

Contextualizing Common Property Systems: Action Research Insights on Forging Effective Links between Forest Commons and ‘Meso’ Layer Governance

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Abstract

The literature on common property resources is heavily focused on understanding how users of the commons interact with each other regarding production and appropriation of these resources. There is, however, relatively little attention paid to understanding how meso level governance – i.e., that layer between local level and national (policy) level - interacts with users of the commons in shaping the social and environmental outcomes of commons management. The meso level consists of actors, institutions and processes which interact with each other and with users of commons, interpret and enforce policies and regulations, and can also reinterpret or misinterpret policies according to their own interests and agendas with beneficial or deleterious effects on the actors and the commons. We contend that the dynamic link between meso level governance and the commons is not sufficiently appreciated and poorly understood. Taking Nepal’s community forestry as a case study, this paper seeks to explore the dynamic links between meso level processes and the commons. Based on the learning and reflections from an ‘adaptive collaborative management’ research project implemented in five districts of Nepal over the past two years, the paper seeks to: a) develop a preliminary conceptual framework for understanding meso spheres of governance in relation to local level commons; b) describe the nature of linkages between the meso level and community forestry and their influences on the condition of the commons and the livelihoods of forest users; and, c) share action research insights on how meso-commons linkages can be improved.

Introduction

This paper seeks to challenge conventional understanding of commons that emphasizes solely the self-organization of local users for the sustainable management of the commons. Rather, we suggest that a better understanding of the dynamic link between the structures and agencies that interact with the management of the commons is needed in order to enhance social and environmental outcomes of the commons. In this paper we identify a ‘meso’ layer of actors, institutions and processes outside and above the local commons users that are involved in shaping the management of the commons.

The literature on common property resources emerged as a critic of earlier theories that highlighted the temptation of users to harvest resources unsustainably. In reply, this literature analyzes and appreciates the mutual interactions of users of the commons regarding production and appropriation of these resources. There is, however, relatively little attention paid to actors,

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institutions and discourses outside the users' domain that directly or indirectly influence the governance of the commons. The role of the 'meso' level in particular is important in influencing the governance of the commons as it is this layer which shapes management processes and outcomes of the commons.

Our conception is that the meso layer consists of actors, institutions and processes, which influence the workings of the commons in a variety of ways, i.e. learning from CFUGs, providing material and technical support and feeding back to policy making level. They interpret and enforce the policies and regulations which emanate from national policy makers. Relatedly, they can also re-interpret or misinterpret these policies according to their own interests and agendas, with beneficial or deleterious effects on the actors and the commons. The meso level may take the form of forums and networks of the users themselves, in which cases they represent the voices and interests of the users, as well as their resistance against national policies on governing the commons. In other cases, they may take the form of hybrid forums that are arena of contestation and negotiation over management of the commons.

We take a case from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)-funded research project in Nepal titled: *Improving Livelihoods and Equity in Community Forestry in Nepal: The Role of Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM)*. This ACM Research Project is being implemented jointly by ForestAction and New Era in Nepal in partnership with the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR). The project seeks to examine the potential of an adaptive collaborative management approach to improve governance in community forestry and thereby enhance livelihoods and equity. The role of the *meso* level in improving the governance of the community forestry, and particularly in the meso level's influence on livelihoods and equity outcomes, is a very important aspect of the research project.

In this project we are analyzing the intersection of different actors, which occupy the meso level space of forest governance in Nepal. These actors include state and donor agencies (here we have seen formal government institutions including policy and legal provisions of community forestry, market forces, political parties and civil society (mainly community-based organizations/non-governmental organizations, networks, citizen forums). Our information collection and analysis focuses on the interactions between meso actors and the governance of the community forestry with the consequential social and environmental outcomes. This study also explores existing spaces for meso level sharing, learning and deliberation and the perception of meso actors on the importance and effectiveness of these forums.

The paper is divided into five sections. The second section draws from theoretical reviews and literature on the commons and shows that many existing theories have placed an emphasis on the self-organisation of the local users of commons, while relatively ignoring external factors in shaping the governance of the commons. The third section discusses the conceptualisation of the meso level and its link with governance of the commons. The fourth section draws from the community forestry programme experience in Nepal to illustrate some of the meso level influences in the management of community forests. The fifth section brings insights from the ACM Research Project in five sites and extracts some lessons on strategies and actions that can strengthen the dynamic link between the meso and the commons. Finally, the paper concludes that

an adaptive collaborative management approach is highly helpful in strengthening the meso-comons link that enhances the social and environmental outcomes of the commons.

