



Social Learning at Work: A Case Study of Community Forestry in Nepal

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Abstract

Because of their global environmental significance and direct contributions to local livelihoods, the management of natural resources has been on the top of policy discourses in recent years. There have been a variety of policy and programme initiatives to achieve these twin livelihood and conservation goals, including community based natural resources management (CBNRM) approaches. While there have been successes in CBNRM policies and programmes as they have developed in many countries, there is not yet consistent progress in achieving the two goals. Underlying this is the fact that it is unfortunately common to find CBNRM institutions that are characterized by institutional traits such as elite domination, limited creativity and innovations, limited sense of ownership, free-riding, unbounded conflicts, lack of transparency, unequal representation, or inequity in benefit sharing.

Taking evidence from Nepal's community forestry program and using a social learning perspective, this paper seeks to promote an understanding of how social learning processes take place in the context of community based natural resource management. The paper analyzes the problems, and key challenges and opportunities, and offers strategies to address these. From a social learning perspective, the evolution and enforcement of appropriate institutional arrangements is shaped by the way various stakeholders: engage in the process of learning (through constantly testing assumptions during experience and knowledge building processes); negotiate rules, divide responsibilities, monitor each other; devise incentive structures; and, get engaged in political processes. Evidence from community forestry in Nepal is presented to demonstrate how such knowledge building and political processes within and between key CBNRM institutions are related to the success in achieving the two goals of environmental conservation and poverty reduction. In particular, the current status, challenges, and opportunities for future improvement as seen from the perspective of social learning are highlighted, using three key components as a basis: adaptive management; bounded conflict and social capital; and micro-macro governance linkages. Some conclusions and policy suggestions are then made as contributions to the wider contexts in which CBNRM approach is practiced.

Key words: *Nepal, community forestry, social learning, adaptive management, community based natural resource management (CBNRM), monitoring, governance, bounded conflict, social capital*

I. BACKGROUND

To achieve the twin goals of conservation and poverty reduction, there have been a range of attempts to engage the state, markets and local communities in managing natural resources in different temporal and spatial contexts, with an increasing emphasis on the roles and rights of local communities in the recent years. The shift towards a greater (acknowledged) role of communities in what is commonly known as Community Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) reflects the belated recognition that sustainable resource management can never be independent of the sustainability of collective human institutions at local level (Agrawal 2001).

While CBNRM has generated several successful outcomes in some parts of the world such as in Nepal (see, Mahapatra and Khanal, 2000; Joshi, 2001; Sharma, 2002), there is not yet satisfactory and consistent progress in both resource sustainability and improvement of livelihoods of the poor. A number of researchers and policy analysts have analyzed the dynamics of institutions governing the common pool resources at local level, including factors related to their successes and failures (Ostrum 1990, Bromley 1991). Their work has advanced our knowledge of how people and resources relate in using and managing resources. However, there is still a limited understanding of dynamic aspects of this, in other words, how key social actors within such institutions learn, and improve rules, practices and technologies relating to resource management and use, and what policy instruments facilitate the process to accommodate new learning in policy arena.

II. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Three key concepts are explored here as the basis for grounding a social learning perspective in community based natural resource management. The first concept is *adaptive management*, which relates to the processes and praxis of learning through experience in a more conscious way. Adaptive management can, in its simplest terms, be understood as a process of enhancing learning for improved management outcomes, by incorporating explicit learning (such as for monitoring) into management plans and action. According to Lee (1993: 9), "adaptive management is an approach to natural resource policy that embodies a simple imperative: policies are experiments; learn from them. Adaptive management assumes that organizational policies and plans are based on incomplete knowledge, and takes this uncertainty seriously, organizes actions on experimental mode, taking special care to collect information so that action yields knowledge, even when what occurs is different from what was expected (ibid: 1993:9). In this sense, adaptive management refers to how consciously the social actors are learning through experience.

