



## Can Policy Learning be Catalyzed? *Ban Chautari* Experiment in Nepal's Forestry Sector

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**Abstract :** Over the past several years, technocratic approaches to forest policy have been challenged and more collaborative processes have been advocated. While these shifts have offered significant space for citizen engagement at local level – such as through community based forest management in Nepal's case – these have not taken roots at higher levels of policy making, especially at the level of formulating or revising legislations, or setting up a protected area. In this paper we critically review a *collaborative* experiment on catalyzing deliberative policy learning process in Nepal's forest sector. We examine how and to what extent such experimentation could overcome seven identified challenges to forest policy deliberation in Nepal. The experiment, which we named as *Ban Chautari*, involved three key strategies – conducting diagnostic research, empowering local communities to articulate their voices in deliberative forums, and then acting collaboratively across diverse institutional groups. Our examination of the *Ban Chautari* process focused around three research questions: a) How can policy learning be catalyzed?; b) How can actors with differentiated capacity and resources collaborate in the policy process?; and c) How can research processes be re-organized so as to contribute effectively to constantly shifting policy agendas and rapidly changing contexts? The experience of *Ban Chautari* has some good news to share with the wider public policy research community that conditions for collaborative policy learning is possible. And at the same time, it has generated evidence that warns the advocates of participatory and collaborative policy processes on the more subtle, and fundamental challenges that surround any attempts to foster collaborative learning.

**Key words:** ban chautari, policy learning, diagnostic study, collaborative leadership, deliberative process

### INTRODUCTION

At a time when Nepal is moving through political transition following 10 years of civil conflict, a number of substantive policy issues surfaced in Nepal's forest sector – such as setting up new protected areas, linking forest with climate change mitigation (Pokharel and Byrne 2009) and illegal harvesting of timber from the Terai forests (Banjade *et al.* 2011). Nepal's Three-Year Interim Plan (2009-2012), which is the key strategic development plan of the country guiding all sectoral policies, states that the forest sector policy's objective is to contribute to national economy through scientific, inclusive and participatory management of natural resources. Contrary to

this broader objective, the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MoFSC) declared the year 2011 as a "Plant Holiday" so that tree felling, sale and transport of timber were banned for the entire year. This was to observe the International Year of the Forest, declared by the United Nation whose theme was 'Forest for People.' The ban on tree felling and timber trade has induced import of over NRs 4 billion worth of furniture, logs and other substitutes such as aluminum for construction purpose<sup>1</sup>. In 2011, parliamentary committee on natural resources probed into the problems of illegal logging and deforestation in the Terai and instructed the MoFSC to create and enforce

<sup>1</sup>. Personal communication with Chairperson of Federation of Forest Industries and Traders, Nepal (FenFit)



policy to ensure that at least 40% of the country's area is put under forest for ecological sustainability. In the same period, two new protected areas were set up for biodiversity conservation, while REDD Forestry and Climate Change Cell of the MoFSC has become active in preparing for potential carbon trade hoping that it would generate millions of dollars of income to communities and government if they reduce the current trends of deforestation and forest degradation.

But the irony is that not all stakeholders, specially the local communities who have direct stakes over forest for livelihoods, are aware of, get opportunity to engage with, and influence such agendas in the 'business as usual' process of policy making in Nepal (Ojha et al. 2007).

The forestry sector has remained a policy hotspot throughout the past several decades in Nepal. It is one of the most contested sectoral arenas of governance, mainly because 39.6% of the country is officially under forest, a part of which – under Sal forests in the Terai – is highly valuable fertile land. Sal timber has also made forest sector economically attractive to a wide range of actors. Moreover, it is also known that over 100 medicinal plants, mostly from forest and pastureland, are of high commercial values. The globally powerful agenda of Biodiversity conservation also has its key focus on forest. With climate change, the role of forest in mitigation has come back on the agenda, and more recently climate change adaptation is also turning to the ecosystem potential. Multiple waves of policy change emerge and force stakeholders to make choices and decisions (Ojha 2008), but there are still limited attempts to understand and strengthen policy processes such that both science and voice form a key basis for making policy decisions.