Meso Level Governance: The Missing Link in Common Property Theory

Theories of common property have emerged since the late 1980s, parallel to an increased emphasis on decentralization and devolution in natural resource governance. These theories primarily analyse the complex relation between the local users and governance of the commons, along with their social and environmental outcomes (Ostrom, 1990; Bromley, 2004, Baland and Platteau, 1996; Agrawal, 2001; Agrawal and Ostrom 2001; Jodha, 1986; Runge 1996; Dolsak and Ostrom, 2003; Pottete and Ostrom, 2002). Contrary to the earlier theories of commons in which commons were perceived as dwindling 'open access' resources, these theories appreciate the self-organising capacity of the users of the commons leading to their sustainable management (Ostrum, 1999).

Very recently, some limits of the CPR theories in providing an adequate explanatory framework for natural resource problems are being recognized. Campbell *et al* (2001) warn about the existence of a fair degree of misplaced optimism about common property resource (CPR) management. Instead they observed a gradual breakdown of traditional institutions rooted in norm-based control and the lack of any emerging alternative institutions for such management. They suggest that advocacy of CPR systems has to be tempered with critical analysis. The limited consideration of the external environment affecting commons institutions has been highlighted by critics (Agrawal, 2001). For example, even when CPR theories do address external forces, this consideration is often limited to policies and market forces at the macro level. Furthermore, critics have also suggested that the causal links explaining what makes commons work are underdeveloped (Agrawal, 2001). The economic-institutional modelling of CPR systems in terms of sets of rules and co-operative equilibrium outcomes, internally sustained by a structure of incentives, have been recently challenged (Mosse, 1997). Its basis in rational choice theory, which assumes that all individuals are rational human being who makes decisions based on cost-benefit analysis, has come under criticism for being too narrowly focused on the technical and economist aspects of resource management and the emphasis on resource appropriation.

We suggest that the socio-ecological systems that govern commons are, in fact, too complex for narrowly focussed models to accurately predict directions. This suggestion implies a rejection of objectivist and reductionist approaches to the analysis of the commons, and instead indicates an appreciation for a social constructivists' perspective (Steins and Edwards, 1999). Taking such a perspective to these issues means that, beyond the economic costs and benefits, users' behaviour towards commons are shaped by the wider socio-economic and politico-cultural system in which users operate. This approach studies CPR as an entity within a wider external environment, and focuses on resource users' motivations for their action strategies. It views each social group as an essential part of the larger social system. The outcome of collective management is considered to be the result of interactions between actors and their natural environment, which depends on the way actors "socially construct" their everyday reality. As a theory to explain the management of the commons it is informed by an historically and politically grounded understanding of resources, rights and entitlements.

Cleaver (2000) illustrates this by questioning the prevalence of rational choice premises in defining the problem of collective action and the persuasiveness of institutionalism in offering solutions to it. He rejects simple evolutionary theorizing about institutions in favour of an embedded approach that allows for complexity, for the social and historical location of collective action and for an examination of the interface between agency and structure. Building on this view, we argue in this paper that collective management of the commons is shaped by multiple factors, including the socio-ecological systems of the commons, that are themselves dynamic, uncertain, changeable and evolving.

Thus in this paper, our starting point is that the idea that narrowly (*i.e.*, purely locally and/or econo-institutionally) focussed CPR theories are inadequate in explaining the external forces that shape commons institutions and outcomes. Besides the need to recognize context and complexity in general, we specifically highlight the need to include in commons analysis the governance processes that occur at the layer below the national level policies and above the local level, which we call the ‘meso’ level. This level has a dynamic link with the users of the commons that shapes social and environmental outcomes of the commons. A better understanding the meso level and its dynamic interaction with the management of the commons in CPR theory will be helpful in the positive transformation of, and support to, these links as needed, for so that social and environmental outcomes of the management of the commons may be enhanced over time (Banjade 2006; Banjade *et al.* 2006).

Conceptualizing the link between meso level governance and the commons

The meso level consists of actors, institutions and processes that operate immediately ‘above’ the local level. It is also the intersecting point of market, civil society and government, who often interact and influence the governance of the commons. Actors at this level transmit and mediate policies and, as such, influence social and environmental outcomes of those policies. These meso level actors, institutions and processes are in direct interface with local communities where the ultimate policy outcomes are expected to be realized.

In the context of community forestry governance of Nepal, the government offices, civil society organizations and market agencies at the district and sub-district level can be conceived of as meso level actors. For example, in the management of commons such as community forests, government’s forest sector agencies such as DFO and its subordinate offices, District Soil Conservation Offices, protected area authorities are the key agencies at meso level. Other support agencies such as bilateral projects, I/NGOs working in the forest sector, and networks and federations of community forest user groups such as FECOFUN also are important players at meso level. Besides, private agencies and co-operatives involved in forest product related trade have increasingly played active role at meso level. These are the responsible agencies to interpret, implement/enforce and monitor the implementation of national policies on community forestry. In some cases, federations and networks of users have also actively participated in these forums representing their own voices and interests.

