

Narpat Jodha and Anupam Bhatia
International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD)
4/80 Jawalakhel
GPO Box: 3226, Kathmandu, Nepal

Fax No: 977-1-524509
E-mail: jodha@icimod.org.np

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COMMUNITY MANAGEMENT OF COMMONS: RE-EMPOWERMENT PROCESS AND THE GAPS

Previewing the Issues:

Common property Resources (CPRs) are broadly defined as those resources in which a group of people have a co-equal use rights, specially rights that exclude use of those resources by other people. However looking at CPRs from “rights” perspective may disguise the more important ‘obligation or responsibility’ aspects as well as the basic driving forces that help in shaping and enforcing these obligations and rights. In rural areas these rights, obligations and enforcement mechanisms, as the society’s institutional arrangements, are a product of community’s collective concerns, norms and action for common good, which in turn are manifestations of what is described as ‘social capital’. The latter though a social and cultural phenomenon, is a product of society’s prolonged processes of adaptation to its natural resource base. The institution of CPRs or rather rights and obligation towards CPRs are a part of the adaptation process. This is more visible in fragile resource zones such as mountains and dry tropics focussed by this paper.

The decline of CPRs as shown by field evidence (from the areas mentioned above) is closely associated with the depletion of social capital i.e. the community spirit and actions reflecting reciprocity, trust, shared values, net working and group action. This in turn has happened due to several legal and administrative as well as institutional and technological interventions, which have disrupted or derecognised the customary collective arrangements for CPRs and in the process tried to replace ‘social capital’ by externally designed, top down formal arrangements.

The factors like local control of local natural resources, collective stakes in the health and productivity of resources, locally evolved and enforced technological and institutional measures etc., which were not only the product of social capital but in turn strengthened and utilised the social capital, are rarely visible today. The consequence has been the conversion of CPRs in to open access resources and their rapid degradation despite efforts to protect and conserve them through special programmes, subsidies and enlarged bureaucracy.

However, guided by the lessons learnt from the mounting costs and recurrent failures of measures to protect natural resources with out involvement of local communities, some efforts have been initiated to, at least, partially transfer local resources management to local control and to empower local communities for the purpose, or to involve local communities in the protection and management of natural resources. Joint Forest Management in India, User Group Forestry initiatives in Nepal, and participatory irrigation systems in Philippines and Sri Lanka, water harvesting and integrated watershed management projects in several Asian countries would illustrate this (*Krishna et al. 1996, Hobley et al. 1996, Wood and Mellink 1992*).

The basic premise behind these “devolution” efforts is that transfer of local natural resources to local control can induce local communities to protect, conserve and sustainably use these resources. In other words, re-empowerment of the communities to manage CPRs is a key to their revival and sustainable use. However, without this paper, minimising the significance of a few success stories of participatory initiatives, calls for a critical examination of this premise. This is not because of any lack of inherent virtues of devolution but because of the concentration on devolution as a formal arrangement, which ignores the complex of driving forces and integrated processes by which communities are induced and enabled to organise group action to manage their natural resources (e.g., CPRs).

The devolution efforts or the measures to re-empower local communities (through transfer of resource control, provision of joint activities etc.) for management of CPRs, seems to ignore the understanding of the whole process of initial disempowerment of the communities, which led to the present situation of CPRs and the lack of community efforts to redress it. Though the state’s usurpation of community resources under different pretexts (*Guha 1989, Blaikie 1985, Jodha 1992*), was a major and crucial step towards disintegrating traditional management of CPRs, but this also facilitated several other (less visible) changes which converted CPRs into open access resources. An understanding of these changes can help in designing more appropriate and integrated approaches to encourage effective community participation in CPR management. In the absence of this understanding, the currently promoted “devolution efforts” may remain partial, ad hoc and ineffective.

The key points of our argument are as follows. The initial disempowerment of the communities through formal public policies and other interventions contained the following interrelated elements. (i) removal of local (community) control over local resources, and transferring the control to government agencies; (ii) de-recognition/disruption of the customary arrangements for resource management; (iii) marginalisation, or disregard of local perceptions and traditional knowledge systems; (iv) top-down formal interventions displacing the locally evolved technological and institutional practices for CPR development and regeneration. At a second level, the above changes individually or jointly led to (i) depletion of culture of group action manifesting ‘social capital’; (ii) disintegration of community’s collective stake in their natural resources; (iii) individualisation of people’s approaches to natural resources leading to over extraction and degradation of CPRs as open access resources. The current efforts to structure devolution, however, do not respond to most of the above aspects of change. .

