

# A round peg for a round hole



Community forestry was formally introduced in Nepal in 1993 to transfer the ownership and management of forests from government to those who rely on forest resources for their livelihoods.

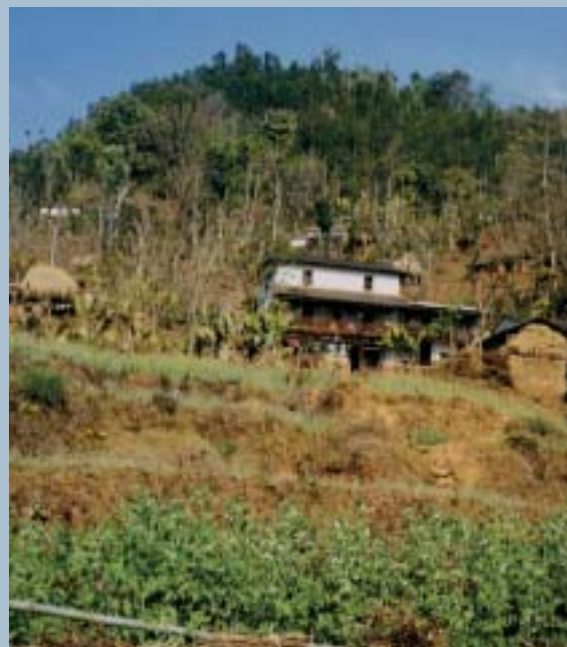
On the face of it this appears a sensible move that could benefit forest users, in particular the landless poor and the disadvantaged. However, after nearly a decade of this style of forest management, there are concerns that it is not working as well as expected and in some cases the poorer groups within communities are worse off.

The Nepalese government nationalised the forests in 1957 as a protective measure and took over the responsibility for their management. In practice however, the Forestry Department did not have the resources to do the job properly. There was continual friction between Department staff and forest users with the result that forests deteriorated and there was over-extraction of resources and illicit tree felling.

## Forest User Groups (FUGs)

Nepali foresters realised that this situation could not continue and so in 1993 the Forestry Act formalised community forestry and handed over forest management to Forest User Groups (FUGs) on a wide scale across the mid-hills region. Community forestry seeks to provide stable access rights to forest users for sustainable forest management and for livelihood security. But it also required that people should change the way they use forest resources and the way in which they work together as a community with respect to this resource.

Setting up FUGs was not without its difficulties. Although democratic decision-making is a key element of community forestry there were power problems between individuals within FUGs and between local people and outside agencies. Traditional village leaders tended to dominate and the



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result was often elitist 'committee-forestry' rather than community forestry. In many cases this led to poor and undemocratic decision-making, bias in benefit sharing, and neglect of the needs of poorer sections of the community. Those most dependent on forest resources were rarely involved in making decisions. Some people did not even know that they had a community forest. The result was that forests were not managed systematically according to the needs of the FUG members.

## A square peg

Critics of FUGs point out that the idea did not come from the grass roots but was imposed from outside and so like other imposed systems it was unlikely to succeed. It was like supplying a square peg to fit in a round hole. They were set up too quickly for the gradual introduction of the concepts, roles and



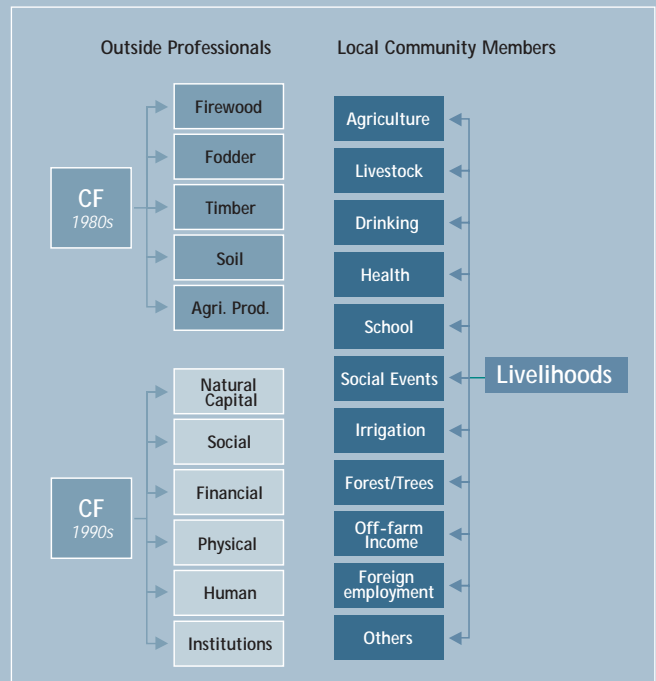
practices of community forestry and the inevitable result was a poor level of understanding of the principles of community forestry and weak decision-making and planning among the Groups.

