

BEYOND TRADITIONAL-SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE DIVIDE: MULTI-ACTOR KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND DELIBERATIVE INTERFACE IN NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN NEPAL

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1. Introduction

Despite recent upsurge of participatory innovations in development actions (Chambers 1997) and natural resource management, there is a continuing concern over limited real achievement in terms of local livelihoods outcomes, economic contributions and natural resource sustainability (Cook and Kothari 2001; Edmunds and Wollenberg 2002; Colfer and Capistrano 2005). In many situations, collective processes of institutions and policy fail to address the opportunities to optimize individual and collective benefits from natural resource governance practices. One of the consequences of such failure is that a vast majority of the world's poor who continue to live at the interface between land, forest and water, often have limited access to such vital resources (Scherr et al. 2004; Sunderlin et al. 2005). This reality, to a significant degree, is related to how and to what extent diverse groups of social agents, often with different and competing systems of knowledge, deliberate over decisions and practices of natural resource governance.

In the recent years, knowledge systems have become central areas of concern for researchers, policy makers, development activists and practitioners striving for improving natural resource governance (Blaikie et al. 1997; Sillitoe 2006). Despite such concerns, there is still a lack of consensus on basic issues such as how and where knowledge is produced, disseminated, and applied in natural resource management practices. Given the ongoing debate on such questions, we drew upon critical, theoretical insights of Bourdier and Habermas and undertook an empirical research to understand knowledge systems in natural resource governance in Nepal¹. The overarching research questions included:— how diverse knowledge systems mediate the outcomes of equity, efficiency and sustainability in natural resource management; how different actor's knowledge systems emerge in relation to the practices of governance, and when and how various types of actors engage in deliberative interfaces. We combined Bourdieu's cultural theory of

¹ The study was made possible because of IDRC's global competition based grants under the program called Research on Knowledge System. The detailed findings of the research are now available in a book entitled *Knowledge Systems and Natural Resources: Institutions, Policy and Management in Nepal*.

action (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1984) and Habermasian perspective of deliberative politics (Habermas 1996) in the analysis of empirical information generated by the study..

2. Methodology

We investigated knowledge systems at three different levels (local, sub-national, and national), in three different sectors (forest, agriculture, irrigation), across four categories of institutions (government, donors, civil society and local communities). At the local level, emphasis was to understand how community groups, households, and individuals who belong to different wealth categories, gender and ethnicity engage in, and benefit from, managing knowledge. In doing this, four Forest User Groups (FUGs) and two Water User Groups (WUGs) were selected at the local level to represent three distinct ecological zones - Tarai, Middle Hills and Mountains of Nepal. At sub-national level, contribution of Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) in relation to democratizing power and knowledge dynamics has been examined while at the national level, Nepal Agricultural Research Council and the case of community forestry inventory policy were investigated.

3. Findings

Our research challenges the dichotomy of traditional versus scientific knowledge in natural resource governance, and proposes to identify different systems of knowledge based on the cultural-political standings of the social actors in relation to the practice of governance. We found that change in governance hinges centrally around how these diverse systems of knowledge come into deliberative interface and to what extent power imbalance among social actors continue to constrain the processes of deliberation. In the context of Nepal, four key categories of social agents corresponding to their relatively distinct systems of knowledge are identifiable – techno-bureaucrats, civil society groups, politicians and development agencies. Box 1 summarizes the key findings of our study.

Box 1. Issues in Relation to Enhancing Deliberation among Diverse Knowledge Systems

- Differences in power, prestige and status among social agents create advantages for some and disadvantages to other knowledge systems.
- Bureaucratic organizations/agents demonstrate significant institutional rigidity to deliberate with citizens in exploring policies and practices of governance.
- Theoretical, generic and reductionist approach of technical specialists do not always go together with the practical, context-specific and problem-oriented perspective of resource user groups.
- There are limited communication and weak information sharing mechanisms.
- There is a monopoly of public institution in production of knowledge.
- There is inadequate recognition of non-governmental research and innovation systems.
- There exist non-transparent alliances of knowledge elites suppressing open deliberation.
- Practices on monitoring, reflections and sharing within and between diverse groups of social agents are limited.
- Rhetorical instruments of participatory approach are often been used to legitimise non-deliberative processes.

The six case studies suggest a number of emerging innovations in the deliberative interface, such as emergence of a federation of civil society groups, participatory mechanisms through which technical specialists and natural resources users work together in undertaking research and devising policies, emergence of critical and reflective intellectual practitioners and civil society activists working to bridge technical and civil society knowledge. Likewise, we have also identified persistent constraints to deliberative knowledge interface, primarily as a result of unequal distribution of knowledge resources in the society.

4. References

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