Learning to Learn: Research into Adaptive and Collaborative Management of Community Forests

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The author highlights conceptual, substantive and methodological aspects of participatory action research(PAR) into adaptive collaborative management (ACM) of community forest in some selected FUGs in the Hills of Nepal. Three main concepts of ACM identified as the core of research include: ***collaboration*** *among stakeholders,* ***conscious social learning*** *and application of learning* ***feedback*** *to management. Ten specific elements have been recently innovated around the three broad areas of ACM, and the research team uses them as a basis to assess and facilitate action research at local level. The author indicates that all the four partner FUGs have shown significantly greater progress towards improving collaboration, conscious social learning and application of feedback than during the time before the PAR. Future activities of research are expected to enable FUGs to achieve goals, and at the same time enable researchers to draw broad lessons as regards conditions, processes and outcomes of ACM, along with potential strategies and tools to facilitate the process.*

Imagine this: Four teams racing against the clock, trying to pass a big floppy book as fast as possible down a long line of people and back, without dropping it….without using their hands. There are troubles, and there are 'catastrophes' — books dropping, people getting stuck, some 'cheating' from time to time… In the successive tries by all the teams, some groups make very little progress, other teams - especially one all women team - makes significant progress, eventually outpacing the other teams by an impressive margin. *Why is one group able to outpace the others who trundle along with little improvement? How does the 'winning team' ensure its continuous improvement with each successive try? And, what does this have to do with forestry?*

This game was a pivotal activity in a recent workshop of the Participatory Action Research project on Adaptive Collaborative Management, which is a joint undertaking of the Ministry of Forests and Soil conservation and the Center for International Forestry Research, as well as many other partners[±]. The answer to the above questions lie in the name of the research initiative, or what our research group refers to as 'adaptive collaborative management' (ACM). This term can be broken down into 3 key concepts: collaboration, conscious social learning, and feedback and adjustment. These 3 interrelated concepts are what the local people in 4 Community Forest User Groups (CFUG) in Nepal (Manakamana CFUG and Andheri Bhajana CFUG and Sankwasahba, and Deurali/ Bagedanda CFUG and Bamdibhir CFUG in Kaski) and our group of researchers are teaming up to learn more about.Their 'working hypothesis' is that, in forestry, as in the game, under certain conditions, these three concepts may be key elements in maximizing the benefits from community forestry. Their task over the next 1.5 years is to find out more about: under what conditions this is true (or not); what the impacts are of the implementation of these 3 concepts; and, what are the strategies and tools for best implementing these concepts? Taking a closer look at these 3 concepts is most easily done by returning to the game described above.

Collaboration

Collaboration, can be understood in this context as people (and/or institutions) *acting* and *learning* together. (So it incorporates, but also goes beyond the implication of simple "co-operation" on a task). *What emerged during the above game, was first that some teams were playing as individuals, with each person very occupied only with his/her own part of the job (i.e., receiving in one moment, and then passing).* Other teams, specifically the women's team that won, used a more co-operative approach, in which each person engaged in also trying to accommodate the other person with whom they were interacting. In other words, the "receiver" could

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Our researchers are a combination of New ERA staff and independent consultants. The collaborating institutions at the central level include the Forest Department/Community and Private Forests, NARMSAP, Nepal-Australia Community Resource Management Project, Nepal-Swiss Community Forestry Project, and FECOFUN. At the district and community level, the collaboration is with the DFOs, the CFUGs, FECOFUN,and a number of bilateral projects and local NGOs. The research would be impossible without the contribution of all these partners.

be seen trying to adjust their height to accommodate the person who was passing (and thus who was less able to adjust because they were busy trying not to drop it). More important than the individual actions, was the fact that this was not just done by a few individuals, but in fact, it appeared that the whole team developed this approach together (in discussion between rounds) and applied it across the team. In other words, this reflects that they 'learned' together' from their experiences, and 'acted together' in implementing their strategy. The relevance of collaboration in the world of Community Forestry (CF) is self evident – CF involves complex situations with multiple stakeholders, overlapping and differing interests, capabilities, and a myriad of challenging activities, including the CF planning processes themselves. Within the context of the participatory action research project, the recent community workshops provided an opportunity for the diverse FUG members, as well as forest guards, FECOFUN representatives and others to learn together by creating shared visions of their CF, as well as by undertaking a self-assessment of social, economic and biophysical aspects of the CF, and to plan for future joint action by prioritizing issues and action planning. (The workshop participants identified priorities such as forest management skill development among the CFUG members, leadership development of the CFUG members, demarcation of the CF boundary, participation of women and disadvantaged users in the CFUG, flow of information among the FUG members about the CF rules, regulations and operational plan.) Through continuing with these actions and reflection, the research project will try to shed more light on questions such as: what is the role of collaboration versus conflict in meeting CFUG goals? What are the costs and benefits of collaboration (and participation) under different circumstances? Are there circumstances in which it is not desirable to collaborate because of the costs involved or risks involved? What are some approaches and methods to enhance effective collaboration in CF?