### Reshaping the peg

Researchers from Reading University in association with ForestAction (an NGO based in Nepal), Oxford University and the Livelihoods and Forestry Programme in Nepal have investigated ways of reshaping the peg for a better fit. They examined ways of changing FUGs using group action and learning processes to make them more effective and democratic in the way they operate and to enable the poorer members of the community to have a voice in decision-making. The most obvious way was for the forest users themselves to become the driving force in shaping plans and policy. To achieve this, all forest users within a FUG needed to participate in the process of management. Better communications were required within and between FUGs and other stakeholder organisations and a monitoring system was needed so there was a means of assessing the value and relevance of the actions taken.

Five FUGs were selected for investigation and workshops were arranged with all the stakeholder groups to make sure that everyone involved fully understood the objectives of the research project.

Workshops in the villages were particularly important to select community representatives to attend FUG meetings and to develop communication between people with differing interests and values. They involved over 90 percent of households including poor people and women, and not just the FUG committee members. Poorer people were encouraged to attend by paying them a research allowance to avoid foregoing wages for the day.



## Monitoring

Running the workshops created new problems as well as solving old ones. The idea of monitoring, for example, was considered by researchers to be an important and essential part of forest management. It provided a standard set of information that gives a common basis for transparent decision-making. But local stakeholders had differing perceptions of what was important and did not give it such a high priority. (see box on previous page)

There is no direct translation in Nepali for the term 'monitoring' and the words that were available had negative connotations and implied assessment of activities by outside officials. It was also apparent that the practice of collecting data and applying performance indicators was not appropriate in this context. Alternative ways of assessing improvements were needed. People eventually settled for phrases like 'reflect on the work already done,' 'learning' and 'taking action accordingly' as something meaningful to them because it described the context and need for monitoring through familiar activities. From this, users began to recognise the need for monitoring and the challenge of taking action as a group in relation to forest management. It also helped local people to appreciate the views of outsiders on issues such as biodiversity and empowered them to negotiate to fulfil other people's interests as well as their own.

## Participatory management

Participatory management appeared to offer significant potential for FUGs to manage their forests more actively and to function better as sustainable and equitable local institutions. However, this approach cannot be solely developed and delivered by outside researchers. It has to be integrated into a support programme involving better information gathering and analysis; better and more equitable forest management planning and encouragement for FUGs to learn through doing and to be flexible and innovative.

Constraints to more participation were many and complex and included the time costs of participation, power relations among individuals and the limited knowledge that participants had of the issues being

discussed. Some of the more elite members of FUGs were more concerned with simply closing the forest rather than managing it for everyone's benefit. As one committee member commented: *We decided to leave the forest alone, because we hoped that in future someone might come and reward us for protecting it.*

In spite of these conflicting factors, importantly, in the period since the project ended, there is evidence of continued experimentation at the FUG level, improved communication and transparency within FUGs and more open discourse on how to manage the FUG and the forest in a sustainable and equitable manner. But there remains a challenge to improve institutional and economic support to poorer groups from local sources to increase their negotiating power in decision-making and ensure that FUG planning processes do not stagnate.

## The result

The project identified a means by which forest management could be tailored to suit people's local circumstances as well as favouring forest conservation. This system has yet to be fully tested on a larger scale but once it is promoted FUG members should be able to use it and adapt it to their local circumstances with minimal help from external facilitators.

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### Yam Malla

Regional Community Forestry Training Centre  
for Asia and the Pacific  
Kasetsart University, PO Box 1111  
Bangkok 10903, Thailand  
(previously at Reading University, UK)  
Email: oyam@ku.ac.th

### Krishna Paudel

ForestAction, PO Box 12207  
Kathmandu, Nepal  
Email: forestaction@wlink.com.np



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