Community forestry, which has produced positive results in restoring forests in the hills of Nepal, is now facing its challenges of governance, equity and livelihoods (Banjade and Ojha, 2005; Malla, 2000). The heavily degrading forests of Nepalese hills which were described to be at the

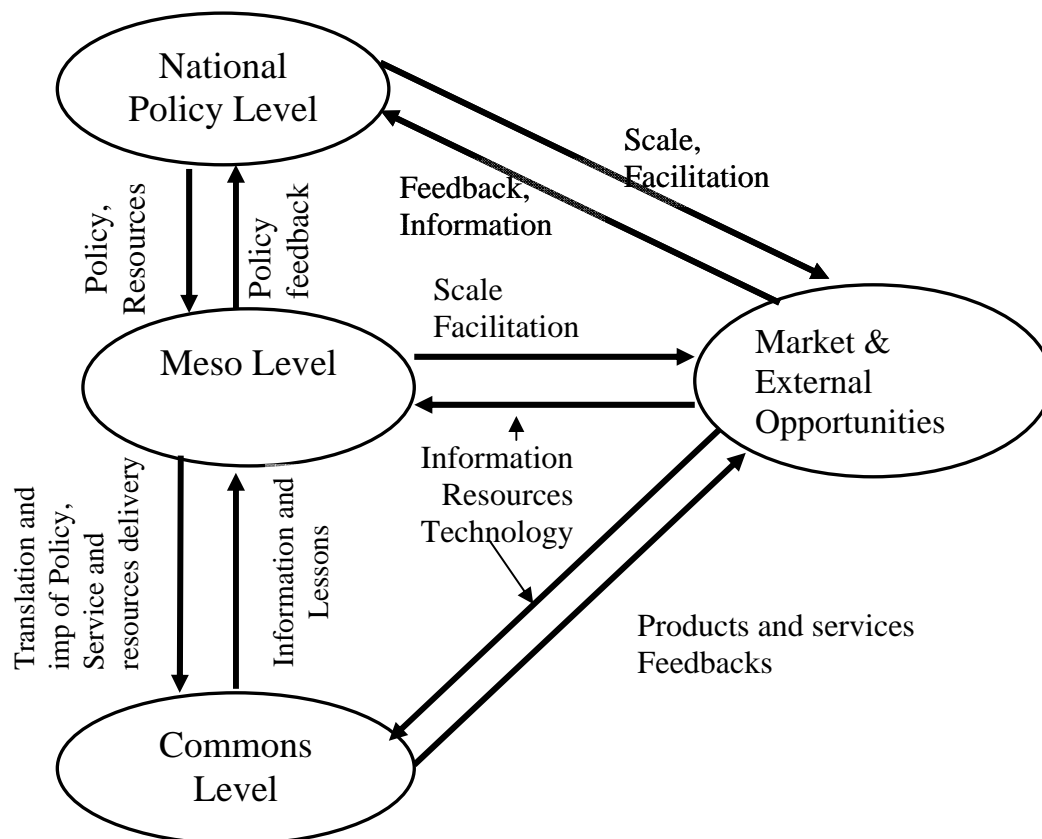
brink of environmental disaster (Eckholm, 1976; World Bank, 1979), were rehabilitated after handing over forest management responsibilities to local forests user groups. After the introduction of community forestry, there has been a resurgence of community groups to manage small forests patches as commons. Since, halting environmental degradation was the prime objective of community forest policies, management of community forests during these early periods were primarily guided by protectionist ideas. This approach was also straightforward from a management perspective. However, along with the improvement in the condition of the forests, discourses on the roles of forests have changed from protection to management and sustainable use. The Fourth Community Forest National Conference held in August 2004 identified livelihoods, equity, governance and sustainability as the key issues currently faced by the community forestry process in Nepal (Kandel, 2004).

This shift of the community forestry programme away from protection to supporting livelihoods has created a need for increased collaboration between multiple actors: a) concerned government line agencies such as forest, agriculture, livestock, soil conservation and rural (local) development; b) NGOs and other civil society organizations; and c) private agencies. However, this need has been constrained by the top-down and fixed management approaches, and narrow institutional mandates, of most of the actors. While, several policy initiatives have been taken to address these needs, less attention has been given by practitioners and theorists alike to the meso level. As noted earlier, this level plays a crucial role in implementing central policies and mediating outcomes of those policies. Furthermore, although meso level actors connected with central organizations⁶ usually represent their central policy level organizations in the district, it does not mean they fully subscribe central level policy intentions. Instead they are partially detached from their institutional centers and have a certain degree of freedom and agency to act in different ways. This freedom and agency of the meso level actors can play significant roles in shaping the governance of commons.

