

An Overview of Nepal's Community Forestry Program

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Forests and scrublands, which cover nearly 40 percent of Nepal's total land area, are an integral part of the country's farming system. Sustainability of mountain farming system depends on the transfer of nutrients from the forest to cultivated land by means of tree fodder and leaf litter. Leaf litter is used as bedding material in animal sheds and mixed with dung to make compost, which is the major fertilizer used on farmlands. Nearly every rural household depends on fuelwood for cooking and heating. Apart from fodder and fuelwood, forests also provide a range of other goods and services. Forests make a significant contribution to the subsistence of rural population. Consequently, the sustainability of mountain agriculture places a heavy demand on forests. Given the enormity of the forest degradation problem, it was realized in the late 1970s that sustainable forest management was not possible without the participation of local people. Furthermore, the forests in the mountains of Nepal are fragmented into small patches surrounded by habitation and cultivation, and are not amenable to conventional industrial forest management practices. The only practical alternative is community forestry, i.e. protection, management and utilization of forests through the participation of the local communities.

NATURE AND SCOPE OF COMMUNITY FORESTRY PROGRAM

The Forestry Sector Master Plan, which was approved in 1989, gives the highest priority to community forestry, which is evidenced by the 47 percent of the total forestry sector

investment during the next two decades earmarked for community forestry. Forest Act 1993 and Forest Regulations 1995 are the current forestry legislation. These legal instruments provide a basis for implementing the policies spelled out in the Master Plan. The current community forestry policy is a result of an evolution of forestry policies over two decades. The government gives responsibility and authority to local people by forming Forest User Groups (FUGs) to protect, manage and utilize the forests for fulfilling their needs of forest produce.



In the context of Nepal, community forests are state-owned forests that are handed over to a group of local people organized into FUGs. Depending on localities, community forest areas may be bare land, plantation, scrubland or even well-stocked forest or a combination of these. There is no limit as to how much forest area can be handed over as community forests, and the only criterion considered is whether the user group is able and willing to manage the given area of forest.

Members of a FUG are households that have residential proximity to a particular forest area and have historical affiliation to it. The FUGs are registered with the concerned Dis-

trict Forest Office (DFO). The handed over forest areas are managed on the basis of rules and arrangements spelled out in the group's Constitution and Forest Operational Plan. The day-to-day business of the FUG is handled by the Forest User Committee, which is formed by the assembly of the users. However, the assembly of the member households is the supreme governing body of the FUG and this assembly makes all major decisions.

Although the management and use rights are transferred to FUGs, the ownership of the land is not transferred and remains with the Department of Forest (DOF). The DOF, through its field offices, plays a catalytic role by getting the process started and ensuring continuity. The field forestry officials help the users by organizing the FUG; preparing its Constitution and Operational Plan; registering the FUG; and providing continuous support to FUGs.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Currently, nearly 13,000 FUGs are managing over 1 million hectares of community forest area. A total of 1.5 million households are participating in the program. Community forestry program has been acclaimed for its success in bringing back greenery to the once denuded mountains of Nepal. Its major achievements are as follows:

- ✿ Local control of community-managed forest has led to **increased productivity and biomass** because of protection from fire, grazing and uncontrolled cutting. Improvement in water regime (both yield and quality) has been



observed in many community-managed forest areas, due to the increased forest cover in the watershed.

✿ At present, FUGs are getting a **regular supply of forest produce** in terms of timber, fuelwood, leaf litter and fodder. In addition, the FUGs producing surplus forest products are also generating increasing amount of cash in their funds. Some FUGs are also cultivating cash crops and medicinal plants as ground cover in their forest areas. This is also helping in the income generation of FUGs. For example, many FUGs in eastern Nepal are planting cardamom under alder forest, and are making money through the sale of cardamom.

✿ A positive outcome of the program has been the **change in attitude of local people towards foresters**. The feeling of antagonism that existed in the past has now been replaced by amity, and foresters now feel that they are getting the social prestige that they so deserve! Similarly, the attitude of the forestry staff towards the people has also changed.

✿ Apart from utilizing the **FUG fund** in forestry activities, it is also used for construction, maintenance and operation of rural infrastructure like schools, foot-trails, drinking water projects, irrigation canals, etc. Thus FUGs are becoming effective local institutions that are **supporting various rural development works**.

CHALLENGES

Nepal's community forestry program can be considered a success in terms of forest protection; increased production and availability of forest products; improved water regime; community development works; and empowerment of local people. How-

ever, there are some challenges that need to be tackled to prevent the dilution of the program's successes.

✿ *Voice*. The policy and law provide opportunity for full participation of all members of FUG. However, because of the ingrained traditional cultural factors, the village élite tend to have a major say in the decision making process. The poor and disadvantaged groups do not voice their interests in FUG assemblies and have to accept the decisions made by the élite.

✿ *Conflicts*. Many kinds of conflicts have surfaced while implementing the community forestry program. Most of these conflicts are related to land encroachment by individuals; unclear community forestry boundary between FUGs; and violations of Operational Plan by the users themselves. Some conflicts are among the users of the same FUG, some involve two or more FUGs and others involve FUG and outsiders.

