

# Promoting equity in community forestry: recognition of the marginalized people matters

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## ABSTRACT

The community forestry program in Nepal has been advancing as a successful model of participatory forestry. However, there have been growing concerns that the poor, bearing a greater extent of costs in comparison to the well off, has not been getting a fair share of benefits. Rather, they are further disadvantaged in some cases after the introduction of community forestry. This paper seeks to explore underlying causes of inequity based on contemporary theories of justice. Examining two community forest user groups in the middle hill districts, the study finds that lack of recognition of the poor in interpersonal and public sphere exacerbated the powerlessness of marginalized people, reducing their participation in the decision-making. This suggests that policy and practice in community forestry needs to focus on broader political questions, including representation in decision making, making space for the voice of members to influence decisions, and transforming socio-economic and political institutions and cultural practices.

Keywords: *community forestry, equity, justice recognition, participation*

## INTRODUCTION

The community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) approach has been initiated in Nepal since the late 1970s as community forestry. With the shift in property rights from the State to communities, the community forest user groups (CFUGs) have been able to exercise a bundle of property rights over national forests namely access, use, management, and exclusion rights with some restriction. The policy and legal instruments such as the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector 1988, the subsequent Forest Act 1993 and the Forest regulation 1995 have provided a conducive environment for the successful handover of national forests to local communities. As a result, some 25 percent of the forest area has been handed over to more than 14 439 CFUGs encompassing 32 percent of the total population of the country (DoF 2009).

Nepal is in the 144<sup>th</sup> position among 182 countries on the human development index (HDI) according to the Nepal Human Development Report 2009 (UNDP 2009). In 2009, the country slipped two notches from 142<sup>nd</sup> position. With per capita income of US\$ 470 (CBS 2008), Nepal is one of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the world. Twenty nine percent of the total area is covered by the forests (CBS 2008) and the majority of the rural population depends on forest resources for livelihoods. This scenario indicates the immense importance of forests for rural communities to sustain their livelihoods.

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Initially, the government of Nepal adopted a community forestry policy in response to the failure of the State-controlled regime to halt deforestation (Talbot and Khadka 1994). Over the last three decades, the community forestry program, however, has evolved incorporating two major objectives, the first being improving forest condition and the second being improving the livelihoods of the local people particularly that of the poor people. Researchers have conducted studies since the early 1990s to assess whether community forestry is contributing to meet the stated objectives. The findings of the studies are contentious as some results are promising while others are disappointing. Some studies show that community forestry program has been successful to restore degraded land and improve forest condition (Adhikari *et al.* 2007, Dev *et al.* 2003, Richards *et al.* 2003). Apart from environmental services, improved forest condition increases the availability of forest products to the local people which in turn is expected to improve their livelihoods. Nonetheless, improving livelihoods of the poor people through community forestry has remained questionable. Rather, some studies show that the livelihoods of the disadvantaged people have been further worsened (Malla *et al.* 2003). Similar findings have been also reported in India and West Africa that common property regime may lead to exclusion of poorer households (Beck and Nesmith 2001).

All users are supposed to benefit equally through community forestry (Hobley 1996). In most cases, the poor people, however, have been restricted to access forest products even for their subsistence living. Most poor households are not benefiting as much as others and are not very interested in community participation. Thoms (2008) argues that the way CFUGs have been set up has been reinforcing existing power disparities and elite domination.

Many previous studies related to equity have focussed on benefits received community forestry and contributions made by users (Adhikari *et al.* 2004, Malla *et al.* 2003). However, very few studies look at underlying causes and procedures underpinning equity. This study, therefore, aims to investigate distributional outcomes, procedures and underlying causes simultaneously based on contemporary theories of justice. Specifically, the study aims to address the following questions:

1. To what extent are the costs and benefits borne by different users (rich, medium and poor)?
2. How do procedures in CBNRM shape distributional outcomes?
3. What role does recognition of people play in CBNRM procedures and outcomes?

This study is based on a case study of two CFUGs in the middle hills of Nepal. The key argument of this paper is that the outcome from community forestry is not solely dependent on formal rules rather it relies on participation and recognition of individuals conditioned by embedded social, economic and political relationships. Contributing to CBNRM scholarship this paper will help policy makers to develop pro-poor policies.

The remaining part of the paper has been structured as follows. The next section presents theoretical review. Section three includes research methodology including

study sites, survey methods and data analysis. Section four reports findings and discussion. The paper ends with the conclusion and policy implication.

## THEORETICAL REVIEW: CBNRM, EQUITY AND JUSTICE

CBNRM is one of several approaches that has been increasingly accepted and recognised as suitable for the sustainable management and utilisation of forest resources, mainly in developing countries (Agrawal 2001, FAO 1978). The disappointing outcomes that followed decades of State-led natural resource management strategies have forced policy makers and scholars to reconsider the role of communities in resource management. Empirical evidence has been put forward that local people are capable of managing natural resources through collective action (Hobley 1996, Ostrom 1990).

