

Caught in the Crossfire: Forest-Dependent Poor People in Nepal¹

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Abstract: This paper examines the impact of armed conflict on the lives of the forest-dependent poor in Nepal. Based on a survey study carried out in four districts among forest-dependent poor and their service providers, the findings show that the armed conflict is severely affecting the lives and living conditions of the poor. The lack of food, drinking water, education, health care and employment opportunities has made them more vulnerable. The conflict has contributed to the disruption of social security, communal bonds, friendship and brotherhoods, trust and local hospitalities and it has planted frustration in these populations. Optimism of the poor is waning. However, they still want to see peace restored.

Keywords: forest-dependent poor, poverty, insurgency, poor

BACKGROUND

In February 1996, the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) initiated an armed political movement with a call to the Nepali people to “march along the path of people’s war to smash the reactionary state and establish a new democratic state” (Karki and Seddon, 2003: 187-193). The party has guided the war with the doctrinaire principle that “political power comes through the barrel of the gun” and has aimed to “free humanity forever from the yoke of class exploitation” (Karki and Kattel, 2005: 29). This war has been accompanied by the physical devastation, destruction, decimation, abduction and disappearance of innocent lives that do not side with the war. Ten years down the road, the war that “builds on the revolutionary theory that war teaches war” (Prachanda, 2003: 220) has lived on, causing the demolition of infrastructures on a massive scale, serious impediments to socio-economic development, shortages of food and medicines in rural and remote areas and displacement of able-bodied human resources. This façade of war, consequently, has commandeered the livelihood options of the poor in whose name, as the Maoist party claims, the war has been fought for.

Within this background, this paper analyses how the escalating armed conflict in Nepal is affecting the life of the poor, who essentially are forest- and tree-dependent people. This write-up, a consolidated form of the poverty survey, draws up the perceived priority problems of the poor themselves. While the previous survey (Paudel *et al.*, 2003) focused on the problems of the forest-dependent poor, it did not explicitly look at the linkages between the conflict and livelihoods. As such, this report seeks to focus on understanding how the escalating armed conflict in Nepal has affected livelihoods and reconfigured the structure of the livelihood problems of the poor.

The survey was carried out in four districts in Nepal between May and June 2005, following a similar approach to the previous survey (Luintel and Bhattarai, 2006). Two districts, Nawalparasi and Kabhre, were selected from the previously enumerated sites, whilst two others, Palpa and Sarlahi, were new to the survey. A sample questionnaire was developed and used to interview respondents in the survey area and key informants were consulted in the selection of the sample villages. The survey identified the problems

¹This article is based on the findings of the poverty survey carried out in May–June 2005. It is an update of the previous survey of the Priority Problems of Forest and Tree-Dependent Poor People in Nepal conducted by ForestAction, Nepal, in collaboration with the Forestry Research Programme of DFID, UK in 2003. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the collaborating institutions, but are the sole responsibility of the authors concerned.

prioritized by those interviewed and examined their underlying causes within four focus groups (resource-poor farmers, poor small-scale artisans, the landless and the urban poor) who have varying degrees of dependencies on forest and tree resources.

Relevant documents were also collected on an on-going basis throughout the survey period and were reviewed in light of the findings of the interviews. Of particular importance were the national strategy documents of both government and donor institutions (HMGN, 1988; HMGN and ADB, 1995; HMGN, 1998; HMGN, 2002a; HMGN, 2002b) as well as the review and assessment reports of projects related to poverty alleviation in Nepal (Seddon & Adhikari, 2003; DFID, 2005; KIRDARC, 2005; CHRI, 2001; SAAPE, 2003).

The finding of the survey shows that the forest-dependent poor have suffered greatly as a result of the armed conflict that has hijacked their mental peace and social security. In addition to this lack of peace and security, regular *Bandha* and strikes, declining basic health care and the lack of employment opportunities were other priority problems identified during the interviews. Forest resources in Nepal continue to form a critical livelihood base for poor and marginalized groups, primarily

through their contributions towards the sustenance of farming systems, their provision of a cheap source of household energy, and the creation of a source of income through a wide range of commercial timber and non-timber resources, including medicinal plants (Gilmour & Fisher, 1991; Malla, 2000). Traditional rural livelihood opportunities, such as the collection and marketing of non-timber forest products, have been seriously disrupted.

