

Empowerment or marginalization: a debate in community forestry in Nepal

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Abstract

The impact of community forestry program in Nepal is debated around the potentials for empowerment and risk of marginalization. This article draws some evidences of both scenarios. Evidences in the field show that community forest management process can be a forum for all users including women, poor and 'lower' castes on the one hand, and equally it can be a vehicle for the elite group of people to legitimize their interests by the unconscious consent of the users, on the other. This article concludes with a recommendation for monitoring policy implementation and democratizing the Forest User Groups at local level in a way that enables the poor and marginalized to articulate their interests and needs to the decision making process of the forest resource management.

Key words: user group, empowerment, marginalization, community forestry, power structure

INTRODUCTION

The community forestry (CF) program in Nepal is being implemented for more than 15 years. The experiences and learning of CF are being better documented and disseminated across the world. However, the benefits and impacts of CF are debated around empowerment and/or marginalization of local people. Some practitioners and researchers consider CF as a strong and better medium of empowerment, especially in terms of involving people from community to decide how to use and manage the common property forest resources. It is also seen as the devolution of power to the local people so that they can decide and use their wisdom to manage available resources.

On the other hand, there are views that CF policy and programs further marginalize the weaker section of the society, which includes the poor, women and the oppressed, in a way that the policy and programs vest the rights and responsibilities only to a few key individuals in the community. All the benefits accrued from the community forestry go to the elites (Hobley, 1996; Malla 2001). This means that after the intervention of CF, the access over the forests by weaker section of the society has been restricted. This has badly affected the poor who mostly depend on the common property forest resources. The management and utilization decisions also rest with the Forest User Group Committee (FUCs) members who are generally local elite, leading to the alienation of the poor from the resource as well as management process.

There are thousands of FUGs with unique socio-economic characteristics and varying degree of resource availability. The issue of control and access depends to some extent on the construction of socioeconomic structure of the particular FUG (Agarwal, 2001). If it is not too differentiated by the class and caste compositions, it is more likely to be represented also by the women, the poor and the oppressed.

This paper draws some characteristic indicators of potential for empowerment of the poor users as well as risks for marginalization of the weaker section. This paper is based largely on field visits, interviews, discussions and observations with the FUGs in the mid hills of Nepal.

CONCEPTUAL BASIS FOR ANALYSIS

The concept of participation and empowerment in a development intervention means involvement of poor and marginalized people in decision making and thus result into the empowerment of those people (Agarwal, 2001). However, it is a normal trend in development program that participation is a concept which, has been mis-used by development professionals, government bureaucrats and other development agencies through top-down approach. Rural people are seen as objects, who participate for the program designed by outsiders so that it helps to fulfill outsiders' objectives rather than villagers' own objectives. But, if participation means empowerment of the poor, it must be understood in the context of existing socio-political power structure. Keeping the existing power relationships constant, it is impossible to achieve the empowerment of rural poor. Power manifested as control over access is linked to a marginalization of the weaker section of society (Raymond et al., 1997). Empowerment of people through participation is only possible when it is framed outside the bureaucratic structures. Space should be created in which the rural poor have an opportunity to gain within the process. Participation should seek to create countervailing power to challenge the orthodoxies of the past and the structures, which they perpetuated (Okley and Mardsen, 1985). Furthermore, it can be argued that participation as an empowering process inevitably challenges existing power structure at different levels. Similarly, Agarwal (1994) has described empowerment as a process of change and challenge of existing power relation:

"as a process that enhances the ability of disadvantaged ('powerless') individuals or groups to challenge and change (in their favor) existing power relationships that place them in subordinate economic, social and political positions" (p 39).

Empowerment is gaining power and it is a part of system experienced and encountered in every day life. Power is not a description of things what people have, but it is a behavior that how people relate to each other in a system (Nelson and Wright, 1995). The structure of every legal order directly influences the distribution of power, economic or otherwise within its respective community. Prestige and social honor is the basis of economic and political power and vice versa (Bottomere, 1993). People having economic and political power in the traditional feudal system would still remain powerful and maintain or increase their level of exploitation by favoring alliances with small emerging urban elite class (Yadav, 1984).

CF policy has considered participation as a means for achieving the goal of empowering people especially poor and marginalized (HMGN, 1989). This paper discusses the potential for empowerment and risk of marginalization on the basis concepts discussed above.

POTENTIAL FOR EMPOWERMENT

Reflecting the conceptual basis of participation and empowerment of CF policy in implementation, there are some evidences for the empowerment of poor and marginalized section of the society. FUG is the major local institution not only for forest management, but also other development activities in the village. It is the only institution in which all users can be members of the groups. CF has brought the women outside of the household domain. The poor and Dalit (lower caste) have been able to participate in discussions regarding forest management and there are various evidences of such representation in decision-making process. A brief description of evidences in this line is given below.