Through the above described features, the meso level filters, transmits and mediates community forestry policies by re-interpreting - and sometimes mis-interpreting - policies during their implementation (see Figure 1). Meso actors primarily translate and implement national policies, provide (or fail to provide) responses to local demand on services and resources, and co-ordinate with other meso actors on these issues. Relatedly, this level also functions as a feedback mechanism. Based – ideally - on action-verified lessons, meso actors inform the central level policy-making bodies of their respective sectoral lines. In this process they interact with both the policy makers and the local communities and filter communication between them. District Forest Officers (DFOs), for example, implement forest policies such as community forestry, protect the national forests, regulate people's access to forests, fine offenders, and regulate forest management activities of community forest user groups (CFUGs). At the same time, they gather information, as well as generate opinions, based on these experiences and provide feedback to the Department of Forest and Ministry of Forests.

⁶As opposed to some meso actors who represent their local organizations, for example CFUG representatives in CFUG networks or cooperatives.

Figure 1 Role and Linkages of Meso



It is also significant that the ‘meso level’ is more than an aggregate of individual actors. The diverse actors generally follow different institutional practices and discourses that are historically rooted in different social and cultural systems. In other words, while we noted above the importance of the freedom and agency of meso actors, it is equally important to note that they do not act entirely based on conscious “free will” that is detached from their social contexts. Instead their agency is highly shaped by historical processes of cultural production and re-production, so that their practices, cognitive frames, and ideologies, are generated without conscious reflection. This is true not only of individuals but also of organizations as well. Government offices, for example, largely subscribe to a stereotyped understanding of the relation between state and society and the dominant discourses of environment and development. Protectionist ideologies have guided the management priorities of many community forests giving a heavy emphasis on environmental objectives, usually at the expense of livelihoods objectives. In cases where CFUGs are development-oriented, they tend to focus on infrastructure. In fact, these understanding and

assumptions regarding well-being have become the guiding principles of community forestry management in Nepal.

The meso level can thus be conceived of as a complex arena of actors, institutions and processes along with actors' resources, interests, and also strategies that they utilize to shape policy outcomes. As such, meso level actors, institutions and processes are part of a field of continuous struggle and contestation over identities, positions, resources and goals. In practice, through constructive engagement in meso forums, the meso level can potentially create opportunities for transforming meso actors' roles further towards enhancing equity and livelihoods benefits from the management of community forests. Meso level forums are unique arenas of interactions between conflicting and competing discourses on environment and development. These forums can be conceived of as 'platforms' of communication and exchanges where meso level actors interact and share their experiences and expertise as well as material resources. We give examples of 'meso level forums' in action in the 'Action Research Insights' section of this paper.

In sum, we suggest that despite the significant and complex role – and potential - of meso level governance, this level has not been sufficiently appreciated nor fully understood in commons theory (nor in CF practice). Rather much focus still tends to be given either to national policy or to CF users and their behaviour at the community level. In this paper, taking cases from Nepal's community forest programme, we illustrate that a deeper understanding and appreciation of meso level functioning and its role in modifying social and environmental outcomes can help to generate desirable outcomes of commons management and governance.

Community forestry in Nepal: The Role of the Meso Level

Policy and Practice of Community Forestry

Nepal's Forest Act of 1993 allows CFUGs full autonomy to manage the handed-over forests. The general assembly of any group approves the Operational Plan (OP). The OP is then submitted to the District Forest Officer (DFO) for approval and then is implemented by the CFUGs. However, in practice, some DFOs put special provision at the end of the OP: "whatever is written above, the CFUG should comply with orders, instructions and circulars from DFO". While this is a completely conflicting clause it is justified by DFOs as a requirement to ensure sustainability of the forests. A DFO, using this provision, may take control over CFUGs affairs. For example, in the context of current political crisis in Nepal, many CFUGs and their federations have actively supported the democratic movements through mass protests and rallies. These institutions are autonomous people's organization and by constitution can play all citizenry rights including political activities. However, according to reports during our field research, the DFO in Nawalparasi chastised some CFUGs for their moral support to the democratic civic movement. Despite their constitutional and legal rights to exercise political agency, the users of this groups were implicitly restricted from supporting to civic movement.

In many cases, verbal understandings between DFO staff and CFUG leaders guide management operations. For example, the Chautari CFUG in Nawalparasi, allegedly with verbal permission from the ranger, made a fire line within its forest that involved felling eight standing green trees. Later, the DFO launched a case against the CFUG. This brought a crisis within the CFUG leadership to resignation of the members and deep misunderstanding within leaders and users.

However, recently a new DFO, with the collaboration of some neighboring CFUGs and FECOFUN, took the case positively and helped resolved it. This illustrates again that the functioning of the commons is very much shaped by forces outside of commons themselves.