Collective action in CBNRM is pivotal in formulating rules for allocation of the benefits and costs among the local people. Given the collective action possible for common pool resources management, CBNRM has become an important approach to empower local people in managing natural resources particularly in developing countries. This approach relies on the assumption that people have more interest in conserving natural resources that are close to them than the government or private institutions (Ostrom 1999). The approach recognises that local people have a greater understanding of resources in their area and can adopt indigenous techniques to adapt in local settings effectively than the central government.

In the CBNRM approach, theoretically, communities can manage natural resources in an equitable, efficient and sustainable way (Ostrom 1990). Agrawal (2001), building on the work of Wade (1988), Ostrom (1990) and Baland and Platteau (1996), has listed thirty two 'enabling conditions' for successful CBNRM broadly as characteristics of community, resource systems, institutional arrangements and external environments. One of the enabling conditions outlined by Agrawal (2001) is the low level of poverty. It implies that a high level of poverty leads to the failure of CBNRM. A high degree of poverty can result in more pressure being placed on forest resources for earning livelihoods. This fuels trade offs between twin goals of conservation and livelihoods improvement leading to the breaking of rules which in turn creates conflict among forest resource users. In addition, equity in benefit allocation from common resources, another 'enabling condition', is also related to the former which is expected to reduce the poverty.

Concern over equity, one of the fundamental principles of community involvement in forest management, is increasingly considered as a legitimate basis for CBNRM (Li 1996). Equity also matters in Nepal's community forestry because it has been emerging as a crucial component to reduce poverty. In this research, justice and equity are used interchangeably despite the subtle difference in their meanings. Equity refers to getting a fair share, not necessarily an equal share while justice is the indifferent (but often equal) treatment to different people. Equity here is understood as fairness in the decision-making processes (procedural justice), and fair outcomes of such decisions (distributive justice). The important point remains that an equitable system should not further marginalize the poor (Gilmour and Fisher 1991).

Contemporary theories of justice are important to understand equity issues. Traditionally, justice has been narrowly understood as a concept that focuses on the distributional consequences of decisions. One of the influential contributions in the theory of justice is Rawls (1971)'s notion of justice as fairness which includes just distribution of social, political and economic goods and bads. Although justice concerns about equality, Rawls (1971) gives due emphasis to equity as well. He illustrates:

*“All social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favoured” (Rawls 1971: 303).*

This Rawls's notion indicates that rules of equality can be breached to favour the least well off. Most theories of justice including Rawls (1971)'s work have been criticised as being focussed on distributive outcomes (Schlosberg 2007). While justice should be concerned with issues of distribution Young (1990) and Fraser (1998) argue that it should also deal with the processes that create maldistribution focusing on individual and social recognition as key elements of attaining justice. They believe that the lack of recognition in the political and social realms, manifested in different forms of insults, disparagement, degradation, and devaluation impairs marginalized individuals and communities. Taylor (1994), one of the key proponents of the concept of recognition, argues that self-worth, indispensable for human dignity and integrity, comes from the recognition by others. Two kinds of recognition are distinguished: the equal dignity of all (universally same basket of rights) and the politics of difference (unique identity of individual or group) (Taylor 1994: 37-38). So it can be understood that misrecognition may be both individually experienced and socially constructed. The term 'recognition' in this study refers to how users in CFUGs respect each other in terms of communication and language used as being human (equal status) and as being a different characterised by socio-economic status.

There appears to be a link between recognition and participation. Lack of recognition witnesses a decline in participation, and increased participation can also address issues of misrecognition (Schlosberg 2007). So Shrader-Frenchette (2002) has placed particular emphasis on the importance of procedural justice and participation. Procedures are seen to be fair when people are given opportunity to voice their concerns, and when procedures seem fair that is likely to result in fair distributive outcomes.

Some empirical studies show that CBNRM has failed to ensure a fair allocation system (justice) and consequently has failed to reduce poverty (Hobley 1996). Malla (2000) found that poorer households have less access to forest products than they had before the introduction of community forestry. The author has analysed existing forest products distribution systems and has revealed that the existing systems are hindering poorer households to access forest resources. From the analysis of one CFUG, Maharjan (1998) found that poor people are receiving a lesser amount of forest products than their well off counterparts causing increasing number of disadvantaged users to be disappointed. Another study by Richards *et al.* (2003) pointed out that poor people have been bearing more costs. Similarly, Pokharel (2008) found that only 26 percent of the group fund accrues to the poor.

Formal procedures stated in the constitution of CFUGs are supposed to work in a rational way and benefit users accordingly. However, embedded processes (social, political and economical) more often shape outcomes which have usually been undermined in CFUGs (Shrestha 2007). This is related to procedural injustice which is likely to result in asymmetric distributive outcomes. However, the previous studies have hardly examined formal and informal procedures and underlying causes impinging the distributional issues.

