

Social Mobilization and Governance of Community Forest in Chitwan, Central Terai, Nepal: A Case Study

by

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Abstract

Decentralization as a means to improve forest management and promote sustainability has been practiced while governing the forest. Although the Forest Act, 1993 and Forest Regulations, 1995 has clearly opened up the avenue for the implementation of Community Forestry (CF) program in the Terai as in the Hills of Nepal, CF program in the Terai region was started lately after it was originated and experienced its success in the Hill region of the country. This is because user group identification is serious issue in the Terai region. The Forest Act 1993 and the Forest Regulations 1995 has clearly defined Community Forest User Group (CFUG) as a self-governing institution with rights to acquire, sell, or transfer forest products. CFUG has the right of mobilizing the fund for managing and developing their community forest and for other community development activities. To assess social mobilization, incentives and user group's fund mobilization processes in the Terai community forest, a study was conducted using International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) protocols. This study was done in Parewaswori community forest of Chitwan district. The paper analyzes participation of forest users in the governance of the forest and utilization of user group's fund (income derived from forest management).

INTRODUCTION

After the nationalization of forests through the enactment of the Private Forest Nationalization Act, 1957, forest exploitation took place haphazardly, and heavy deforestation as well as degradation in the forest condition was observed due to lack of adequate resources for effective monitoring, and loss of incentives to local people. Statistics show a decline in national forest cover from 47.6 per cent in 1954 to 42.2 percent in 1978 (CBS, 2001). Forest planners began to reconsider the management capability of the Department of Forests as the government's only sole authorization in forest protection, and a necessity of participation of forest users in the forest management was realized. Kanel (2001) argues that this situation led to an institutional innovation in the management of forests that resulted in the decentralization of forest management rights to local communities.

Decentralization in forestry was started in 1978 as Panchayat Forest, and Panchayat Protected Forest with the legislation of Panchayat Forest Rules, and Panchayat Protected Forest Rules, 1978 under the Forest Act, 1961. With this enactment, Department of Forest (DOF) was authorized to hand over the management of national forests (government managed forests) to local government units, Panchayat (village/town development committees). Hand over of national forests on the basis of political boundary and political bodies was not found to be practical because it excluded traditional and real users from their traditional use rights. To address all the traditional users in the management of forest, several acts, regulations and policies were revised. The development of community forestry policy resulted to the formulation of Decentralization Act 1982, National Conservation Strategy for Nepal 1988, Master Plan for Forestry Sector 1989, Forest Act 1993, Forest Regulations 1995, and Community Forestry Directives 1995.

The Forest Act, 1993 empowers the District Forest Office (DFO) to hand over management of national forest to a user group as a Community Forest (CF). The user group, identified as Community Forest User Group (CFUG), is responsible to manage, use, and develop the forest. The user group must be guided by a constitution of the group, and operational plan of the forest. The user group is recognized as a self-governing, autonomous body, enabled to sell and distribute forest products. It has the right to exclude others from using the forest, and the right to use its funds for forest conservation and other community development activities. Hence, devolution of power regarding rights and responsibilities of forest management in CF is remarkable. At present, the main objective of the nation's forest policy is to hand over management of the national forests to local users rather than to manage by the government itself.

Although the Forest Act 1993 and Forest Regulations 1995 do not distinguish between Hill and Terai in handing over the national forests to CFUGs, CF program in the Terai region was started lately, and the pace of handing over the forests in the Terai is relatively very slow. The total forest area in Nepal records at 5,828,368 ha. Of this, Terai region covers 2,528,200 ha. and Hills area covers 3,300,168 ha. (CBS, 2001). Community forest in the Hills area comes to 28.3 percent (932,430 ha.), while Terai area has 5.2 percent (132,572 ha.) of the total forest area (DOF, 2004). Several issues have emerged in handing over the Terai forests, like identification of real users, exclusion of traditional users and equity. Bhatta (2002) argues that identification of users and equity are serious issues affecting success of Terai community forestry, and there is also misuse of fund. Likewise, Pokharel and Amatya (2001) identifies some issues like policy and legal, CF awareness and participation, encroaches as users, CFUG capacity, DFO institutional capacity that have implication in scaling-up community forestry in the Terai. Winrock (2002) identifies that community forestry in the

Terai in its present form is problematic, given the loss of traditional use rights. Shrestha and Shrestha (2002) argues that instances of misuse of CFUG funds and harvesting of commercial trees as against the operational plan also has hampered the progress of the program in the Terai. Kanel (2001) points out that handing over Terai forests to CFUGs might lead to better management but the state would lose its revenue source, and the state has to bear additional cost of extension, monitoring and other forest management activities.