Similarly, meso forums have been influential in managing inter-group conflicts of CFUGs. In Lalitpur, for example, there was a long conflict between Patle and Pandali CFUGs over their forest border. The issue was discussed in a meso level meeting, where DFO staff were also present. Representatives of neighboring CFUGs and the Range Post help resolve the case.

In our experience, meso forums have also been helpful in bringing a pro-poor livelihoods agenda into CFUG planning. In some cases, district level government offices have induced this (*e.g.*, in Palpa) and in other cases it has been due to ‘peer pressure’ from the neighboring CFUGs (*e.g.* Nawalparasi). For example, the pro-poor livelihoods activities in Chautari CFUG were highly motivated by the Sundari CFUG, which is recognized one of the best in Nawalparasi district.

CFUGs often plan their activities and make decisions according to, or sensing the interest of, external donors or support agencies. For example in Chautari CFUG of Morang district they planned for the distribution of goats to the users when they received information from donors that they might provide the support in goat raising. In Lalitpur, one ranger wrote to CFUG make specific arrangements for pro-poor activities and to get approval from the range post before harvesting a tree from the community forest.

There are also examples of meso actors revitalizing CFUGs. In Handikharka CFUG of Dhankuta district, meso actors collectively put their effort into the reinvigoration of this CFUG. The CFUG had become completely defunct and was being misappropriated by two or three people – the forest was destroyed, no assembly had been called for about 7 years, users were frustrated, and so on. The influence of external forces (*i.e.*, the collective energy of meso actors) was such that users could change the leadership and the governance is improving now.

These are but a few examples of how the meso level has been influential in shaping the management option of the community forests in Nepal. The influences include both increased legal and administrative constraints, and as well as helping to improve management by resolving conflicts or by bringing livelihoods agenda into the planning process. These influences are the results of the direct engagement of meso actors, institutions and processes with the forest management and governance of local users.

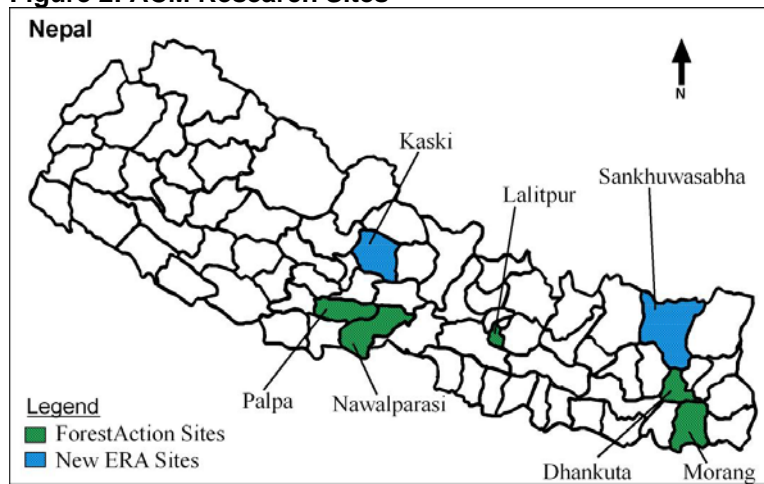
ACM Approach in Community Forestry and the Meso Level

Here we provide insights from participatory action research conducted in five sites in Nepal. We explore the dynamic link between meso level processes and the governance of the commons, particularly of community forestry. We show that meso level processes influence the way users interact with the commons and shape the governance of the commons, thereby having an ultimate impact on social and environmental outcomes of community forest management in Nepal.

ForestAction, CIFOR and New ERA have been conducting a participatory action research project entitled ‘Improving Livelihoods and Equity in Community Forestry in Nepal: the Role of Adaptive

Collaborative Management (ACM)' in five districts of Nepal with financial support from IDRC. The five research sites are located in eastern, central and western region of Nepal and represent both hilly and terai districts (see Figure 2). The research focuses on three different levels: a) the local level where local forest users directly engage to protect, manage and use forest resources; b) the district and sub-district level, which we call the 'meso' level, and that includes both governmental and non-governmental actors involved in the implementation of forest policies; and c) the national level, which draws information and critical learning from field activities through the meso level and feeds that into policy making process.

Figure 2: ACM Research Sites



At the local level, we are working with the community forestry user groups (CFUGs). After the inception workshop with CFUG leaders, in which we agreed on a plan of action, we jointly selected some local 'change agents' and trained them in the concepts of, and facilitation skills for, an ACM approach. They are now facilitating ACM in their respective CFUGs. In line with this, these 'change agents' are supporting their CFUGs in consciously designing action strategies in an 'action and

learning' mode that draws from elements of an ACM approach. These include: involving all the relevant stakeholders/actors; developing joint visions; seeking to assess uncertainties; developing mechanisms for effective communication and conflict resolution; and, designing collaborative action as appropriate. Through the institutionalization of a self-monitoring process as part of their on-going planning, the CFUGs engender inclusive decision-making and periodic self-assessment. In this sense, the users of the commons are applying an ACM approach to deal with the complexity and dynamics of their socio-ecological system.