Hence, the recent initiatives with all their variants focussing on devolution or re-empowerment of communities to manage local resources, are a positive and necessary but not a sufficient steps to alter the situation, because they do not cover total aspects of the process of re-empowerment or devolution. In the past “empowerment” with all its associated autonomy and social sanctions to build up, protect and strengthen collective stakes in natural resources; design and enforce a variety of sharing arrangements and group action; develop and use the functional knowledge-based appropriate technological measures etc. meant much more than currently emphasised involvement of the people for protection of resources and sharing of some of the benefits.

It is well recognised that the currently attempted devolution or re-empowerment process cannot restore the situation that existed prior to ‘disempowerment’ of communities to manage CPRs, because the objective circumstances affecting CPRs and communities have changed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Increased economic differentiation and socio-political factionalism of rural communities; depletion of CPRs beyond any hope (in most cases), and persistence resistance to self disempowerment on the part of the state, even while promoting devolution, are some examples of the change. In view of the above, a search for the present day substitutes for the key elements of traditional community arrangements for CPRs should get a high priority. The paper elaborates on possible approaches to handle these issues.

The key conclusion of our discussion is that effective community management of CPRs is not simply a matter of according legal rights and autonomy to the communities but an integrated process where collective stake in CPRs, culture of group action (or social capital), people’s functional knowledge and adaptation to biophysical features of CPRs, and explicitly identifiable economic gains from CPRs play important role. The devolution planners, therefore, should give more attention to what makes community management of CPRs effective and structure devolution accordingly. Some possibilities to address the imperatives aforementioned factors are discussed in the paper.

Focus on Devolution: Causes and Responses

The increasing advocacy and demand for devolution or handing over the CPRs to village communities is a consequence of several factors such as mounting costs and failures of government efforts to protect CPRs, (specially forests and parks), without community involvement; grassroots level environmental activism pressing for community rights to local natural resources, discovery or visibility of indigenous systems reflecting effectiveness of community management of natural resources; success stories of NGO supported participatory NRM and donor encouragement and support to them; slowly happening reorientation of government bureaucracy that supports dialogue with communities on management of natural resources, and rapidly enlarging platform (including IASCP) for debating and projecting the ‘devolution’ issues (*Proffenberger et.al. 1996, Hobley et.al. 1996, Joshi, 1997, Jodha 1996b, Hana et.al. 1996*).

The governments, however, have fairly generalised response to the above demand for devolution, though at times there are significant differences depending on the type and productivity of CPR (e.g. forest or pasture) and intensity of pressure for devolution from NGOs, donors etc. This is

reflected by the manner in which public authorities attempt to structure devolution. The key elements of the effort are:

- (i) Creating legal space for the change in terms of legislation or operational directives guiding the transfer of resources or usage right to communities, or involving communities in joint management of natural resources and sharing benefits there from.
- (ii) Provision of enforcement mechanisms including designation of approving/ monitoring authorities, procedures for establishing formal community associations/committees, user groups etc.
- (iii) Establishment of norms, yardsticks and procedures to implement and oversee the proposed changes.
- (iv) Capacity building of local communities both in terms of technical skills and organisational abilities to effectively use the new rights and opportunities.
- (v) Provisions of resource support as well as multi-agency partnerships in the process of implementing devolution.

This absolutely sketchy outline of provisions for structuring devolution efforts does not do any justice to the volumes of finer and varied details characterising the process (*Hobley et.al. 1996, Saxena 1994, Joshi 1997, Palit 1996, Wood and Mellink 1992*). However, our purpose is not to elaborate on the details of devolution approach, but to high light its primary orientations.

Accordingly, the structuring of devolution as manifested by the above provisions could be treated as more legalistic, formal and mechanistic, without addressing the key factors (collective stake in CPRs, culture of group action etc. to be elaborated later) that make community management of natural resources effective. At best they represent only a part of the framework, which if earnestly and effectively implemented can equip the local communities for involvement in CPR management. And this may very well happen in the cases where grassroots level environmental activism has been the key factor which compelled the state for devolution of CPRs to the communities.