This paper attempts to explore on two research questions: a) How different ethnic groups (forest users) participate in governance of the community forest? b) How income derived from the forest management (CFUG fund) is utilized? On the basis of the findings, the paper has identified the prime factor that are playing major role to make Terai CF successful and would be worthwhile for extending community forestry program in the Terai.

METHODS

The study was carried out from 18 April to 1 May 2003 by a team of forester, botanist, sociologist, and economist. Data on socio-economic and biological condition was collected using the methodology of the International Forestry Resources and Institutions (IFRI) Research Program. Data were collected through field observations, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) techniques, personal interviews, and extensive focus group discussions with forest users as well as other stakeholders. Vegetation characteristics of forests were measured in 60 forest plots. The forest plots were selected based on systematic sampling technique with an interval of 150 meters between the two plots. A household survey of 30 households was conducted keeping in view the extent of awareness, participation, use and the sources of forest products. A complete enumeration of the user group

members was conducted to collect information on demography, livestock, education and employment. For secondary data, the constitution and operational plan of the CFUG, and related publications were collected and used.

Study Site

The study site is located in ward no. 5 and 6 of Piple VDC of Chitwan district at a distance of 36 km. from Bharatpur, the district headquarters. The latitude and longitude of the site records at 27° 36' 47.2" N, and 84° 42' 42.1" E respectively. The site consists of 12 settlements. Elevation of the settlements varies from 320 m. to 935 m., and location of the forest stretches from 320 m. to 975m. The vegetation is tropical and dominated by *Shorea robusta*. The upper settlements are surrounded by the forest, situated in hill area, and have mostly steep portions with inferior farmland. Tamang and Chepang (Praja), the most disadvantaged group and rated as poor, live in this part of the site. The settlements in the lower parts are located in flat land with good farmland accessed by irrigation canals. Mixed ethnic groups, mostly dominated by Brahmin and Chhetri, are found in the plain area. Lothar Bazaar, located on Bharatpur-Hetauda High-Way, is the nearest and the most frequently used market. Lothar Bazaar is a developing rural market. The distance to the market from the settlements varies 1 km. to 10 km., and to the forest varies from 0.2 km. to 1.5 km.

RESULTS

Group Mobilization

Forest users of Piple Village Development Committee (VDC) started to protect the forest since 1991 with formation of a VDC level protection committee. The protection committee could not function its management activities due to large forest boundary and lack of participation from forest

users. As such, the protection committee could not exist. In 1993, the forest users of ward no. 6 formed a community forest user group to use and manage the forest of ward no 6. This group prepared constitution of the group, and operational plan of the forest with technical support from the District Forest Office in 1995. The forest was officially handed over to the group in 1996. Currently, the user group has membership of 483 households mostly from ward no. 6, and some from ward no. 5.

The member households have right to use and harvest forest products as envisaged in the operational plan, and they are responsible to participate in forest management and assembly meetings, and share views in rules making without distinction of ward numbers of their residence. Member households from ward no. 5 do not have right to vote in selecting executive committee members.

A total of 17,060 labor days (equivalent of Rs. 1,279,500) were contributed to the forest management during the last 5 years. The forest management activities were conducted for a week each year. All the member households have participated in the forest management.

During the group formation, demarcation of the forest and boundary of the encroached area (previous encroached forest area) were marked. All the encroachers have been included in the group. They have been warned against further encroachment, and voluntarily checked further encroachment by others and themselves.

Governance

The success or failure of community forestry program depends on the procedure that was followed during preparation of community forest constitution and operational plan. Active

involvement of people in decision-making, benefit sharing and forest management activities (plantation, thinning, pruning, bush cutting) from different economic classes, women and disadvantage group plays great role in this aspect. Therefore, governance is intended to efficient management of forest user group for sustainable management of natural resources. In the study area, it is observed that rules and regulation regarding the governance of community forest are made in general assembly meeting, and implemented by the decision of the executive committee, and sub-committee.