## STUDY SITES AND METHODS

### *The study sites*

This study was undertaken in two CFUGs located in two districts in Nepal, one in Dolakha and the other in the Ramechhap district, but they were spatially close and socio-culturally similar (see Figure 1). These districts lie in the middle mountain region of Nepal where the community forestry program has been in operation for more than two decades. Some donor-funded projects including the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP) have also been working to support the community forestry program.

Two CFUGs mainly based on two criteria were selected deliberately. First, a CFUG with at least five years of registration as community forest was selected assuming the period is enough to practise their group constitutions and implement different activities as per their forest management plan. Second, heterogeneous CFUGs were selected since the purpose of the study was to analyse equity issues through caste, class, and gender dimensions. Key attributes of the CFUGs are presented in Table 1.

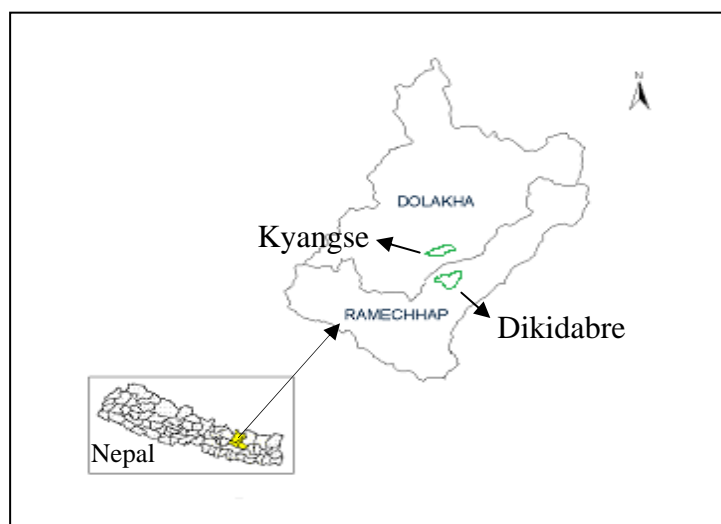


FIGURE 1 *Map of the studied CFUGs*

TABLE 1 *Key attributes of the studied CFUGs*

Name of CFUG	Key attributes
Kyangse Setep (Located in Jiri VDC of Dolakha District)	180 hectares of forest managed by 236 households since 2001, heterogeneity in terms of economic class, education, caste, religion and cultures, major castes include <i>Jirel</i> , <i>Shrestha</i> and <i>Sherpa</i> (so-called higher castes) and <i>Bishwokarma</i> (the so-called lower caste, called Dalit), Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP/SDC) supported
Dikidabre (Located in Rasnal VDC of Ramechhap District)	149 hectares of forest managed by 298 households since 2003, de facto community management before community forest, heterogeneity prevails, NSCFP/SDC supported, major castes comprise of <i>Chhetri</i> , <i>Sherpa</i> and <i>Sunuwar</i> (so-called higher castes, most of them considered as elites) and Pariyar and Bishwokarma (so-called lower castes, considered as marginalized section of communities)

## Methods

### *Case study as a research strategy*

A case study approach has been adopted to answer the aforementioned research questions as the study is a thorough one concentrating on two cases of community forestry. Further, the research intended to provide thick description and analysis of CFUGs for the purpose of expanding understanding on distributive and procedural justice embedded in social, economic and political relationships. Employing the explanatory-causal case study, this study tries to interpret phenomena to the point of answering questions of 'why' on a theoretical basis (Kyburz-Graber 2004). To ensure reliability and validity of the study, some basic criteria for case studies suggested by Yin (1994) have been followed. First, the research questions have been developed on a theoretical basis. Second, methods for triangulation have been followed using multiple sources of information and multiple perspectives for interpretation.

The case study was administered using a mixed approach of data collection. Quantitative data through household interviews were collected to analyse distributional outcomes of costs and benefits borne by different households. A stratified random sampling was employed to select households for interviews considering well-being category as stratum. Existing well-being categories obtained by participatory well-being ranking exercise done by CFUGs themselves with the support of NSCFP were used. A combination of criteria was used during the ranking exercise such as landholding, food security, livestock holding, income sources, remittances and social status. 32 households from each stratum (rich, medium and poor) were selected for household interviews randomly.

Qualitative methods were used to capture the procedural aspects, underlying causes of inequity, and information concerning recognition of different users in CFUGs. This was achieved using participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools such as focus group discussions, key informant interviews and participant observation. Separate focus group discussions with poor people, women and executive committee members were conducted in each CFUG. The participant size was from 6 to 11 with the

average time for discussion being 40 minutes which fall within the limit suggested by Greenbaum (1998) to make discussions effective. According to Punch (2005), participant observation can be useful to crosscheck or verify information for the purpose of triangulation. Besides this technique was also used to observe meetings of CFUGs to collect information on what sorts of procedures were followed to conduct meetings, how people expressed their views in meetings and how people showed respect to each other. Secondary data were gathered through CFUGs' documents, project reports, and research papers to complement data collected through other methods.