Globally, the science of policy is co-evolving with discourses and practice of democracy. Yet, despite the long history of policy science in a democracy, most notably the work of Harold

Lasswell (Lasswell 1951) who identified the need for empirical science to aid policy decisions (Fischer 2003), the research community continues to struggle with understanding and explaining 'policy paradox' (Stone 1997). Over the years, the policy research community has equipped us with a number of normative and idealistic frameworks to seek out incremental change – from deliberative democracy through collaborative planning to social learning. Alongside this, analysis from critical social science perspectives have offered rich explanations of how power and hegemony distort communication in democratic processes (Crossley 2004; Hayward 2004; Ojha et al. 2009).

Over the past decade, there is an increasing scholarly and policy interest on 'how' to get the policy process right (Keeley and Scoones 2003). A policy is a contract for collective action among citizens, and a *legitimate* policy hardly emerges other than through genuine dialogues and collaborative learning among those affected. How can multiple policy interventions occurring in Nepal be better aligned with each other? How can the affected people and stakeholders participate in such decisions so that the decisions remain effective in enforcement? These questions point to a gap in empirical evidence in relation to understanding what it takes to actually organize and facilitate critical, deliberative, and learning-focused strategy of policy change and democratization. In this paper we critically review a *collaborative* experiment on catalyzing deliberative policy learning processes in Nepal's forest sector. This is based on the work of ForestAction Nepal and several other collaborators over the past several years, most specifically during 2010-2011.

In early 2011, in view of such prolific policy issues and the limited opportunities available for dialogues and critical analysis surrounding these issues, a collaborative learning framework which we call *Ban Chautari* was developed jointly



by four organizations: ForestAction Nepal, Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN), Nepal Foresters' Association (NFA) and Asmita Nepal in collaboration with and some funding from the Growing Forest Partnership (GFP) initiative. This paper reviews the processes and outcomes around *Ban Chatari* processes and synthesizes the whole approach to policy dialogue in terms of three key research questions that are critical in the debates around collaborative policy learning processes:

- a) How can policy learning be catalyzed?
- b) How can actors with differentiated capacity and resources collaborate in the policy process?
- c) How can the research process be re-organized so as to contribute effectively to constantly shifting policy agendas and rapidly changing contexts?

By analyzing the year-long *Ban Chautari* process that involved diagnostic studies and policy forums on nine policy issues that were identified by ForestAction and its partners, we aim to generate some conceptual lessons in relation to these questions and make some contributions to the discourse of collaborative policy learning and dialogues. Since this work is based on an action research practice, with intent to improve learning and collaboration on substantive policy issues, we also have the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the approach in relation to outcomes generated, as well as the feedback of stakeholders on the *Ban Chautari* process and outcomes. Based on this, we identify challenges and lessons for informing future policy debates, applicable in a wider range of policy situations beyond forestry.

The paper is organized as follows. Section two provides a conceptual overview of challenges experienced in collaborative policy learning, and thus situates Nepal's case in the wider debate of collaborative policy making. Section three

describes the structure and process of *Ban Chautari* itself as a package of series of sequential actions and events. In section four, we examine the outcomes of nine policy issues deliberated in the *Ban Chautari* process over the past year. Section five identifies and analyzes the key issues and lessons, followed by key conclusions in the final section.

### CHALLENGES IN COLLABORATIVE POLICY LEARNING

In political theory, possibilities for improving democratic engagement in public policy are being opened up through: a) challenge to empiricism – coming from recent development in critical, post-empiricist and postmodern theories and hence disarming the pretense of objective, neutral and scientific policy analysis (Fischer 1998); b) taking discursive approach to policy analysis – discourse and social meaning internal to the very social systems we seek to research (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008); and c) reconceptualizing policy analysts as engaged researchers and facilitators of democratic politics, thus integrating inquiry with social meanings and normative framings (Fals-Borda 1987; Ojha et al. 2010). This means that policy analysis now is not just collecting facts from the viewpoints of experts, but more about unraveling the discourse and politics of meanings held by multiple actors concerned with the policy process (Hajer 2009).