A key element of adaptive management is monitoring, which has different meanings to different people (Abbot and Guijt 1998). The term has been used extensively in the discourses and practices of development over the past three decades or so, yet it has no agreed, coherent, conceptual definition. At least three different approaches to, or 'conceptual threads' of, monitoring have evolved over time: a) control-oriented monitoring; b) monitoring designed to meet project requirements; and c) learning-oriented monitoring (for more detail see Paudel and Ojha 2002). Adaptive management relates most closely to *learning-oriented monitoring*, which has an explicit focus on enhancing learning within organizations. In this sense, monitoring is fundamentally a way of learning to improve by consciously linking reflection with action. This is based on the premise that: a) what we plan to achieve through some action is in fact an *assumption* (i.e we cannot know it to be certain) regarding the relationship amongst a complex set of factors and variables; and b) there is a great scope for

learning if such assumptions are made explicit and tested during the course of actions. Learning-oriented monitoring is at the heart of adaptive approaches to resource management.

The second concept we address is the dual one of *bounded conflict and social capital*, which refers to how, and the degree to which, people and groups manage diverse interests to form collaborative associations⁵ involving trust and reciprocity. Community based natural resource management situations are characterized by a multiplicity of actors, both within and outside the community. Recognizing this fact, a social learning perspective espouses that resource management is always associated with conflicts of interests, along with opportunities to form collaborative relationships or social capital from which to address resource management and livelihood goals. In fact, since learning is not confined to one individual, but engages a number of individuals or even groups, conflicts and cooperation can be seen as related, unavoidable and essential processes.

Social capital generally refers to the “institutions, relationships, and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions” (World Bank Group, URL: <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/index.htm>). This includes the horizontal and vertical associations between people, consisting of social networks and associated norms and behaviors within and among groups, that have an effect on community productivity and well-being (*ibid*). As Ostrom (2000) highlights, not only communication and interaction can add to social capital, but even conflict – constructively managed – can build it.

Finally, since natural resources management crosscuts different layers of governance, the concept of *micro-macro governance linkages* is significant. This concept refers to how resource governance is shaped by rules and decisions at different layers, from community through different levels of forest bureaucracy to national government. Three distinct layers include: a) micro level governance, i.e., within the community; b) meso level governance, such as district or provincial layers; and c) macro level governance, which refers here to national governance. There are almost no local resource management situations that are fully independent of the state; decisions at macro and meso levels of governance affect costs, benefits, risks and opportunities at local level⁶. Sharing of power and flow of information among these different layers is therefore a crucial aspect of social learning.

The above three concepts and associated processes, are clearly inter-related in practice. As we explore below in the Nepal case study, in each of these there is a constant interaction of power and knowledge; together, these have significant influences on forests and livelihoods.

III. COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN NEPAL FROM A SOCIAL LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

The processes of joint and deliberate learning, as well as negotiation or managing bounded conflicts, are the key elements 'social learning' (Lee 1993: 8; Wollenberg et al 2001). Social learning involves the engagement of multiple actors, which is necessarily a political process;

⁵ According to Riley (2002), a collaborative relationship involving two or more stakeholders addressing a given problem is based on a set of mutual perceptions, which state that – a) each is a legitimate actor, b) each is capable of contributing the solution of that problem, c) it is to the greater advantage of all parties to work in partnership than to work separately, and d) stakeholders have agreed to share the authority to both define the problem and its solutions.

⁶ This is also true of the meta level. Because of global externalities of natural resources as well general globalization processes, international agreements and inter- and supra-national forces also influence the boundaries and directions of macro level governance.

it also involves a learning process that is conscious (not merely incidental), and responsive to environmental pressures.

Nepal's community forestry has come a long way. Following the enactment of the Forestry Sector Master Plan in 1988, over 12 thousands Forest User Groups (FUGs) have been formed, and over 7 million hectares of forest areas (or nearly 17% of the country's forests) have been handed over to these groups (HMG 2002). The range of stakeholders has expanded to include users, government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international institutions and private sector, all of whom sustain, support, facilitate, and enable community forestry at different levels. Legal arrangements are already in place that recognize the perpetual sovereignty of FUGs, and the majority of benefits of forest management are guaranteed to users (Forest Act 1993).

Adaptive management

Nepal's community forestry policies have been subject to constant, and sometimes swift, changes. Having evolved from the assigning of some limited rights to Local Governance Units (*Panchayats*) in 1978, the current legal arrangement recognizes local resource user groups squarely in the center of resource management. This change took place through an iterative practice of piloting in the field and amending national forest policies based on feedback from the experiences over several years. This indicates a relatively active policy making and management process during the evolutionary phase of community forestry.

