Community Forestry: Conserving Forests, Sustaining Livelihoods and Strengthening Democracy

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Abstract: Community forestry in Nepal has a well-documented history of over 25 years. It is now widely perceived as having real capacity for making an effective contribution towards addressing the environmental, socioeconomic and political problems raised by Nepal's rapid progression from a feudal and isolated state into the modern, globalised world. This paper analyses the evolution of community forestry in Nepal, focusing on how policy, institutions and practical innovations evolved together to create a robust system of community forestry. It highlights the key outcomes of community forestry in the aspects of livelihoods and democracy and identifies two key lessons in relation to forest resource management, social inclusion and contribution to democratization in Nepal. First, mechanisms for policy amendment and revision for community-based forest management need to be based on real-life experiences rather than *ad hoc* and top-down decision-making. Second, if given complete autonomy and devolution of power, community forest user groups can become viable local institutions for sustaining forests and local democracy, and delivering rural development services by establishing partnership with many NGOs and private sector service providers.

Key words: community forestry, livelihoods, forest user groups, democracy, equity

INTRODUCTION

Community forestry[1] in Nepal has a well-documented history of over 25 years. During this time it has become recognised as an example of 'best practice' in participatory forestry, one where local people are genuinely in control of management of forest resources (Taylor 1993). In Nepal it is acknowledged as a demonstration of local democracy in action--one where local people have successfully taken control of an important aspect of their livelihoods. Internationally, it is regarded as a model demonstrating the sometimes difficult paradigm shift from government-controlled forestry to active people's participation--one that is observed with keen interest for lessons that can be learnt and applied elsewhere. It is now widely perceived as having real capacity for making an effective contribution towards addressing the environmental, socioeconomic and political problems.

This paper analyses the evolution of community forestry in Nepal with reference to the underlying political economy of land use as well as the international aid responses to the Himalayan degradation crisis. It highlights the key outcomes of community forestry and presents the main lessons in relation to forest resource management, social inclusion and contribution to democratization in Nepal.

EVOLUTION OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY POLICY, PROGRAMMES AND LEGISLATION

The beginning of 'official forestry' in Nepal can be traced back to the Rana regime (1846-1951). Nepal entered the post-colonial world of externally imposed and state-led forestry management, with the enactment of the Private Forest Nationalisation Act 1957, rather late. Under this Act, all Nepal's forests, regardless of their ownership and use, became state property.

The nationalisation approach, on the one hand, can be viewed as an attempt to dismantle the prevailing feudal *birta* system[2] of land tenure, in which sense it was well-intentioned legislation with the aim of wresting powers and use rights over forests

away from the ruling elites, following the fall of the Rana regime in 1950. On the other hand, it was also driven by the perception of the need for direct government intervention and control to address the environmental problems that were increasingly being associated with forest degradation and loss. Although unintended, one result of the 1957 Act was that it promoted the revival of community interest and involvement in the protection and management of such nationalised local forests (Gilmour and Fisher 1991).

An earlier draft forest policy, written in 1953, had already contained specific proposals for certain forest areas to be classified as community forests to provide subsistence forest products for rural communities (Bartlett and Malla 1992). Despite this, community forestry did not find a place in the earliest forestry legal framework and was not included in the 1957 Act.

The state's monopoly on national forest was further reinforced by the more strict terms of the later Forest Act 1961 and the Forest Protection (Special Arrangement) Act 1967, both of which more clearly emphasised forest conservation through government regulation, control and prohibition of local use. The Department of Forest (DoF) was, for the first time, given necessary powers to enforce the legislation with the use of armed guards (Graner 1997).

Fuelled by the opinions of international experts, theories of Himalayan resource degradation abounded during the 1960s and '70s. These linked the demand for fuelwood with high birth rates, expanding populations, agricultural expansion and dwindling forests, to come up with projections of the total loss of Nepal's forests by the end of the twentieth century, unless immediate actions were taken.