In more critical approach, policy research efforts are directly aimed at unraveling deeply held hegemonic relations of power – such as 'symbolic violence' (Bourdieu 1998) or 'ideological hegemony' (Gramsci 1990) – the social situations that prevent open discussions and democratic deliberation in policy processes. This approach emphasizes a shift from 'methodological tidiness' to complex and reflective engagement with the public in the collaborative learning process. In this approach, the role of experts is to stimulate the debates

and learning, rather than settle disputes (Fischer 1998). This requires looking at the crucial role of language, discourse, rhetoric, stories, and normative presuppositions that operate below the surface to structure policy processes. Thus, the work of collaborative inquiry is to unravel systematic distortions in communication and deliberation around policy negotiations. The whole approach, as suggested by some, becomes deliberative policy analysis (Hajer 2003), involving civic discovery, social learning, and cooperative inquiry that move beyond the technocratic model of policy making.

Seen from this perspective, we identify below seven anti-deliberative forms of power at work in the forest policy system in Nepal, creating a condition of 'symbolic violence' and 'hegemony' in policy dialogues and learning, thus distorting policy processes towards reinforcement of the *status quo* (Figure 1). It is important to locate and identify these anti-deliberative forces in the policy field. The champions of *Ban Chautari* were of the opinion that such anti-deliberative forces are at play, but it was not until the end of the cycle that more comprehensive understanding was developed – especially with regard to how these forces

constrain and shape policy learning and deliberation in Nepal. These are briefly outlined below.

First, the techno-bureaucratic power has over the years become a principal way to regulate the state-society interface, and the dominant actors (mainly public officials) enjoy authority to make decisions on behalf of and for the people, without being questioned from the society and affected communities. Experts – both within and outside of the government – narrowly focus on analyzing 'factual dimensions' of the policy problems from their own disciplinary values and mindsets, while ignoring other, competing values and judgments of citizens and affected stakeholders as, identifying them as 'unscientific'. This has led to a situation of what is widely known as technocracy (Fischer 1990) – where policy decisions became the subject of analysis by experts, whose recommendations will become public policy decisions when political leaders endorse them through the parliament or government mechanism. This is what happened in the case of forestry world wide, as the strong scientific bureaucracy was assigned to handle the issues of forest management.

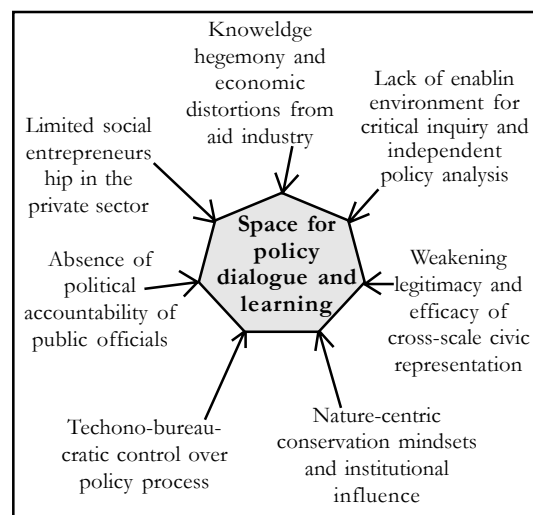


Figure 1: Seven challenges to deliberative policy making in Nepal's forestry sector

Over the past several years, these technocratic approaches to policy have been challenged and more collaborative processes have been advocated (Gronow 1991; Hobley 1996). These shifts have offered significant space for citizen engagement at local level – such as through community based forest management. However, these have not taken roots at higher levels of policy making – such as at the level of formulating or revising legislations, or setting up a protected area. The participatory movement has itself become confined to local and community based initiatives, without creating ways to strengthen the power of citizens to influence the more fundamental processes at which policy decisions are made (Shrestha 1999; Ojha 2006; Mahapatra 2001).