However, beyond this, the devolution measures may prove yet another set of well intended but poorly enforceable provisions and which are largely insensitive to the totality of objective circumstances and driving forces behind the current degraded status of CPRs. Furthermore, except for the provisions of local skill formation and potential community mobilisation through NGOs, there is very little in the above provisions to address the “process dimension” of community management of CPRs, where collective stakes in CPRs; culture of group action, diversity, and economics CPRs; local perspectives or knowledge and oral history of CPRs play important role. More importantly, the above devolution provisions do not show enough awareness of the very process of disempowerment of communities and usurpation of community resources by the state, even when the reversal of the same process is supposed to be the goal of devolution efforts.

In view of the very short history of current devolution efforts, the above gaps can be condoned. But at the same time the experience and feedback - based evolution of devolution efforts, a proper understanding the above gaps can prove highly rewarding for structuring of devolution. To facilitate a better understanding of the aforementioned gaps and possible approaches to respond to them, we can look at the community arrangements for natural resource management (NRM) in the past, their decline following the external interventions (including disempowerment of the communities), and possible approaches to revive their relevant components in the present context. This is done through a descriptive account of the changing situation of community natural resources (CPRs) in the fragile resource zones covering countries of Himalayan region and dry tropical plains of India.

The Past and the Present of CPRs in Fragile Areas

Here we describe some features of traditional natural resource use systems with direct relevance to our discussion. It should be added that purpose of high lighting traditional NRM practices in fragile resource zones is not to idealise them. The objective is (a) to indicate the grass roots level institutional arrangements, which helped in balancing the protection and extraction of resources to meet sustenance needs, and (b) to reflect on the processes and factors leading to their erosion and marginalisation.

Table 1 summarises the inferences from different studies in mountains and arid, semi-arid tropical plains on the aspects which are central to the community usage of natural resource (CPRs) in these areas. Accordingly, most of the communities in the relatively isolated, fragile and marginal resource areas, faced with limited, high risk, low productivity options; and limited and undependable external linkages, had to evolve their sustenance strategies through adaptations to the limitations and potentialities of their local natural resource base. They included seasonally and spatially diversified and interlinked land based activities (farming systems, common property resources etc). The key feature of the adaptations were:

- (i) All most total dependence on local natural resource base (NRB), leading to community's explicit realisation of strong links between their sustenance and protection and productivity of their NRB. Despite internal inequities and occupation specific differences in gains from NRB, every one's close dependence on local resources, created an integrated collective stake in their natural resource base (*Berkes 1989, Jodha 1995a, 1997, Leach et.al. 1997*).
- (ii) In the context of relative isolation and small size of the rural communities, the latter's physical proximity to their environmental resources imparted better knowledge and understanding of limitations and usability of their NRB (*Bijoness 1983, Jodha 1995c*). This not only helped in developing folk technological practices to protect and regenerate the resources while using them, but also facilitated creation of locally enforceable range of regulatory measures to guide use-intensity of resources, and periodical contributions (labour etc) towards investment for up keep and development of the resources (*Jodha 1992, Arnold, and Dewees 1995*).

- (iii) Most importantly, enforcement of the above measures was facilitated by social sanctions, group action and in some cases feudal arrangements. The ultimate source of strength for enforcement of these arrangements was local autonomy or local control over local resources and local affairs; and the resource users' collective experiences and knowledge of resource base, due to close proximity (*Jodha 1992, 1998, Sanwal 1989, Leach et.al. 1997*).
- (iv) The regulatory measures and collective efforts also extended to different demand side aspects of resource use. Collective sharing arrangements during scarcity and crisis, management of demand pressure in general through migration and restrictions on size and composition of animal holding etc. were quite common (*Bijoness 1983, Prakash 1997*).

To sum up, the foundations of the traditional systems of natural resource management in the fragile areas included:

- (i) The community's sustenance-driven collective or integrated stake in the health and productivity of its natural resource base.
- (ii) Physical proximity and practical experience based-knowledge and understanding of natural resources, as a basis for evolving technical and institutional measures to prevent overextraction and promote regeneration of resources.
- (iii) Local control over local resources, and adherence to social sanctions empowered the community to protect and enhance community stake in its natural resources, and enforce measures which helped in balancing supply and demand aspects of resource use in the community context.