Conscious social learning:

This concept builds on the idea of collaboration, in that the learning process is shared, and takes it further, by adding that learning is *intentional,* not just a 'by-product of experience'. In other words, it implies that there is an attitude and intentional plan to design your actions so that you are going to be able to learn from them – the scientific correlation of this would be seeing all actions as 'experiments' rather than solutions. Again, this can be understood using the book passing game as an illustration. In the game, for example, this approach present in the game's given goal of all teams making *improvements* in their time and reducing the number of errors (drops, using hands, etc.) from one round to the next (they had 4 rounds total), rather than a single competition for the one fastest time and team. Rather than seeking the 'perfect score/ time' (or 'solution' to their challenge), teams aimed for incremental improvement in speed and competence through successive attempts. A second aspect is that almost all attempts incorporated some new *experimental strategy* for passing. People were trying new approaches, with the expectation (or hypothesis) that it would contribute to their success, and seeking to learn from them. Another aspect of the conscious social learning (or 'planning for learning') is that teams had clear *indicators for monitoring* and measuring their success — in this case 'time' and 'number of penalties'. Each time they re-assessed how they were doing, they had something clear and useful to help gauge the direction of change of each round (i.e. better or worse), and link that to the new strategies they were introducing (e.g., the 'receiver' adjusting her/his height). A very important element underlying these two is that people have an attitude of 'experimentation', or 'open mind to learning'. Even while they were carrying out their task (at high speed!), they were still mindful of the questions: was their strategy getting them to their goal as they had expected or not, and why? What were they learning about the challenges of the task and the strengths and weaknesses of the team as they went? The rest of the workshop activities offer some illustrations of how this relates to CF management more broadly. One key aspect of the workshops was the development of a set of criteria and indicators which they could use to assess their progress towards their vision of their CF. Participants also developed plans oriented towards improving their situation, by drawing on their strengths, and identifying ways to address possible challenges along the way, rather than focusing on problems and "single solutions". One good example of an 'experimental approach' to CF management is that one group planned to develop 2 NTFPs simultaneously in small comparative steps (e.g., compare market price; how well it grows; time required for care and processing), rather than launch wholesale into one. (Thereby diffusing the risk, and increasing the potential for learning). Furthermore, for most of the planned activities, participants built in ways to reflect and assess their progress (i.e., monitoring) on each of these activities.

Feedback and Adjustment

This third concept builds directly on the second one (designing for learning), it refers to the actual

Old Growth without regeneration: A typical scenario of Terai Sal Forest in Nepal

incorporation of feedback (information collected through learning and monitoring) and then adjusting strategies as a result of that learning. In the game, it was clear that while all teams recognized when things were not working only a few of the teams were successfully able to incorporate knowledge about what parts of the strategy were useful and what not, and adjust their actions so that the next turn was better. The most successful team not only readjusted the individual strategies based on learning, but they actually applied this also to their whole 'system' (all the players) and reorganized the line up by height, so that the height differences between players, and thus chances of dropping the book, was also minimized.

There are clear parallels to this in forestry; even when CFUG members are aware of weak areas of CF, in some cases that learning or knowledge is not translated into an effective adjustment of strategy. In other cases, a CFUGC may "over steer" and adjust its plans further than required, because it was not able to effectively digest and incorporate new understanding. In the workshops, participants did a mini-assessment of their CF situation, both in terms of social and biophysical conditions and processes. It was based on the learning from the identification of strong and weak areas that the participants drew up new priority areas for action, and are planning to take action on these. As much as possible, participants reflected on their past experiences, strengths, and challenges to shape their action plans. As described above, each of these 'actions' will have some future reflection processes built in as well (i.e. a small feedback loop); researchers will try to work with CF members to ensure that learning along the way is incorporated into small, appropriate and effective adjustments in CF activities. By exploring the concept of *conscious planning for learning* and *feedback and adjustment* within a participatory action research approach, the hope is that local goals of the CFUGs involved can be more rapidly achieved, as well as generating some insights on a broader set of questions, which will be useful to other CFUGs. These questions include: What are the costs and benefits to various stakeholders, of a conscious social learning approach? What impact can this approach have on income generation and on forest condition? What are the equity implications, especially for the most marginalized CFUG members of participating in a potentially time consuming social process? To what extent does this process raise social questions that might spark increased conflict? Under what conditions is it possible for CFUGs and other stakeholders to maximize conscious social learning? Is there a minimum level of social capital necessary to start or can it be built simultaneously? Can it take place where there has been a less than ideal CFUG formation activity? And, what are some of the most effective tools and strategies for enabling conscious social learning? CFUG self-monitoring as a feedback mechanism is gaining popularity – how effective is it? What are its limitations? Can monitoring be undertaken collaboratively with CFUGs and other stakeholders? How can monitoring outcomes feed into the assembly and CFUG management planning process? How does it link to Department of Forest needs? Can the CFUG management plans take an 'experimental' approach (e.g., with NTFPs, or with silvicultural blocks), and with what effect? Can the Range Post coordination committee processes incorporate more shared learning and how?

Research into these questions is being undertaken concurrently by CIFOR and other partners in Indonesia, the Philippines, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Brazil and Bolivia. Anyone with ideas, input, or questions is encouraged to contact us directly: Cynthia McDougall (c.mcdougall@cgiar.org); Laya Upreti (info@newera.wlink.com.np); Netra Tumbahangphe (ktmwatch@wlink.com.np).

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