Second, despite expanding democratic space in Nepal through successive political movements (most notably the one in 1990 and then 2006), political institutions including the political parties have adopted and internalized very thin norms of internal democracy, creating problems of reverse representation, wherein citizens have to abide by what political parties ask citizens to do, and not what citizens and the public ask the parties to do (Ojha 2008). But as the country moved through cycles of political movement, mobilizing people's rights to participate in the process of governance, serious concerns were raised about the deficit in public deliberation and citizen engagement on forest governance issues impacting people's lives. As a result, while the policy system has become more open to public criticism and faces questions of accountability, it has at the same time become even more opaque, resurrecting claims of feudalistic authority and denying affected people and citizens to exercise their rights in practice. Moreover, the prolonged transitional politics of Nepal means that political parties will continue to use the language of 'national consensus' among the key party leaders to make decisions, thus effectively disengaging the citizens in making and enforcing public policy.

Third, the last 50 years of foreign aid in Nepal has nurtured apolitical subjects and impregnated the policy communication system with imported language and alien tools, as part of the global project of depoliticizing development (Escobar 1995) and creating environmentalised subjects (Nightingale 2005). As Shrestha writes:

"In a country like Nepal, development is rarely a cumulative process, evolving indigenously through its symbiotic interaction with the expanding base of local knowledge and resources. It is predefined and predetermined in accordance with the Westerners' assumption of superiority of their economic rationality, imbued with techno-fetishism. It is this over emphasis

on the presumed superiority of Western economic rationality that has led to the total devaluation of the local modes of life and economies, consequently breeding and nurturing the culture of dependency. They continue to treat Nepal like a retarded child, thus further tightening the loop of dependency on Western monies and material values" (pp 22, 32) (Shrestha 1998).

One obvious way the aid industry shapes space for and processes of deliberation is through inculcating new language that makes sense to aid administrators, and not to the people on the ground. As a project manager of a bilateral forestry project writes in his 'critical reflection' on Department for International Development's (DFID's) livelihood framework, "the approach is found to be a useful tool for understanding of the elements of livelihoods.... [But] it does not offer any explicit clues as to how such a transformation is to take place or how people can increase their capital and reduce vulnerability" (Pokharel 2010). Phrases promoted by development agencies, such as 'absorptive capacity', 'weak institutional base', 'lack of strong political commitment', do not shed light on the dynamics of societal forces at work and hide more than they reveal (Gyawali 1997).

Despite such deep rooted problems of hegemony, aid has induced positive changes at some critical nodes of public decision, as is found in the case of development of Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, and created a strong experiential base for the enactment of Forest Act 1993 that stands out in the history of decentralized natural resource management and development in Nepal and outside. The continued challenge with aid, however, is the package of knowledge it brings with it, and the cultural and institutional legacy it aims to leave in the developing country, effectively modifying (positively and negatively) stakeholder deliberation in public policy processes and practices.





Fourth, the proliferating civil society movements – including those around issues of caste, gender and ethnic marginalization – have emerged as powerful players in public policy. However, there is a concern that these movements have nurtured counter elites who construct radical politics and resistance to strengthen their own position, instrumentally mobilizing dissent of the affected mass (Shrestha 1998; Panday 2004). This is in part due to the benefits and power they derive within the underlying aid-fuelled political economy. As Panday (2004) writes: "When civil society creates space for itself and is in a position to challenge the state and its possibly arbitrary conduct, it provides the necessary scope for donors to tread in areas of domestic affairs of recipient countries that they would not dare approach earlier." The irony is that with growing involvement of civil society, the hegemony of the aid industry has strengthened, thus creating additional challenge for open and active public policy deliberation.

Fifth, a transnational environmental conservation field intrudes the public decision processes through a network of people and organizations, by creating incentives and prestige attuned to the West-centric and imported formula of conservation, dichotomizing people and environment, and usually excluding people who live on natural environment (Colchester 1996; Paudel *et al.* 2010). In Nepal, the conservation field has prompted top-down, nature centric approaches and strategies of resource management. The language of conservation encapsulates the idea of controlling resources from outside. This features very strongly in public policy process, as actors from local to national and international arenas bring in depoliticized conservation narratives in policy discourse (Paudel 2006).