These gloomy projections were later largely disproved and dismissed as a 'pseudo-crisis' (Ives and Messerli 1989), but by that time they had already provided enough impetus for further legislation, enabling greater community involvement in forest management. The argument for this was that, since government agencies in Nepal could not themselves directly manage and protect forests effectively, communities would be more likely to be able to do so. The

legislative framework for this was established through enactment of the Panchayat Forest Rules and Panchayat Protected Forest Rules in 1978. These, for the first time, introduced the concept of 'handing over' government forests to the elected bodies of '*panchayats*' either as panchayat forest (PF), which was normally highly degraded (often treeless) land suitable for plantation establishment, or as panchayat protected forest (PPF), which consisted of existing forest--often in a severely degraded condition. Ceilings were set as to how much forest could be handed over to a panchayat under these two categories.[3] With the panchayat at its core, it had heavy emphasis on creating new forest resources that would, in the future, provide rural communities with their subsistence forest product needs.

These earliest experiences with community forestry during the 1980s were clearly reflected in Nepal's Forestry Sector Master Plan (1988) with particular emphasis on those aspects that prevailed in the development paradigms of the time, e.g. gender equality, conservation, community participation and the institutional role of the DoF.

Nepal's 1990 democracy movement and the associated demands for decentralisation and people's participation in decision-making provided further stimulus for the community forestry programme. By the early 1990s, however, continued experiential learning had started to highlight deficiencies in the legislative framework under which the community forestry model was being implemented. In particular, the key role of the panchayat as local institution began to be questioned. Panchayats were often large (geographically and in terms of population) and tended to be dominated by the traditional elite in rural society (wealthier, better educated, male and high caste). It was found that actual management of community forest and day-to-day decision-making on how the forest was to be developed and used would be better if it were undertaken by those people most directly affected by such decisions and who were prepared to contribute time and inputs into what they considered as their local resource. Thus, the concept of 'forest users' arose, i.e. those local people who traditionally used a particular patch of

forest. Subsequently, community forestry became based around the community forest user groups (CFUGs) rather than the panchayat.[4] Much effort during the early 1990s thus became focused on basing community forestry at community level and on seeking ways to bring such disparate groups together into CFUGs.

The Forest Act 1993 provided a clear legal basis for community forestry, enabling the government to 'hand over' identified areas of forest to CFUGs. The procedures were later detailed in the 1995 Forest Regulations, backed by the Community Forestry Operational Guidelines 1995. According to the Forest Act and the associated Forest Regulations, CFUGs are legal, autonomous and corporate bodies having full power, authority and responsibility to protect, manage and utilise forest and other resources as per the decisions taken by their assemblies and according to their self-prepared constitutions and operational plans (with minimal scope for interference from the state forestry agency). Although all benefits from community forests would go to the CFUGs concerned, the land legally remained part of the state. Devolution of state power and authority to CFUGs to manage their forests, stipulated in the Forest Act, coming as it did so soon after the democracy movement of 1990, was far-reaching and innovative. It has provided a firm backbone for the community forestry programme until the present time and was a contributing factor for the rapid expansion of community forestry throughout the 1990s and beyond.

At various times, community forestry policy and legislation in Nepal has genuinely evolved out of an extensive field-based and iterative process of 'action learning'. Community forestry was not initiated by the framework provided by the Act; rather, the experience and learning that was already available up to that time demonstrably influenced both the Act and the subsequent Regulation. Thus, community forestry practice and programmes based on this critical legislation were grounded in real experience, leading to rapid uptake and expansion of the programme.

However, the progressive policy also indicated a need for a major rethinking of the role of foresters and the state in forest management. This was particularly problematic since there was strong resistance from many bureaucrats, foresters and politicians, who were reluctant to endorse a people-centred approach to forest development and management.

Perhaps as a result of this, since the late 1990s there has been a gradual reversal of some of the progressive intent of the 1993 Forest Act and the earlier Forest Sector Policy. A series of statements have been made and directives issued that have eroded the authority originally given to CFUGs and undermined much of the earlier confidence in the supportive forest policy framework that was in place. These reversals have been characterised by a lack of deliberative process in policy formulation and decision-making with excessive bureaucratic procrastination, imposition of 'guidelines', *ad hoc* individual interpretation of grey areas and, most importantly, by a lack of participation of civil society represented by CFUGs in policy formulation (e.g. Ojha *et al.* 2005).

COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN PRACTICE: ACTORS AND PROCESSES

Community forestry in Nepal is no longer limited to being a project or government-supported programme. It has become an extensive system which continues whether or not any external support is provided. In many places CFUGs have become the vehicle for rural development and at present CFUGs are the main (in most cases the only) democratically elected local institutions in place. For many poor rural people, CFUGs also act as rural banks and source of revenue and income, including for Maoist insurgents.

As of August 2007, 14,337 CFUGs had been registered across Nepal. Of these, over 11,000 (about 77%) are federated within the umbrella of the Federation of Community Forestry Users-Nepal (FECOFUN), covering 74 districts with 560 sub-district-level committees. There is 50% representation of women in executive committees at all level. Out of a total of 5.5 million hectares (ha) of forest, shrubland and grassland in Nepal (39% of the physical area), about 1.22 m ha of forest land (about 20% of the country's forest area) is managed by CFUGs, whose

membership consists of about 1.65 million households (or 8.9. million population), constituting almost 35% of Nepal's population.

Field experience of community forestry implementation in Nepal has been developed as the community forestry processes—this being the process by which CFUGs are facilitated and supported to become sustainable and democratic local forest management institutions. The development of this process was driven by an action research approach from the start with practitioners, having participated in field-based learning, contributing to a step-by-step process that eventually became reflected in the revised Community Forestry Operational Guidelines 2002. After some 20 years of experience, many of these process steps are now institutionalised within both governmental and nongovernmental supporting sectors—most staff concerned of the DoF and NGOs having been directly involved in implementing them.

It is in this area of implementation approaches that several field-based projects have been active in developing the skills of support agents for community forestry. Later, such processes also started to include modifications of more conventional forestry techniques and their application for resource assessment of community forests by CFUG members to determine silvicultural interventions and product off-take level (Branney 1994; Branney *et al.* 2001). Most recently, approaches have been developed that meet the requirements for better social inclusion and poverty focus within CFUGs, including the identification of the poorest households and livelihood planning and support for these by CFUGs through participatory processes, e.g. the governance coaching and household livelihoods planning being supported through the Nepal-Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP 2005; NSCFP 2006a; NSCFP 2006b).

The learning and experience of the community forestry process have led to significant changes in the key actors involved and their respective roles over the past 25 years. Changes in Nepal's society have undoubtedly also been a strong influence on this, since a more active and articulate civil society (since the democracy movement of 1990), improved travel opportunities, wider availability of communications and media, and improving education level have also contributed to the ability of different actors to participate more effectively in community forestry.

One of the more important changes concerns the role of government. Initially, DFO staff (mainly forest guards and range officers) were seen as the main actors for facilitating and supporting the community forestry process and working with CFUGs. This situation continued until the mid 1990s with the result that, for the first time, a cohort of government forestry staff have pursued their careers almost entirely within community forestry and have acquired the associated skills and attitudes. Thus, they are now able to contribute towards the gradual institutional changes that continue to take place within the DoF--most importantly, a shift from a policing to an advisory and enabling role.

The rise and significance of federations within civil society has been significant. FECOFUN has been the major federation representing CFUGs in Nepal, and its role and profile have expanded greatly since its establishment in 1993 to become the major civil society organisation representing forestry (specifically community forestry) interests in Nepal. Similarly, since the 1990 democracy movement, NGOs have played an increasingly important facilitation and supporting role in the community forestry process. They now provide and facilitate a range of services that were earlier thought to belong more or less exclusively to government forestry staff. This situation has become enhanced since 1996 when government staff have not been able to move freely in remote districts due to security problems. Correspondingly, the government has tended to take a backseat in many areas, being mainly involved in planning, monitoring and coordinating community forestry with less direct implementation support.

Initially CFUGs were heavily supported by donor-funded projects mainly for three types of activities: first, to train forest staff in forming CFUGs through a social mobilization process; second, to enable CFUGs to prepare appropriate forest operational plans; and, third, to provide training to CFUG members to build their

capacity and ensure institutional, ecological and economic sustainability.

Following the royal coup of February 1, 2005, many donors have withdrawn their financial support for community forestry. Whereas until that point there were six major donors[5] supporting community forestry in 66 districts, now only three donors[6] remain in 23 districts. As a result, more than 10,000 CFUGs receive no external support at all. Nevertheless, they continue to function and rely on their own knowledge and self-generated income sources.