Efforts were made to reach out to the key informants who participated in the 2003 poverty survey and to compare the past and present priority issues in the work of these organisations. Nevertheless, many of these people were not available for this survey. Most of those who had worked in the support institutions were found to have either left their previous location or had changed their job. Due to the escalation of armed conflict, poverty has become ever more pervasive in rural households. Many of the active members of households have either taken up arms to become combatants -for the liberation from poverty and to restore justice or have left the country to escape forced recruitment into the Maoists' squad. Only the elders and the young who are unable to work remain at home and they represent the dominant voices in this study.

ARMED CONFLICT IN NEPAL: AN OVERVIEW

In 1990, following a popular movement against the Panchayat system, a multi-party political system was restored in Nepal. Nepal entered into a period of open politics, where people were able to speak freely, holding dialogues and debates on social, political, economic and legal issues. Most of the power exercised by the King was devolved to the Parliament and the elected Prime Minister. The new constitution vested state sovereignty in the Nepali people, provided for multiparty democracy with a bi-cameral form of parliament, enshrined people's fundamental rights and, most importantly, brought the institution of the monarchy within the bounds of the constitution. Despite these changes, there remains a limited scope of popular sovereignty in practice and the recent political crisis and resurrection of power by the King in February 1, 2005 has further created a

dilemma with regard to the nature of democracy and popular sovereignty.

Although the constitution recognizes cultural pluralism, it has emphasized the patronage of the Hindu religion and, in practice, considers non-Hindus to be second-class citizens. Regional disparities, especially between the Kathmandu valley and the outside, continued to widen. The creation of new employment opportunities could not keep pace with the rising levels of education and the number of people coming into the labour market. This situation bred frustration in the people, primarily those from the rural areas, and created a breeding ground for the Maoist rebellion.

Capitalizing on the growing dissatisfaction of the Nepalese over the poor performance of the democratic government and parliamentary parties, the radical communist faction, known as the

Community Party of Nepal (Maoist), decided to launch a “people’s war” starting from February 1996 against the multi-party system, accusing it to be unable to address the problems of farmers, workers and the proletariat (farmers and workers are, by definition, included in the proletariat). The Maoists claimed that armed struggle was a necessity, in light of the limited opportunity available for social transformation (Bhattarai, 2003), a viewpoint corroborated by external observers of Nepali politics (Millard, 2002). This conflict has engulfed the whole country, but the countryside has received the hardest blow. The fear of being caught in the crossfire between the Maoists and the security forces has forced rural people to abandon their villages, leaving behind their belongings. While it is difficult to put an exact number on those displaced due to the conflict, evidence suggests that the number is on the rise. Between 2002 and 2004, over 38,000 people were estimated to have been displaced throughout the country (INSEC, 2005). The insurgency has had an adverse effect on the overall socio-economic life of the country. Rural areas are short of food and medicines because of restrictions imposed by the

government in fear that the items will find their way into the rebels’ hands. The displacement of able-bodied workers has had a serious impact on agricultural production. All of these factors draw Nepal dangerously close to a crisis, resulting in famine and hunger.

Both Maoists and the government have been severely criticized for human rights abuses. Of these, women and children have been affected the most. As Thapa (2005) reports, women have been the victims of rape and sexual assault in connection to the people’s war. In most of the cases, security personnel are reported to have been involved in the rape cases as a form of revenge and harassment. The impact of the war on children is similar.

With the passing of time, the war continues to cost Nepal dearly. Already hit hard by poverty, the Nepali state faces a new challenge in rebuilding after the destruction that the conflict has caused. However, the possibility of a negotiated outlet to the crisis is at the verge of date. The country seems more likely to enter into a new tunnel of violence from which an end is not in sight.