Quantitatively, data on costs and benefits across different users (rich, medium and poor) were analysed through coding and feeding them into SPSS 16.0 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Results are presented in tables, graphs and in text as well. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and mean are used to present a summary of the data. Qualitative data were analysed through a coding system. The data were coded according to themes such as distributive outcome, procedures for benefit sharing, and recognition. The information was then presented in a descriptive way.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### *Distributive outcomes and underlying procedures*

Through household interviews the amount of major forest products such as timber, firewood, tree fodder and grasses and leaf litter collected by households were identified. Table 2 shows that the flow of forest products is more skewed towards better off households. Households in the rich category have harvested timber (relatively expensive forest product) by over threefold than poorer households. Although the price has been reduced for poorer households in both CFUGs, they have received less amounts of timber. It was found that poor people's primary needs were neither new house construction nor furniture rather they were desperate for daily subsistence livings so they barely need timber. Even if they need timber, the quantity will be less because they build small huts which don't require a large quantity of timber. During the focus group discussion with the poor, most of them pointed out that they could harvest more timber if they were allowed to sell. This is, however, restricted by the CFUG rules.

TABLE 2 Annual collection of forest products by households (n=90)

Forest products	Unit	Well-being category		
		Poor	Medium	Rich
Timber	Cubic feet (in a five year)	95	180	340
Fire wood	Bhari*	21	18	13
Grass and tree fodder	Bhari**	10	33	31
Leaf litter	Bhari**	11	42	45

\*1 bhari firewood = 30 kg; \*\*1 bhari grass and fodder= 25 kg; \*\*\*1 bhari leaf litter = 20 kg.

Table 3 shows the formal rules for distributing timber stated in the forest management plans. It seems attractive, at least theoretically, that CFUGs have made provision to reduce the price of timber or to provide timber free of charge to the poor people for their domestic use but they are not allowed to sell the timber to other users. As timber is neither a subsistence need of the poor nor are they allowed to sell it, the poor are not benefiting from these rules. The major concern here appears to be a question of power, powerful elites dominate the decision-making process and formulate rules which may not reflect the needs of the poor people. This is in consistent with a theory of access by Ribot and Peluso (2003) that power determines access to resources. Adhikari *et al.* (2004) argue that transferable use right scheme might work to benefit the poor which allows them to sell their timber permit. In this scheme, poor people are entitled to access a certain quantity of timber (timber permit) which they are allowed to sell to other users when they don't need it for domestic purpose.

Unlike timber, the wealthier households have collected a lesser quantity of firewood than the poorer households. Two reasons were responsible for this difference in the firewood collection, pointed out during focus group discussion with the executive committee. First, well off households mostly own the private forests from which they can fulfil their demand for firewood. Second, users can collect firewood (dried twigs and branches) throughout the year according to their rules which enhances access of even the poor, giving an opportunity to collect more firewood. Despite the fact that firewood is the only affordable source of energy for the poor in Dikidabre CFUG, given the free access over the whole year this was not a huge concern since most respondents were not worried about firewood.

TABLE 3 *Rules for distributing forest products*

Type of forest products	Rules for distribution	
	Dikidabre	Kyangse Setep
Timber	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Annual demand for timber will be collected (someone who needs timber should apply specifying quantity of timber and its expected uses).</li> <li>Committee shall make decisions on who will be provided timber based on annual allowable cut (stated in forest management plan)</li> <li>Poor people will be provided timber at half price for their household purpose. However, they are not allowed to sell to other users.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same rules as that of Dikidabre</li> <li>Poor people will be provided timber free of charge for their household purpose. However, they are not allowed to sell to other users.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forests shall be kept open throughout the year to collect firewood (in case of dry wood, twigs and branches).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forests shall be kept open for one week annually as decided by the committee and one</li> </ul>



Firewood	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The committee shall set time for thinning and pruning. Household contributing to conducting these activities are entitled to share green branches and twigs equally.</li> </ul>	<p>person from each household is allowed to collect firewood during the period.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same rule as that of Dikidabre in case of green branches.</li> </ul>
Fodder, grass and leaf litter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Forests shall be kept open for one week in rainy season and two weeks in winter season. One person from each household is permitted to collect fodder, grass and leaf litter during the period.</li> <li>The committee shall decide the date for opening up forests for collection.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same rule as that of Dikidabre.</li> </ul>

*Source:* Forest management plans of CFUGs

However, the story was different in Kyangse Setep CFUG. By the CFUG's rule the forest is open to collect firewood for one week annually. Respondents from poor households reported that their firewood requirements are hardly met. Sometimes they miss their share of firewood due to ignorance of their unavoidable circumstances such as sickness. For instance, usually the chairperson and the secretary set their convenient time for firewood collection, and the poor people more often cannot find a suitable time as they depend on wage labour. Even if they made use of the opportunity, firewood collected in a week hardly suffices to meet their demands for the whole year. Further, most poor don't have an alternative like most rich people who have their private forests. Thoms (2008), therefore, argues that community forestry is more egalitarian lacking socially differentiated rules of use. The ways rules are formulated and practised are also linked to power which shapes access of users. Formal CFUGs rules have given authority to the committee to set time for opening up forests for firewood collection (see Table 5). Well off people, who are powerful in the committee, set the time for firewood collection to suit them.