As a result, if CFUGs did not exist, government would have to find about NRs. 18 million per year per district to compensate for CFUG members' labour inputs and forest development activities. Village Development Committees (VDCs) and other government service providers would also have to fund other community infrastructure activities that are currently being undertaken by CFUGs. These facts indicate that CFUGs are moving towards financial sustainability and making significant contributions to the costs of local development.

Despite its scale, the value and contribution of community forestry to Nepal's economy are not well recognised by the national accounting system. Linkages between the community forestry sub-sector and the National Planning Commission (NPC) are lacking. At national level, data still tend to reflect physical targets on implementation rather than impact, particularly on poverty (given the emphasis on this in the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper [PRSP] and The Tenth Plan). Only limited direct government revenue is generated through community forestry, although its wider impact on the local situation is likely to be significant.

A more recent development has been the emergence of partnerships between CFUGs and the private sector, especially in the area of forest product utilisation, processing and trade, including the establishment of pro-poor enterprises. This reflects a trend towards the wider prominence of the private sector in Nepal's society, but, more importantly, it demonstrates the commercial interest in community forestry as a source of products for which there is an active demand and a system whereby the poorest members of CFUGs are enabled to move beyond their subsistence-level dependence on forests into a cash economy that was previously unavailable to them (NSCFP 2006c). Commercialisation of community forestry through the sale of forest products and marketing after product promotion is inevitable if poor people are to benefit more in terms of cash income through community forestry. Keeping community forestry rooted in a subsistence forest product mode unnecessarily limits the potential for this, while the existing framework for community-run forest-based enterprises also needs extensive revision if it is to be supportive rather than restrictive towards this approach.

Although not originally designed to do so, it is expected that community forestry will contribute to addressing poverty since this is a national priority for all development interventions in Nepal. Since the late 1990s there has been increasing interest in establishing what (if anything) community forestry is contributing to addressing poverty. Several studies (e.g. Malla *et al.* 2003; Pokharel and Nurse 2004) highlight a problem for poor CFUG members, indicating that they bear disproportionate costs of their involvement in community forestry. Mechanisms used by richer CFUG members to maintain their status and influence over CFUG functioning in their own favour have also been documented. This has now become a major issue for community forestry and one which is at the centre of most field-based development efforts.

The widespread recognition that poverty and equity issues were not being adequately addressed through community forestry has had a significant influence on implementation and practice in recent years with emphasis on developing new linkages and mechanisms that are intended to be 'pro-poor'. Consequently, awareness of poverty and equity issues has been significantly raised both among CFUGs and within a range of service providers and supporting institutions, including government (Kanel 2006). Linked with this is the understanding that at village level, caste and gender dimensions still have an important and far-reaching influence that has yet to be adequately addressed.

It is also startling to note that the issues of poverty and social inclusion cannot be addressed merely through the mechanism of handing over forests to local people to safeguard their supplies of subsistence forest products. Kanel (2004) suggests that community forestry can make a significant contribution to poverty alleviation, but that the critical issues of forest sector governance and sustainable community forest resource management need to be addressed to do this. These then become sector-wide issues that have to be tackled at national level through forest sector reform. From a livelihoods perspective, poor people need more than subsistence products, and their needs may be more for cash income through product sales and employment rather than products themselves.

The scope of community forestry is still geographically limited.[7] Although there are extensive forest areas at higher altitude, there are, as yet, few community forests since there are fewer people and forest is less accessible. Extensive areas of high altitude forest (much of it coniferous) also represent a high-value timber resource, which the government has been more reluctant to hand over to community than the more degraded forests at lower altitude. Other areas have been covered by protected areas (national parks), which limit the opportunity for communities to utilise them even if they were handed over.

In the lowland Terai, the extent of community forests is also limited. Only 3% of the terai forests have been handed over as community forest and only 7% of the CFUGs are in the Terai. Again, the forests here often represent a valuable and productive timber resource (sal[8]-dominated) where complex issues such as cross-border smuggling, high population pressure, relatively easy access, and conflicts between indigenous and more recently settled people have made the government reluctant to support extensive handover as community forest. Most of the most valuable forests in the Terai are now also categorised as protected areas, and this prevents them from becoming community forests.

