



Imposing indicators or co-creating meanings through joint reflection? Lessons from Community Forestry in Nepal¹

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The Forestry Challenge in Nepal

Over the last two decades, the government of Nepal has handed over patches of forest to local communities. These communities form Forest User Groups (FUGs), as part of the nationwide community forestry programme supported by the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (1988), the Forest Act (1993) and the Forest Rules (1995). The main aim of this programme is to provide a legal basis for access to forests by local communities as a means to improving livelihoods, as well as to reverse the trends of forest degradation and deforestation, particularly in the middle hills of the country.

Recent studies have demonstrated that the community forestry programme has, in many instances, led to improved forest conditions. Nevertheless, some studies have highlighted problems of the under-utilisation of forests and of poor people having less access to the benefits from community forests than the better off.

Community forestry implementation suffers from two main difficulties that have contributed to these negative impacts. First, within FUGs, decision-making has been centred around a minority of dominant community members, who very often depend least on common property forest resources. Field experience has also shown that the District Forest Office and Range Post staff often drive decisions through the elite members of the FUG, even including the decision to form the FUG. Second, other organisations involved in community forestry face difficulties in identifying support services and skills that are appropriate and responsive to the needs of FUGs and specific groups within them, and accordingly in understanding the impacts of their current services and policies. Linked to this, communication between stakeholders has been identified as a constraint.

These problems highlight a need to enhance the ability of forest users to undertake two crucial steps. They need to plan systematically for forest management on the basis of needs analyses and forest resource-related social, institutional and economic factors. They also need

¹ This article is based on the research work carried out by the International and Rural Development Department of the University of Reading in collaboration with ForestAction, a national non-government organisation (NGO), and the Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP), now Livelihood and Forestry Programme (LFP) and funded by the Department for International Development (DFID, United Kingdom), through its Natural Resources System Programme. We acknowledge the conceptual guidance of Dr Yam Malla and other team members involved in the research.

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to demand services from, and provide feedback to other organisations, including the field offices of Department of Forest.

This arena was the scene for our research on monitoring, which we initially thought was the missing piece that would enhance FUGs' abilities to undertake effective forest management. From November 2000-May 2001 we carried an intensive field research to develop a monitoring process and indicators aiming at supporting forest management in five sites (4 FUG sites and 1 non-FUG site) in the Kushmisera Range Post of Baglung district in West Nepal.

Getting Started by Revising the Original Purpose

During the field research, the research team initially invested much effort into finding indicators to monitor. However, the team came to realise that excessive focus on indicators related to the project purpose left little time for looking at more important aspects of the processes through which actual learning takes place within FUGs, and to which the targeted indicators could be effectively linked. Without this, indicators would either be unidentifiable, inappropriate or simply not cost effective.

Our research consisted of several steps. First, we piloted the work using a PAR approach in Pallo Pakha FUG. We started by developing a general understanding of and with the forest users through meetings with key representatives, the committee and subsequently, in *toles*³, with as many households as possible. From this, we asked each *tole* to select representatives who would work with us on the detailed investigations in the next phase.

At the first representative's workshop, we first discussed the research purpose before moving on to indicators. Firstly, we found it difficult to get into the meaning of 'monitoring' and 'indicator'. As the discussion progressed, it became obvious that there was difficulty in understanding words such as 'monitoring' and 'indicators'. In literal translation, monitoring and indicators are 'ANUGAMAN' and 'SUCHAK', the Sanskrit words. In most of the cases these words are used by Brahmin communities and rest of the community people rely on their interpretations. The word 'ANUGAMAN' is also viewed rather negatively, by Forest Guards and local village elite, as senior officials from the national, regional and district headquarters have often come to assess local work in the past. Even approximate local words or phrases relating to monitoring or investigation have negative connotations, or are perceived as activities conducted only by officials and technicians. Phrases such as 'REKH DEKH' ('keeping an eye on something'), 'LEKHAJOKHA' (weighing up and writing), 'KHOJBIN' or 'CHHANBIN' (investigation - but usually referring to investigating someone else), were considered but do not help to develop a common understanding about the monitoring process.

Secondly, we find difficulties to develop consensus about the meaning of 'indicator' before moving on to setting the 'criteria' for identifying indicators. Reflecting on it, we realised how strongly the different interests among workshop participants shaped their perceptions on indicators. While discussing the indicator on improved forest condition, we observed various views on it. For an example, for a member of FUG who has rented a piece of land for grass cutting (for her cattle to feed) she said good ground cover of grasses. Watch man of the forest, put his indicator as the 'forest cover where we can't see people moving inside the forest (in a workshop in Pallo pakha FUG).

