

Private property arrangement within community forest: a case of Raktamala forest user group

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This article briefly outlines individually distributed plot based forestry practices of a forest user group (FUG) in eastern Terai of Nepal. Forest users have adopted this system to enhance livelihoods impacts of forest, although there is no explicitly designed national policy and legislation to support it. Raktamala Community forest user group, which is located in the eastern Terai district of Saptari, is one that has been practicing this type of system. Most of 620 households affiliated to the group use about a half of the 350 hectares of community forests as individually-owned forest plots.

There was a big fire in what is now the Raktamala community forest in the 1992 summer, which devastated not only the forest trees but also hundreds of huts and buildings in the area. While the fire originated deep inside the forest, which is indeed a regular phenomenon during summer, what was unnaturally disastrous that time was the enormous damage on houses and human property. People learned that this was because of heavy thicket of dry bushes, which found its place when all trees were clewed over the past several years. Following this, people began to discuss among themselves ways to prevent similar catastrophe in future. They agreed to clear the thick bush that was the chief source of fire hazard.

To provide incentives to those clearing bushes, an agreement was made which allowed the members to do intercropping along with plantation in the area cleared. A person was entitled to use the land as much as s/he could clear. This allowed households to make exclusive use of the pieces of forest land cleared. Initially, they grew cereal crops inside the forest area, and later they planted improved varieties of grasses, fruit trees, bamboo, and cash crops.

Meanwhile, the community members knew about the policies and practices of community forestry, and the District Forest Office (DFO) handed over the area as community forest in 1997, by developing the group constitution and an operational plan for setting the priorities and directions for forest management. Although the approved operational plan did mention nothing about the plot based forestry practices, the FUG decided to formalize this system calling an assembly of forest users.

Every plot has a small signboard mentioning the name of the plot owner and identification tags. FUG has developed some standards to be followed by each and every plot owner. Plot owner should clean the plot by bush cutting, climber cutting, and the plot should look well-managed. Cultivation of improved grasses and fodder are encouraged. After a few years of practice, an assembly decision banned the cultivation of agricultural cereal crops with an objective of retaining the structure of forest ecosystem.

The FUG has provisions of award and punishment with regard to the compliance of these standards. There is a mechanism for monitoring, supervision and evaluation of plot management, which is helpful to make decisions regarding award and punishment

Impact on livelihoods

Because of plot based forest management practices, the contribution of forest to local people's livelihood has increased. Farmers have been able to increase the production of milk by several times using the plenty of grasses and fodder available from the forest plots. Users of middle wealth class are highly benefited from the plots. Even those users who lack private land are also able to keep livestock after getting forest plots. Because of the increased supply of milk from the community, they have formed milk cooperative to manage milk the marketing, which is significantly contributing to village economy.

The private property arrangement within community forest has created a strong sense of resource ownership among the people. Landless users are proud of getting the forest plots in community forest.

Issues

There are however some issues relating to this practice. One of them is related to the crop composition. Foresters argue that as the users are allowed to manage the forest plots upon their own needs and ways, they will certainly focus on their basic needs, thus emphasizing on agricultural species instead of long run profitable tree species. Present trend shows an emphasis of users in short-term benefit-making plant species like improved grasses, fodder, fruit trees, bamboos and cash crops. If this is continued, the community forest may lose its basic characteristics of a forest.

Second issue is related to the equity. The plots are not distributed in a socially just way; those who could put greater efforts in clearing bushes got larger areas. Most of the disadvantaged groups (such as Dalit, poor, and landless people) did not benefit from this arrangement, either because they could not allocate their very scarce resources to clear the bush (and hence got deprived of the plots), or even in case they managed to get the plot, they did not have any livestock (or money and credit to buy them) so that the fodder and grasses could be of real use to them.

Third, and most importantly, the private property arrangement is an interesting policy issue. Forest act and regulations allow the hand over the forest to the whole group of forest users for protection, utilization and management, and the DFO also recognizes the system in an informal basis only, without incorporating the provision in the operational plan. As such, this system depends only on the mercy of the forest officials, in that this will continue so long as they do not take any legal actions. This issue should be brought into greater policy debate so that a suitable policy arrangement is made.

Conclusion

The case demonstrates community innovation of property right arrangement within community forest to match specific ecological and socio-economic contexts of the area. While the overall livelihood impact is positive, there are questions as regards the equity and ecological sustainability of the practice. This raises a question both in terms of inadequacy of current policy framework as well as whether this sort of community innovation on property rights arrangements should be allowed to take place without any restrictions.