✿ *Wildlife Attacks*. News about wildlife attacks on villagers and their livestock is becoming more and more frequent. This is a clear indication of the increase in the diversity and number of wild animals due to the protection of forests by the community. Though increase in biodiversity is a positive outcome, it also has negative effects like crop damage by wild animals, and hazard to the life of man and his livestock.

✿ *Increased need for field staff support*. After handing over a forest area to an organized FUG, it needs post formation support and frequent visits by technical field staff. As the number of registered FUGs goes up, the pressure on the forestry field staff also increases. This has resulted in the reduction of frequency of field vis-

its by the field staff.

✿ *Civil unrest*. The ongoing Maoist insurgency in Nepal is an overriding concern not only for community forestry but also to all development efforts in Nepal. Despite civil unrest FUGs in most areas are exhibiting resilience by continuing their activities even during a period when most government agencies are not functioning in rural areas. It is heartening to note that in the absence of elected local government bodies, FUGs are the only grassroots organizations with elected office-bearers and resources that can be used for local development.

LESSONS LEARNED

Community forestry program has been implemented in Nepal for more than two decades now. From this exercise, many lessons on participatory approach to natural resource management can be drawn, many of which may be useful to other countries as well. Most important lessons are:

✿ *Empower local forest users*. Forest resources will be better protected and managed, but the users must be assured of benefits that accrue from the resources they are protecting and managing.

✿ *Identify the real users*. Hasty formation of FUG tends to leave out some users and this invariably leads to conflicts during the implementation phase. Proper identification of the real users of the forest areas is the key to the success of community forestry.

✿ *Provide continuous support*. Continuous post hand over support to FUGs is very important. Without this the FUGs may lose track of the program.

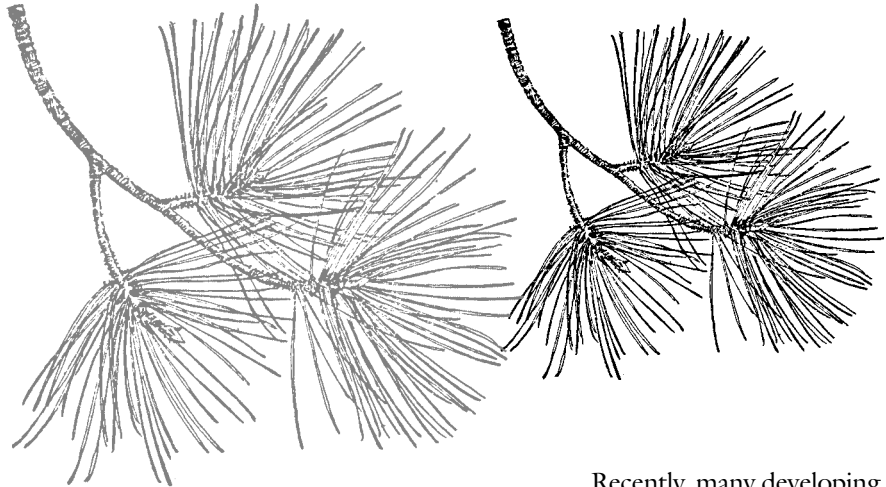
✿ *Provide a training program.* Rigorous and continuous training program has been instrumental in changing the attitude of the forestry staff to play the role of community forestry facilitators.

✿ *Encourage networking.* Forest users should be encouraged to interact among themselves by means of networking to share their experiences. This has proved to be an effective way of generating new ideas and learning from one another.

Based on the experience of Nepal's community forestry program, the following are the key components of success for participatory forest management:

✿ empowering legislation that ensures users' rights over the resource

✿ positive and committed officials



✿ simple procedures and clear guidelines to implement the program

✿ continuous support to the community groups

✿ training of staff and users

✿ regular review and improvement in policy and its implementation.

Recently, many developing as well as developed countries have realized the importance of participatory approach to forest management. The lessons learned from Nepal's community forestry program could be valuable to these countries for crafting more enabling policies, appropriate legislation, and practical implementation procedures.

ABOUT PRAKASH MATHEMA

The Pinchot Institute extended an affiliation to Prakash Mathema as a Research Fellow at the Institute, and hosted him for a period of six weeks. During this time, Mathema had an opportunity to work with Pinchot Institute staff on topics of mutual interest in environmental and natural resource policy.



Mathema is currently an Undersecretary level officer at the Nepal Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, and was on study leave as a Humphrey Fellow at Cornell University. He has a Masters degree in Environmental Forestry from the University of Wales, UK. His work experience, spanning 15 years, includes: forestry research, field implementation of community forestry, forest planning, and participatory watershed management.

His Humphrey Fellowship objectives were to learn about policy processes and institutional arrangements for forestry and natural resource conservation in the U.S.; learn about the latest approaches and methods in forestry/natural resource management from the U.S. academia and practitioners; and establish collaborative professional networks with U.S. professionals.

Mathema's featured essay presents an overview of the community forestry program implemented in the mountains of Nepal. Together with the achievements and challenges of the program, some pertinent lessons learned have also been identified.