



Equity and Social Justice in Natural Resource Management



A Discussion Note

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By

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Introduction

In the last two to three decades, there has been a rapid change in the perceptions of the role of natural resources in society all over the world. The natural resource issues have now been associated with wider socio-economic and environmental concerns, such as biodiversity loss, climate change, poverty and governance (Brown and Schreckenberg et al., 2002). Recently, equity and social justice have been the major issues to be addressed while managing the natural resources.

Some authors, such as Aplet et al. (1993) argue that natural resource management is about making resources perform for people, in which, the decision to engage in natural resource management covers social/political/economic issues from the outset. Natural resource utilization is a social process in which different interests groups, with diverse and often conflicting interests, confront each other at local, regional, national and global levels (Nygren, 2000). While much of the community based natural resource management issue is increasingly seen to be both global and cross-sectoral, the actual solution to many of these issues is social, especially in developing nations, where natural resources are an integral part of local communities' livelihoods. Consequently community based resource management, is a major component of most developing nations' new natural resource sector policies.

Community based natural resource management, or for that matter any other form of resource devolution policy, has generated high expectations that it would save the state money, improve resource quality, and provide benefits to those who really need them. Unfortunately, from a poor person's perspective, who relies on natural resources for their own and families livelihoods, the outcomes have been rather discouraging.

The main problem is natural resource management issues in general and those of the community-based natural resources in particular, are viewed differently by different people (see, for example, Anderson et al., 1998; Khare et al., 1999). However, to date, the views of a few selected interest groups, or stakeholders, mainly the elite and powerful have dominated the content and process of the natural resource management.

Natural resource in Nepalese contexts includes the land, water and forest. This discussion note takes the issues in policy and practices of forest and irrigation in terms of equity and social justice. The authors will explain the concept of equity and social justice in brief and outline some of the policy issues of natural resource management particularly forestry and irrigation. It draws on some reflection from the filed and analysed the equity situations in different cases of natural resource management. Then it will discuss how a particular context and process affect the equity outcomes in general. It highlights the limited and often negative, impact on equity outcomes. This also has proposed some future direction to facilitate the policy discussion in natural resource management sector to address the equity and social justice.

The concepts of equity and social justice

From the perspective of social justice, equity must attend to issues of fairness. Equity, which is contributed by social and economic factors, includes fair distribution of resources, rights, opportunities and wealth among people and over time. In other words, the inclusion in decision making of those most affected by the proposed development intervention should be seen as social justice (Agarwal 2001; Kothari 1999). This definition is distinguished both from the notion of 'equality' where everyone receives the same benefit from a resource, and from a notion of 'equity' that suggests people get benefits according to the amount of their input in terms of labor, etc. Neither of these definitions takes justice into consideration. Rather, equity or fairness must take many other factors into consideration. Equity in resource management must consider the historical, cultural, social, economic, political and institutional forms of oppression that have produced marginalized people and inequitable conditions in the society. The management approaches of natural resource management must be devised to allocate more resources to disadvantaged groups so as to make the system as a whole more fair. Therefore, interventions, which seek equity and social justice, should devise ways to give marginalized groups more benefits.

The Gap between the policy and practice

In Nepal, significant achievements have been made in terms of policy and practice especially in the forestry sector. The need for a change was recognized by the 1989 Forestry Sector Master Plan. The Forest Act of 1993 and the Forest Regulations of 1995 in Nepal are notable progressive frameworks that are means for facilitating devolution of forest resource management at the user level.

However, even with such devolution of control over forest resources, there is an increasing concern among advocates of community forestry that issues of equity and poverty within community forestry have not been adequately addressed. Researchers and practitioners have reported several examples of inequity in resource distribution as well as decision-making in community forests. It has been reported the continued marginalization of women, poorer sub-groups, socially disadvantaged sections and occupational castes within community managed forests.

As in the case of forest policy, government assistance to farmer managed irrigation systems is an important policy area in Nepal where many irrigation systems are owned and managed by farmers and which irrigates more than 70% of irrigated area in the country. There have been attempts by a significant number of donor agencies to help people by providing assistance and funding to develop and manage such irrigation systems. Yet, the equity is a big concern in this sector. The user committees, which are mandatory for accessing support, are formed hastily, with the result that few elites and powerful people of the area dominate decisions relating to access and distribution of benefits from the irrigation. The process of irrigation management often ignores the cases of landlessness and *sukumbasi* who deprive most for not having the land to irrigate.

Some of the reflections on equity in natural resource management are drawn in order to understand the nature of problem in this sector.