OUTCOMES OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY: CONTRIBUTION TO LOCAL, DEMOCRACY, LIVELIHOODS AND IMPROVED FORESTS

Beyond the original aims of community forestry (as articulated in the forest policy), there have been significant and sometimes unexpected consequences. In both conflict and post-conflict situations, CF has a strong influence on local democracy and inclusive self-governance. For example, in a recent quote from a popular newspaper in Nepal:

> *'There are enough examples to show that Nepal can make democracy work for the people if there is indeed that stability and the presence of an alert civil society to watchdog and back up politicians. Nepal's successful experiments in local government, community/public radio and community forestry, just to take some recent examples, prove that this country of "manageable" size and population can make things work quicker than countries in the neighbourhood.[9]'*

Community forestry, through creation of experiences with local decision-making, institution building, leadership, conflict resolution, common resource management and forest-based enterprise, is therefore a fertile ground for rural people to develop their own skills and attitudes in these and for contributing to wider society outside the forestry sector. It is not surprising that many VDC office-bearers have built up their reputations from first being involved in CFUGs. This has allowed them to gain the respect and recognition of their neighbours and to become more actively involved in local governance. The widely accepted principles of good governance, which have been lacking in Nepal's government structures, are largely present, effective and having a strong influence on CFUG functioning. Increasingly, CFUG members have seen that the principles of good governance such as accountability, transparency and rule of law, with which they are already familiar, need to be more widely applied outside community forestry if society is to be truly democratic.

There have also been certain important policy outcomes that represent a positive learning process from problems and experiences arising from the field. While this learning has not been very effectively able to influence policy or stem policy reversals, it

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has much more successfully influenced the practice of community forestry on the ground. For example, the now widespread institutionalisation of participatory processes at community level and the greater focus on poverty and social inclusion have come largely from the experiences of a wide range of governmental and nongovernmental actors through their day-to-day involvement with community forestry. Participation and social inclusion of disadvantaged groups is becoming widely recognised at all levels in Nepal from national policy to CFUG decision-making.

The result of this learning-oriented policy process was that, by the mid-1990s, Nepal's forestry regulatory framework had become progressive and well adapted to the country's needs. This still forms the basis for the community forestry programme today. It did, however, require a major rethinking of the role of foresters and the state in forest management. This was particularly problematic since there was strong resistance from many bureaucrats, foresters and politicians who were reluctant to endorse a people-centred approach to forest development and management.

In the absence of elected local government and, in many remote areas, any active infrastructure and development programme, CFUGs have taken on the role of at least 16 Ministries. Data from 692 CFUGs of Dolakha, Ramechhap and Okhaldhunga districts show that, over the last six years, CFUGs have contributed about NRs. 10 million (40% of their cash income) to physical infrastructure and other rural development activities (Box 1), excluding additional voluntary labour contributions. About half of the CFUGs have contributed to education and more than one-third to road construction.

Box 1: CFUGs as vehicle for democracy and rural development

1. CFUGs democratically select or elect CFUG committees annually, thus institutionalising democratic practice.
2. CFUGs manage their finances and give loans to villagers.
3. CFUGs harvest forest products and supply goods and services to communities.
4. CFUGs settle conflicts over access to and control over resources, land boundary and disputes over land tenure.
5. CFUGs form networks and federations, which have become strong nested organizations to safeguard users' rights.
6. CFUG members guard forests by patrolling and protecting forests as regular work on rotational basis.
7. CFUGs are active in activities related to soil conservation and watershed management.
8. CFUGs support their members for income-generating activities such as vegetable farming, livestock, horticulture, fishery and beekeeping.
9. CFUGs contribute to the construction and maintenance of physical infrastructure such as irrigation canals, drinking water schemes, community buildings, wooden bridges, etc.
10. CFUGs sensitise community members to have more inclusive governance with proportionate representation of women, dalits and members from ethnic minorities and remote places.
11. CFUGs invest in scholarships for poor children, teachers' salaries, school buildings and furniture.
12. CFUGs invest their funds and labour in the construction of roads and trails.
13. CFUGs practise systems of public auditing, public hearings and two-way communications and information flow, both vertically and horizontally.
14. CFUGs promote eco-tourism and nature awareness by constructing picnic and recreational spots, temples and eco-clubs.
15. CFUGs raise awareness of health, hygiene and sanitation; invest in health posts, medicine and equipment.
16. CFUGs construct community forest nurseries, establish plantations, protect and manage natural forests in sustainable manner and establish forest-based enterprises.

