

## **Current Issues in Community Forestry in Nepal and Implications for Research**

A presentation by  
**Hemant R Ojha, ForestAction**

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### **I. Current Issues in community forestry in Nepal – achievements and Issues**

Nepal's community forestry has come a long way. Over 12 thousands Forest User Groups (FUGs) have been formed, and over 7 million hectares of community forestry handed over. Millions of forest dependent people meet and discuss forest management and community development issues regularly. The base of stakeholders has expanded from initial resource-people relations to resource-people-government to resource-people-government-donors-civil society-private sector to sustain, support, facilitate, and enable community forestry at different levels. Community forestry is recognized by the entire cross section of Nepalese society as one of the few successes Nepal has gained after democracy in 1990. It has become a new identity of Nepal internationally.

Yet, these are the interpretations almost entirely of the government, projects, NGOs who have been engaged in community forestry industry. Forty percent of the people who live below poverty line (with annual income less than USD 57- according to Nepal's definition) have yet to realize the achievements of community forestry. The potentials of community forestry in aspects of efficiency (such as forest productivity), equity (within and between communities) and the sustainability (institutional, ecological) are far beyond what has actually been realized.

Forest resources, which cover one-third of the country's area, are an important resource for local livelihoods as well as national development, as forests of Nepal have been used for timber as well as a number of non-timber products such as food, medicines, inputs to agricultural system, and more recently as commercial traded products. Forests have also been a basis upon which community institutions have evolved over time creating social capitals for livelihoods. Despite such a potential of forest, and expansion of community forestry as an approach, why the real impact has been less than expected?

Five reasons have been identified and discussed briefly.

## **1. Political imbalance and inequity**

FUGs have been hijacked by local elites. The disadvantaged groups - poor, women, "lower castes" - have been deprived of socially just/equitable access to social, natural and financial capitals augmented by community forestry. In many worst instances, poor's natural capitals have decreased as a result of protectionist approaches to community forest management. There are some reported instances in which the transactions costs of participation, opportunity cost of use deferral have forced the poor to withdraw from community forestry.

There are some evidences and a synthesis of knowledge in this regard. But problem lies in responsiveness, commitment and attitude to address the issues in all quarters. The knowledge gap is therefore more related to why there is limited responsiveness from different stakeholders to such issues despite there being documented evidence.

## **2. Passive management of forest**

Productivity of community managed forest is low. This is because of both political and learning-related reasons. Political - because elite dictate the protectionist ways of managing forest as they depend less on communal forests, and value "greenery", and "option" and "existence" values of forest. Also, Department of Forest staffs tend to minimize risks of over-cutting that may crop up with active forest harvesting, and encourage passive management indirectly. Learning related because - neither local elites, disadvantaged groups or government staff can confidently say some level of cutting/use is better than non-cutting. No action research done, nor are there adequate and effective demonstration plots on silvicultural aspects.

Research should focus on analyzing the macro environment - a source of incentives, commitment, capacity, motivation - that affects the emergence and development of innovations. There has to be balance of efforts in research in developing specific silvicultural options as well as identifying/facilitating conditions for the emergence of silvicultural innovations in different contexts.

## **3. Poorly defined stakeholder roles and unbalanced political spaces**

Despite the expansion of community forestry in scales of complexity, size, dynamism on the one hand, and the rapid changes in the wider context in which community forestry is operated (democracy, market, civil rights, technology etc.) on the other, the role of forest bureaucracy has remained more or less the same, while that of civil society and private sector is still poorly defined in the national legislative framework. This has not only lead to the monopoly of service provisioning role with government forestry staff, creating critical imbalance in power relations between people and government institutions and opportunities

for rent-seeking, but also limited the supply of highly demanded services through competent NGOs and privately managed firms. The demand for post formation services of FUGs is growing geometrically, and the supply side is still viewed from narrow sense, without inviting private and civil service providers.

Donors have worked entirely through government even in delivering the services, which has limited the scope of the emergence of competent alternative service providers. Linkage between micro and macro is poor, and policy response to learnings and innovations is slow.

There are limited mechanisms and efforts to foster participation and interaction of stakeholders at different levels. Few multi-stakeholder forums that exist have been ad hoc and sporadic, often depending on the interests and emotions of key individuals across institutions and their relationships. Policy processes are still controlled by bureaucratic interests, with limited consultations.

#### **4. Commercialization, local livelihoods, conservation and equity**

The expanding market for certain high value species (or their products) has created opportunities of trade, which is both a challenge and opportunity for livelihoods and conservation. Challenge because - it tends to emphasize a few tradable species, rather than biodiversity as a whole, and more powerful business interests, often in collusion with bureaucratic elites, replace the traditional small producers, creating inequity. Efforts to find dynamic balance among the levels of commercialization, equity and biodiversity are limited. There is even little monitoring/ knowledge of what is happening in these aspects, not to mention the need for exploring policy processes and options.

#### **5. Limited conscious social learning**

Learning is mostly through trial and error approach. "Conscious" processes of learning, which is so critical in the face of inherent uncertainty and complexity, and commitment and capacity for this, across all types of institutions, is low. Inter-institutional communication and interface is also limited. Action and learning are separated. For example, a district forest officer, who manages 200 FUGs (with varying degrees of successes and failure) covering different forest and community types through about 100 staff have a lot of potential to generate answers to questions such as why some FUGs are more active and successful than others, by integrating explicitly learning-oriented monitoring with the implementation process. But they are not prepared to do so because of incentives, attitude, commitment, and competency. How can these factors be influenced so that their learning process be strengthened, rather than researchers doing research independently and supplying them with the information?

## II. What contributions can internationally designed research studies make?

- Most of the second generation issues are more complex, relating to political aspects at the fundamental level, and incorporates such factors as incentives, attitude, power relations, commitment, and motivation for change. Changing attitudes and commitment and redistributing power requires more powerful knowledge pressure, which comes from studies across wider contexts. International research makes more rigorous comparisons, with greater sampling intensities, taking into account wider contextual variations.
- Locally based researches, while powerful in finding solutions to site specific issues, sometimes may not be open enough to explore, compare and contrast alternative perspectives, ideas, and options.
- Policy frameworks are emerging at the international level - such as international conventions and covenants. The unit of research should be made parallel to the domain of decision-making for issues related to such policies.
- Outside interface is important to cross fertilize ideas and perspectives, which is possible through multi-country partnerships in research.
- Many issues are common across the regions - equity in Hindu Kush Himalaya and South Asia. Research in international context can be done in low efforts, greater power, and wider relevance. At the more general level, livelihoods, sustainable resource management - common problems everywhere.
- Multi country partnership in research helps avoid duplication, and encourages adaptive replications, "scaling out", "scaling up".
- Several non-timber forest products find their way into international markets. Their research is essentially international.

## III. What are the limits of research at international level?

- Possibility of too much abstraction, limiting the relevance of research findings to local contexts
- Imposition of external values
- Philosophy of knowledge - can not be transported, but developed

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