In case of tree fodder, grass and leaf litter (used for livestock bedding and as compost fertiliser), poorer households have collected lesser amounts than wealthier households despite the equal access to all households. Adhikari et al. (2004) also found that the collection of fodder, grass and leaf litter is wealth sensitive indicating the more well-to-do households collect higher amounts of these products. It implies that less land and livestock endowments of poor households preclude them to equally benefit like their wealthier counterparts.

In contrast to benefits, costs of community forestry are skewed more towards poorer households although all users are supposed to equally share costs. Analysis of time spent in different forest management activities such as forest protection, pruning and thinning reveals that poor people are spending seven days annually on average while wealthier households spend approximately about three days (Table 4). The reason is that the committee, supposed to implement CFUG rules, is composed of local elites. They hesitate to take action against other elites either they have a good relationship (family relationship, political, and other forms of clan-based relationship)

with each other or the former seek to win the good will of other elites who appear powerful and often play a pivotal role to elect and re-elect them in the committee (Poudyal 2008). In the case of the poor, usually neither have they a close relationship with committee members nor are they well organised and powerful to influence an election.

TABLE 4 Annual time spent for different activities (n=90)

Activities	Well being category		
	Poor	Medium	Rich
Forest protection/patrolling (person days)	4	2	1
Pruning and thinning (person days)	3	2	2.5
Assembly (hours)	5	8	11

No wonder, the days spent by all users have opportunity costs of engaging in other activities which could generate more benefits. This cost hits the poor people hard as they mostly rely on wage labour to earn their living. Conversely, better off households appear to be involved more in decision-making activities like assembly. As seen in Table 4 rich households allocated 11 hours for assemblies whereas poor households spent only 5 hours. This is similar to the findings of Adhikari and Lovett (2006) that wealthier households share a bulk of decision-making costs in terms of time spent in meetings and assembly than their wealthier counterparts due to possible gains through social reputation and future benefits.

TABLE 5 Rules for cost sharing

Types of activities	Rules for costs sharing	
	Dikidabre CFUG	Kyangse Setep CFUG
Attendance in meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All committee members shall attend meetings</li> <li>Failure to attend meeting consecutively three times will cease membership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All committee members shall attend meetings</li> <li>Failure to attend meeting will result in fine of NRs 100 (Nepalese currency)</li> </ul>
Attendance in assembly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All users shall participate in assembly</li> <li>Failure to attend assembly will result in fine NRs 100</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All users shall participate in assembly</li> <li>Failure to attend assembly will result in fine NRs 50</li> </ul>
Forest guarding/stewardship roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each user household shall involve in forest patrolling in their turn</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Not clear</li> </ul>
Thinning and pruning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>One person from each user household shall take part in thinning and pruning activities as per date fixed by the</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Same rule as that of Dikidabre CFUG</li> </ul>

*Decision-making procedures and equity*

Procedures often determine the outcomes (Schlosberg 2007). Looking at the procedures in the constitution and forest management plan, and practice of the CFUGs, procedures for electing committee and decision-making process seem accounted for inequitable outcomes. The constitutions of both CFUGs do not account for the importance of heterogeneity in terms of caste, class (poor, rich, medium), and culture not only in benefit sharing but also in representation of all users in the executive committee. As Table 6 shows, rich (40%) dominate committee composition in both CFUGs. In terms of gender, 66 percent of the committee members are men. Unlike in Dikidabre CFUG, Khyagnse Setep CFUG has, however, provisioned at least one-third female representation in the committee. Surprisingly, representation of the *Dalit* in the committee is null. This lack of representation of *Dalit* is due to the lack of positive discrimination policies in CFUGs. The *Dalit*, historically an oppressed and marginalized community, are less powerful so there appears to be a very meagre chance for any *Dalit* to be elected through the existing procedures (through consensus or voting) of electing committee members. Forging consensus for electing *Dalit* is socially challenging due to their lower hierarchical social status and powerlessness. Likewise, securing a majority vote by the *Dalit* seems beyond their political capability, constrained by their poor social and economic status. In addition, in the key positions (namely the chairperson, the secretary and the treasurer), the representation of women and the poor is worse.