Subsequently we also saw that there was an imbalance in the representation of members' interests (and the interests of various groups within) in FUG planning as well as in the

³ *Tole* is the Nepali word for a hamlet or similar small settlement within a larger one. It is not always easy to identify *toles* in a large village, though most people will understand it to be cluster of about 10 to 20 houses. It is also recognised as the level at which most informal communication takes place.

opportunities for FUGs to generate new knowledge through their forest management activities. There is limited participation and/or no representation of various interest group from within the FUG in annual planning meeting where, FUG takes decision on various activities for the next year. As observed these meeting held among the FUGC⁴ members and range post staffs.

We realised that to address this imbalance, we needed a process that would allow indicators to be identified that reflect the variety of perceptions and interests amongst general forest users and committee members. These indicators would enable each interest group to analyse trends in their forest after establishing a baseline of information. The field experiences, however, demonstrated that an undue focus on indicators at the level of development project purpose and their need for developing monitoring indicators to assess planned activities meant that it was difficult to address the many more important prerequisites. For example the process of enhancing greater participation of various interest groups, development of common understanding of meaning and defining the purpose of forest management is crucial for effective and equitable management processes to be followed, without which indicators would either be unidentifiable, inappropriate or simply not cost-effective.

The original purpose of the project was to assess the perceptions or expectations of various stakeholders on common property forests and accordingly to identify indicators that would enable these stakeholders to effectively plan for and monitor common property forest management. This purpose had two underlying assumptions. Firstly, that local communities are firmly in control of their community forest resources, following the identification of forests and their users and preparation of operational (management) plans, as specified in the community forestry guidelines. Secondly, that community forest users are aware of the government community forestry policy objectives, and that all the aspects of forest management are considered in the forest user group's operational plan. Following on from these assumptions, the project originally proposed that a set of criteria and indicators could be developed that would help to assess whether or not community forest is managed as specified in the operational plan and that process used to arrive at such criteria and indicators could be documented.

However, once the field research began, it became evident that the majority of the members, including those belonging to the most active or strongest FUG, were not aware of the government community forestry policy objectives. Apart from a few FUG committee officials, mainly the chairmen and secretaries, very few people knew about the existence of operational plans. Some people did not even know that they had a community forest. Under such a situation, it would have made little sense to talk about monitoring indicators.

The project purpose was consequently revised to allow spaces to develop and assess participatory action and learning approaches to the management of common pool resources (CPR) and biodiversity for sustaining livelihoods, including monitoring systems that enable various stakeholders to plan forest management. Explicit monitoring systems at the level of local forest management are necessary for two reasons: to enhance the internal action and learning processes in local forest management institutions (in particular FUGs) in pursuit of livelihood security and sustainable resource usage; and to raise the profile of local people's interests in stakeholder interaction, through a mutually active monitoring interface, in order to improve the relevance of and accountability of interventions, service delivery and policy formulation. This change was agreed with the donor (DFID) who has funded for the original purpose of the project.

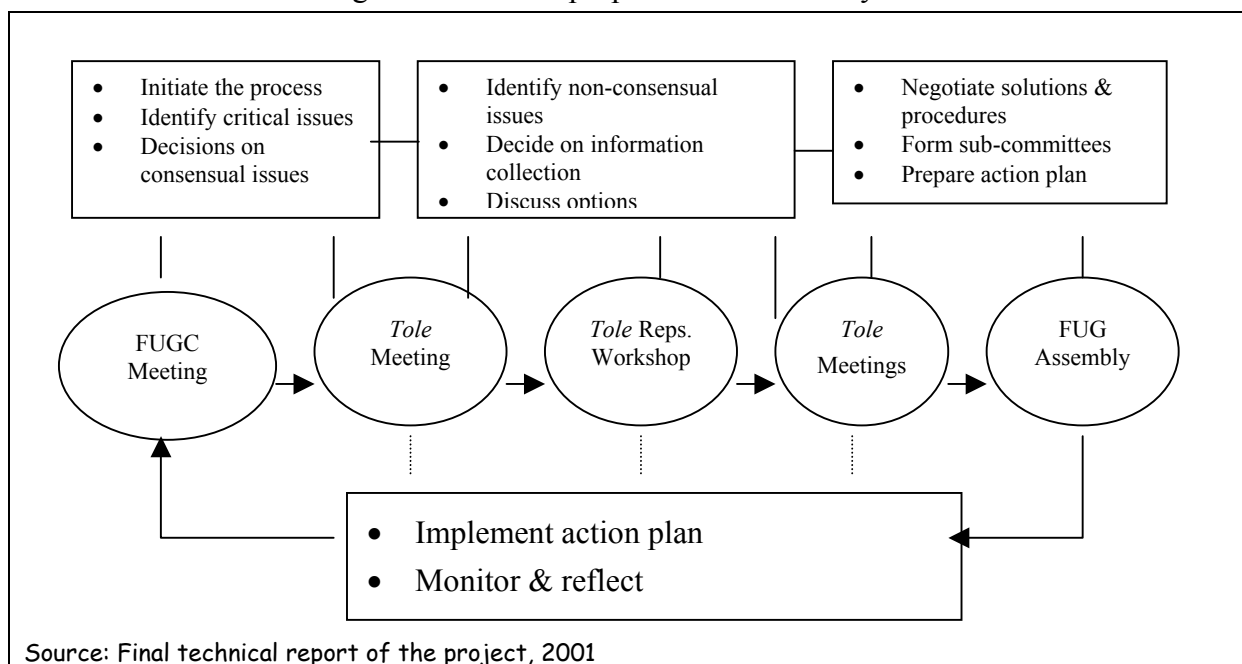
⁴ Forest user group committee(FUGC) is a executive body of a FUG elected by group members in assembly meeting