Sixth, there is a lack of enabling environment to support and encourage critical, independent research and policy analysis. The donors, bilateral projects and the government agencies conceive

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) as service providers and expect nothing but accomplishment of defined activities as assigned in the terms of reference. Development research is largely dominated by project evaluation and impact assessment through "friendly consultancies" funded by the implementing agencies themselves. At the same time there is extreme scarcity of resource for research. For example, agriculture gets only 3% of the total national budget, out of which only 0.3% is allocated for research, and there is no budget for independent, policy focused research.

Finally, the private sector has not demonstrated socially responsible entrepreneurship, and business elite' work in collusion with bureaucrats and political leaders to reap benefits from the country's natural resources (as is seen in the case of hydropower licensing). The poor governance of state and non-state institutions and the continued political transition has resulted in weak accountability of the private sector. Two typical cases illustrate this. First, a large number of big businesses caught up for fake Value Added Tax (VAT) bills were under the government special examination (Nagarik National Daily, August 5, 2011). Second, during the investigation of reports of illegal logging in Terai and Churia, the Parliamentary Committee on Natural Resources found that timber traders were involved in this process by developing clandestine relations with forest officials and Community Forest User Group (CFUG) leaders (PCNR 2011). Public policy process has to confront such pervasive challenges relating to the lack of fairness in economic innovation and business.

In the face of these challenges, the *Ban Chautari* experiment in Nepal was essentially aimed at enriching collaborative policy learning by creating mechanisms and processes through which actors come out of their mental boxes, listen to and understand other worldviews, and then negotiate new institutional and policy



options that enhance larger public outcomes from policy decisions. This experiment thus situated the collaborative learning process in a more contextually grounded way to understand how it occurs in the face of seven anti-deliberative forces outlined above. It also explored any possibilities that existed for further improving collaborative inquiry process in public policy.

The experiment is noteworthy in view of the standard policy processes that involve limited collaborative learning. They are either driven by donors, political leaders, or bureaucrats. In the recent years, national media has also increased its involvement. Non-state policy actors have also become stronger – on aspects of political lobbying, civic mobilization and critical action research/alternative truths. More recently, there are participatory initiatives involving multi-stakeholder processes, working groups, task forces and the like, but they have in most cases reproduced the underlying power relations. As a result, decisions coming out of such fabricated processes have been even more contested than conventional technocratic decisions. This is evident in the controversy around ‘Multi-stakeholder Forestry Program’ in Nepal, which despite its good intentions is impregnated with vested interests of the key players around the program (Shahi 2012).

Based on our previous research on knowledge systems (Ojha *et al.* 2008), adaptive collaborative management (McDougall *et al.* 2010), and deliberative governance (Cameron and Ojha 2006), we realized that any attempts to improve collaborative policy learning in the forest sector should comprise – a) generating critical evidence that challenges mainstream knowledge and assumptions, b) overcoming deliberative inequality amongst the policy actors, especially the affected citizens/communities, public officials, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), donor officials and experts. We also realized that any innovative experiment to

catalyze the policy process should essentially involve multiple perspectives and actors to have better credibility and influence in the process. All this led the four organizations to work together to try and experiment with a new approach to policy learning and dialogue.

### **BAN CHAUTARI PROCESSES – HOW IT WORKED IN PRACTICE?**

The overall approach to policy learning and dialogue under *Ban Chautari* model goes beyond any rational model. It takes a post-empiricist, deliberative and discursive approach (Dryzek 1982; Dryzek 1989; Fischer 1998; Dryzek 2010). While critiques of rational, technocratic models argue that a deliberative approach would be superior, there are few empirical cases of rigorous testing of such models. The *Ban Chautari* model of catalyzing policy learning in Nepal’s forest sector comprises the following ten elements:

1. A coalition of a small number of organizations and groups, collectively having capacities for policy research, community mobilization, and representing diverse perspectives on the policy issue being addressed;
2. A policy issue selected for catalyzing learning among stakeholders, prioritized through informal consultation by the organizing coalition;
3. A relatively speedy diagnostic study generating critical evidence to establish that the policy issue warrants significant public attention from economic, social, political and environmental points of view;
4. Empowerment of affected communities to express their concerns in the dialogue processes;
5. A central dialogical platform (or the central *Ban Chautari* event) where community voice, research evidence and stakeholder perspectives are brought together for negotiating, learning and creative imagination of policy solutions, including redefinition of the policy issue itself;