FUG as a major institution at village

FUGs have become a major umbrella institution to decide the use and management of the forest resources. In addition, it has been increasingly realized that FUGs have also become important local development institutions at the village level. At least one member from each household meets together once/twice a year or even more frequently to discuss the matters related to forest resource management and other development aspects of the village. There are hardly any other village level organizations that give opportunities to villagers even to meet at a place on specific issues. In this sense, FUG is a strong medium at local level that enables people to think and discuss about their resources themselves. It accommodates diverse interests and needs of the users and organizes various development activities such as supporting schools, construction of irrigation channels, drinking water facilities, development of road facilities, etc. Users contribute to these activities voluntarily. In many cases, FUGs seem to be more effective than local government institution, i.e., Village Development Committees.

As per the record of Department of Forest (DOF) it revealed more than 10000-FUGs have been already formed and operating in Nepal. Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN), as a national organization representing FUG of Nepal, has been in operation since 1996 (Shrestha and Britt, 1997). The major role of FECOFUN has been to articulate the interests of forest users, defending their rights and providing various supports and services.

Women in CF

Women participation has been increasing due to change in perception that women also have capacity to make decisions related to village development, resource management and their family concerns. CF processes have encouraged and provided spaces to women to get engaged in decision making as well as play the role of catalytic agent that helped to grow other groups and co-operatives managed primarily by the women in the village. Before CF program, women participation was very low in development programs related to common concerns in the village. CF has important role in bringing women out of household domain. The CF programs have recognized women as real resource manager and users to be empowered. The CF guideline (issued by DOF) has indicated that there should be at least 33% women in FUGC. The constitution of FECOFUN has also a compulsory provision that 50 percent of executive committee members should be women. There are some cases in which poor women are given opportunities and encouraged in this process, including external opportunities such as training and exposure visits.

Poor, lower caste and CF process

"We go for meeting on forest resource management. We also send our wives to attend the meeting. In assembly, several things are discussed, including how to protect forest, how and when to distribute the forest products. We are getting benefits from forest. Though our needs are not satisfied with the present level of availability of the forest products, the social process of CF is important for us, as we are being included in common concerns of the resource management and village development. With the initiation of CF, our access has been increased even to political and social concerns in the village" (Dhana Bahadur Mijar, personal communication). Shoe-makers (so called untouchable caste) groups expressed these views in a discussion held at their hamlet in a village in the hills of Nepal.

FUG organizes various programs such as street drama, discussion about village activities to be done etc., these Sarki people (Shoe-maker) take part and put their voices in the discussion. The lower caste people have also been represented as members in the user committee. The role of the

committee is to implement activities assigned by general assembly of the users. Thus, the poor and oppressed also have been represented in this day-to-day decision-making body.

A more in-depth discussion was held on issues related to exclusion and inclusion of lower castes. They explained that they are slowly being liberated from the exclusive and oppressive social system. Their relationship with upper caste has been changing. Earlier, they were even not allowed to sit together with upper caste people, but now they can sit, eat and drink together at least in village teashops. They were not allowed to enter the house of the higher caste people previously but now they attend meetings inside the office building where all members sit together and discuss the issues related to forest management. CF is one of the main interventions that included them in socio-political and economic processes of the village.

RISK OF MARGINALIZATION

Nepal's rural setting is a complex structure of social system. It consists of hierarchical social structure that includes different economic and social classes, oppressive caste systems and gender discrimination. The differences between rich and poor people, upper and lower castes, men and women creates conditions for social conflict and discrimination to have access and control over the resources. In this context, there are evidences of potential threats to more vulnerable groups as poor, women and Dalit in the CF process. Some evidences and arguments in this line are presented below.

Marginalizing the poor, landless, women and Dalit

CF is equally likely to be a means of marginalization of more vulnerable section of the society such as poor, women, and Dalit. (Agarwal, 2001). Though the social relationship and patterns of interaction have changed over time, access and control of vulnerable section of the society such as poor, women and lower caste groups to the institution and resources are still minimal. Even when they attend meetings, assemblies and participate in various activities, their presence is merely physical, without actually voicing concerns and expectations. It shows that only bringing people together does not mean that they are equally benefited from the process.

