

Community not committee forestry



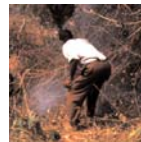
Farmers and the landless poor living in the mid-hills of Nepal depend heavily on the forest for their livelihoods. The forests contain conifers and hardwoods and produce a wealth of products. Timber and poles are cut for house construction, fencing and agricultural implements such as plough shares; fuel wood is collected for cooking and heating, charcoal is produced by local blacksmiths, resin is tapped for distilling into turpentine and leaves are collected for animal fodder and bedding. Protecting the forests was traditionally the responsibility of local feudal tenure-holders but in 1957 the Government nationalised the forests, in order to control and manage them centrally. In practice it has had little capacity to do this. Relations between local people who use the forest for their livelihood and Forest Department officials became strained and the forests deteriorated due to a lack of effective regulation. There were growing concerns about the sustainability of forest resources due to unregulated over-extraction and illicit felling. Nepali foresters recognised that the realistic way of solving these problems was to allow forest users themselves to take over the management responsibility for their local forests. This was the beginning of the concept

of community forestry. Gradually legislation followed and in 1993 the Forestry Act formalised community forestry practice in Nepal and precipitated the handover of forest management to Forest User Groups (FUGs) on a wide scale across the mid-hills region.

A GOOD IDEA BUT?

The idea of communities taking over forest management may have seemed strange to those who had been used to the government doing this job. But it came at a time when forest users were increasingly concerned about the deterioration of their forests and felt a need to take over the responsibility for local control, forest protection and use regulation.

Setting up such Forest User Groups (FUGs) was not without its difficulties. Initially



approaches made by the

Department of Forestry (DoF)

were to traditional village

leaders, rather than to the entire

community of forest users. The result was often elitist 'committee-forestry', the outcome of which was poor and undemocratic decision-making, bias in benefit sharing, and neglect of the needs of poorer sections of the community.

In some cases genuine forest users were excluded from FUGs. Examples from the research sites include groups of blacksmiths who rely heavily on the local forest for charcoal, and fuelwood sellers who depend daily on collecting fuelwood to sell in bazaars.

In practice they were obliged to break the FUG rules in order to continue their livelihoods.

Even successfully functioning Groups

complained that the DoF staff had formed the

Groups too quickly to pass on a proper understanding of community forest concepts, roles and practices. The inevitable result of this was a poor level of understanding of the principles of community forestry amongst the general body of users, and weak decision-making.

THE RESEARCH AND ITS OUTCOME

Research undertaken by the University of Leeds in collaboration with the Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project has suggested that there are ways in which this situation can be significantly improved. The project was designed to develop an improved understanding of common property issues and tenure rights among Forest User Groups. It was aimed primarily at forest users themselves and the agencies supporting them. An important aspect of the work was the Participatory Action Research approach, which aimed to share the learning process with local forest users, so that the project could be of direct benefit to them. The forestry part of community forestry is recognised as an unambiguous success. All sites showed a reversal from the deterioration they had been suffering prior to its introduction. Before the formation of FUGs unregulated felling and extraction of timber and open grazing were widespread problems. This has now largely been brought under control and the transfer of ownership to FUGs has spread a sense of ownership amongst users.

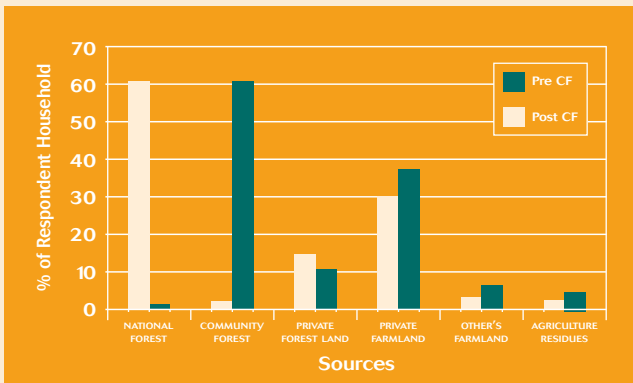
However, the community aspect of community forestry is so far more ambiguous in outcome. The livelihood benefits to households in the villages are mixed both within and between villages. The rich are less dependent on forest products as they have other sources of income. But poor households have little private access to trees and so are heavily dependent for

fuelwood, animal fodder and leaf-litter for composting. On formation, one of the first steps that many Groups took was to restrict access to the forest to allow a period of regeneration, and this quickly impacted on the poor. In one case it reduced the amount of fodder available and therefore the ability to keep livestock. One farmer who used to keep 15 goats, for example, had to reduce his flock to only 4 goats. In general though, the majority of households reported that the introduction of community forestry had not significantly changed the availability of fodder, grazing and bedding resources from the forest. But a number of farmers, particularly those from poorer households, did report a decrease in the additions of organic matter to their land. This was a result of less leaf fodder and bedding being available.

Virtually all the members of the community, irrespective of wealth, use fuel wood from the forest, and changes in its availability are central issues of community forestry's impact on households. In some FUGs where there are



small forests, and where users are highly dependent on them, intensive management of fuel wood has developed and although quantities are limited, harvesting is on a sustainable basis and the productivity of the forest is increasing. In larger forests, with more diverse groups of users, regulations are often



Changes in sources of supply of fuel wood

imposed which are inappropriate for poorer households, particularly restricting fuel wood selling. In these cases there is less satisfaction among poorer landless households. This reflects their more marginal involvement in and influence on decision-making and this is a critical issue, which must be put right in the future.

Another important finding of the research has been that virtually all the FUGs have weak decision-making processes and no formal planning or resource management systems. Women too are largely outside the process. A key output from the research has been a Micro-Action-Planning methodology, based on Participatory Action Research (PAR), to assist communities to assess for themselves the community forest process, and to plan its future development, in a way that includes all the users. This process was tested on all the FUGs and was found to be of great value. They all developed action plans during the first phase of fieldwork and after one year, over two thirds of points were implemented. The Micro Action-Plans are crucial to ensure support to FUGs (from DoF and other agencies) is on a focused and needs basis.

Key indicators of FUG processes were identified with the communities, to assess how well the process is succeeding. A sophisticated

and diverse list of key process indicators was identified through participatory exercises with users, which reflect the key needs and constraints of FUGs. Indicators such as active forest management, hamlet level interaction, women to be included in the FUG functioning where all given a high priority by users. Small ethnically homogenous User Groups, highly dependent on forest resources for regular fuelwood performed most effectively according to their chosen indicators. As might be expected, larger ethnically diverse and spatially diffuse Groups managing large forests have been less successful. This is due to the greater difficulties in coordinating decision-making, which can lead by default to 'committee' forestry. But on the whole the indicators did show that community forestry in Nepal is a positive and dynamic process that has achieved a great deal.



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