



# FORMATION AND INSTITUTIONALISATION

## Formative stage

ForestAction Nepal, established in 2000, emerged from the ideas of a team of enthusiastic young activists from the forestry and research sector. This group shared the core aim of strengthening evidence-based policy making across the forest sector by generating critical knowledge, and informing and empowering communities and stakeholders.

In the late 1990s, this team of young and enthusiastic foresters and agriculturalists started reflecting on the forest policy and development context of the time. Many of these key individuals having come from prior campaigning experience in the community forestry sector<sup>1</sup>. Together, this group explored prospects of establishing a new institution focusing on critical research, capacity building and policy dialogue, with the aim of democratising development interventions in Nepal's forest sector, particularly CF. Full of energy and vision, Hemant and Krishna first crystallised the idea of a *Forest Resources Studies and Action Team* - or *ForestAction Nepal* in short - integrating both research and action-based dimensions into the philosophical foundation<sup>2</sup>. Other like-minded friends joined the initiative and further envisioned the future of ForestAction Nepal.

Thus, ForestAction Nepal was formally registered as an NGO on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 2002, with its first formal governing body<sup>3</sup>. Beyond this governing body, a further group of dynamic individuals<sup>4</sup> joined the organisation in its seminal years, 2002 to 2003.

In the initial days, the ForestAction Nepal team were able to generate small amounts of funding in piecemeal fashion for the work they wanted to do. They initially organised a training-come-workshop on the Preparation of CF Operational Plans

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- 1 Hemant Ojha, Krishna Paudel and Naya Sharma were associated in a campaign aimed at expanding community forestry in Terai through a network called Terai Community Forestry Action Team (TECOFAT). This campaign was the foundation of the organisations conception where Shambhu Dangal was also part of the discussion in the initial days.
- 2 As a co-founder, Hemant Ojha led the conceptual aspect of ForestAction Nepal's participatory action research and publication and still serves as an advisor. Likewise, Krishna Paudel, as a co-founder, led participatory action research initiative on livelihood and governance. After 2010, he took organic agriculture & food systems framework issues to the national policy debate.
- 3 First Ad hoc Committee members included: Krishna Paudel, Hemant Ojha, Harisharan Luintel, Basundhara Bhattarai, Hariraj Neupane, Tara Bhattarai and Raju Bikram Shah.
- 4 A team comprising of Naya Sharma Paudel, Netra Timsina, Kamal Bhandari, Amrit Adhikari, Mani Ram Banjade and Lalit Thapa joined the organisation from 2002-2003.

in Chitwan. However, three early projects became instrumental in helping them to leverage resources and build connections. First, they received an opportunity to collaborate with a project with the aim of examining and promoting self-monitoring of CFUGs, to be implemented in Baglung, western Nepal (led by Yam Malla at the University of Reading, UK). Second, they received a small research grant from Whitley Awards. Third, the team applied to CIFOR (Centre for International Forestry Research and World Agroforestry) and received two small research grants. These projects helped ForestAction Nepal leverage additional funding for research and action on matters that were of priority to their central goals.

Unlike the large scale approach common of other development projects, ForestAction Nepal focused on limited districts and localities to generate in-depth insights from community action and pilot activities.



As of 2025, ForestAction Nepal has implemented 212 projects worth of around one billion rupees, supported by over a dozen bilateral and multilateral donors<sup>5</sup>; 26 universities; and 27 non-academic research and development organisations including INGOs. These projects have ranged from a couple of months to over ten years in duration. Unlike the large scale approach common of other development projects, ForestAction Nepal focused on limited districts and localities to generate in-depth insights from community action and pilot activities. We carried out focused work in a few areas where we could observe long term trends and generate longitudinal data and deeper insights. The focus of our critical research agenda has been targeted towards achieving the following three major objectives from our projects: i) to generate generalisable knowledge that can contribute to global knowledge gaps and engage with epistemic communities, ii) to generate policy relevant knowledge and empower policy actors so as to contribute to national and sub-national policy process, and iii) to contribute to the wellbeing of the communities and restoration of resources where we work.

<sup>5</sup> Bilateral (such as FCDO, DEFRA, IDRC, DFAT/ACIAR, NWO), Multilateral agencies: UN agencies (UNDP, FAO, UNEP), CGIAR agencies (CIFOR, ICRAF), World Bank), Universities: Most often we have worked with Universities in the West.