TABLE 6 *Representation in the executive committee of CFUGs by class, caste and gender*

	Membership in CFUGs (%)	Representation in committee (%)	Representation in key positions (%)
<b>By well being status</b>			
Poor	33	16	10
Medium	43	35	29
Rich	24	49	61
<b>By gender</b>			
Female	51	34	20
Male	49	66	80
<b>By ethnicity</b>			
Dalit	4	0	0
Non-Dalit	96	100	100

It is stated in the constitutions of both CFUGs that an inclusive committee will be formed representing all caste, class, gender, and settlements. However, due to the lack of concrete provision (proportionate or what percentage), the decision-making platform is dominated by males, wealthier, and non-*Dalit* people. Some women are included in the committee partly due to the influence of positive discrimination policies of the government and the campaign of FECOFUN (a federated body of

CFUGs to advocate rights of local people over forest resources). The Community Forestry Guidelines 2002 has indicated that there should be at least 33 percent women in the committee. Likewise, FECOFUN advocates for the compulsory provision of 50 percent representation of women in the committee. At least a positive discrimination policy has ensured some representation of women in the committee. However, they are rarely holding key positions and more importantly their physical presence does not guarantee their influence in the decision-making. The reason, as many scholars argue, is that Nepal's rural setting comprises a hierarchical social structure that includes different economic and social classes, an oppressive caste system and gender discrimination (Lama and Buchy 2002, Nightingale 2003, Timsina 2002). This in turn impedes the genuine participation of disadvantaged people in the decision-making.

The implication of this disproportionate representation is apparent in costs and benefits sharing. Formally, the general assembly is the main body of the user group that prepares and amends its constitution and forest management plans, and makes major decisions affecting the forest and the users, and the committee executes the decisions. In practice, however, most of these functions are executed by the committee. Representation in the committee is therefore important as these are the people whose voices and actions affect both the costs and benefits sharing across households.

The way the general assembly is conducted is ritualistic and more oriented to seeking public legitimacy by the committee rather than focusing on public deliberation. The chairperson of Kyangse Setep CFUG explains the reason:

*"We generally finished assembly in two or three hours. Our CFUG has many members and it takes a whole day if we let each and every people speak out in our general assembly. There might be disputes as well because the more people speak out, the more complex will be decision-making. Because we need at least two-third of our members to make decisions valid according to our constitution, we encourage our members to take part in the assembly. Otherwise District Forest Officer (DFO) will take action against us characterising our decisions as illegitimate".*

This indicates that the committee seeks participation of users for ensuring legitimacy of what decisions they intend to make. This also suggests the poor understanding of the importance of public deliberation among the members of executive committee. The menu of the program in the assembly usually includes a welcome speech, followed by a presentation of annual progress and a financial report, and major decisions (considered by the committee) followed by closing remarks. When asking a woman member during group discussion about her participation in the last assembly, she responded that she attended the assembly and came back after frequent yawning. For these reasons, Agarwal (2001), metaphorically, terms 'participatory exclusion' of women, *Dalit* and the poor in community forestry. She argues that participation in community forestry belongs to nominal participation (just by name, marginalized people are involved in decision-making, not by influence). Likewise, Nightingale (2002) also casts doubt about the participation of women and *Dalit*, as to whether they are participating or just sitting in.

Like electing an executive committee, decision-making procedures in both CFUGs were largely based on consensus. It was reported that no voting has been done for making decisions on any issues so far. In CBNRM literature, it is argued that both voting and consensus-based decision-making do not guarantee equity as consensus does not eliminate power inequalities. Rather consensus empowers powerful elites to get their agenda legitimised exerting pressures on the poor to assent to their agenda (Poteete 2004). During the group discussions with the poor and women, they also tuned in the similar lines that they do not oppose agenda put forward by elites because livelihoods strategies<sup>2</sup> of the poor heavily depend on the rich. It indicates that decision-making procedures also empower powerful to enhance their access and influence rather than that of the poor.

In addition, unfair distribution in CFUGs is a reflection of an imbalanced power relationship embedded in the social and economic structure, and cultural beliefs. This can be examined looking at the recognition of individuals and groups in CFUGs, an issue discussed in the following section.

*Recognition matters: underpinning power and participation*

Nepalese society is patriarchal and hierarchical in terms of caste, class and gender (Gurung 2003). The so-called upper castes discriminate against lower castes; rich people repress poor people and men dominate women. These characteristics of a typical Nepalese society were also observed in the studied CFUGs. The so-called upper caste namely *Chhetri*, *Sherpa*, *Sunuwar*, and *Jirel* and the lower caste namely *Pariyar* and *Bishwokarma* (collectively called the *Dalit*) were organised for collective action despite their different interests, and social and economic status. The discriminatory practices against *Dalit* behaving as inferior human beings by the so-called upper caste were similar to that of other villages elsewhere in Nepal (*pers. obs.*). Patron-client relationship between the upper-caste and *Dalit* was evident. In an interview with the chairperson, an upper caste