Source: Adapted from Pokharel et al. 2006

Increasingly, CFUGs are becoming sensitive to the need to address issues of poverty and social exclusion among their members. Many CFUGs have made special provision for the poor or disadvantaged groups in their operational plans.

It was never expected that community forestry in Nepal would influence participatory forestry in a wider regional context. However, it is now evident that practices in countries like Bhutan, Cambodia, India and Vietnam have, to a certain extent, benefited from the learning generated in Nepal. Possibly this effect would have been more widespread had there not been limited opportunity for cross-learning and experience-sharing between these countries. Regional organisations have an increasing role in this, not only through conferences and training courses, but, also through networking, thematic workshops and action research, although many donors are averse to supporting regional programmes and instead favour direct budget support (as a consequence of the 2005 Paris accord on aid harmonisation and effectiveness).

Initially, this spread of experience and lessons from Nepal was due to the recognition by these countries that community forestry could be used as a mechanism for environmental improvement and for the protection of natural forests. For example, Vietnam has recently promulgated a new law on forest protection and development (2004), which provides legal authority for forest management to village communities. Cambodia has developed a sub-decree for community forestry (2003), which provides a modality to complement the recent cancellation of 4 million hectares of timber concessions and allow other more devolved forms of forest management.

Community forestry as a social and political process in Nepal has been well documented and studied. Unfortunately, there is still a rather weak quantitative impact evidence to back up many of the qualitative and anecdotal assertions about its impact. The current challenge is to develop evidence that demonstrates links between community forestry and broader environmental outcomes, including biodiversity conservation and poverty reduction. To some extent this is a result of changing perception of what it is that community forestry is expected to achieve. As with many social and environmental processes, change is slow and resulting impacts take even longer to appear; thus, quantitative data are hard to find and even more difficult to attribute to community forestry alone.

There have been a few impact studies producing some quantitative data on changes in forest condition as a result of community forestry. All these have indicated positive changes--in regeneration status, canopy density, biodiversity, basal area, etc.–as a result of forest handover to CFUGs (e.g. Branney and Yadav 1998' Jackson *et al.* 1998 ; Gautam *et al.* 2003; Rana 2004; Karna *et al.* 2004). To summarise, environmental impact of community forestry has been visible and well perceived by community members.[10]

There have been numerous studies of the poverty and livelihoods impacts of community forestry programmes (Collett *et al.* 1996; Pokharel & Tumbahangphe 1999; LFP 2003; Dev *et al.* 2004). Various positive livelihoods impacts of community forestry have been recorded, such as increases in natural, social, human and financial capital. There is increased availability of forest land and products (natural capital) as a result of community property rights as well as improvement in forest resource condition; social capital (social inclusion and representation) of disadvantaged groups has increased through their participation in CFUG management and decision-making; and CFUGs and their members have increased access to financial assets from group funds (financial capital). Increased access of forest-dependent households to basic services such as education and information has been shown (often representing improved political capital as CFUGs gain in status and ability to influence decision-makers). Finally, there is development of physical infrastructure at community level and increased community awareness and ownership over policymaking processes and community development activities.

However, these positive benefits have usually been disproportionately captured by wealthier CFUG members--often at the expense of more disadvantaged members (Malla *et al.* 2003). It is not yet certain to

what extent the vulnerability of the poorest households can be addressed through community forestry and whether or not community forestry offers route out of poverty for the poorest households. Ongoing support for community forestry programmes in Nepal focus on mechanisms that will address such issues, especially at CFUG level.