POOR IN THE CROSSFIRE

The problems of the forest and tree-dependent poor are not limited only to those that are conflict-induced. Since a number of other specific priority problems were covered in the earlier article (Luintel and Bhattarai 2005) and there are not significant changes in the status of these problems, this report exclusively focuses on the newly identified problems of the respondents that relate to the armed insurgency.

As mentioned in the introductory section, the poverty survey conducted in 2003 did not mention the effects of political conflict, specifically the Maoist insurgency-related problems. This was partly because it did not surface as it has now, and partly as it did not took up openly in the political discourse, for fear of retributive actions from the sides of both the State and the Maoists, it became difficult for ordinary people to speak about their problems publicly. Within the last three years, there have been various changes in the political ground as well as in the effects of the conflict within the wider

national socio-political context.

Regarding the priority problems of forest and tree dependent poor, out of the 16 priority problems, five (i.e. armed violence, general strikes, lack of food security, lack of social security and lack of health services) are clearly related to the insurgency. Another two, unemployment and the degradation of resources, are associated with the conflict situation and are rapidly intensified at the pace of the conflict. Social discrimination, lack of access to decision-making processes, lack of awareness and education, low income, low wages and lack of land holdings of the poor are priority problems that are similar to those mentioned in the earlier article. Alcoholism is now of higher concern, possibly being a result of the increased social violence.

Armed conflict and poverty have, in the main discourses, been treated as separate spheres of academic enquiry and policy. But this discourse is waning in the particular context of the political conflict led by Maoist

insurgency. It is argued here that poverty and armed conflict are not separate issues. While poverty is one of the underlying causes of the insurgency, the insurgency has also become a cause of increasing levels of poverty.

In Nepal, around 31 percent of the population is living below the poverty line (CBS, 2005). The armed conflict has further hit the poor, already marred by stagnation in development and rampant poverty, leaving them with no resources for livelihoods. Forest-dependent poor and their service providers in the study area stated that the armed conflict has destroyed the basis for livelihoods and made it harder for them to build a secure future.

The conflict has not only destabilised the income of the poor, it has also restricted their choices in work and livelihoods. They are deprived of opportunity, security and empowerment – cornerstones of poverty reduction and human development. Stagnation of economic growth and depleted services in the areas where they live has affected them badly, leaving many jobless and constraining their income.

"Since the insurgency chose a path of brutal acts, all the development activities have been suspended because of the problem of security. Since then we have not been getting any labour works and nowadays we drink gruel and sleep"- said a respondent from Palpa.

Human relations have been badly affected since the insurgency erupted. Trust, an open welcome and hospitality are now overrun by suspicion and doubt. Increasingly, participation in public spheres is limited and those involved are less interested. A respondent in Nawalparasi remarked-

"We do not go to public meetings, rallies or any other demonstrations. If we go, we are in danger. Either the army or the Maoists come to us, ask for the reason for our participation and torture us. We cannot offer our life for a mere meeting or demonstration."

Frequent crossfire between the conflicting parties, together with bomb blasts in private and public places has caused great loss in resources. Disruption of industries, factories, food depots, schools and health

posts have adversely affected the poor, barring them from receiving the already limited facilities. The urban poor feared for the future of their children. They reported-

"The industries are either being closed or disrupted and the schools are not freely running due to the insurgency. We somehow manage to send our children to school, but as the environment for education is badly affected, we see an opaque future for our children. We are worried how our children will manage themselves when they are uneducated and unemployed."

After the insurgency escalated and the Maoists began to use the jungle as their shelter and training centres, access of village people into the forest has become severely restricted. Referring to this, resource poor farmers of Hariwan mentioned that they had been deprived of forest products-

"We do not have enough land for production, so we used to go to the jungle for roots, shoots and fruits to live on. But now we are unable to get these, too. We stopped going to the jungle, fearing to catch in the crossfire."