In the post-1995 phase of community forestry, with well-established legislation in place, a series of critical 'second generation issues' or challenges have emerged including issues related to: post-formation support; equity in decision making and benefit-sharing (within user groups and between groups and others); and commercial use (Gilmour 2002). Yet, despite indications of earlier active and iterative policy formulation, recent studies indicate that currently at all levels, from forest user groups (FUGs) to the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MOFSC), decision-makers often follow an 'unmonitored experience' approach (sometimes simply casual observation) to devise solutions to these types of problems (Ojha et al 2002, Pokharel et al 2002). Policies, programs and targets are often treated as certitudes; in other words, there is little or no monitoring to assess whether the assumptions about goals, actions, and effects are correct, or if they can be improved upon. Rather than being used as a mechanism for feedback to policy, 'monitoring' is often perceived as a tool for 'punishment by superiors'. In practice, the existing monitoring mechanisms do collect significant amounts of data, but when most of that passes unanalyzed and unused through the hands of decision-makers at various levels.

Currently, staff of the Department of Forest (DOF) - which is the main service provider and policy making and implementing body - have limited incentives, and time to learn together with CFUGs. Thus, many CFUGs feel they are not getting adequate support from the DOF (Ojha et al 2002). In some cases, there are clear indications of contradictions between the knowledge systems of local communities and those of formally trained forestry officials. At the same time, there are promising cases of innovative young forestry staff who are increasingly committed to engaging in a process of collective learning with forest users.

Within FUGs, unfortunately it is fairly common that learning opportunities are fairly traditional in nature (such as trainings), and that those and other opportunities tend to be dominated by elite FUG members (usually committee members). However, there are also currently some innovative cases of CFUGs members conducting experiments in resource and

institutional management, and using these as the basis for future improvements. Furthermore, where practiced, self and collaborative monitoring has made strong contributions in both learning and relationship aspects of FUGs, including through assisting decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, maintaining transparency, and facilitating decision-making and planning (Malla et al 2002, Cynthia et al 2002, Pokharel et al 2002, Paudel and Ojha 2002). While these are promising, to date there is still limited sharing, synthesis and scaling up of such current innovative initiatives.

Bounded conflicts and social capital

Conflicts and collaboration in community forestry in Nepal center around the diverse interests and the power relations of individuals and groups, within and outside communities. In a study of 8 FUGs across the country, Ojha et al (2002) identified as many as 12 different interest groups within single community forestry user groups (CFUGs), based on interests and nature of dependency in forest management, institutional roles they occupy, occupations, socio-economic status and physical access to forest. The interests or visions of members in these CFUG were found to be as diverse as access forest products to becoming a political leader using CFUG as the platform. Such diverse interests, along with concomitant power differentials, have given rise to conflicts and resistance, along with some limited communication and fair negotiation of rules relating to resource use in FUGs across the country. Our analysis of CFUG decision-making processes to date indicates that the CFUG-level directions are set largely by visions of dominant people, while those of less powerful groups such as women, the disadvantaged and Dalits, are mostly subsumed in the elite-led decisions (Ojha et al 2002; McDougall et al 2002a).

Recognizing this, and the increasing complexity of management, some CFUGs have started to adopt various innovative institutional arrangements to facilitate internal communication, manage conflict situations and develop social capital. Key arrangements relate to decentralizing decision making processes, developing more systematic office systems, including accounting, creating sub-group level units for discussion and negotiation. A key lesson emerging in this regard is that the recognition of sub-groups (such as interest groups or toles (hamlets)) interests and roles in FUG level processes can facilitate the expression of subsumed interests, particularly those of the disadvantaged groups leading to more effective and more equitable negotiations (Malla et al 2002, Springate Baginski et al 1998; McDougall et al 2002b). This implies a need for actors in FUGs and those involved in policy making, implementation and/or support to FUGs to incorporate some form of stakeholder analysis in CFM at all levels, as a part of on-going conflict management, and building of social capital.