Perhaps, it is too early to demonstrate the political impact of community forestry. Following the royal coup of February 1, 2005 and the resulting recovery of power through the People's Movement II in April 2006, it is evident that the political situation in Nepal is still in a state of flux. While it is evident that local democracy within CFUGs has persisted for more than 10 years in the face of the Maoist insurgency and government pressure, it remains to be seen what role the 8.8 million CFUG members in Nepal will have in crafting a new constitution through a democratic and inclusive process. Perhaps some recognition of the political importance of community forestry is best expressed in an exclusive interview for a special issue of a Nepali journal *Prakritik Sampada* in 2005 by leaders of different political parties.[11] All of them echoed the same voice: 'being parliamentarians of that time we are very proud of having community forestry legislation that gave power and authority to the people.'

LESSONS LEARNT

The community forestry development process in Nepal has been a long and often an arduous one. From its relatively modest beginning, it has now become a major social and political movement with a worldwide profile emanating from the forestry sector-- somewhat akin to the '*Chipko*' movement of Indian Himalayan states or Chico Medez's rubber tappers in Brazil. Certainly community forestry in Nepal has reached a state where it can influence the course of Nepal's political future and, potentially, the forest politics of other countries.

We have summarised the learning of community forestry in Nepal in three key messages:

First, community forestry is a viable resource management approach to conserving and improving the condition of forest resources if appropriate policy, policymaking process and compliance with them are maintained. While this message is clear, it is also evident from our experience over a period of many years of crafting a workable policy and legislation framework for community forestry that a simple blueprinting of policy is not appropriate. For community forestry to work, there needs to be initial piloting, to test and understand successful approaches, and an associated willingness and openness to learn from successes and mistakes before formalising the enabling policy environment.

Policymaking itself is a chaotic process. A strong civil society ensures a deliberative and iterative policy process that includes opportunities for transparent stakeholder participation and an effective policy-practice loop. A sound policy itself cannot ensure its interpretation on the ground. This requires trust, honesty and, most importantly, an appropriate attitude among implementers through a robust institution-building and institution reform process. It is particularly important that the government role towards community forestry be redefined. An assumption that an unchanged institution can perform a radically different role is unlikely to be correct. With government forest departments, the shift from policing to facilitation is particularly difficult to achieve. However, the transformation of the mindset of existing personnel is possible, instead of crafting new institutional structure.

Mechanisms for policy amendment and revision for community forestry need to be based on real life experiences rather than *ad hoc* and top-down decision-making. It is likely that the 'one size fits all' approach to the community forestry policy will not work. There is always a need to ensure sufficient flexibility to allow different community forestry models to evolve to suit different circumstances. The policy processes to create a favourable and workable community forestry model will take time and skills to develop. While it will be very difficult to change the attitude of all stakeholders, once change has occurred, skills and knowledge can be more easily enhanced.

Second, CFUGs can become effective and inclusive institutions, bringing together the rich and the poor, men and women, *dalits* and non-*dalits* to address poverty and social exclusion by utilising available resources for both subsistence needs and commercial purposes. We have learnt that community forestry institutions can contribute to poverty reduction as well as forest management and conservation if local power elites can be made more responsible. The reorientation of such elites towards equity and poverty, fund management and active management of forests is essential. Separating groups of the rich and the poor without taking power elites on board tends not to work since it does not provide sufficient opportunity for breaking down hierarchical and entrenched power positions that characterise Nepali rural society. This requires that robust local institutions are established and supported so that they are more sustainable and able to deliver real outcomes, as well as able to withstand external pressures and sustain local democracy under adverse conditions. In addition, commercial use of forest resources and entry into the cash and market economy is often the most appropriate strategy for the poorest households, as well as for ensuring sustainable forest management.

Third, CFUGs, if given complete autonomy and devolution of power, can become viable local institutions for sustaining local democracy and delivering rural development services by establishing partnership with many NGOs and private sector service providers. The key to creating and supporting such viable local institutions lies in a good governance approach, which can be achieved through a facilitated process. Without first ensuring robust institution building through such a process and ensuring that awareness of good governance principles, inclusion and transparency are strong, sustainable management of forest is not possible.

Having built local institutions, we should be aware that decentralisation of forest management authority does not necessarily result in improved service delivery unless the capacities of these institutions are also strengthened. A network of 'nested enterprises' for undertaking different functions may be more appropriate, with service delivery being undertaken by a range of partners from civil society to government. Allowing and supporting forestry institutions to diversify their functions in this way not only ensures the better availability of demand-led services at local level but also contributes to strengthening and empowering the institutions themselves.