BOX 1

*Hierarchy of pronouns in Nepalese language*

- *Mausuf* – showing the highest level of respect used for His Majesty the King, the Queen, the Crown Prince and other members of Royal family. This pronoun is politically no longer in existence since the monarchy has already been overthrown from Nepal in 2008.
- *Hajur* – is showing a special respect used while talking with powerful elites
- *Tapai* - showing high degree of respect used while talking with respectful superiors like teacher
- *Timi* - is moderate showing some degree of respect and used while talking with people of equal and lower status
- *Ta* - highly disrespectful and insulting word showing no respect at all and usually for people in the lower status by caste, age and gender, and powerless people

<sup>2</sup> In the study sites, livelihoods of the poor were dependent on the well off in two ways, for accessing land to cultivate on a daily wage basis, and to be involved in sharecropping called *adhiya*, a common type of land tenancy with land-rich households. In this system, the poor people work on the farms of the well off households from sowing seeds to harvesting. After harvesting, the tenants (poor) and the landlords (rich people) share equal amounts of crops in general. Besides, the poor were also found relying on the rich for access to loans to cover immediate expenditures such as the cost of medical treatment because they (village moneylender) don't need collateral and easily accessible at village.

man, had used a sentence like '*gardeka chhau*' (we have done this and that for the *Dalit* people). It indicates he considers himself as a patron of the *Dalit*. During the focus group discussion with the *Dalit* voiced that they cannot break silence even if they know that the upper caste exploit them because they (*Dalit* with high incidence of poverty in Nepal) can't earn a living without the support of the wealthy households. One of the *Dalit* participants in the group discussion explains how they are dependant on the well off:

*"We work on their farms and in return we receive wage – mostly grains but sometimes also cash. And we also have balighare pratha<sup>3</sup> in which we sew clothes for our bistas (patron upper-caste people) and in lieu we receive grains. This is how we earn our living. If we speak against our bistas, they will be unhappy and will quit our relationship"*.

This indicates that the *Dalit* are enormously dependant on wealthier households for their livelihoods because they do not own large landholdings (primary means of securing livelihoods in the study area) and paid jobs. Cornwall (2003) also points out that disadvantaged people know well that they risk retaliation when speaking out against the interests of rich people so they are reluctant to challenge the well off people.

Lack of recognition is apparent in patterns of representation and communication. During a field visit in Dikidabre CFUG, it was witnessed that the so-called upper caste people were greeting the *Dalit* as '*ta*'. The word '*ta*<sup>4</sup>' is used to greet someone thought to be inferior and is considered as an insulting word. Box 1 presents the stratification of Nepali pronouns which all are equivalent in meaning to the English word 'you'. Language is attuned to the expression of status and power in Nepalese society (Dahal 2000). The use of various words for the various classes to indicate the same meaning is one of its features.

It was also witnessed during the field visit that upper caste people were not calling poor people and *Dalit* by their proper name rather they used adjectives such as *Kale*, *pudke* and *Langree* based on colour of their face, and height. Thus they feel, as reported in the group discussion, dominated and oppressed. They see themselves less worthy because self-worth comes from recognition by others (Taylor 1994).

*"We are Dalit, hajur (respectful word to greet outsiders), who will hear our voice even if we speak out!"* (Personal communication with a *Dalit* member in Kyangse Setep CFUG).

This indicates how inferior *Dalit* feel that they have no doubt that other people will not listen to their voices reflecting their relegated position in the society. Lack of recognition by other people in public sphere renders them powerless which also reduces their participation in decision-making. When influence in decision-making

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<sup>3</sup> A traditional system of *Dalit* individuals working for so-called 'higher caste' households for fixed amounts of grain per year. Types of work might be iron work (making utensils, agricultural implements-knife, spade, and axe) or sewing dresses/cloths.

<sup>4</sup> The word *ta* has other connotations as well. For instance, it is also used to greet someone who is intimate.

(power) lacks vigour, access to resources for those people tends to be restricted (Sikor and Lund 2009).

Similarly, men have been dominating women for religious, cultural, political and economic reasons. Women are typically supposed to be household women expected to only be involved in household chores like cooking food, washing clothes, taking care of the baby, working on farms. Being involved in community work, for instance, providing leadership for community groups, involving in decision-making was found to be men's duty in most rural areas, and the study site was not far from this reality. Economically, most land tenure has remained with the men in both CFUGs, the land is considered as valuable and most important property in rural Nepal. Only 11 women own land titles (tenure). This is just a litmus test of women's access to economic capital. It was reported during the focus group discussion with women and the *Dalit* that upper caste and men dominate all local power structures - the local administrative body and political parties.