Similarly, at the national level, we have a national 'community forestry learning group', where critical reflection and learning drawn from the local and meso level actions takes place amongst national level actors. Moreover, this forum identifies specific areas of knowledge gaps and implements small research initiatives to address these, reflects upon the finding and draws on them to inform the policy process, mainly through informal channels.

At the meso level, we bring together various stakeholders working at the district and sub-district level, who are responsible for implementing forest sector policies. These include District Forest Office (DFO), Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN), I/NGOs and bilateral projects. In meso forum these actors plan, implement and reflect upon various initiatives that either to support local level activities or relate to a separate agenda of collaborative action for learning. Moreover, this forum is important in responding to the local interest and voices. The forums are being facilitated by the 'change agents' selected from meso organizations and provided

training on facilitating ACM at the meso level. These forums discuss common concerns of CFUGs, such as improving and renewing their constitutions and Operational Plans, or discuss inter-group issues such as border conflicts, and also critically reflect on the ongoing actions to learn from them.

The ACM research at the meso level involved a number of steps that helped bring the stakeholders together in a forum. First, discussions were held individually with all potential meso actors at the district and sub-district level. They were then brought together for an inception workshop. Some change agents were selected during this meeting and were trained in facilitating an ACM approach. Regular joint meetings of meso forums were held that provided opportunities for assessing their existing activities, their effectiveness and possibility of collaborative efforts. Moreover, meso actors have developed a collective vision of the meso level, and a ‘terms of reference’ related to institutional arrangements for meso stakeholders for promoting learning-based collaborative initiatives. As a part of their reflection, the meso actors assessed the district and sub-district level situation using ACM elements, which included: collective vision; effective communication and information sharing; systemic considerations; conflict resolution; experimentation and deliberate learning; use of learning in further planning; collaborative action as appropriate; participation of all the relevant stakeholders; equity in decision-making and benefit sharing; joint reflection and shared learning; and, dealing with uncertainties and risks.

For effective communication with the users of commons, the change agents organized joint workshops with CFUGs, as well as integrating representatives of CFUGs in other meso forums. In these joint workshops, of CFUG and meso actors, CFUGs presented their own plans with specification of expected roles of external agencies. Meso actors were then able to identify their roles within the broad framework of CFUG programmes. The meso actors and CFUGs thus developed greater mutual understanding and expectations and the meso actors started supporting CFUGs along these lines.

Among the local, national and meso levels, the meso level has been relatively little explored and the least well understood in CF in general. However, from the preliminary findings of the ACM study, this level appear to play a crucial role in the development of the commons and in transforming users’ attitude and behaviours towards equity, good governance and sustainable resource management. In this way, the study of the meso level governance is very useful in understanding meso actors’ and commons users’ interaction with each other, and with community forest resources, and thus with the forces that ultimately shape the social and environmental outcomes of community forestry in Nepal.

Participatory action research insights on improving meso-commons linkages

The participatory action research with meso forums in five districts in Nepal provides important insights on strategies and tools to improve the meso-common linkages. Although similar strategies were adopted in all five sites, the nature and the features of meso forum varies greatly. In some cases, the ‘meso forum’ that was the focus of the participatory action research was formed around district level stakeholders, whereas in other cases stakeholders at sub-district level were the ‘hub’. In other cases still, the meso forum is largely a network of CFUGs that facilitates community forestry process at the CFUG level, and represents the CFUGs in their interaction with the DFO or

other stakeholders. Given the diverse and changing forms of meso forum, they can be conceived of as fluid and evolving platforms that are constantly transforming both their structure and functions in response to their context.

An adaptive collaborative management approach has already been shown to positively influence social and environmental outcomes of community forestry in Nepal when used at the CFUG level (McDougall, 2004) . However, the role of meso forum was little appreciated in the earlier phase of the research project. Based on our learning about meso forum linkages with local CF governance, the current phase of the research now has focused increasingly on the role of the meso level. Principles of participatory action research have been adopted with the meso forums to acculturate adaptive and collaborative management within them. Critical analysis of the meso situation is carried out by meso actors based on reflective learning process which directly feeds to the planning. It is then followed by implementation of action plans and constant monitoring of the process (see Figure 3). In this learning cycle there are two clear objectives: to improve the outcome of the plan; but also to draw reflective learning from the process so that it can contribute to enhancing the future planning cycle.