Probably the most unexpected outcome of community forestry in Nepal has been the contribution made by CFUGs to the current political movement. This does not signal 'politicisation' of CFUGs; by and large they are not aligned to party political lines, but increasingly there is a consensus that once there are sufficient numbers of such groups, and once they are effectively skilled and empowered, they will represent a strong political force for democratic change.

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[1] The term 'community forestry' is defined by various authors in different ways and for different contexts. Here, the term refers to a forest managed by a group of people who depend on the forest and who live within a defined geographical area. Nevertheless "community forestry " in this paper is defined in a much wider sense, mainly community's relation with forests and other stakeholders including government, non-government and forests related private sector agencies .

[2] Under the *birta* tenure system, land was granted by Rana rulers to members of the nobility in return for various services. By 1950, approximately one-third of Nepal's forest and cultivated land was under *birta* tenure (Regmi 1978). The *birta* system was officially abolished by the Birta Abolition Act 1960.

[3] Each panchayat was entitled to a maximum of 125 ha of PF and 500 ha of PPF.

[4] After 1990, panchayats were replaced by Village Development Committees (VDCs), which had similar functions and covered the same geographical areas, normally several villages.

[5] UK, Switzerland, Denmark, Australia, USA and Germany.

[6] UK, Switzerland and USA.

[7] Most community forests are in the middle hills of Nepal, lying between 500m and 3,500m.

[8] A well-known timber species of Dipterocarpaceae family.

[9] Dixit, K. M., *Nepali Times,* No. 282, January 20-26, 2006.

[10] Forest agriculture interface improved:

Evidences from 60 case studies from Dolakha, Ramechap and Okhaldhunga, NSCFP supported districts; suggest that majority of respondents farmers who are members of FUGs feel that forest agriculture interface has improved following the establishment of community forests in their villages. They report that there is an increased biomass in community forests resulting in increased off-take of litter and organic manure on their farmland. Therefore many farmers have been able to cultivate more varieties of cash crops than before. Availability of more quantity of grass and fodder from community forests have encouraged the practice of stall feeding which have reduced grazing pressure and saved the time of children to herd cattle to the forests. Enrollment of girls children at local school have also increased. In addition, it is reported that the number of water springs and water volumes have increased, and soil nutrition and moisture conditions in their agricultural land during dry season have improved.

Trend of forest degradation reversed

Forest users have reported that there is less forest fire in recent years. Before the handing over of community forests, forest fires used to be very common and there were incentives for the people to put the fire off. DFO staff neither had capacity nor the resources to take preventive and protective measures of forest fires. Encroachment of forest land adjacent to the private farm land is very common in government controlled forest area. In addition, government reports have estimated that more than 100,000 ha of government land are encroached. Nevertheless in community forests the picture is different. The trend of encroachment of forest land along the forest boundary with private agriculture land has tremendously decreased. This has been possible due to the fact that local villagers themselves are involved in boundary survey of community forest land. Since villagers are actively involved in making rules on how to protect, manage and utilize forest land and products, illegal felling of trees and stealing of forest products have decreased. Evidences show that the number of complaints and forests offences have reduced because local people have become self-disciplined and in many cases have been able to fine forest offenders by local rules.

Forest conditions improved

Various studies show that formerly denuded hills are covered with forests and greenery again. The overall forest condition has improved mainly in terms of regeneration, number of stems per unit area, basal area, growing stock, and the rate of annual increment, density of a number of forest patches, species diversity, wildlife and the total biomass. Villagers have perceived that number of water springs as well as the volume and duration of water discharge have increased.

[11] Notably Bir Mani Dhakal, ex-Minister of Forest; Pradeep Nepal, leader of UML; Minendra Rijal, leader of Nepali Congress (Democratic); Ram Saran Mahat, leader of Nepali Congress; CP Mainali, leader of Bam Morcha; Lila Mani Pokhrel, leader of Jana Morcha; Meena Pandey and Bidhya Bhandari, women leaders of the Nepali Congress and UML respectively saying that.