## Horizontal leadership and adaptive management

From the very beginning, ForestAction Nepal has practiced a relatively horizontal organisational structure and laissez-faire leadership style, promoting a participatory and consultative decision-making culture. Although we have followed the generic governance framework of Nepal's NGOs - general members - general assembly - executive board<sup>6</sup> - executive coordinator and rest of the staff - we developed and practiced unique structure and process that ensures accountability and transparency and allows autonomy and flexibility to project teams<sup>7</sup>. Project leaders are the pillars of the organisational governance who collectively, along with the Finance and Operation Head, form a Management Team. The Executive Committee nominates the Executive Coordinator (EC) from among the project leaders, often in consultation with the Management Team. Krishna and Hemant jointly led ForestAction Nepal for the first three years. In 2003, we formally established the position of EC. Since then, 10 Executive Coordinators have provided their leadership, each with two to three years tenure. Naya Sharma Paudel<sup>8</sup>, served as the EC for three non-consecutive terms between 2005 and 2022. Likewise, ForestAction Nepal has always facilitated in empowering its staff and providing leadership roles to young generations<sup>9</sup>. The EC contributes 25% of his/her time to organisational management and coordination with the rest focused on specific projects. Alongside this efficient bureaucratic structure, there is a robust operational and financial practice to meet the most stringent governance and integrity standards<sup>10</sup>. The unique organisational design and practice is guided by our vision of a wider egalitarian society and the deliberative, participatory process that we preach.

Right from its beginning, during the first decade of establishment, Ram Bahadur Chhetri<sup>11</sup>, Hemant Ojha, Netra Timsina, Mani Ram Banjade, Hari Sharan Luintel, Basundhara Bhattarai, Hari Raj Neupane, Kamal Bhandari and Radhika Regmi provided pivotal leadership, playing a crucial role in strengthening and advancing the organisation's early growth. From 2010 to 2025, Birendra Karna, Rahul Karki, Sujata Tamang, Lila Nath Sharma, Sarada Thapa, Kanchan Lama, Shambhu Prasad Dungal, Jailab Kumar Rai, Kalpana Giri, Bishwo Nath Paudyal, Kiran Paudyal, Dil Bahadur Khatri, Sudeep Jana, Mahesh Paudyal, Dharma Raj Uprety, Srijana Baral and

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6 Since the 25 years of establishment, 10 Executive Boards have provided their guidance, with each committee tenure three years.

7 There are two parallel systems adopted by the organisation: first is the programme team which leads the delivery and ensures contribution to the overall society, and second the operations team that leads operational and financial system including the day-to-day management of the organisation. This has been fundamental in ensuring focused and quality delivery by the project team and release them from managerial burdens of the organisation.

8 During his tenure as EC, Naya Sharma Paudel led the organisation for a total of eight years. Moreover, for over two decades, he guided the forest policy and governance thematic area and significantly shaped ForestAction Nepal's strategic direction. In course of his two decades long tenure, he adeptly aligned community institutions, government bodies, and bilateral partners, reinforcing the organisation's credibility and advancing its institutional development.

9 Right from the initial days, ForestAction Nepal has had the culture of giving opportunities for young generations to hold leadership positions. For example, most recently, the executive role is served by Mr Rahul Karki, who has also been leading the Journal of Forest and Livelihood since 2013.

10 Amrit Adhikari has been instrumental in steering robust operational and financial systems, framing HR policies, and establishing a strong institutional foundation and dedicated over 20 years to strengthening organisations operations, administration, and human resource systems.

11 Prof. Dr. Ram Bahadur Chhetri has served four non-consecutive periods as chairperson totaling eight years and also served as the principal investigator for two research projects in addition to the Editor in Chief of the Journal of Forest and Livelihood.

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Upama A. Koju, were instrumental in steering project design, conceptual framing and thematic leadership, thereby consolidating the organisation's influence and programmatic depth. In the 25-year journey of ForestAction Nepal, Krishna Paudel, Naya Sharma Paudel, and Amrit Adhikari made remarkable contributions to institutional development and management, serving for over two decades in key leadership positions. In addition, several colleagues who have served for over a decade—Manita Chaudhary, Madan Bashyal, Sanjeeb Bir Bajracharya, Lalit Thapa, and Laxmi Kumari Ghale—have made substantial and enduring contributions to the organisation's institutional development and operational strength.

