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Contributions of Community Forestry in Rural Social Transformation: Some Observations From Nepal[^]

This paper examines the contribution of Nepalese Community Forestry in social change process in two central hills districts of Nepal. Analysis of data indicates improvement in forest management, decision making, representation of poor and women in forest management and utilisation, awareness on economic and ecological contributions of forests. Debates and discussions have increased as regards roles and responsibilities of users as well as mechanisms for gender-sensitive, poverty-focused and equity-based forest management activities. All these factors are contributing to achieve sustainable management of forest resources, to improve the living condition of people and to promote non-coercive social transformation.

Introduction

This study was carried out in Dolakha and Ramechhap districts of central hills of Nepal (as a part of my PhD research). The main objective of this research was to examine the potential impacts of community forestry (CF) on the status of people and sustainable management of forest resources and contribution of CF to non-coercive rural social transformation. The study was carried out in 1998, 1999 by using qualitative methods like focus group discussion, key informants, and semi-structured interviews (with forest users, selected staff from different organisations), transect visit to community forests, observation of the general assemblies and meeting of forest users groups (FUG) and use of secondary information. The contribution of CF in rural social change is examined using an analytical framework of inputs, process and results.

Contribution of CF in social transformation

Improvement in forest resource conditions and bio-diversity

It is observed that the condition of community forests in the study area is improving as compared to the government managed forests because of increased feeling of ownership (Upreti, 2000) and adoptive various management arrangements. Thinning, pruning, fire control, harvesting, *lauri-palo and sithi-palo* (rotational surveillance of forests by users with stick and whistle) were important activities under taken by users. Protection-oriented forest management approach is gradually changing to production-utilisation-management approach. Natural regeneration, plantation in private lands and

agro-forestry practices have increased. The concept of "social fencing³" is strongly emerging in management of community forests. In most of the cases, participatory silvicultural production oriented practices are adopted in community forests (NSCFP, 1999).

Bio-diversity situation in the study area is improved (Ibscher, 1999). Plant species composition is increasing due to natural regeneration and plantation of seedlings. FUGs are becoming sensitive to biological resources conservation. They are declaring some plant species as depleting species and have enforced cutting bans, declaring small part of community forests as 'conservation area'. Bee keeping is integrated with community forestry to promote pollination and income generation. DFOs have provision of award to motivate FUGs to promote natural regeneration in their community forests, and plantation and protection grant to FUGs to improve the condition of their forests. As a result, annual increase of growing forest stock in study area is 3-7 percent (NSCFP, 1999). However, in a few cases, some forest management practices have negative impacts on bio-diversity (e.g., preference of fast growing multipurpose species, removal of unwanted species and dead trees, dried leaves, etc.). Stall feeding practices are increasing after the implementation of CF programme and helping to protect local forests. Respondents of Dolakha explained that they are consuming 50-60 percent less firewood than before taking over the community forests.

Women empowerment

The status and position of women is still sub-ordinate in the study area due to the patriarchal socio-

[^] This is the synthesised version of the research report. The full document may be found in the Mountain Forum's Online Library: <http://www.mtnforum.org/resources/library/upreb00a.htm>

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cultural structure of the society. Existing socio-cultural characteristics like caste, marital status, economic condition, level of education, access to information, are the determining factors of the status/position of women in society. Even within such a resistant socio-cultural situation, the status of women in the study area is gradually improving after CF (Khadka, 1999). Women are increasingly involved in forest management and economic activities. Representation of women in FUG committee is increasing (e.g. 39 percent in Dolakha and 27 percent in Ramechhap) as against 19 percent of national figure (Shrestha, 1997). Their general level of awareness is raised due to the participation in training, workshops, general assemblies and executive committees. In many FUGs women are chairpersons, and some women from the FUG Executive Committees are also elected in VDC bodies. They have emerged as social activists and change agents are contributing to the process of rural social change. Special arrangement of NSCFP such as school level scholarships (to girls of untouchables group), college level forestry scholarships and forestry extensionist training to women from the study area, employment of female staff, are contributing to change the status of women. Gender sensitivity is increased mainly because of the promotion of gender-focused participatory forest planning and management practices

Poverty alleviation

Vast majorities of the people in study area are suffering from poverty and deprivation. Dolakha and Ramechhap districts themselves belong to 23rd and 31st rank respectively in the national poverty and deprivation index (ICIMOD, 1997). Community forestry in itself is a user focused programme rather than poverty focused because it can not exclude rich people from the use of forest resources (Upreti, 1999). However, Master Plan for the Forestry Sector emphasised to direct Community Forestry towards poverty reduction. The main poverty related issues of the poor users are lack or inaccessibility of fodder and fuel wood for daily requirements, lack of purchasing power, non-participation in forest use decisions due to lack of time, low level of education and awareness and lack of confidence. However, special provisions of the NSCFP such as emphasis on involvement of poorest during the preparation of FUG constitution and OP, deliberate attempts to select poor and deprived groups of people for pre-SLC scholarship, representation of poorest in FUG committees, encouraging poor to express needs and concerns during the FUG formation have contributed to change the status of the poor. In many cases, poverty focused activities like inter-cropping of cardamom, ginger, turmeric, broom grass and bamboo. in the community forests are practised.