Similarly, in the cases involved in the study, about a dozen different external stakeholders were found to be associated with a CFUG directly or indirectly in six different categories - central government agencies, local governments, civil society, bilateral projects, and private sector (Ojha et al, 2002). These institutions varied in terms of interests and power to influence CFUG decision processes. External interactions of the FUGs were mostly with DFO/Range Posts, and were primarily governed by the existing patron-client relationships. As such, despite the benefits of practical support provided to FUGs in the short term, we suggest that interactions within this relationship context may limit the scope of FUGs' longterm independence and capacities. The interaction of FUGs with civil society organizations is still limited in Nepal in general, as there is limited space for the latter to work in the forestry sector. Particularly after the enactment of local self-governance legislations in 1998 (HMGN, 1998), relationships of FUGs with local government are still emerging slowly, spiraling through various conflicts and cooperation in different contexts. The development of

networks at different levels, and ‘nested networks’ (i.e., from the very local to district level), appear to be promising platforms for addressing conflicts, information sharing and building collective action for accessing resources and influencing policy. While it is too early to see the outcomes, in some cases, these are bringing together interesting combinations of forestry extension, local government and civil society.

The overall analysis of stakeholder relationships within and outside CFUGs indicates that conflicts, resistance and collaboration are common, and sometimes essential, processes in building social capital, and laying the foundation to augmenting other livelihood capitals. At the same time, this capital formation is not inevitable; it needs to be facilitated and nurtured through efforts and innovations, such as those noted above.

Micro-Macro Governance Linkages

Community forestry essentially cross-cuts the three layers of governance: micro (local, community level); meso (district or provincial); and macro (national) level. Experiences indicate that, despite breakthroughs of participatory policies, approaches and practices in community forestry, there is still not adequate nor effective linkage among these layers of governance (Pokharel et al 2002). It appears increasingly likely that a number of challenges in community forestry – including weak outcomes in livelihoods, equity and productivity of community-managed forest areas - are rooted in part in the weak linkages among the different layers of governance (Ojha et al 2002), and the corresponding lack of responsiveness of decision makers at different layers of forest governance, including FUGs, DFOs and MOFSC. The effectiveness of the linkages refers to a combination of governance-related issues across levels, including clarity of rights and roles, sharing and balance of power, flow of communication, transparency of procedures, and extent of participation and consultation of lower layers in decision-making⁷. Specifically, the extent to which relevant information flows across the levels in both the directions is a crucial factor in determining the effectiveness micro-macro linkage and consequently the decision makers’ responses to various challenges and opportunities emerging at local level. However, the current system of communication is primarily driven by upward extraction of information through numerous ‘formats’ with limited downward information flow and feedback, particularly to FUGs (Pokharel et al, 2002). This includes that currently information needs at various levels have not yet been identified. The key lesson is that the very limited and uncoordinated information flow and communication between different layers of forest governance has limited the possibility for learning in, and responsiveness of, different levels of governance to feedback about policy and policy implementation.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Adaptive management, bounded conflicts and social capital, and micro-macro governance linkages are key elements that together shape institutional, policy and operational provisions of resource management and ultimately contribute to desirable outcomes in resource conditions and people’s livelihoods. Based on this, we suggest that applying a social learning approach in analyzing and facilitating CBNRM at various levels could be a very useful means of enhancing the effectiveness of CBNRM, including through attention to knowledge building and political processes within and between institutions. This perspective can also help to address issues of marginalisation of various users and groups of users in CFM. For example, decision-makers at all levels can apply this approach by testing the assumptions about marginalization that guide their policies (and practices) and plans, by making them

⁷ We address only one of these here due to the brief nature of this paper.

explicit, and monitoring influences on marginalized users or groups; they can then use this learning to improve policies, institutional processes, and practices.

In the Nepal case described briefly here, we noted the multi-layered scenario, in which there was diversity both within the different layers (especially at the local level), and across layers. Although the basic CF policy was well-established, the analysis indicated that much current policy-making was happening in isolation from applied learning and systematic feedback. While there was data gathering in place, many decision-makers at all levels were operating with piece-meal information. In terms of conflict and social capital, we noted the significant power differences at the local level, and indicated the potential passivity or dependency within and amongst groups of actors or institutions that can be triggered through the traditional relations between and within levels. In terms of macro-micro linkages, one point of note was the imbalance in information flow. In each of these aspects of social learning, we also noted a variety of innovations that have emerged, including various learning-oriented monitoring practices (especially at the local level), decentralizing decision-making within FUGS, and the emergence of networks at all levels. Innovations such as these suggest that social learning approaches are beginning to take root at different levels; we suggest that if the social learning perspective is used in understanding CF issues, and even nurtured, observed, and engaged in as an approach, that it may provide a strong foundation for meeting Nepal's second generation challenges.

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