Understanding the nature of problem: Some reflections from the filed

This section presents some example of equity issues in different regimes of natural resource management, such as buffer zone management, leasehold forestry, non-timber forest products, irrigation system and grazing land management.

If we take the case of buffer zone area management in Kumarwanti community forest in Nawalparasi district, the Bote/Majhi, the indigenous people in relation to their access and control over the forest resource management, they have been alienated from decision-making process in managing the forest resources by curtailing their traditional rights in entering into the forests, though they have been asked to participate in the meeting organised by forest user group committee. Here, we can observe the serious disparities in distributing benefits as the local elite solely controls the distribution system (Timsina and Paudel, 2003)

In case of leasehold forestry programme, it can be argued that leasehold forestry is an initiative with good philosophy but that implementation does not necessarily confirm to the intention. While the endeavor is seen to have been instrumental in contributing towards environmental recuperation and uplifting of rural income, it is often accompanied by clear degree of unintended consequences. It is speculated that, as the situation stands today, unintended negative outcome might outweigh the positive one (Baral, and Thapa, 2003; Bhattarai et al, 2003). Baral and Thapa (2003) show the case how the individual tends to alienate from the access of his/her own land when the leasehold forestry programme was initiated.

Lal Bahadur Thapa from the Upper Gynjha said that "they had decided to pull the land for lease which I had recently bought from my neighbour (this was bound to be unofficial transaction as it related to shifting cultivation for which official transactions are not possible). I have been personally growing staples like maize and millet in a rotational basis, as others did. I tried to object the move as I had spent as much as Rs. 2,5000/- for buying the land. However they would not listen. They insisted that I instead could join the leasehold forest group, but may not show an objection over what they said is the government programme. When I learnt that I would no more be able to cultivate staple crops I required for my day to day use, I gave up the idea. The land thus fell in the hands of some one else and I remained out of the group".

Source: Baral and Thapa, 2003

The analysis of marketing margin in non-timber forest products in the Malekhu Khola Watershed in Dhading district revealed that there is no equitable distribution of final sales value between collectors and traders. There is a threat to undermining the equity in distribution of this source of income among resource poor people in the long run because of the lack of proper institutional arrangement systems (Pandit et al, 2003).

In farmer managed irrigation system, there are issues that the irrigation interventions do not target the poor and marginalized people as they have no or very little land to irrigate, though the system compels to change its rules to better fit the new social situations, physical structures, and/or water delivery rate and flow in the canal. Most of the poor people have been forced to settle in marginal upland where irrigation canal could not run along their land. They earn their livelihood working for the landlords in the local area. But very often the poor are asked to contribute irrespective of the benefit they receive from the irrigation system. Water Users Association (WUA), itself is controlled by the local landlords and influences the decision in their own favours (Personal communication).

In the case of grazing land management in Mustang district, the high hills of Nepal, households who keep the sheep and goat for the business purpose get most of the benefit from the grazing land. In high hills, the livestock can graze only for 6 months in the grazing land, as other 6 months remain almost chilly. Relatively the wealthier households have higher and increasing access in alternative livelihood options as they possess some land in lower stream to keep the livestock in winter. But for the poor and marginalized, they cannot keep as many livestock as rich households, because they do not have alternative options since they lack the access over the private land. Therefore, these households continue to be marginalized even though the rule seems more democratic that allows all households to graze their cattle in the grazing land (Basnet, 2003).

Discussion

Looking at the nature of problem in natural resource management in addressing the issues of equity and social justice, we need to understand the contexts to which the interventions have been introduced and the ways they have been put into practice. This will have a great impact on the equity outcomes of the particular resource management regimes.

Ecological and socio-economic contexts

Resource attributes or ecological contexts and user attributes or socio-economic contexts of the areas where the natural resource management are implied seem to have an impact over the outcomes. In this discussion note, it was assumed that the contexts are less likely to be changed by the development interventions until and unless the social structure is transformed.

The resource attributes include the physical characteristics of the area where the resources have to be thrived. The availability of the resources and its physical conditions, regenerative capacity and its usefulness to the local people are important imperative to be analysed when we talk about the equity on natural resource management. The resource attributes also include its use and management pattern over time. For example, the degraded forest and grazing land and the limited availability of irrigation water may cause an impact on the distribution systems.

The user attributes or socio-economic contexts cover a wide range of issues in society. Therefore, it is imperative to look at the complex fabric of society, because it is within

this complexity that the roots of inequality can be revealed and the process through which such inequities are perpetuated.