Most households in the study area were practising Hinduism, believe women as men's subordinates and their caretakers. Even men from households who believe in other religions (like Buddhism) have suffered from their assimilation with Hinduism for a long time. In Dikidabre CFUG, it was found that some households have been following Christianity for some five years. In response to the question 'how did you feel the behaviour of your husband towards you before and following Christianity' during an informal talk, a woman (her household used to practice Hinduism before and her husband is also chairperson of the CFUG) replied '*mero budako lageko bani ka janthyo ra, paila ni ta nai bhanuhunthyo aile ni tehi bhanuhunchha*' (My husband's habit is no more changing. No difference at all. He used to greet me as '*ta*', this is still the same). However, generally women respect their husbands as '*tapa*', a respectful word.

Now the question of recognition in those CFUGs established in hierarchical and patriarchal society remains daunting. The lack of recognition of the *Dalit*, the poor and women and its reflection in the decision-making process is visible in the functioning of CFUGs be it in meetings or an assembly, or forest management activities. Recognition of all users has been poorly covered in literature. However, the findings from this study show that lack of recognition has been an obstacle to address equity issues. As being oppressed in society, women, the poor and *Dalit* hardly voice concerns to improve their access to resources. Their participation in the decision-making process is more cosmetic, just as a showcase despite the efforts of many environmental NGOs, development projects and DFO. Executive committee includes some females and *Dalit* but they do not put items on the agenda since they are oppressed section of society.

*"In meetings and assembly, Dalit and women cannot put 'nice agenda'. They talk about their problems and they cannot give time for our CFUG. So we do not think that they can contribute to decision-making and forest conservation".* (Personal communication with chairperson of Kyangse Setep CFUG).

Women, *Dalit* and the poor are not only underrecognised by elites in CFUGs but also by DFO staff, who are supposed to empower them. DFO staff usually meets elites

and live with them whenever they go to visit CFUG. One of the key informants explain the reason:

*“There is mutual benefit for both parties. DFO staff concern more about forest conservation as they think that their job depends on forests for which powerful elites can support by formulating rules to restrict access to forests. Likewise, DFO staff can support elites to remain in the committee in a tacit way”.*

It seems that the executive committee lacks downward accountability to their members; rather they embrace upward accountability to DFO. There are high chances of missing the real issues of the poor, women and *Dalit* in their reports as well. In general, the misrecognition of *Dalit*, women, and the poor discourages them to express their concerns. This leads to no voices of those disadvantaged people in the decision-making process, and their issues and concerns may not be given adequate attention. It means the basic forest products needs of the poor are not met, overlooking their livelihoods issues. This situation render their issues continue to remain fuelling injustice. This is what Young (1990) also concludes that misdistribution or injustice is partly due to the lack of recognition. As argued by Scott (1985), the poor is likely to show resistance in a subtle way when they face injustice. Nightingale (2003) found, in the study of community forestry in Nepal, the poor set forest fire and cut down trees secretly to show their disagreement against the rules made by the powerful elites. These acts are potentially damaging for the environment as well.

## CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATION

Started in the late 1970s the community forestry program in Nepal has been developing integrating equity concerns into policy and action. Can community forestry contribute to ensure equity? An answer, however, to this question has remained debatable within Nepal and outside.

Findings of this study show that poor people are benefiting less and bearing more costs in comparison to well off households although all users were supposed to share costs and benefits equally. It is usually argued in the CBNRM literature that the governments transfer responsibilities to communities to reduce administrative costs. This study indicates that the cost is by and large bearing by the poor within communities. Socially un-differentiated rules and socio-economically and politically embedded relationships in CFUGs accounted for restricting access of the poor to resources.

Issue of access is associated with power. This study shows that well off, male and upper caste people are dominant in the decision-making process due to existing procedures for electing the committee and making decisions through consensus and voting. While shaping access to resources interests of powerful elites were reflected in rules whereas concerns of disadvantaged people were overlooked. Poor people's dependency on well off household hindered them to voice against well off even if they felt injustice. Despite inclusion of some women and the poor in the committee, their influence in decision-making remains weak since they are deprived of power embedded in socio-economic and political terrain.



This study also shows that the lack of recognition in the interpersonal and public sphere accounted for exacerbating powerlessness of some users such the *Dalit*, women and the poor. As the lack of recognition is reflected in communication and language the study revealed that the language used to greet and talk with the *Dalit*, and women are of insulting nature. It was also found that they don't feel worthy in participating in the decision-making process because the powerful elites have been undermining and insulting them for a long time. The 'enabling conditions' for successful CBNRM outlined by Agrawal (2001) is lacking of recognition of every user in interpersonal and public sphere. This study suggests further research, the importance of recognition of users in CFUGs, its implication in social and environmental outcomes and how these problems might be addressed.

Community forestry policy in Nepal has placed more emphasis on setting formal rules. In addition, policy should also focus on altering an imbalanced power relationship embedded in social, economic and political relationships. To benefit the poor equitably, transferable use rights might work which would allow the poor to sell their forest products permits. Along with positive discrimination policy for including the marginalized people, the provision of financial incentives while taking part in meetings or the assembly could encourage their participation.

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