Subsequent Work in the Field

With this revised purpose, the research team facilitated the next steps of the field investigations processes by first forming the research group⁵. This was achieved by using a group inquiry approach, during which the issues brought together from the *tole* were analysed and discussed in order to develop a set of proposals for short-term and long-term solutions and setting the clear objectives for each proposal. These proposals were then discussed by the *tole* representatives with the other households in their *toles*.

After this stage, all the household members of all the *toles* came together in an assembly meeting of the FUG to decide on the priority issues, develop a work plan for each decision, and plan ways for monitoring both implementation and impact. Where there was no consensus on particular issues or where there was a clear need for further research, the information requirements and method for researching the issue, were also discussed. After this, the FUGs started implementing decisions and monitoring progress. This was only partially covered in the timeframe of our research project, hence our observations are only partial and preliminary. We developed a one year follow-up plan to the research project in order to gain some understanding of the sustainability of the process at both FUG as well as range post level and the constraints encountered by both the forest users and Range Post staff.

The full process is shown in Figure 1. The circles represent the core activities in the process and the texts in the rectangles indicate the purpose of each activity.



In each FUG, a team of three members representing FUGC members and *tole* representatives were formed in each FUGs. Similarly a team formed at range post level consisting member of the range post staffs who involved in the process, Range post level users' network (FECOFUN). Finally, at the end of research project we along with *tole* representatives analysed the research process and planned subsequent activities such as implementation of

⁵ The research group differs from the executive committee in that the research group involves more people and these representatives are supposed to change annually in future. Furthermore, the research group also discusses the committee and its relation to the rest of the group, and accordingly the committee is also regarded as a stakeholder group within the FUG

planned action, and research follow up. This involved reflection on the methods, tools and techniques used, the sequence in which these were used, the role of the facilitators and identifying how the methods, tools and techniques could be adapted in the future activities of FUGs as well as Range post staff and users network at Range post level.

Methodological Results

The core methodology that drove the monitoring fieldwork with community members from the five sites was participatory action research. We developed case studies to examine local level monitoring practices within the forest management planning framework. Our field investigations focused on using methods that are inclusive of different people's needs and interests, and that enable the users to learn from new experiences through monitoring. In the beginning of the process in each group, we identified key issues and challenges of participation of the various interest groups within them, which then used to set up basic norms to follow while representing the meetings and workshops. For example, representation of women and minority sub-group such as occupational castes and land less people. The Range Post staff members were involved throughout the investigations in order to develop their capacity to continue adapting the process in future.

Throughout the research, the core research team including tole representatives constantly assessed and reflected the usefulness of the methods and tools used, and accordingly adapted the research methodology. A range of methods, tools, techniques and games were used including resource and social mapping, village and forest walks, situation analysis (via a 'web diagram'), visioning, wealth rankings, focused group discussions, forest resource assessment, sample plots etc. For example, wealth ranking- initially there was no use of wealth ranking in Bhane FUG, during the workshop, tole representatives used it to identify the various category of forest product users subsequently it is used to see the representation of wealth categories in FUGC and tole representative themselves. After the workshop, they revisited the wealth ranking and reassessed it in various toles to adjust the changes.

