is there a functional balance between upward accountability to higher authorities and downward accountability to local communities? If not, how do these forms of accountability differ?

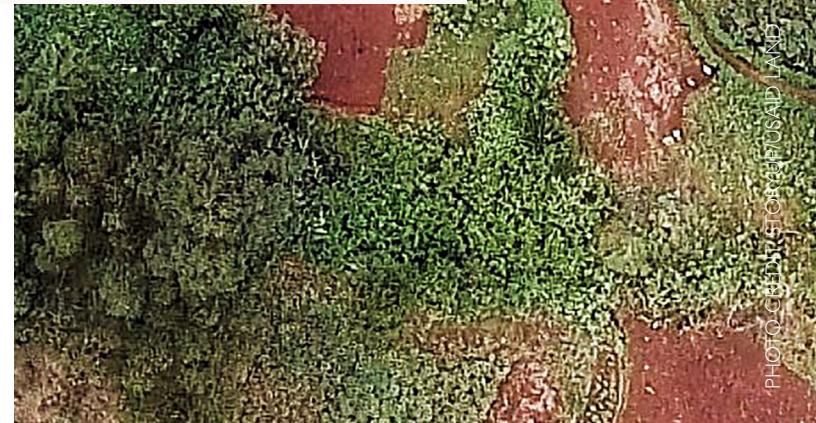
2

What criteria—both de jure and de facto—determine leadership positions and decision-making roles in PNRM? Are these roles and tasks open to all community members?

3

How is the participation of women affected by time poverty (e.g., caregiving or home care duties), restricted educational opportunities, and lack of tenure rights and assets?

Exploring these questions can generate productive focal areas for program activities seeking to link PNRM and improved democratic outcomes.



LOCAL CONTEXT AND SOCIOCULTURAL NORMS



OPPORTUNITIES

Building social capital to strengthen voice and advocacy

Natural resource committees, forest user groups, fishing cooperatives, and community conservancies are all venues for developing skills in collective decision-making. Strengthened social capital and group solidarity from PNRM can bolster citizen advocacy and advance political and programmatic goals.

Establishing links with broader coalitions for expanded rights

Groups engaged in PNRM can link with other national and international environmental organizations, forming more powerful coalitions that can help address a broader range of issues such as women's rights, land rights, climate change, and environmental defenders.

Bridging divides between Indigenous communities and formal governance

Local and national perspectives about the relationship of traditional participatory processes, land and resource rights, and formal governance often diverge, particularly around Indigenous lands. Examples from Brazil, Bolivia, and Indonesia demonstrate that PNRM can help to bridge these divides and find innovative ways to integrate customary practices within multi-level governance.

CHALLENGES

Coping with patriarchy and gender inequality

The participation of women in PNRM can be limited by time poverty, lack of tenure rights, and gendered socio-cultural norms. Women often gain fewer benefits, and communities do not realize women's potential contributions to rule-making and conflict management.

Coping with discrimination based on identity, caste, and class

Marginalized groups can face forms of exclusion in the context of PNRM. The impact of restrictions on resource use to promote conservation can fall disproportionately on Indigenous groups, lower castes, and classes who have limited influence on the design and implementation of rules.

FLEXIBILITY TO REFLECT, REVISE, AND ADAPT



OPPORTUNITIES

Diversifying activities and achieving success through adaptive management

Successful experiences with PNRM are characterized by a diversification of activities that produce positive downstream effects for democracy, including legislative reforms, improved local government performance, strengthened conflict resolution, and increased political stability. These experiences are grounded in adaptive management made possible by sustained political and financial support.

Helping to cope with absent governance at times of political crisis

In crisis situations, PNRM provides alternative mechanisms to help fill gaps in governance. In Nepal, during Maoist control of the countryside, community forest user groups provided a stabilizing presence. In Timor-Leste, in the aftermath of violence, displacement, and land disputes, communities turned to customary forms of PNRM to provide the necessary settings for positive, peaceful social interactions.