The above arrangements significantly helped in sustaining the right-obligation arrangements, for conservations and regeneration of CPRs while using them. However, as Table 1 also shows, these arrangements got eroded following the changes which (except population growth) were initiated from the outside. The most critical and common element of these changes has been the conception, design and implementation of external interventions at grass roots level without sufficient understanding of the ground realities including, local communities' concerns, capabilities and knowledge to manage CPRs. These interventions in their respective ways created circumstances and perverse incentives which finally led to:

- (a) Disintegration of community stakes in the local natural resources
- (b) Disempowerment of the communities to manage the grass roots level problems including protection and regeneration of CPRs
- (c) Marginalisation of local knowledge system and institutional arrangements which helped in enforcing rights and obligations necessary for protection and sustained use of CPRs.

The Table 1 focusses on these aspects by indicating the provisions which went against the above traditional arrangement and marginalised them without providing effective substitutes.

To elaborate further, in the first place enhanced physical, administrative and market integration of traditionally less accessible, marginal areas in the main stream systems initiated the processes that disempowered the communities and deprived them of the local resource autonomy; reduced the crucial dependence of local communities on local CPRs. Integration, brought several gains to these areas including external linkage-based diversification of sources of sustenance. But it had some back lash effects in terms of: (i) dilution or disintegration of collective community stake in its natural resources; (ii) disregard and erosion of the traditional arrangements which in the past helped in protection and regulated use of CPRs; a consequence of imposition of several externally conceived and designed technical/institutional interventions with little understanding and sensitivity to grass roots level realities; (iii) depriving the local communities of their role and responsibilities in managing local resources and local affairs; this happening through (a) introduction of largely outward looking and politically oriented formal institutions such as village Panchayats; (b) empowering of government revenue official or forest officials as custodians of community resources; (c) replacement of locally evolved institutional arrangements and customary provisions by legal and administrative arrangement evolved at higher level; and (d) distortion of

community incentive system by patronage, subsidies, relief etc. that not only induced individuals to ignore collective concerns and responsibilities but also led to higher pressure on local CPRs without regenerating them.

The point of concern here is not to question the integration and its benefits, but the process of integration of marginal/fragile areas including through disempowerment of local communities, designing and implementation of interventions for them which were guided by the perspectives of the mainstream system rather than local realities (*Sanwal 1989, Jodha 1995a, 1995b*).

Table 1: Factors and processes associated with the community approaches and usage of natural resources in fragile resource zones under the traditional and the present systems.^{a)}

Situation under traditional systems	Situation under the present day systems
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<p>A. Basic objective circumstances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Poor accessibility, isolation, semi-closeness; low extent and undependable external linkages and support; subsistence oriented small populations; (ii) Almost total or critical dependence on local, fragile, diverse natural resource base (NRB)^{b)} <p>Bottom line: High collective concern for health and productivity of NRB as a source of sustenance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Enhanced physical, administrative and market integration of traditionally isolated, marginal, areas/communities with the dominant mainstream systems at the latter's terms; increased population; externally supported (ii) Reduced critical dependence on local NRB; diversification of means of sustenance. <p>Bottom line: Reduced collective concern for local NRB; rise of individual (extractive) strategies.</p>
<p>B. Key driving forces/factors generated by (A):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Local resource sustenance strategies focused; (ii) Sustenance-driven collective stake in protection and regeneration of NRB; (iii) Close proximity and access-based functional knowledge/understanding of limitation and usability of NRB; (iv) Local control of local resources/decisions; little gap between decision makers and resource users. <p>Bottom line: Collective stake in NRB supported by local control and functional knowledge of NRB.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) External linkage-based diversification of sources of sustenance (welfare, relief, trade, etc); (ii) Disintegration of collective stake in NRB; (iii) Marginalisation of traditional knowledge, and imposition of generalised solutions from above; (iv) Legal, administrative, fiscal measures displacing local controls/decisions; wider gap between decision makers and local resource users. <p>Bottom line: Loss of collective stake and local control over NRB; resource users respond in a 'reactive' mode.</p>
<p>C. Social responses to (B):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Evolution, adoption of resource use systems and folk technologies promoting diversification, resource protection, regeneration, recycling, etc; (ii) Resource use/demand rationing measures; (iii) Formal/informal institutional mechanisms/ group action to enforce the above. <p>Bottom line: Effective social adaptation to NRB.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Extension of externally evolved, generalised technological/institutional interventions; disregarding local concerns/experiences and traditional arrangements; (ii) Emphasis on supply side issues ignoring management of demand pressure; (iii) Formal, rarely enforced measures. <p>Bottom line: NR over-extracted as open access resources.</p>
<p>D. Consequences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Nature-friendly management systems; (ii) Evolved and enforced by local 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) Over-extractive resource use systems, driven by uncontrolled demand;

- a) Table adapted from: Jodha (1995a, 1995b).
- b) NRB in the present context means Common Property Resources

Lessons for the Devolution Planners(?)