6. Ban Chautari interventions comprise active efforts undertaken by coalition partners or stakeholders subsequently involved in the *Ban Chautari* process – and these include five major activities: a) generating critical evidence, b) empowering the marginalized groups, c) facilitating dialogues, d) collective imagination of the policy solutions, and e) engaging the wider public through the media (Figure 2);
7. Key message was disseminated to the wider public through media;
8. Policy uptake, community interventions and follow-up studies were supported as Post Ban Chautari event processes, depending on the outcome of central *Ban Chautari* event;
9. Ban Chautari cycle represents the sequential flow of all the above activities around a particular policy issue over a period of time, with some level of catalytic role by the consortium still being played. *Ban Chautari* process is synonymously used with the cycle;
10. *Ban Chautari* policy process/cycle can yield three sets of outcomes: a) procedural outcomes (such as improved understanding of the problem, minimization of conflicts), b) substantive policy outcomes (involving direct contributions to policy decisions and implementation), and c) institutional outcomes pertaining to rules and norms guiding policy processes. The process was however focused more on generating procedural outcomes, and to some extent institutional outcomes, with the presumption that such ‘antecedent’ outcomes would have at least some effect on substantive policy outcomes, and more importantly, any substantive policy change could only work in practice if accompanied by critical procedural and institutional changes, including common understanding among the key policy actors holding diverse perspectives.

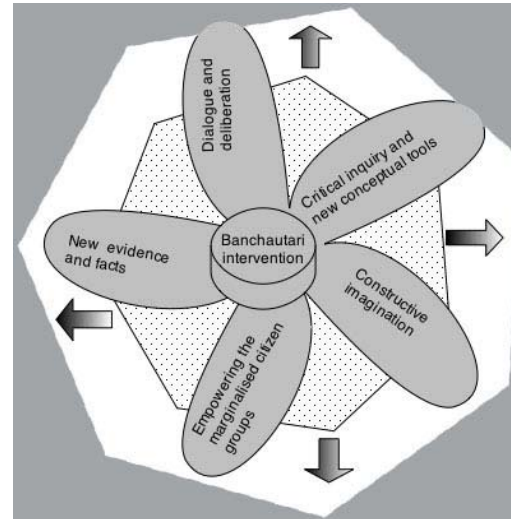


Figure 2: Five intervention edges of *Ban Chautari* model of policy learning

As elaborated elsewhere in our reports (Khatri et al. 2012), ForestAction collaborated with FECOFUN, NFA and ASMITA Nepal to form a coalition and initiated a catalytic multi-stakeholder forest policy dialogue in partnership with GFP in 2010. These groups had complementary expertise and identity, and together they had research expertise, access to government decision and policy-makers, wide reach with media and political leaders, and to some extent, access to funding needed to conduct the activities.

The coalition members worked together to understand the dynamics of forest policy processes and explored avenues for creating deliberative space for forest sector policy processes. During the first phase of this initiative (July-December, 2010), the consortium worked together to identify and address anomalies and key hurdles underpinning forest policy formulation processes.

Based on collective lessons and insights, the coalition proposed to introduce the idea and practice of *Ban Chautari* as a unique policy learning model that allows accessible and non-competing space for debating all relevant forest policy agenda. In Nepali language and culture,



*Chautari* means forum where anyone can participate and share views about community life. It provided a common, multi-stakeholder forum for all policy actors. We expanded this meaning to include diagnostic inquiry, dialogue, and empowerment of the affected local communities and collective imagination of the solution. A steering committee was formed, comprising consortium members and key individuals outside the coalition with history of significant contribution to democratizing the forest policy process. The *Ban Chautari* was open and provided an opportunity for the inclusion of those willing to contribute. Apart from the resources and expertise within the consortium members, *Ban Chautari* mobilized expertise and

resources outside the members for facilitating effective and productive debate on forest policy agenda.