The assembly meeting is held once a year. From the PRA discussion with the executive committee members and forest users, it is estimated that about 65 percent of user members had attended the last year's general assembly meeting. From the household survey, it is found that 83 percent of members have attended the general meeting. Of the total participated households, 52 percent are from Tamang and Praja (disadvantaged families) while 48 percent are from Brahmin, Chhetri, and others (herein after termed as other groups). In the rule-making process, nearly 62 percent of disadvantaged families have been bold to speak, whereas over 66 percent from other groups have put their opinion. From gender perspective, only two women (6.7 %), one from disadvantaged group, and one from other group, have participated in the general assembly. They have not expressed their opinion on rule making. Overwhelming participation of disadvantaged families in the assembly and their active role in decision-making is very much positive aspect to make community forestry program successful as they dependent on the forest significantly. The involvement of women was found to be quite low in the assembly and decision making procedure.

The user group has established one executive committee and one sub-committee to implement daily functions of the group. The committee meeting is held once a month. Most of the members attend the meeting. The members are elected for 5 years. The executive committee members are composed from Brahmin, Tamang, Magar, and Damai ethnic groups. The sub-committee members are from Tamang and Praja only, regarded as the most backward and unprivileged ethnic groups.

The executive committee members are selected from hilly and plain settlements, while the sub-committee members are from hilly settlements only. The sub-committee has been delegated power to collect fees/prices and use locally.

Incentives

Harvesting of grass, tree fodder, fuelwood from dry and dead branches, and leaf litter are allowed free of cost. Wood, which is not useful for timber but useful for fuelwood, is distributed at Rs. 2 per bhari (30 kgs.). The user group has established two system of pricing for timber harvesting, one is based on cubic feet (cft.) (Rs. 20 for one cft.), and other is based on pole size (Rs. 150 to Rs. 500 depending on the pole size). The latter system is preferred by hill residents who are economically weak, and found affordable to them in comparison to the price based on cubic feet measurement. A member household is allowed up to 80 cft. If he needs more than the allowed quantity, he has to pay Rs. 40 for one cft. User group members affected by natural calamities like flood and landslides can get timber by paying Rs. 5 for one cft.

Fund Utilization

A CFUG has own fund received from fees collected with members, income from sales of forest products, and other receipts. A total of Rs. 8,736,665 (US \$ 121,343) has been recorded as income of the group over the six year period, 1996/97 to 2001/02 with an average of Rs. 1,456,111 (US\$ 20,224). The financial statement reveals that receipts from forest product sales (mainly timber), and member/application fees are main sources of income of the group. A development support grant (3 %) from the District Development Committee, Chitwan and an International Non-government Organization is received in the fiscal year 2001/02 (Table 1a).

Table 1a about here.

In the expenditure side, expenses in forest development (6%), community development (18%), loan investment, credit to user group members for income generating activities, (25%), transport and processing of timber (14%), and salary/allowances and office expenses (10%) are the principal items. Forest development includes fencing, plantation in the bare land, and salary of a forest watcher. Community development cost includes expenses in road/trail construction in the forest, salary of a teacher in the local school, and drinking water tank construction. Credit has been provided mainly to livestock rearing, farming, and other business development. Nearly 27 percent of the total income is saved after meeting all the expenses (Table 1b).

Table 1b about here.

DISCUSSION

a) Equity

Three levels of equality like intra-CFUG equity, inter-CFUG equity and equity between those with CFs and those without are recognized in benefits of equity in community forest (Bird, 2002).

This paper attempts to deal about inter-CFUG equity. Bird (2002) argues that communities are generally more comfortable with equality than equity, and the primary factors limiting equity within CFUG is the exclusion of the poor from decision making process. Ensuring equity in community forest programs is critical for achieving social justice and success of community forestry programs (Winrock, 2002). For achieving social justice and make community forestry successful program, the poor, women and disadvantaged groups should participate effectively in the decision-making processes.

The priorities for forest products from community forest depend on the caste, wealth and availability of private tree resources. For example, the prime interest of high economic user group member may be obtaining timber from the community forest. On the other hand, lower economic class people's interest may be fuelwood. Therefore, to table the voice of different interest group's people, there should be provision of involving such interest group in decision-making processes. Otherwise, decisions are made in favor of people who hold decision-making power. If there is domination of elite people in decision-making, probably there may be chances of not tabling the voice of lower castes. In this context, the user group has representative from major ethnic groups in the executive committee with Brahmin/Chhetri 72 percent, and disadvantaged families 28 percent. More than 16 percent committee members are from women. The group's basic policy is decided with the voices from every member participated in the general assembly of user group, and implemented by the committee accordingly. More than 60 percent of disadvantaged families and nearly 7 percent of women users participate in the rule-making process. The poor's voice and interest are found to be addressed properly.