The preceding discussion has tried to identify some key factors and circumstances responsible for protection and regeneration of CPRs in the past and their disregard and decline leading to resource degradation in the changed context of today.

In view of the recurrent failures and ineffectiveness of interventions directed to stop degradation of CPRs, one may be tempted to look for some lead from the traditional arrangements. Before venturing in this direction, it should be clearly stated that pleading for revival of traditional arrangements for CPR management may amount to an exercise in futility, because, most of the objective circumstances associated with them in the past have completely changed to permit their revival and ensure their effectiveness in the present context. For instance: (i) market penetration and changes in the attitudes of village communities have promoted the values and approaches which put very low premium on collective strategies; (ii) population growth, rise in factionalisms, and increased economic differentiation have made it difficult to evolve and maintain a collective community stake in CPRs; (iii) depletion of CPRs and depletion of culture of group action tend to reinforce each other in accentuating the community indifference towards rehabilitation of CPRs for collective gains; (iv) the legal, administrative and fiscal mechanisms (despite lip service for the opposite) have strong tendency for centralisation and application of uniform, generalised solutions, ignoring the diversities at the grass roots level. However, our pleading is not for revival of traditional arrangements as they were. Instead, our focus is on a search for functional substitutes of the traditional arrangements, which can fit with the present day circumstances.

The Three Key Elements of Traditional Systems

The factors and circumstances supporting or obstructing community management of CPRs (as summarised under Table 1) are too many and too complex to be addressed through formal structure of devolution as promoted presently. Hence, the devolution process should focus on the key elements or the main springs of community management systems.

In the preceding discussion we identified three elements of traditional resource management/usage systems, which in the past played very crucial role in preventing degradation of natural resources in the fragile resource zones. To reiterate, these elements along with the objective circumstance that promoted and strengthened them were:

- (i) Strong community stake in their NRB, facilitated by community's almost total dependence on local natural resources.
- (ii) Local control over local resources resulting from isolation and inaccessibility induced degree of autonomy.
- (iii) Resource user's and decision makers' functional knowledge of limitations and usability of their diverse natural resources resulting from people's close physical proximity and access to resources.

The incorporation of the three elements (i.e., community stake; local control and functional knowledge of NRB), into the present resource use systems can help in rehabilitation and conservation of CPRs, and therefore should be promoted. But revival of their historically associated circumstances (e.g., exclusive or critical dependence on local resources, semi-closed communities, physical proximity) is neither possible nor desirable. Hence, the challenge lies in creating present day functional substitute of the past circumstances, which can promote the three key elements (community stake etc.) and induce communities to protect and regenerate their CPRs while using them. The devolution has to be structured in a way which could facilitate promotion of such functional substitutes and thereby strengthen the three key elements mentioned above.

However, strengthening of these elements (collective stake etc.) in the present context is not an easy task as elaborated below. While alerting to their constraints we may also suggest indicative possibilities to address the same. The purpose of this discussion is to help widen the scope of thinking and planning of structure of devolution efforts.

(a) Reviving Community Stake in CPRs:

The community stake in the local NRB is most central for protection of and effective management CPRs. However, in the present day context there are more circumstances discouraging this than those supporting it.

(i) The external controls and perverse incentive systems:

In most cases local communities respond or simply adjust to external interventions and impositions i.e., government laws and regulations, rather than control or plan their approach to CPRs. The whole incentive structure - permitting privatisation of community resources, illegal extraction with little penalty, priority to political patronage and unrealistically low or little pricing of high value CPR products - is designed and operated against the community involvement in resource protective and regenerative efforts. The possible solutions to some of the above problems lie in effective transfer of local resources to local control and genuine involvement of local communities in the management of local natural resources. More on this will be discussed in a latter section.

(ii) Extremely depleted CPRs not worth a stake:

In the context of present biophysical (and economic) status of CPRs, the local control over local resources may not induce positive response of the community. The CPRs in many areas are depleted to a level which does not inspire much hope, let alone community's group action for their management.