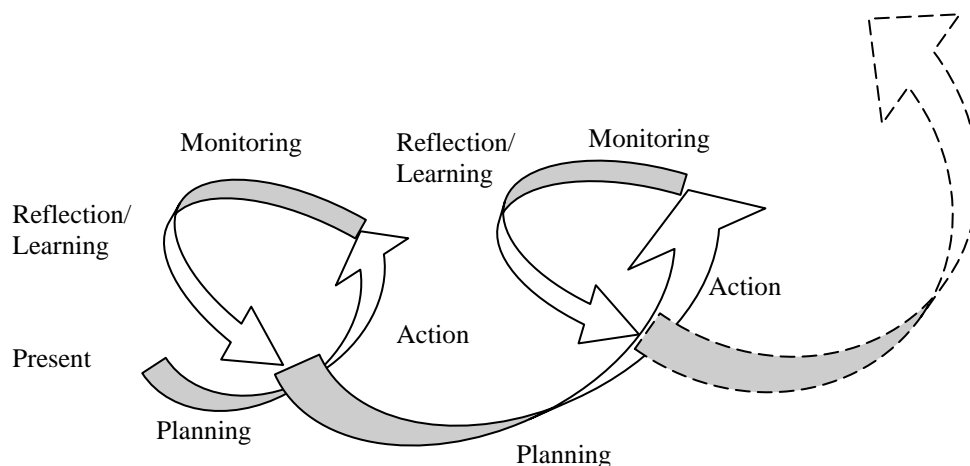


Figure 3 Continuous learning cycle of planning, action, monitoring and reflection (adapted from Hartanto *et al.* 2003)

This process of planning, action and reflection is embedded in various strategies of our engagement with the meso forums who use an ACM approach. In each of the activities meso forums plan and implement, the change agents (i.e., who undertook training in an ACM approach) try to catalyse a conscious enhancement of the elements of the ACM approach (as described above). For example, they deliberately work through the ACM elements with meso actors and design strategies to strengthen them in the meso area. The major meso strategies that we have seen emerge from this reflection include: the formation of multi-stakeholder forums at district or sub-district levels; the introduction of a reflective process and critical enquiry as stakeholders develop common vision; consideration of complexities and resulting uncertainties and risks in the respective CF system; and planning for and implementing collaborative learning activities; and,

meso forums organizing regular joint interaction workshops with CFUGs. These and some of the other ACM-based strategies developed by meso level actors in the participatory action research to increase their constructive influence in the governance of the community forests are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Strategies and activities for increasing meso-common link and their outcomes

Strategies and Tools	Activities	Outcomes
Multi stakeholders forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of meso forums • Regular meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved links with private sector • Improved communication between meso actors
Reflective process: Facilitating regular self-assessment, critical reflections – change agents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflective workshops • Seminar on special issue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A culture of regular sharing established • Use of learning through collaborative actions are being used within individual organizations
Critical enquiry – PAR, on policies, practices,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Select and train change agents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have identified the learning questions of PAR, for pro-poor CF
Interaction with CFUG – planning – bilateral meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Joint meetings and workshops • Presentation of CFUG planning • Bilateral meetings between CFUG and meso actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship of Meso with CFUGs has improved • Meso SHs have started joint development actions. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meso actors have shown increased response to local demand
Learning oriented central mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community forestry learning group at the centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Started engaging higher level actors in Meso initiatives (north-south dialogue in Morang)

Meso actors have their own interests in participating in this process, some of which are not openly expressed. Instead they are latent interests. In box 1 we give an example from one meso forum to show the diverse interests of the meso actors and the CFUG (Box 1). Mutual understanding of specific interests helps them achieve a win-win situation that can improve meso-commons relations.

Box 1 An example of diverse latent interests in one meso area

Meso actors in have their own interests in collaborative initiatives. The DFO in one case has been encouraging initiatives for joint projects at least in part because there would be professional kudos for this. The meso NGOs are pushing for collaborative initiatives because this would bring them closer to DFO, whose cooperation is valuable in many instances for their project success. FECOFUN in the area is interested in it to mediate between the CFUGs and the DFO and wants to increase its image from a pure advocacy organisation to that of a constructive engagement in the empowerment of the CFUGs. Whatever may be the intention, the appreciation received by the CFUG from meso actors has encouraged users in CF processes, which could ultimately result in better protection of the CF. This has also increased their ownership and interests in implementing their plans

Reflective processes with meso actors that focus ways of making their initiatives more effective help them rethink previously static and/or isolated approaches and help them towards more adaptive and collaborative approaches. In these processes, it is important to build confidence that in collaborative efforts, meso actors won't lose their identities. Instead collaborative efforts need to seek ways to build their role and clarify their identify with a wider group of stakeholders in the sector. On the other hand, there is the risk that if an actors remain passive, it will be isolated from the process.

