

Decentralization with clear federal rules

Decentralization in Forestry: the Swiss Experience

The situation in Switzerland's forests around 150 years ago was similar to that found in many developing countries today, for example Indonesia:

- **Forest ownership in the hands of the authorities.** Up to the 1840s, the forests in the Swiss Confederation of States were owned by the authorities, i.e. ownership of most forests was claimed by the powerful cities and cantons. The rural population merely enjoyed rights of use. Old Berne for instance claimed ownership of large areas of forest upstream of the river Aare to ensure its supply of wood for fuel and raw material.
- **The decentralization process.** From 1830 onwards, forest ownership in many cantons was transferred from the cantonal authorities to the municipalities and private parties under the liberal cantonal constitutions established at that time. However, despite the implementation of a decentralization process, no new forest legislation was enacted. A forest service, which would have been able to enforce the old municipal regulations, was also lacking. This resulted in the emergence of temporary phenomena which can also be observed in many developing countries today.
- **Deforestation and flooding.** With the development of industrialization, demand for wood increased rapidly, both in Switzerland and abroad, and resulted in the extensive clear-cutting of Switzerland's forests. This was one of the reasons for the disastrous floods of the 1860s.
- **The Confederation passes a framework law.** Swiss forest policy was reorganized in response to this crisis. The state became involved for the first time in 1876 with the passing of the Swiss Forest Police Law. This framework law decreed that Switzerland's forest area could not be reduced in size, it provided subsidies for the afforestation of watershed areas and obliged the cantons to appoint the necessary trained forestry personnel. The new legislation was implemented decentrally in the cantons. The cantonal forest services were supported by the Confederation. In this way, local interests and national concerns were reconciled.
- **Updating of the division of tasks.** This system was and is optimised continuously. Based on the Swiss National Forest Programme (WAP-CH), the division of tasks between the Confederation and the cantons will be redefined in part in the coming years. In future, the Confederation wishes to concentrate its activities on the protective forest and biodiversity.