It is said that the Maoists tend to requisite food supplies from houses of the poor, demanding to be fed. The security forces are also said to be punishing people for supplying or feeding the rebels. As the poor themselves have to rely on other people for food grains, the demand of food by the Maoists has further impoverished them. Survey respondents stated that they were tired of feeding the combatants. An artisan in Sarlahi mentioned:

"If we feed them, we will have nothing to eat the next day. If we don't, we will not be spared. So we cannot oppose them (Maoists). Whatever we possess, we need to share. No one asks whether we have enough for living."

In Sarlahi district, most community members spoke out on how the insurgency has escalated chronic poverty. Defining poverty as "not only economic scarcity, but also the loss of peace and security," an old man in Hariwan, Sarlahi said, "Invasion of insurgents into our house is frequent and pervasive. We work for the whole day for 'ek mana chamal' (half a kilo of rice) to feed our

family. But insurgents come, ask for food, eat and go, leaving us no grain." Poor people attribute many of their current problems to the insurgency, which has widened the gap of poverty.

Poor families often depend on minor forest products such as edible fruits, vegetables and medicinal plants, which can be sold in nearby markets, receiving food in return. However, the conservation policy allows limited opportunity for the poor to collect wild, edible plants. In conflict zones, forest areas have become more insecure, hence these foods are less accessible to the poor.

Recalling past experiences, an old man from Nawalparasi district told the research team that in his youth he used to go to the forest to collect thatch grass and other forest products to repair the thatched roofs of their houses. Slowly, they were restricted for a week and even for a month from collecting these products. Now, the forest has been completely closed in the name of security. As a result, many of them have changed their occupation and come to Amarapura, a semi-urban village in Nawalparasi district, for pebble and sand collection from the nearby river to sell to construction companies for a living. During the interviews, some of them mentioned, "We have gone nights without food in the time of regular strikes because we are unable to sell the pebbles and sand. We cursed our fate and passed the nights of scarcity but constantly failed to give solace to our children. Every night, we tried to keep them asleep so that they would not ask for food, but how can an empty belly sleep! We passed nights crying with our children."

Disruption of factories, industries and development activities due to the insurgency has severely hit the urban and peri-urban poor who often work as wage labourers. In the study areas, the respondents blamed both the insurgents and the state. The former was blamed for "attacking local industries and for the ruin of agriculture by planting landmines and socket bombs, consequently spoiling the productive land" and the latter for "not acting for the restoration of peace and the absence of protectionist policies."

In connection with the increasing intensity of armed conflict, the poor spoke of declining safety as an element of increasing insecurity. Escalation of violence is linked to

increasing crime and criminal psychology. Degradation of social cohesion, shortage of food, famine, displacement, terror of security forces, increasing incidents of theft and robbery were the major problems repeatedly highlighted by the poor during the survey discussions. The poor also recalled the theft of their livestock, crops and vegetables, noting that it posed the greatest risk to their security. They explained, "Those who are well off, have more to lose and yet they have opportunities to gain. But it is the poor who experience the surge of crime and violence and are always the losers."

This massive escalation of violence has left the poor with an overwhelming sense of frustration that has led them towards a "do-nothing state." As they mentioned, they do not want to plant crops or keep livestock. "If we keep our earnings for the next day, it would not be for us, but for the insurgents who shamelessly enter our house each night and take everything away." An old man at Janagal in Kabhre said in a painful tone, "I am waiting for the day to die. I no longer want to wait for the worst and most painful day of my life." In his view, the armed insurgency has done nothing more than create panic among the helpless poor.

Disruption of peace is the most pressing problem of the poor. Many respondents reported that they have lost their mental peace, trust for and cooperation with each other. Instead of friendship and "brotherhood", a form of enmity has developed in the community as a result of the insurgency. A respondent in Palpa stated that arrival of a guest at home would also be a matter of suspicion, whether he was a guest or a stranger. If the house owner did not inform his neighbour about his arrival, the other would secretly pass a message to the security forces and create trouble.