Allocation of certain patches of community forests to disadvantaged groups of people for the cultivation of cash crops and to collect the required forest resources have been started. Involvement of 'untouchables' in FUG committees (4-7 percent) is almost proportional to the total population (NSCFP, 1999). However, the level of direct benefit from the community forests to poorest is relatively low as compared to general users and still below the level of satisfaction.

Poorest people's interests are incorporated more in the recently formed FUGs as compared to old ones. They have included special provision for disadvantaged group of people in OP. However, the windows of opportunities are still insufficient due to inadequate awareness about opportunities, lack of market information, major share of profit from forest resources still being captured by elite, limited technical as well as managerial knowledge and skills, administrative and legal barriers and uncooperative behaviour of some of the concerned authorities. Also poor are affected by grazing control and restrictions in fuelwood setting.

Strengthening of Forest Users Groups

Principally, FUG is an autonomous institution and solely responsible for the management of community forests. Majorities of the users in the study area are poor and depending significantly upon available community forests for their survival. Self-confidence and management skill of FUG is increasing because of special activities like FUG networking workshop, FUG forest management training, OP monitoring and evaluation, CF introduction workshop, record keeping training, FUG evaluation and rewards, users study tours, women workshop, implementation of five phase FUG formation process through the involvement of users. All these activities are contributing to develop capacity of FUGs. Many FUGs are emerging as a functional institution and gradually strengthening their position. However, institutional development aspect of FUG in general is still weak. The FUG formation process practised in the study area is an important step to achieve operational sustainability of community forests and to induce non-coercive social change, which focuses on a detailed and stepwise procedure for the FUG formation with the active involvement of users. The quality of FUGs (management skill, decision process, planning, etc.) is improved due to a joint effort of NGOs, DFOs and NSCFP. The majority of FUGs are able to protect their CFs and properly utilise fodder, litter and fuelwood. However, elite domination on FUG committee formation, decision-making and forest resources distributions still prevalent. Some capable FUGs have started to utilise their fund in community development activities like construction of schools,

temples, community buildings, school maintenance and furniture supply, student support, non formal education, vegetable cultivation, fire and landslide victims in addition to forest related activities (NSCFP, 1999).

Increasingly, people are realising the economic, ecological, environmental, religious, cultural and political roles of forests and their contribution to social change. Several members of FUGs have been trained on conflict resolution, gender relation, forest management, agro-forestry, bookkeeping, planning, leadership, income generation. Lower caste people are almost proportionally represented in FUG committees of their total population. Main reasons explained for such a success are: sufficient time and efforts invested, proper facilitation and rapport building with communities, transparent, democratic and participatory process followed. Quality of forest management plans of FUGs formed through MP approach has substantially improved. Nevertheless, there is still wider scope for broadening knowledge on production potential of forest and socio-economic and ecological benefits.

Master Plan for the Forestry Sector clearly articulates the primacy of community forestry and provided clear policy framework to meet people's basic needs for fuelwood, timber, fodder and other forest products on a sustained basis by promoting people's participation including women. Community and Private Forestry Programme was placed in top priority. Forest Act 1993 and Community Forestry Regulations were other important factors contributing to enhance CF.

Conclusion

Community Forestry Project in Dolakha and Ramechhap districts is gearing towards gender-sensitive, poverty-oriented and equity-focused outcomes and contributing to rural social transformation. The methodological approach practised to facilitate CFP is very effective to achieve the desired outcomes. Poverty, gender and equity aspects are now in strong discussion and debate at all level of involved stakeholders due to overwhelming contents in almost all training, workshop, assemblies, meeting and informal gatherings. Feeling of group ownership, group identity and solidarity among the users have drastically increased due to demand driven approach. Power, authorities and responsibilities are decentralised to the users and community forestry related activities in the study area are gearing towards balanced social, economic and ecological benefits. These are significantly contributing to social transformation in the study area. However, uncertainties about government policies, rules, decisions and notices might hamper the smooth

implementation of CFP.

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