Two types of pricing system for timber extraction are found very justifiable to the poor, and unprivileged users. Again, those users who consume more timber than others need to pay more money.

b) Livelihood Supports

Livelihoods of the people in the rural areas depend on the forest resources for their subsistence needs as well as commercial activities. There are 15 poor households who depend on fuelwood selling, and eight households of Kami ethnic group who operate ironworks (repairing of agricultural tools) for their livelihood. These households can obtain fuelwood from the community forest by abiding the rules of the user group as existing traditionally to run their commercial activities. This rule plays positive role to make disadvantaged group actively participate in the forest management activities.

c) Fund utilization

Expense of six percent of total income in forest development is below the requirement provisioned by the community forestry guideline that suggests a requirement of 25 percent. If the volunteer labor (nearly 15 %) contributed by the member households is to be considered, the expenses would be still less by four percent.

Credit provided to the members has been found helpful to run farming activities, and other income generating activities. But providing of loan to help get foreign employment has been facing a problem of reimbursement, and cannot be perceived as fair. For example, a loan amount of Rs 1 lakh 19 thousand provided to a member to go foreign country in search of work has not been repaid back.

It has been a matter of critics by the members, and there is tension between executive members and general members.

CONCLUSION

The study shows that community forestry program in the Terai can be successful to protect the forest and fulfill the basic needs of users, and generate a large amount of money. However, the study revealed that proper mobilization of the money generated from forest management is a problem. Six percent of the total income expended on forestry development is very low against the actual requirement, and a big amount of credit provided to a single person has been a problem of reimbursing, and not justifiable. The substantial portion of income remains in the group's bank account with low interest. It can be used in a better way.

The user group has provided equal opportunity for the unprivileged ethnic groups to represent them in the governance of community forest. Two levels of committee organization have been democratic, and rational. It has empowered unprivileged groups like Praja, and Tamang in the decision-making processes. Poor and unprivileged households who significantly depend on the forest for their subsistence livelihood by selling firewood are not hampered even after the implementation of community forestry.

The user group has maintained equity by making two pricing system for timber harvesting, one is pole size based, and other is cubic feet based. The former is economical and affordable to the poor, and disadvantaged group, especially living in the upper hill settlements. Again, timber price

determination is progressive, because the users demanding more timber have to pay more money than the first allotment.

The user group has been successful in controlling encroachment of the forest, which is the main problem in the Terai region. The identification of traditional users and included them into user group was done systematically and that ultimately contributing for success of the community forest. Besides, handover of all accessible adjacent forests to other neighboring communities is also prime reason to make this user group successful.

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Table 1a: Income of Parewaswari Community Forest User Group

Particulars	2001/02	2000/01	1999/2000	1998/99	1997/98	1996/97	Total
Balance from previous year	256,518	446,648	808,474	452,971	45,700	100,000	2,110,311
Sales of forest product	1,128,533	549,646	627,663	1,560,761	791,966	53,033	4,711,602
Development support	280,000	0	0	0	0	0	280,000
Member/application fees	16,846	29,206	14,160	37,760	12,710	12,715	123,397
Interest earned, loan repayment	129,099	0	1,025,407	288,830	67,757	262	1,511,355
Total	1,810,996	1,025,500	2,475,704	2,340,322	918,133	166,010	8,736,665

Table 1b: Expenditure of Parewaswari Community Forest User Group

Particulars	2001/02	2000/01	1999/2000	1998/99	1997/98	1996/97	Total
Forest development	236,983	200,000	56,887	0	0	0	493,870
Community development	787,526	188,540	273,090	272,061	23,255	0	1,544,472
Salary/allowances	97,686	218,636	146,124	182,048	91,248	49,960	785,702
Office expenses	26,851	0	0	35,115	9,054	0	71,020
Timber transport, processing	327,729	161,806	134,984	484,839	76,930	70,350	1,256,638
Land purchase, building	0	0	11,667	0	23,180	0	34,847
Loan investment (credit)	0	0	1,406,304	557,785	241,495	0	2,205,584
Cash Balance	334,221	256,518	446,648	808,474	452,971	45,700	2,344,532
Total	1,810,996	1,025,500	2,475,704	2,340,322	918,133	166,010	8,736,665