The research led us to developing a more generic and simple process (see Figure 1) that can enable forest users in different locations in the hills to identify priority issues relating to forests and livelihoods, undertake critical inquiry and self-analysis, negotiate interests (especially of disadvantaged groups), and develop flexible plans that allow for experimentation, monitoring and review. The research team also prepared a set of guidelines for information requirements and data collection methods to assist facilitating organisations undertaking this process with FUGs in the future.

The core elements of the methodology are very simple and replicable, and the process shows the major steps, in terms of what activities to undertake, when, how and by whom. Once the system is in place, the concerned FUG members will be able to use the process on their own and adapt it to their local circumstances. Although initially some outside support will be required to help initiate and facilitate the process, the involvement of outside facilitators can decrease after this.

As we had FUG members as well as Range Post staff involved in all stages of the research activities, we were able to develop a practical process for monitoring that moved away from the notion of indicator and has had local relevance. A follow up study [Paudel et al, 2003] conducted in early 2003 indicated that there is a strong feeling of ownership amongst the community members and Range Post staff over the monitoring system and the process of developing it. The study showed that community groups were expanding the process to other aspects of community development, such as school management.

The methodology that we came to through our PAR process is different from the existing approach for supporting FUGs in several ways. It:

- Reaches the majority of FUG members, beyond the FUG committee officials, and ensures that all the interest groups' views and concerns are taken into consideration. In the past, FUGC has been taken granted to represent the FUG. It is because the concept of interest group applied while forming executive body and few members of group selected to represent the FUGC as the interest group such as minority occupational caste and women. There were no functional tole meetings though there is a provision of tole meetings. In one hand, this representation of interest group paralyzed the functioning of the tole and in other hand, these representatives were selected from group they have no compliance with their tole hence they do not represent any of the tole in terms of functional relation. In this research, we emphasize on the importance and need to involve all members in the process which regained the momentum. In our context, functional social relation exists at the tole level where effective communication, interpersonal sharing and exchange happen. These tole level meetings opened the door for awareness and more critical reflection of the community forestry process
- Provides a sequential framework for information collection and analysis, explaining the required actions and the objectives for each step or activity. As mentioned above, there was no tole meetings for planning and reflection. FUGC simply collects information as asked and required by range post and other development project staffs. It is because there was no tole level meetings where the various issues of conflicts and points for negotiation can be visible.
- Explains the stage at which the interests of various interest groups and individuals should be brought together for discussion and negotiation, and the ways in which this can be done.
- Promotes a deliberate and practical strategy of communication between FUG and various local level stakeholders, including the Range Post and District Forest Office.
- Helps identify and pinpoint areas of uncertainty, knowledge gaps and practical strategies for more deliberate observation, experimentation and analysis for learning
- Seeks to reduce asymmetry of power relations within the various groups within FUG, as well as FUG and the government staff by promoting forums and platforms for the open exchange of views and arguments

Key Lessons

Generally, when development activities are facilitated by outsiders – by they government officials or donor-funded project staff – fieldworkers often impose indicators on client organisations. This imposition is neither feasible nor useful for either party. Our study suggests that it is unrealistic to develop a systematic and hierarchical monitoring system that combines indicators from all different levels whilst ensuring the active participation of all stakeholders.

Therefore, the key lesson arising from this case study is that an externally construed indicator-oriented monitoring process does not necessarily help the learning and planning process of not only local actors but also those operating at higher spheres of decision making to cope with their situations. When we, as the core research team, understood this, we were able to step back from forcefully developing indicators of forest management, and we moved

to finding a strategy for a collaborative process of learning, negotiation, communication and improved management of forest. Monitoring remained as the center piece, not as a rigid and hierarchical framework of indicators, but as a dynamic link between learning and planning process. Monitoring stopped becoming a separate activity. This indeed was related to the fundamental process of reorienting power relations among groups of people within and outside FUG.

Another key observation from our study concerns the role of external facilitators in collaborative learning processes. The important ways through which external facilitators can contribute are: a) defining the overall process of research and communication in terms of the sequence of meetings, b) assisting clients in bringing together different issues, interests and perceptions in relation to group functioning and the resource (particularly where these conflict with each other), c) helping to negotiate solutions, and d) providing a broader picture of social, economic, environmental and political realities with a standard set of information that gives a common basis for transparent decision-making in common property resources (in particular, equity, power relations and environmental degradation) that are global concerns. This will create a critical group awareness, and group level self-assessment, by relating these issues to their own social reality. A challenge however is to minimize impositions, and engage in open and empowering dialogues that enable local actors find and articulate their own ideas and options, this requires a philosophical commitment on the part of facilitators for a participatory process of change and substantial social skills to create learning groups, moving away from typical development actions.

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