However, if one goes by the field evidence on rapid regeneration of natural resources with some protection in many parts of India (*Proffenberger 1995, Hazra et. al. 1996*) and more impressive results in Nepal (*Joshi 1997*), the doubts on rehabilitation and growth of biophysical productivity of community natural resources may prove misplaced. At the same time, need for investment and technological input (which is not even a small fraction of the efforts currently devoted to croplands) cannot be overstated.

Furthermore, in the changed economic context, the focus on CPRs as an exclusive source of biomass alone may not help. To induce and encourage active and effective involvement of communities in CPR management, emphasis should be placed on harnessing high value products (herbs, flowers, seed, etc.) from the community natural resources. Evidence shows that people care more about the more productive unit than unproductive unit of the same type of community resource in the same village (*Jodha 1992*).

(iii) *Increased economic differentiation and diversity of interests:*

The technical and economic issues relating to productivity and rehabilitation of NRB discussed above are much simpler to address. The bigger problem relates to the reconciliation of interests of diverse groups in the villages, without which a community's a collective stake in CPRs is impossible. Internal heterogeneity and inequities are not a new thing in the South Asian villages. However, following the already mentioned changes (Table 1), decline of culture of group action, increased economic differentiation and socio-political factionalism, the differences and divisions in the rural communities have greatly increased.

Furthermore, the traditional circumstances facilitating informal inter-group bargaining and reconciliation (Leach et. al. 1997) do not exist any more. For instance, in place of local CPRs as common source of supplies, now there prevail multiple and diverse sources of supplies (of internal and external origin) for the village economy; the long lead time available for internal adaptations and bargaining by action, is no more available; socio-political contexts for different groups at times also fall outside the boundaries of local community's influence. All these factors will potentially obstruct the evolution or revival of community's collective stake in CPRs.

Remedial measures:

Most of the problems indicated above are of institutional nature. We will address them later while discussing the issues relating to local control over local resources. At this stage we will focus on identifying the 'technical basis' (?) of common stake in CPRs for a diverse community.

- (i) First, promotion of genuine functional local autonomy over local resources (partially addressed by current devolution efforts), is a key step which is discussed in detail in the next section. Here we deal with approaches to promote collective actions. Accordingly, one important step in this context is to provide institutional and operational framework for establishment of the CPR-user groups, as already successfully attempted in countries like Nepal, (*Joshi 1997*). This approach has strengthened collective community stake in natural resources. Some what similar but less dramatic experience one finds in areas with joint forest management in India (*Proffenberg et.al. 1996*). Other Asian countries also have a number of successes to report (*Wood and Mellink*).

However, a major problem with this approach emerges when the CPRs legally belongs to the whole village, but all villagers do not subscribe to the similar use or same product e.g., fodder versus timber from community forest. For instance, the richer group may want growth of timber or commercially more valuable product (after long waiting), the poor may prefer more of biomass for current use. Similarly, water harvesting under integrated development of watershed (which belongs to whole group) may not help those who do not

have land to irrigate. This creates conflict of interests between poor and rich respectively supporting different options.

In the cases like the above, a planned diversification of resource use including by integrating processing and marketing activities or introduction of a system of share holding for service or products to facilitate equitable sharing, can be attempted. This has already been done in Shukhumajari watershed development project (*Sarin 1996*), which has helped in establishment of return-based common concern for community resources.

If complemented with investment and technology as well as promotion of high value options discussed earlier, the above approach can help in reviving community stake in its natural resources. An external input through involvement of NGOs can further facilitate in the process. The key lies in identification of "product" which different groups can share. This sort of vertical up-scaling of participation in NRM can be supplemented by horizontal up-scaling of participation, where small CPR user groups are federated, as attempted in Nepal hills.

(b) Local Control Over Local Natural Resources

Traditionally, the mainstream decision makers permitted greater local autonomy to communities in the fragile resource zones. This however, was more due to default (i.e., their inaccessibility-imposed ignorance and indifference) rather than due to a conscious decision. With the increased physical and administrative integration of fragile, remote, marginal areas with the mainstream political-economic systems, the most of the local natural resources belonging to the communities were taken over by the state either through formal law or through disregard of customary laws and practices (*Proffenberger et. al. 1996, Jodha 1996a, Guha 1989*). The consequent lack of local control over local resources prevents local decisions and action for protection and regulated use of natural resources. The importance of changing this situation can hardly be overstated. This is the key premise behind the current devolution efforts as well.