As the insurgency has held the country in its grip, the priority of the government has also shifted to quelling the insurgents. National economic expenditure has moved significantly to paying for additional security measures, rather than for economic development. This has stagnated the development activities, which has had a direct impact on the already sluggish economic performance of the country. There has been a seven-fold rise in security expenditures from one billion Nepali Rupees

in 1990/91 to seven billion in 2002/03. The total expenditure for security is higher than that for the social sector. All this reveals that security concerns now override development concerns.

Lack of employment opportunities is another problem for poor people. The possibility of employment is much less where the disruption of infrastructure, including industry, has been frequent. Closure of schools and industries in conjunction with the stagnation of the development sectors has constrained the poor from getting labour work, subsequently leaving them in a state of starvation. The poor have said that if they were in a good job, they would have no problems. "Our country would be developed if the war was resolved. The industries, factories, mills and other development activities would no more be disrupted. But things did not go as we had hoped. We may have been pushed to suffer and we have been suffering." In terms of forest-related job opportunities, the Terai forests are managed under protectionist approaches. These areas might otherwise generate many employment opportunities for unskilled labourers. The community forests, too, have very low levels of prescribed harvests, restricting the opportunities for paid work for the poor.

Another severe problem of the poor is the lack of basic health care. Disruption of health centres and blockades in the transport of medicine imposed by the conflicting parties has left people deprived of this facility. The key respondents from NGOs and CBOs also noted that this problem was acute among the poor people. The poor never expect to get good health treatment in the hospitals or clinics. An artisan in Palpa elaborated-

"We never think of going to hospital for treatment. It is not that we never are ill, but because we cannot afford the cost." As he reported, healthcare has become less accessible for them.

Similarly, a resource poor farmer from Sarlahi reported-

"If any member of the family is sick, we fall into debt with the local moneylender, who charges high interest."

The government's effort to provide primary healthcare, drinking water and sanitation has been the focus of its poverty reduction programme. In primary healthcare, the government focuses on immunizing children and reducing diarrhoea, acute respiratory disease and improving reproductive health. "Government's effort lies in providing drinking water facilities to all and improving its quality, increasing public awareness of health and sanitation" (UNDP, 2002). These programmes are yet to be realized in practice, as they are not being implemented.

Unequal sharing of the forest products and the negligible response of elites to the needs of the poor, in some cases, has caused poor families into the threat on their lives, even to death. To cite an example, a poor boy died of snakebite as he was sleeping on the ground in Nawalparasi. The head of the household had asked for some timber from the local CFUG to construct a bed, but no one listened to his request (Bhandari, 2002). Had the poor been listened to and given some timber, he could construct the bed, sleep on it and save the live of his son from this unfortunate incident.

The overall scenario of the-forest dependent poor is that they lack adequate alternative sources of forest products. Their dependency on communal resources is high. Yet, the communal forest areas are frequently controlled by elites and the poor have limited access to it. The conflict has made the forest an even more difficult place to work. Security-related concerns have also caused a reduction in the frequency of visits by pro-poor service providers. After the King's takeover on February 1, 2005, pro-poor resource allocation has been re-centralized. For example, commissioners have instructed CFUGs not to mobilize their funds.

CONCLUSION

Disruption of peace, regular bandha and strikes, food insecurity, loss of resources, and the lack of basic healthcare facilities are some of the problems connected to the

ongoing political conflict in the country, as reported by the respondents. It is observed that, already hit hard by the scarcity of livelihood options, the conflict has brought

further problems upon the poor and they have become more vulnerable.

Poor people perceive that the conflict is not due to individual shortcomings in personality or morality, nor failures of family and upbringing. The majority of the respondents felt that it is the result of uncaring governments who have ruled for centuries to fulfil the interest of a few,

controlling the resources, leaving nothing for the poor. Still, the poor have a choice: peace. They want to see peace restored throughout the country. It is only in peace, as they say, that the search for livelihood alternatives and a peaceful life is possible. So they call for the conflict actors to be committed to peace and rescue the people from a bleak future

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