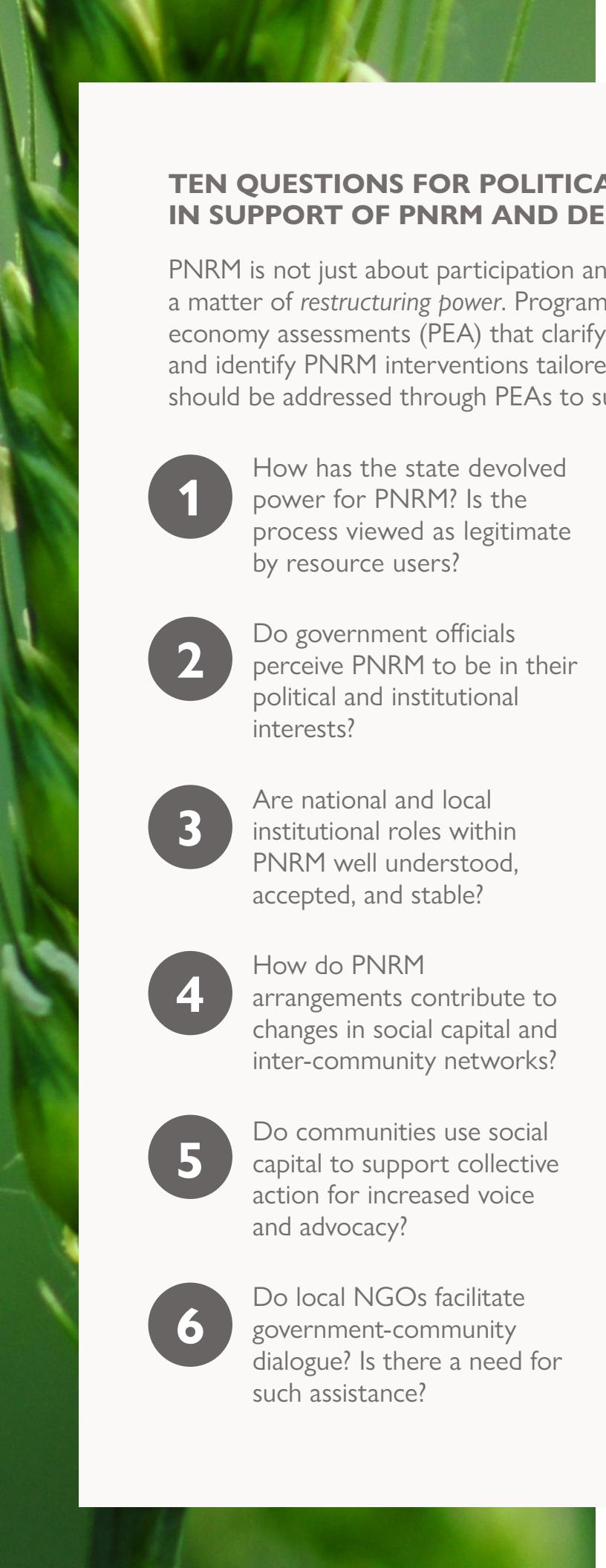
CHALLENGES

Maintaining efficiency while working with weak or flawed local governments

External actors may seek to avoid the governance challenges of PNRM by either working with compliant elites or by creating project-specific institutions. These expedient arrangements, however, can displace or disrupt the normal functioning of local government and the mandated responsibilities of elected officials.

Balancing international environmental goals and community livelihood and cultural priorities

International initiatives for payments-for-ecosystem services engage national governments, ministries, provincial leaders, and local communities. These actors negotiate rights, responsibilities, and benefits. Inadequate attention by external actors to the livelihood and cultural priorities of local communities can lead to miscommunication that hampers PNRM and democratic outcomes.



TEN QUESTIONS FOR POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS (PEA) IN SUPPORT OF PNRM AND DEMOCRATIC OUTCOMES

PNRM is not just about participation and inclusion but is also fundamentally a matter of *restructuring power*. Program activities can benefit from political economy assessments (PEA) that clarify power relationships among key actors and identify PNRM interventions tailored to the local context. Questions that should be addressed through PEAs to support PNRM include:

- 1** How has the state devolved power for PNRM? Is the process viewed as legitimate by resource users?
- 2** Do government officials perceive PNRM to be in their political and institutional interests?
- 3** Are national and local institutional roles within PNRM well understood, accepted, and stable?
- 4** How do PNRM arrangements contribute to changes in social capital and inter-community networks?
- 5** Do communities use social capital to support collective action for increased voice and advocacy?
- 6** Do local NGOs facilitate government-community dialogue? Is there a need for such assistance?
- 7** How do power relations influence how communities engage with government at different levels?
- 8** Do local socio-cultural norms align with PNRM norms for gender equity and inclusion?
- 9** For new initiatives in climate change, land and water conservation, and Nature-based Solutions that involve land-use interventions in areas inhabited by Indigenous Peoples: Are the goals of external actors and local livelihood and cultural priorities aligned and compatible?
- 10** Do program activities recognize and account for local history, conflict, and social dynamics?

Integrated Natural Resource Management (INRM)

Sound management of natural resources is central to long-term development and resilience. Faced with a need to reduce environmental degradation while improving human well-being, solutions that effectively integrate investments in natural resource management with economic and social development are increasingly urgent. INRM promotes integrated programming across environment and non-environment sectors and across the Program Cycle. INRM supports USAID to amplify program impacts, strengthen gender equality and social inclusion, and identify best practices for integration.

For more information: <https://land-links.org/project/integrated-natural-resource-management-inrm-activity/>

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Author: Jeffrey Stark, Samantha H. Cheng, Erin Betley, Susan Telingator

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**U.S. Agency for International
Development**
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20523
www.usaid.gov