

# Jungle policies

## New forest policy requires a rethinking of forests and a break with institutional legacies

**O**UR forefathers (and mothers) used the notion of a 'jungle' to denote two contrasting senses—the fear and the frontier. Fear, because the jungle housed dangerous animals like tigers and bears, and frontier



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because the jungle, once cleared, could become fertile land. For this reason, local lives and state politics in the past were largely driven by the politics of the jungle. Now, we can see the new incarnations of jungle politics in public policy development in Nepal.

Currently, at least 10 policies related to forests are being drafted, including interim policies, forest sector strategies, agricultural development policy, biodiversity policy, national conservation strategy and national REDD strategy. No doubt, effective public policies are necessary to facilitate development. But the concern is that we do not know who is driving these policies and why. As the

pate in policy debates now, rather than wait indefinitely for an ideal political situation. So, we must find ways to improve the policy system even when the country is in a political transition. A wide array of actors, from local communities to transnational campaigners, is active in the forest sector, irrespective of whether or not Nepal has an effective policy system. These actors can better contribute if there is policy direction in the country.

The Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation is taking the lead with support from a multi-donor forestry programme. However, the development of a new forest policy in Nepal requires a fundamental rethinking of the meaning of forests, a break with past institutional legacies, redefining the role of forest actors and a separation of the governing regime from management.

We need to 'deconstruct' the meaning of the term 'forest' as it has evolved in history, and reframe the concept to represent the complex environmental system that exists underneath. This interrogation is critically important because a top-down and nature-centric view of forests has dominated policy debates. From this view, 'scientific forest management' has emerged to focus narrowly on managing high-value timber in the forest. During the eighties, when the Master Plan for the Forest Sector was formulated, there was progressive articulation of forests as a source of rural livelihoods. The FAO's landmark publication 'Forestry for local community development' in 1976 inspired this rethinking of forests. Unfortunately, the meaning of forests has not changed even in the community forestry movement, an otherwise highly successful development case of the past three decades. On the contrary, communities have internalised and reproduced the dominant ideology of forests within the prevailing political ecology. This can be seen in the way community-managed forests restrict grazing and sustainable agriculture, which are vital to poverty reduction. Such problems of the persisting conventional forest ideology are even more critical in areas under direct government control.

Another critical issue is the lack of institutional diversity for the management of forests at various scales—from small forests to large, productive landscapes. While community institutions have worked well, forest institutions have poorly developed the bigger forest landscapes of the Tarai and the larger



conservation landscapes across the country. Despite several institutional experiments to manage larger landscapes—such as through conservation areas, buffer zone management councils, collaborative forest management and other forms of co-management—there is still no agreement among forest governance actors on how these areas should be managed. The whole politics of institutional development has been confined to the 'state' versus the 'community'. The new policies should create a break with past institutional legacies. We require multi-scale institutions, linked to a more holistic local democratic system for the governance of larger forest landscapes.

Linking forest landscapes with local governance is another critical aspect of the development of the new forest policy. Local democratic systems should involve local governments as pivotal actors in forest governance. Communities and groups should be constituencies of the local government system, in addition to individual citizens exercising voting rights. Local governments should be empowered to formulate local rules of forest management including hiring technical experts and business groups for the effective management of forest ecosystem services. Such a democratic local governance system of forests can eliminate the current confusion, or at times a feeling of rivalry, between community organisations and local governments, especially VDCs. This approach can also create confi-

dence at the higher levels of government to devolve power to more credible local governments.

Likewise, there is a lack of clarity on the roles of various actors in the management and governance of forests at different scales. For all scales of forest management, it is important to separate three different roles: regulatory, entrepreneurial and as facilitators. Conventionally, the Department of Forests has been mandated to regulate as well as manage forests. The role of the government should be limited to regulation and monitoring. Local governments should be allowed to regulate forests, within the meta-regulatory framework of the nation-state. Without fostering entrepreneurial innovations, neither the government nor the community alone can realise the full economic potential of the forest sector. Currently, there is a lack of clarity on how the private sector can participate in the promotion of forest ecosystem services. The new policy should promote forest entrepreneurship in socially and environmentally responsible ways. Likewise, facilitative activities like research, training, advocacy and other innovative support services are also important in fostering effective forest management systems. Policies, therefore, should explicitly define a credible space for the provisioning of these—such as through earmarking funds for research and capacity-building services.

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country has no elected government, they are obviously not driven by the sovereign people or their representatives. All of these are actually 'projects' funded by donors.

How do we respond to such a state of jungle policies? One way is to consider these a project of democratic regression, and then demand for their complete withdrawal until we have a new constitution or an elected government. However, we do not know when that will happen. Furthermore, how are we to tell if such ideal democratic politics will be effective in conflict-ridden Nepal? It is thus sensible to talk about and partici-