Constraints:

Genuine and effective restoration of the local control over local natural resources is faced with several constraints from the side of both the state and the local communities.

(i) *State's resistance to self disempower*

Despite all the talk of decentralisation, power to people and devolution etc., when it comes to the control of a property or productive resources, the state operating through its sectoral bureaucracy always tries to avoid the issues. Either it tries half hearted compromises such as under the Joint Forest Management (JFM) in India, where community is involved in protecting resources and limited sharing of specific products (e.g., timber) plus use of products which state finds difficult to use (e.g., fodder, liter etc.).

Use of proxy arrangements is another approach adopted by the state to create formal institutions such as the Village Panchayats in India, with all legal powers and provisions as decided by the decision makers at the top. In most cases such bodies are small scale political bodies with very little concern and involvement in CPR management; except when relief and subsidies could be

mobilised by showing the extent of community resources in the village (*Jodha 1992, 1996*). These bodies (despite recent focus on genuine decentralisation) may not be a substitute for ‘user groups’, as their goals are too diversified, and CPRs constitute a small component therein. Difference between village commons managed through village elders and those by elected Panchayat makes this aspect clear (*Brara, 1987*).

Solution to these constraints lies in genuine decentralisation, choice of small communities and their federating arrangements empowering the CPR user groups, and social mobilisation efforts with the help of NGOs etc. (*Hobley et.al. 1996 Proffenberger et.al. 1996*). However, these measures too have certain constraints as discussed below.

(ii) *Faction ridden, differentiated rural communities*

As already alluded to, the present status of village communities in most cases, characterised by factionalism, high dependence on government patronage, and completely eroded culture of group action and sharing systems, does not strongly equip them for accepting and effectively implementing the responsibilities associated with transfer of local resources to local control. In fact some elements of such transfer already forms part of the Panchayat system in India, with little visible impacts so far. In fact in such situation re-empowerment of communities as a part of devolution would amount to giving more power to the powerful at village level.

The solution to this problem lies in a gradual rebuilding of what is described as ‘social capital’ implying culture and mechanisms promoting trust, sharing and group action. Though, a very crucial requirement of CPR management, this institutional change cannot happen through formal, legal measures only, specially when the latter as under present devolution efforts, focus on supply side and not demand side of re-empowerment of communities. This is a task of social awareness generation and mobilisation, where grass roots level voluntary agencies (NGOs), complemented by genuine encouragement by the state can help. Enhancement and visibility of economic gains from CPRs (through high value, value adding products) alluded to earlier can help in over coming the above obstacles. A number of participatory rural development initiatives are already in place (*Krishna et.al. 1997, Zazueta 1995*). Learning from the existing success stories in this field and efforts to replicate them could be an effective approach to equip rural society to manage local resources and build collective stake in their CPRs.

(c) **Use of Local Perspectives and Traditional Knowledge Systems:**

Even when the advocacy on natural resource management is conceived in a national or global context, in most cases, its practical context relates to the local or micro levels. Hence, unless the perceived and projected approaches to natural resource managements, such as the current devolution efforts are sensitive to the local level perception and problems, their success may be limited. However, the local community perceptions, specially the traditional knowledge and experiences are usually by passed while planning and initiating interventions for local areas, community and resources (including CPRs).

A key constraint against changing this approach is the attitude (involving some degree of arrogance and insensitivity) of the planners of the top down approaches to solve local level problems, including degradation of CPRs.

Another reason for bypassing traditional knowledge systems is its non-availability in very articulated form on the one hand and the focus by technocrate decision makers on the form rather than rationale of the traditional practices, on the other.

Since the forms of traditional practices had been context specific (e.g., land extensive farming practices worked well under low population pressure, or total dependence on local natural resource base helped in building community stake in them), they became unfeasible or ineffective with the changed context (Table 1). The decision makers, instead of evolving alternative forms, have discarded both the rationale and forms of traditional practices. This is evident from state approach to CPRs (Table 1, Col. 2).

Remedial Measures

The formulation of the above constraints itself suggest some remedial approaches against them. Accordingly, focus on bottom-up approaches to CPR management; sensitisation of decision makers to local community's perceptions through participatory approaches; identification and incorporation of rationale of traditional practices in to new technological and institutional measures planned for CPRs, should be encouraged. Some of the ongoing initiatives supported by NGOs are already using these approaches.

