

Protection of Community Forests: Options and Innovations in the Hills of Nepal

Basundhara Bhattarai*

The author highlights various forms of protection arrangements being practiced in community forestry in Nepal, and identifies factors inducing innovations in forest protection. She highlights that still a huge amount of FUG efforts and resources is being allocated for protection of forests, and indicates a possibility of reducing such costs where all FUG members abide by the rules of forest utilization.

Forests, physically speaking, are relatively open properties. The owner(s) needs to have a suitable mechanism to exclude others. The institutional arrangements for enforcing exclusion varies with the type of owner institutions, physical condition of forests, prevailing policy and regulatory environment and other contextual factors. While most of the Government owned forests are open access in reality, communities have adopted several arrangements for protecting and regulating forests. This article highlights various options being employed to protect community forests in the hills of Nepal, and analyzes factors and conditions affecting innovations in protection arrangements. The purpose of this paper is not to analyze in detail the costs, benefits and equity implications of such protection arrangements within FUGs, but to present various options and existing potential innovations regarding this.

In the hills, forests intermingle with community settlements, and the forest can be accessed or guarded via many points by the people living around. In some parts of the country, communities have been protecting forests irrespective of Government nationalizing the forests in late 1950s. With the advent of new forest policy emphasizing community forestry and legislation backing the idea, community forest user groups (FUGs) have responded to the internal and external human threats to forest in several ways.

Protection arrangements in the hills of Nepal have been mostly taken as a force to induce collective action in community forestry, and are primarily targeted to deviant behaviour within the FUG. The level of use has been reduced in many FUGs following the hand over to communities, and this is achieved through specially designed protection mechanisms. Legally, the FUG can devise mechanisms to control and penalize violations of FUG rules regarding access to forests. In some circumstances, the process of user group building has not adequately encompassed all legitimate and interested members of the relevant communities, and this has created added challenges in protecting the forests to FUGs.

Most of the FUGs are formed by field staff at the Department of Forest (DOF). One of their concerns in forming FUGs has been to protect forests from encroachment, illicit felling, fire that are so common in forests not handed over to communities. The agenda and arrangements for protection are often forcefully pushed by staff without adequately addressing the root cause of the problem. Practically, FUGs are not 'autonomous' (as defined in the Forest Act 1993) institutions but work under field staff 'directions'.

Options and innovations

Protection has remained a critical forest management issue, and FUGs have developed various institutional arrangements to regulate unauthorised access to forest. While all community members who depend on forests are entitled to be members of FUGs irrespective of political boundaries, not all members equally abide by the rule actually unless there is some mechanism to control free-riding. In some cases, people not included in the FUG are also a threat to forest. FUGs have made various types of attempts to cope with these challenges, sometimes in collaboration with other institutions. Studies through some of the districts in the middle hills have identified several protection arrangements (see Table below).

Most of the protection arrangements involve the sharing of costs between FUG members (Mana-Pathi, Lauro palo, cash contribution, rotation, payment, fencing) in terms of either cash or personal labor contribution. Government or project paid systems of protection were common until the early 1990s, and are rarely in existence now. Recent policy arrangements do not encourage projects to cover the cost of protection. If someone violates the regulatory arrangements, fines are imposed. Informal protection is the least costly arrangement on the part of the FUG, and is practiced by FUGs that are fully aware of their rights and are well-organized institutionally.

Under all arrangements, defaulters are subjected to fines which are based on the extent of damage made,

* Ms Bhattarai is affiliated with ForestAction.

Table 1. FUG innovations related to forest protection

Protection system	Summary Description
Mana Pathi system	Collection of equal amount of grain from each household and give it to the watcher as a remuneration
Lauro palo system	Every household patrol the forest in rotation basis, the stick is handed over to the following day's watcher from the previous day's watcher
Cash contribution system	Equal amount of cash is collected to pay the watcher as a remuneration
Rotation system	Every household rotate the turn to patrol the forest
Payment system by FUG	FUG pay a lump sum amount to the watcher from it's own fund
Payment system by Government and Project	Government or the project pay the salary of the watcher from their own
Informal protection	Every household is responsible to protect the forest in an informal basis. No watcher is employed to look after the forest
Different rules for different users	Different rules are implied for the particular product used by the different users, for example fire wood seller, NTFP collectors.
Different rules for different products	Rules are different according to the product type
Seasonal protection system	Watcher is employed only in seasonal basis
Fines	Fines are charged as a punishment of violating rules assigned by the users
Fencing	Fence is built to protect the forest from cattle.

though sometimes this may be negotiable. If the FUGs are unable to enforce the decisions, they often seek support from DFO. Observation through several hill districts indicate that FUG decisions are accepted in most of the cases.

Factors leading to change

Changes in socio-economic contexts, internal learning of FUGs and changes in Government/project support strategies have been found to influence the protection arrangements in community forestry, and as a result changes from one system to another are also taking place in the course of time.

Pale Ban FUG of Baglung district, for example, has changed the arrangement of Lauro Palo to Mana-Pathi system and recently to a cash payment system. Lauro Palo was carried over from traditional forest management systems that were in existence before the advent of formal community forestry. Since user households began to get involved with market based activities (as the area is close to the district headquarters), they initiated a Mana-Pathi system so that a watcher can look after the forest using the collected Mana-Pathi as remuneration. The watcher found it difficult to collect grains from scattered households, and the FUG decided to collect cash instead of grains to pay the watcher.

With the withdrawal of Government support in hiring watchers, FUGs started to shift to other approaches to forest protection. In many instances, they decided to retain the watcher and collect money from households to pay the salary, or decided to guard the forest themselves on rotation. In some innovative cases, they came to realize that if all of the member households abide by the rules, there is no need to put extra effort in guarding the forest or paying the watcher. This requires that all household members can perceive clear benefits from co-operation. This in turn is, to a great extent, pre-determined at the formation stage.

Conclusion

A lot of efforts are being made by FUGs in protecting forests by pooling cash, grains or personal labor from member households. In some innovative arrangements where all FUG households understand their rights and roles and the FUG is well organized, there may be no need to put extra efforts in protection. Post-formation support should involve this issue as one of the agendas.

Acknowledgment

This Article is based on field research under Forest User Group Forest Management Project funded by DFID