The users of the resources are divided by a hierarchical social structure based on class, caste and gender discrimination which has led to some having fewer economic opportunities, lower education levels, poor health, and a dependency upon natural resources and on more privileged groups as patron-client relationships for their livelihoods (Malla, 2001). Such structure of discrimination prevents the marginalized from holding economic resources of his/her own, from occupying powerful public spaces of decision-making, and requires them to be the main labourers to gathering of common resources for household subsistence use. Indeed, the control over the social, economic and political institutions by a few has favoured some to the exclusion of others. Such strong forms of power between privileged elite have become almost impossible to break, even with the advent of democratic forms of governance.

The most of the inequity and social injustice in the cases explained above are because of the complex web of social system that control over social, political and economic power.

Processes: how the rules are formed, whose interest they represent and how they enacted?

Natural resource management regimes pass through a range of processes in terms of its use and management within the community. While traditionally many indigenous systems of common property resource management have rules of rule making, rules of resource use and management and enforcement and monitoring systems, the formal processes of natural resource management has in large part led to control over the resources through similar processes. The process that influences resource management also involves the national policy processes. The effectiveness of the policy process depends on the degree of autonomy where the natural resource dependent poor will have their voice heard in the decision making process. Learning from natural resource management and its adjustment and incorporations in management are important processes in addressing the equity issues in natural resource management. However, the learning is affected by the way the political process in the community is undergone where conflicts and negotiations are key factors in benefiting the poor and marginalized people.

These processes of control over the functioning of the resource management leads to prioritisations of some resources over others. For example, in case of community forestry, while elites prefer to have timber species than non-timber forest products in their community forestry, the poor prefer the later one. A protection orientation for the production of large trees over an active management of the forest for the production of diverse species, and an emphasis on how the forest can yield income for those in power rather than fulfil the subsistence needs of the many have been some of the prevailing trends (Bhattarai et al, 2002), particularly in the case of Terai region.

Similarly, in the case of irrigation system, the rule making processes do not consider the case of poor, small holders, landless and the wage labours who become the majority of the farming community.

Interactions between the contexts and the process: the outcomes

The contexts and processes of natural resource management have led to the mixed results in terms benefit sharing between different groups in the community. Depending upon the socio-economic and ecological contexts, and the processes of rules and policy making, the costs and benefits vary among the economic classes, castes, gender and ethnic groups. It also varies with household and between households in the community. The costs and benefits in addressing the equity issue include the financial, economic, social and political processes in the community.

For example, one of the major inequities in community forestry has been the exclusion of some users from the decision-making processes and in farmer managed irrigation system, the poor and landless are not taken in to account, which keeps the users continued to be marginalized. Costs of membership, products and labour are usually applied without attention to the vast differences in wealth and availability of time within the community. In case of community forestry, many have lost access to products that they used to sell, or that they relied upon for their traditional occupations. Increase in time and distance required for the collection of grasses, fodder and fuel wood has increased burdens on already heavy workloads. Further, the funds generated FUG, are often spent on development activities, which benefits only a segment of the community.

Policy implications and future directions

To address the equity issues, a new perspective in both the policy and practices are needed, that balance power relationships. This discussion note presents a number of implications for future community based natural resource management. Some of the major implications are as follows:

- There is a need to develop adaptive approach to resource management that emphasize learning by doing through conscious action and monitoring, rather than seeking a costly precision and certainty in terms of time and resources. The approach should take the factors into considerations specific to the social, economic and political context and the processes.
- Community based natural resource management involves a number of independent actors at the national and local levels and their social, economic and political interests drive their actions where a power relations keep dominating the poor and marginalized. However, most professionals involved in facilitating such community based resource management programme are trained in technical and environmental issues, and are not well equipped to analyze such social, economic and political issues.
- There is at present no forum at both the national and local levels, whereby each actor is allowed to present their case for discussion. It means the poor and marginalized have no opportunity to put their issues. The local elites capture most of the local forums and the bureaucrats and donors capture the national forum. The neutral forum should focus on positive discrimination, where the poor and

marginalized get priority in fulfilling their livelihood needs that ensures the equity and social justice for them.

- Since imposing a policy issues on natural resource management is a highly political issue, implying a potential change in power, positions and interests of actors involved, an mutual learning approach to change is recommended in which all concerned including the representatives of the communities themselves, engage in a process of effective communication, negotiation, collaborations, and even conflicts so that they would be able to arrive at negotiated visions, strategies and policy instruments that better address the issues and opportunities. The debate should take place in all aspects of the issue-technical, political, institutional, service delivery and economic.
- The governance and the role of civil society have been key concepts in development. Therefore, the policy processes need to encourage the presence of multiple network of civil engagement that through learning process facilitate for mutual benefit. Such civic engagement will put pressure to those in power to be more responsive and accountable to citizens, particularly the poor and marginalized.

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