In summary, in seeking to improving meso-commons linkages, we supported change agents in facilitating meso level strategies that drew on elements of an adaptive collaborative approach. This included the formation of meso forums in the way and configuration that meso actors perceived to be appropriate. Meso forums were also encouraged to carryout critical enquiry of the current state of affairs in the management of the community forest and their social and ecological outcomes. This has helped them to gain deeper understanding on how the CFUGs are functioning, what are their constraints and opportunities, and what are the the spaces that meso actors have to influence and contribute to improve their situation. Also, on-going joint workshops between meso actors and the CFUG leaders has been highly effective in sharing experiences and enhancing each other's perceptions of the relationship between meso actors and CFUGs. These joint workshops have provided opportunities for examining activities from each other's perspectives.

Additionally, apart from facilitating the meso forums themselves, we have found that our facilitating for a receptive learning environment at the central level also helped strengthen the learning process at the meso level. As a part of the ACM research project, a central level community forestry learning group reflects upon field-based local and meso lessons and feeds these learnings into the policy making process. Interaction with this national learning group has also encouraged meso level actors to espouse a learning approach.

Outcomes of the meso level shift towards an adaptive and collaborative approach

a) Collective learning from CFUGs:

The source of direction and knowledge for meso actors until now has largely been policy documents and the written and verbal 'orders' from above. After the formation of the meso forums, a series of multi-stakeholders discussions have been organized in which there is a growing recognition that central policies in many cases are not enough to address the specific problems of community forestry management. In order to develop issue-wise responses to these problems, the meso actors involved have gradually realized the need to learn from CFUGs. Reflective workshops for meso actors (facilitated by the ACM-trained change agents) are particularly influential in sparking a learning approach. In some cases these are CFUG-meso exchange workshops, which have been very fruitful to induce collective learning by the meso actors.

b) Material and technical support to CFUGs

Provision of material and technical support to CFUGs has been accepted by many meso actors as a – if not the - main role they are there to provide. These actors often see themselves as being there

to ‘serve people’. However, the service is sometimes based on top-down planning that may not be relevant in many cases. In the ACM project participatory action research, we encouraged meso actors to place an emphasis on understanding and appreciating the complexity of social and ecological system, and to take an adaptive approach to deal with particular issues of forest management. In line with this, CFUGs were invited to present their long and short term plans (five year plan and annual plans) in meso forums. Doing so, they had an opportunity to identify specific area where meso actors could make meaningful contributions. This was followed by bilateral meetings between the specific meso actors and the CFUG to further workout specific collaboration.

c) Feedback to policy making level

Meso level actors play a critical role in feeding field-based learning into the policy process. As a part of the participatory action research, we have tried to build on this meso level critical reflection and feedback. The lessons from the critical reflections at the meso level have been packaged in the form of notes, reports and second order articles. This has been facilitated by our engagement with the national level community forestry learning group, which contributes to policy making through informal channels.

Affirmative and contextual policy interpretation by the meso actors in favour of users and the commons can influence users’ situation and options positively and thus help improve local livelihoods and sustainability of the commons. An adaptive and collaborative approach can enable meso forums to do so through communication, collective reflection, and shared learning and action. These reflective processes help them communicate and understand each others’ views, and the on-going dialogue between them may help develop commonly agreed goals and strategies for the governance and management of the commons. Based on these agreed goals meso actors may involve themselves both individually and collectively. Overall, such an approach helps to equip meso level actors to play an effective enabling role in commons management.

Conclusion

The meso level of governance can be best conceptualized as the level between the national policy-making level and the management of the commons at the user’s level. This level plays a range of roles and functions including policy interpretation, material and technical support, resolving conflicts and introducing new ideas and discourses. While meso level actors, institutions and processes are ‘arms’ of the national policy-making mechanisms, in many cases they work in a relatively autonomous context and are thus capable of having their own significant influence on users of the commons. They transmit not only central policies, but also their own perspectives through their individual or joint interactions with users of the commons and other meso actors.

Based on insights from the ACM research, it appears that the existing linkage between the meso level and the commons can be improved through the use of an adaptive and collaborative approach in meso level forums, including regular reflective meetings of the meso forum and focused on-going interaction between meso actors and the CFUGs that manage the community forests. Preliminary findings from the research to date indicate that such an approach can have positive

impacts in the areas of accurate knowledge at the meso level, effective support to CFUG governance and management, and feedback to the national policy level.

For natural resource practitioners and CP theorists alike, we suggest that this indicates a clear need to expand the area of focus in commons governance and management. Beyond attention to commons users' behavior and institutions and to national policy, focusing on increased understanding of, and attention to, enhancing meso level governance will contribute to the larger complex of equity, livelihoods and sustainability of the commons.

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