An analysis of the structure of FUG reveals that only rich and medium class (based on wealth ranking) people have been represented in the committee. Despite the fact that the poor class constitutes majority of the total users, they have no representation in the committee. The political economic reasons of non-representation of the poor are: economically the poor have to be active all days to sustain themselves and their families for day to day livelihoods. Getting elected as committee members does not yield any immediate returns to fulfill their basic livelihood needs. Instead, poor people perceive that they waste their productive time in the meeting. The political reasons that exclude them from taking decision making roles are: they do not and cannot exercise the institutional power over others even they are selected as committee members, and that they cannot acquire higher social status even when elected as FUG members in the context of the existing social structure.

During the interview with some poorest members of FUG, they expressed that they were not interested to be a committee member. They said "we don't have time to go to meeting and take part in discussions, and we also don't know what is to be discussed and how to discuss. In the past, when we were free and attended some of the mass meetings, we did not properly understand the decisions taken. We were not consulted while making rules and regulations of the forest use and management."

Moreover, the organizational process that leads to equity and justice depends primarily on existing socio-economic structure and the power relation among and within the users (Barraclough, 1995). In a social process, no institution is autonomous; it is always constrained and conditioned by social forces (Pathak, 1994). There is another risk that if the existing exploitative power structure in the community is not taken into considerations' the intervention, such as community forestry, is more likely to further marginalize the poor and oppressed users. Following example shows that how the poor are getting worse, though the intention of the CF is to uplift them.

Use of the FUG fund

A woman with abandoned husband had taken loan from the FUG. Her land ownership certificate was kept with the FUGC as mortgage for the loan. Since there was no income source, she could not pay loan in time and thus the interest of the loan grew at increasing rate. After that, she was recruited as forest watcher so that she could pay the loan by her monthly wages. After few months' time, she fell ill and could not continue with the job. One of her elite neighbors wanted the piece of her land, and he also forced, some times giving some troubles, her to sell. Finally, she decided to sell the land and move somewhere else for settlement. But she could not sell the land as her land certificate was still with the FUG committee. She could not get back the land ownership certificate without paying the loan fully. She had to take another loan from elsewhere (cooperative) to pay the previous loan to get the mortgage back

As I observed, the motivation of the village leader to FUG'S fund is to make more money in the fund by increasing the interest rate. It seems good to have more money with the FUG, but the important question is who benefit or even marginalize from it and how. The case presented indicates that though the FUG fund could have lent the money with good intention, the exploitative nature of social systems in which the local institution operate has further marginalized the poor.

Interpretation and implementation of policy and legislations

The policy documents of the CF mention the rights and responsibilities of forest users in managing their forest resources themselves, aiming to empower them and fulfill their needs. However, DOF officials often manipulate the policies and acts in a way that benefits them, with concurrent costs on users. People's rights assured in the policies and acts are curtailed through directives, circulars and orders (Britt, 2001), which signifies the limit to devolve power to the community (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001). The field level forest officials have considerable scope to manipulate and slow down the implementation of policies for their stated and unstated interests. Decisions regarding forest management such as why and how to manage the forests, who should manage and how and when to distribute the forest products etc. are controlled by the village elite with an alliance of the forestry staffs (Malla, 2001). However, the government at large, and some forestry staff seem enthusiastic about improving the CF.

CONCLUSION

The impact of CF program in Nepal has mixed responses of empowerment vis-a-vis marginalization of the poor and disadvantaged section of the community. As indicated in this paper, there are potentials to empower the poor, women and lower caste people with evidences that the Social relationships and interactions between different groups of people have been changed as compared to the past. The excluded groups, women, poor and dalit have felt some comfort being included in forest management matter. But, in other instances, there are many

constraints that exclude the poor users from the process and from the benefits that accrue there from. Though people come together in discussion forums, the deprived individuals have a little influence on the agenda and decisions. Often the government attempts to control over the forest resources by issuing various orders and circulars, which excludes the people from the use of the forest resources and it serves the interests of elite class. The elite supersedes the interest of the poor and marginalized section of the community.

Looking at the present state of CF policy implementation in Nepal, two potential intervention options can be recommended, if the CF has to benefit the disadvantaged section of the society. First, at the policy level, there must be a strong political commitment to monitor the processes and impacts, as well as to respond to the feedback generated. There must be punishment system to non-performers who are responsible for implementation. The monitoring should be an agenda of not only the government but also the civil society and forest users so that a critical judgment on the CF process is made, incorporating the views of the poor themselves, and then fed into a strong advocacy system at different levels.

Second, the local structures, where the elite and their alliance prevent the users to be benefited from the process of CF must be reformed. Countervailing pressure to change the local exploitative structure should come from within the powerless and disadvantaged section of the community so that they can assert their legitimate rights and roles in the forest management institutions. A strong presence of civil society is needed to facilitate this.

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