

Ban Chautari: A Multi-stakeholder dialogue on forest policy issues

Annual Review Meeting Note

30th December, 2011

Indreni complex, Kathmandu

This brief note summarises the deliberations during the annual review of Ban Chautari organized by the Growing Forest Partnership (GFP) consortium members in Kathmandu on 30th December, 2011. About 50 participants including the Secretary of the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MoFSC), over a dozen of Joint Secretaries, other senior forest officials, representatives of civil society, representatives of private sector and forest professionals and researchers participated in the event. The programme was conducted in an informal model, initiated by Bharati Pathak (FECOFUN/Asmita), moderated by Devesh Tripathi (NFA), welcomed by Dil Bahadur Khatri (ForestAction) and concluded by Apsara Chapagain (FECOFUN). Naya Sharma Paudel delivered a presentation on reflective revisit of all Ban Chautaris and the processes associated with it. The participants commented on the presentation and made suggestions on the future strategies of Ban Chautaris.

ForestAction Nepal, FECOFUN, NFA and Asmita Nepal in collaboration with the GFP took an initiative on forest policy processes with four main objectives: diagnostic analysis, amplify local voices, facilitate multi-stakeholder policy dialogues, and inform wider public on the process. In 2011, they conducted nine Ban Chautaris on issues covering forest act amendment, sustainable forest management, timber management, forest based enterprise, protected areas and green economy. The Ban Chautari is a comprehensive concept that includes: identification of contentious policy issue, carry out diagnostic analysis, engaging with presenter, panelist and participants, organizing a policy debate, dissemination through mass media, and synthesis and publication. The process has made some good achievements and has been hailed by the participants and concerned stakeholders. First, the initiative has institutionalized 'Ban Chautari' - a unique process of policy dialogue that combines diagnostic analysis with structured policy dialogue. Second, it has provided a welcoming environment for dialogue where people can share their views without any fear which has also helped develop trust among the stakeholders. Third, it has been able to narrow down the gaps in stakeholder understanding of some major contentious policy agenda such as sustainable forest and timber management and protected area governance.

The Ban Chautari, as an emerging multi-stakeholder policy forum has number of issues that requires a careful consideration. The relevance and utility of such policy forums in supporting the national forest policy process is a major issue. Similarly, while the GFP has supported the process till now, there are questions on long term sustainability of such forum in the absence of external support. While Ban Chautari has emerged as a brand, yet there are questions on its standardization in order to use this brand in every meeting or workshops pertinent to forest policy process in Nepal. Moreover, questions on its structure and inclusiveness – how open or

exclusive should it be – still remains. With an aim to get the diverse views on Ban Chautari, an annual review workshop was organized by the GFP consortium in Kathmandu where issues pertinent to the achievements of Ban Chautari and forest policy process were discussed. The participants have diverse responses. They highly appreciated the initiative and recognised that such process would contribute to informed policy making in forest sector. Mr. Keshav Bhattari, Secretary of MoFSC, appreciated Ban Chautari and opined that the government could have provided funding and other support for this process. He assured that the senior officials will participate in the future events provided they are timely informed. Dr. Uday Raj Sharma, Ex-Secretary of MoFSC suggested that the government should own and support the process as it would add legitimacy to the process. He urged senior officials to manage their time to participate in the Chautaris. In addition, Dr. Sharma also suggested for working closely with government authority to enhance the policy intake through such process. Mr. Ram Prasad Lamsal opined that contrary to everyday CSO led meetings organized to invite and humiliate policy makers, Ban Chautari has established a culture of mutual respect and genuine exchange of ideas. Mr. Bajra Kishor Yadav, Director General of Department of Forest (DoF) appreciated the process and opined that the DoF would benefit from such dialogues. Mr. Kapil Adhikari, chairperson of timber traders of Nepal stated that the private sector has been involved in forest policy issue for the first time through Ban Chautaris. He highlighted the role of private sector and sought a greater cooperation among government, civil society and private sector to realize the economic potentials of forest resources in the country.

Some participants also warned against potential pitfalls of externally funded initiatives. Dr. Chandra Paudel, Division Chief of Biodiversity at the MoFSC, Mr. Bihari K Shrestha, and Mr. TN Bhattarai warned that Ban Chautari should take nationally relevant policy agenda, maintain transparency of policy issues and management aspects, share outcomes to all relevant actors, and constructively support government in its policy process. Many participants commented on the substantive aspects – what should be the priority policy agenda for discussion. Sas Man Shrestha, DG of Department of Forest Research and Survey (DFRS), Juddha Gurung, member secretary of National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC), and Krishna C Paudel suggested taking sustainable forest management, ecosystem services and biodiversity conservation into consideration in the future debate. There were concerns that Ban Chautari sometimes appeared to be inclined more towards CSO agenda and biased towards rights issues which requires balancing by responsibility. Mr. Kumud Shrestha from NFA claimed that forest technicians have historically invested in decentralizing forest management and should be credited for that. Mr. Bhola Khatiwada from Community based Forestry Supporters' Nepal (COFSUN) suggested the consortium members to reflect back and address the sustainability issue of the Ban Chautari process.

The formal closing of the discussion was followed by a reception and dinner. Much more open sharing and exchange of views took in many small groups. On the whole, participants strongly recognized the role of Ban Chautari in informing stakeholders and policy makers in complex forest policy issues. They expressed their commitment to participate and contribute to the process. Opening up the steering arrangement, adoption of more sustainable level of expenditure, working closely with policy makers particularly involving them in the dialogues and wide sharing of outcomes were some of the recommendations from the review.

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