

Catalyzing Forest sector restructuring in Nepal through Multi-stakeholder Dialogues at Local and National Level

Report of the inception workshop
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Introduction

Nepal's forest policy process, as the sub-set of the national political and policy process is undergoing through a difficult transition. It is moving through a tension between conventional top-down and narrowly conceived policy making on one hand and genuinely participatory and inclusive process on the other. There are ample opportunities to transform the forest policy process towards a truly participatory, inclusive and deliberative one. With an optimistic understanding of the current transition, a civil society consortium comprising of ForestAction, NFA, FECOFUN and Asmita has initiated a catalytic multi-stakeholder forest policy dialogue. The key objective of this initiative is not to develop any new policy agenda, but to review, reflect and revise the forest policy process in general, to add value to the ongoing process. This would hopefully enhance the quality, and political legitimacy of diverse policy decision. An inception workshop was organised in Kathmandu to launch the programme and to get critical inputs for the programme design. This note provides a brief reflective summary of the workshop.

Objective and structure of the workshop

The workshop was aimed at getting a deeper insight on the breadth and width of the issues around forest policy process in Nepal. Besides, it was also aimed to inform the wider stakeholder in the programme: the consortium, strategies and expected outcomes. About 30 people representing range of stakeholders including the MFSC, NGOs, citizen's groups, researchers and forest professionals participated in the workshop. Government forest officers were the dominant group in number followed by participants from the civil society. Two presentations were made from the organisers: i) Naya/Dil from ForestAction on the current assessment of the policy process; and ii) Devesh/Devi from NFA on the proposed initiative, followed by an open discussion based on both presentations. Devesh Tripathi, the NFA chair, who also chaired the workshop, responded to the queries and concluded the programme.

The chaotic environment of policy process

The presentations briefly shed light on the forest policy processes emerged mainly during the post 2006 movement period and was focused around the current chaotic situation. It was learnt that over a dozen of policy initiatives are ongoing currently with little coherence between them. In several cases, the policy decisions have been internationally inconsistent and in some cases have induced strong resistance from some corner thereby making it hard to implement. In fact, several policy decisions have been implicitly withdrawn or are not implemented at best. There have been confusions over the role of different actors around diverse functions of forest governance and management including policy making, everyday forest management, enterprise development, regulating and monitoring, service provisioning, etc. Contestation over several policy decisions can be attributed to the overlapping claims of roles in multiple functions of forest governance and management. The presentation concluded with some points of departure such as: from conflicts to dialogue, from sectoral to holistic, from anecdotal to evidence-led policy making.

Current initiative of the civil society consortium

The second presentation was on the current initiative. As the title of the initiatives reads, the whole process is aimed at catalyzing multi-stakeholder dialogue for informed, deliberative and participatory policy process. Four major components of the initiative include: diagnostic analysis, grassroots mobilisation around key policy issues, regional and national workshops to bring multiple perspectives and media mobilisation for informing the wider public. FECOFUN, NFA, Asmita and ForestAction formed this consortium and have mutually agreed to assume responsibilities for accomplishing the four different components of the programme. The multi-stakeholder process will pass through three layers – local, regional and finally at the national level so that diverse voices get across the different levels and are adequately represented in the national dialogue.

Questions/comments and suggestions

The discussion that followed provided an ample opportunity for participants to share their views on the presentation and also on the proposed initiative. The comments can broadly be organised into three categories:

Significance and utility of such initiative

Major emphasis was placed on the significance of such initiative and the potential outcomes. Most of the participants appreciated the need of such open and inclusive platform where diverse views are welcome, actors can contribute and representatives from various stakeholders own the process. However, participants raised several pertinent issues. One of the recurrent issues was related to the poor link between such process and their actual implementation on the ground. For example, the Task Force¹ Report prepared after a long and relatively consultative process did not

¹ The Task Force was formed by the late Minister Gopal Rai to study and recommend policies/strategies for future forest management with particular focus on resolving the CF vs. CFM debate in Terai.