Over Reliance on NGOs

Three key actors involved in the proposed approaches to rehabilitate and sustainably use CPRs are (i) the state, (ii) the village communities and (iii) NGOs. The factors constraining the role of the first two and possible remedial approaches to them have already been discussed. In comparison to the state and village communities, NGOs are a new actor on the scene. Besides, many of them are mandated to perform or facilitate the changes advocated in the paper. In the discussion their potential involvement has been suggested in practically every context, be it building community stake in CPRs or rebuilding "social capital" to facilitate CPR management or promoting bottom up approach to natural resource management strategies or facilitating devolution process in general. Lest we are accused of over optimistic about NGOs abilities to accomplish indicated tasks in multiple contexts, it will be appropriate to comment on their own limitations and constraints.

To begin with NGOs are a mixed category, and hence being a NGO by itself is not a sufficient condition for their involvement and effectiveness in the tasks outlined in the paper. A discriminating approach in choosing the agencies is a solution to this problem.

Secondly, by background most of the NGOs (their workers) are urban groups even when they operate in rural areas with genuine concern. Consequently, in many cases, their orientation, and perspectives may be at variance from the genuine rural (un articulated) perspectives on the problems. In such cases, NGOs would be only marginally different from the planners of top-down interventions. Even genuinely grass roots level rural voluntary groups in the process of their upward graduation get sucked in to the main stream (urban centred) NGOs. Possible solutions to this problem may include federating the local voluntary groups, non-imposition of pre-determined perspectives of NGOs but to evolve through participatory approaches solutions to rural problems. A number of NGOs already do this, but there are not objective yard sticks to separate such NGOs

from others on a **priori basis**. NGOs themselves have not been able to evolve any quality control devices for this purpose.

Third aspect, quite related to the above issues, concerns with the role of NGOs as mediating agency between the state and rural community. In the process, NGOs may not only focus on selling their own perspectives and approaches but tend to build their own space and indispensability. That fits well with the state, which neither understands rural communities or CPRs well enough nor can deliver promised goods and services. NGOs fill in this gap nicely. Possible solutions to this problem lies in NGOs' own determined effort to reduce dependency on them and create local voluntary groups while implementing the interventions, and not to stick to the same place longer than needed.

Fourth, tendency of many NGOs to stick to their success stories and use them both for greater lime light and increased funding from governments and donors compromises their image as task oriented voluntary groups. The possible solution to the above problems will be the same as indicated in the preceding para.

Finally, in the preceding discussion, we focused only on NGOs. But the field experience shows that several government agencies, academic institutions and un-labelled small voluntary groups have helped in resolving grass roots level problems, both by field action and policy - programme influencing. Their strong complementarity with the NGO efforts should be further promoted and harnessed (Zazueta 1995, Krishna et.al. 1997). This probably can help in replicating and up scaling the success stories of CPR resource management scattered in isolated pockets.

Conclusion

The above discussion has pleaded for stronger focus on three components namely rebuilding community stakes in CPRs; local control over local CPRs, and use of local perspective, knowledge to make devolution efforts more relevant and effective to rehabilitate and sustainably use CPRs. We also highlighted to the constraints to promotion of these element and indicative possibilities to address them. Some of these possibilities (at least in formal terms) constitute a part of the on-going devolution efforts. The paper attempted to provide more concrete context for widening the scope of thinking and planning for structuring devolution. The concrete targets of such devolution efforts would include:

- (i) Rural communities, which are currently disabled by economic and socio-economic differentiation, to think in terms of collective stakes in CPRs and readily benefit from formal devolution/re-empowerment efforts promoted today. This calls for a focused attention to reviving culture of group action.
- (ii) the state, which despite efforts to promote devolution, continues to resist self disempowerment though sharing responsibilities and authority with others. This has to change to facilitate multi-agency partnership in management CPRs.
- (iii) CPRs themselves, which are too much depleted to induce community group action for their management. In the current contexts of rising role of market forces (economic liberalisation etc.), CPRs will to have prove their economic gains to the community.

- (iv) NGOs as a major facilitator of change at the grass roots level, may need introspection and change in their perspectives, vis-a-vis rural communities.

The above items should form worth-examining components of an agenda for meaningful structuring devolution.

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