In addition to our successes, ForestAction Nepal has occasionally faced external, contextual challenges. We at times faced significant funding gaps that compromised our regular operation and staff had to work with partial payments. Simultaneously, we also had cold relations with government agencies and civil society organisations, mainly due to our research and communication revealing uncomfortable truths. Likewise, disasters such as earthquakes and the COVID-19 pandemic posed major health and safety hazards that led to a complete halt of crucial organisational and project related activities.

However, our institutionalisation of adaptive management, reflexive practice and multiple small-scale projects have clearly provided us with resilience to these internal and external shocks. We have developed a broadly acceptable procedural pathway to review, reflect upon and resolve any internal conflicts and external shocks. These deliberative and adaptive processes not only helped us in resolving our existing conflicts, but also actively supported in documenting and drawing lessons for any future incidents.

In 2011, we commissioned a review of the organisation's first decade of operation which would guide us for the next decade. This review provided us with a deep analysis of our leadership, management, operational aspects, strategic priorities, stakeholder relation and delivery performance. While the review appreciated most of the organisational performance, it highlighted gaps in inclusion and equity, mainly in the executive committee and senior staff. Since then, we have made conscious efforts in these dimensions. While the number, scale and nature of projects determine the composition of staff, the gender ratio in overall staff and senior leadership has remained consistent at around 60:40 (men: women). In the executive committee this ratio has remained slightly lower at 65:35. We now have leaders at the top levels of our organisation who are women, Madhesi, Dalits and Janajatis; both in executive committee and senior staff. Furthermore, we continue to develop and execute policies and operational guidelines to further strengthen and institutionalise our democratic and inclusive practice.

In 2002, we established a private consulting firm, the Environmental Resources Institute (ERI), with the objective of accessing additional funds by selling our professional expertise to channels that would have been difficult to operationalise from ForestAction Nepal, whilst also allowing the core ForestAction Nepal team to dedicate itself in areas of long-term research and policy advocacy. ERI has since emerged as a professional consulting firm in the areas of environment and natural resources management.

### Expanded alumni

During the past 25 years, the ForestAction Nepal alumni network has expanded widely, both within and outside the country. We now have colleagues working in government agencies, universities, development partners and NGOs. Dozens of these colleagues are abroad, mainly in the USA, Australia and Europe/UK. The majority of them are in their professional jobs, with a few having chosen new career pathways.

During the early period of our formation, there were plenty of jobs for forestry and agriculture professionals. The supply of such professionals was limited. Similarly, there were only two registered forestry colleges affiliated under the central Institute of Forestry (TU) for Nepal. There were over a dozen of bilateral forestry projects during that time in the country. Bilateral projects' attractive salary and other facilities on one hand and prospects of future career on the other, used to be the major attraction for fresh graduates. ForestAction Nepal, a small NGO with low profile, moderate staff facilities, funding uncertainty and exhaustive work culture could thus not attract many ambitious people from the sector. Those who led the organisation, or joined the team later must have been guided by a strong set of social values or have chosen to take on an ambitious endeavour. Of course, many colleagues have since changed their pathways away from research to government jobs or to development agencies.

However, despite these limitations, ForestAction Nepal was already known for its strong learning environment with rigorous research and writing training. It had soon become a platform for obtaining opportunities for higher degree qualification in overseas universities. Those who worked for a couple of years tended to receive scholarships abroad for MSc or PhD. From the very beginning and until now, it has been an attraction for early career researchers. Dozens of our alumni have completed their higher degrees from diverse universities worldwide. Many of them are still there. Among those who return have chosen diverse pathways. These days, young graduates increasingly prefer government jobs over NGO/development agency work. Increased facilities, prospects of higher degree and declining aid projects may have shifted the tide in this regard.

The expanding alumni network is a major resource for the organisation and has substantially contributed to the growth of ForestAction Nepal. From those in the government sector or in various development agencies whom have lend their support with information, funding, government approval process, to others who have opened doors simply by extending our goodwill to potential partners. Many of our alumni are still strongly associated with ForestAction Nepal through direct collaboration or have helped us with information, links with donors or potential collaborators in the field.



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