materialise in practice. Involvement and ownership of the political leadership, particularly that of major political parties and concerned parliamentary committees was another crucial issue. Since policy making often takes place at the highest political level, current dialogue that are usually limited to civil society and bureaucratic level hardly gets across the political leadership. The fact that the current proposal to revise the Forest Act 1993 has surprisingly been speeded up to pass through the cabinet is largely owned and led by the members of the parliament (MPs). This supports the idea that involving political leadership is paramount for the success of a Multi-stakeholder (M-SH) dialogue. Third and more important issue was the scope and focus of such M-SH dialogue. Though, the notion of ‘forest sector restructuring’ generally includes all institutions and actors around forest governance and management, it has historically centred narrowly around the state forest agency as if this is the only site where all the problems (and therefore the solutions) lie. However, a general consensus was expressed that the term equally includes non state actors such as civil society organisations, citizen’s groups, private sector, donors, research institutions and other professional entities. Only a collective initiative of these different actors can generate some viable roadmap for transforming the forest policy process.

Institutional arrangement/composition of the consortium

Participants strongly urged for an inclusive, legitimate and viable institutional arrangement to catalyse and facilitate such M-SH policy dialogue. As the current consortium comprises of only four civil society organisations, participants raised concerns whether the consortium is capable of catalysing the process. Many also questioned the genealogy of the consortium and suggested to expand it and include more relevant actors for successful facilitation of the process. While the initiative is explicitly a civil society led initiative, the consortium members are committed to follow an open and transparent process so that all relevant stakeholders can own and actively contribute to the process. Of course there were questions on the definition, scope and legitimacy of ‘civil society’, particularly from two different points of view. The first completely denied any role of civil society in policy making as if it was solely a state business and the second sought to transform the civil society towards more inclusive, democratic and responsible movement. Others responded that state cannot and should not monopolise policy making for political and instrumental reasons. The differing views over who should make policy were clearly divided between the government officials and civil society representatives, defending their own constituencies. The event chair also emphasised that the diverse yet complementing expertise and strengths of the consortium members and those of other interested institutions will be fully mobilised towards developing and facilitating a collective policy platform in the forest sector.

Aid, projects and national policy process

The role of aid in overall national development, especially in the forestry sector drew much interest during the discussion. As aid has often been playing influential role in shaping forest policy process, there was concern whether the current initiative is yet another false promises that ends up without delivering anything useful to the nation or the sector. Many policy makers shared their bitter past experiences where the tail had tended to move the body and warned that the current initiative should not repeat the mistake. It was realised that these concerns were based on the past experiences. The chair clarified that the current initiative is aimed at catalysing an inclusive and participatory process and that it won’t impose any particular view or policy agenda. While there was some doubts on whether the civil society led policy recommendation

will be owned by the state, it was clarified that the process is not meant for advancing any specific policy agenda but simply to add value to the ongoing policy dialogue.

Closing

Participants regarded the meeting as a highly productive discussion bringing diverse perspectives and constructive comments. Devesh Tripathi, the chair of the event appreciated all the comments and responded them in order. He also assured that all the relevant comments will duly be considered during the programme implementation. He concluded the meeting with commitments of organising follow up meetings on the issue and sought support from all, in transforming the forest policy process towards a more deliberative and inclusive process.

A number of take home messages for the consortium members can be extracted from the discussion. Firstly, stakeholders have diverse and often conflicting views on who should play what type of role along the policy practice continuum. Some extreme views still tend to deny the role of civil society and private agencies in policy making. It demands a constant dialogue to resolve the role conflicts so that a broad consensus can be developed among the stakeholders on their respective roles and responsibilities. Secondly, there is a generic problem that many policy agenda, even those that emerged out of the multi-stakeholder process have not been put into practice. Consequently, there is a deep rooted frustration among the stakeholders, where cultivating optimistic scenario is a major challenge in order to ensure their active engagement. Thirdly, as participants largely appreciated the idea of the consortium for catalysing multi-stakeholder policy dialogue, the members of the consortium must understand the gravity of the problem and should be able to address the general expectations of stakeholders.