*Ban Chautari* policy learning model combined diagnostic analysis with public policy dialogue. The process constituted a series of consultation, documentation, analysis, synthesis and communication as embedded elements. It was aimed at enhancing stakeholders' understanding around contemporary policy issues through an informed debate based on critical diagnostic analysis, expert critique and moderated exchange of stakeholders view. Figure 3 identifies processes and steps involved in a typical *Ban Chautari* policy-learning model.

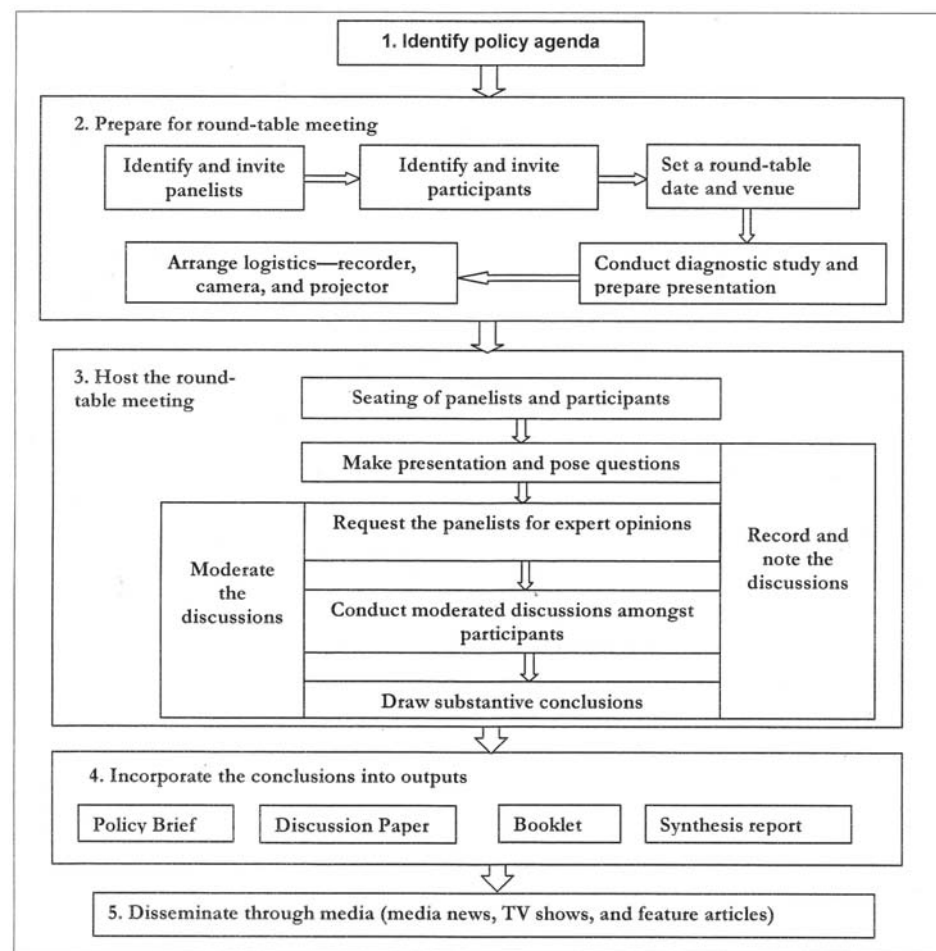


Figure 3: *Ban Chautari* model of policy engagement process (Source: Khatri et al. 2012)



Each *Ban Chautari* consisted of a series of carefully thought and designed steps (figure 3). Once the specific policy issue was identified, a diagnostic analysis was carried out involving the genealogy of the problem, arguments for and against, actor mapping, suggested solutions and responses and the knowledge gap for better understanding. Some 4-6 experts on the specific policy issue were identified as panelists, informed on the content and provided with available literature on the issue.

They were supplied with relevant questions in advance so that they could establish their arguments. Some 30-40 participants representing different stakeholders and fields of experience were invited in each of the central *Ban Chautari* events. The typical structure of this event was as follows: a researcher presented the diagnostic analysis findings followed by comments and views from the panelists who represented diverse stakeholder perspectives. After brief presentation by the panelists, the floor was opened for moderated discussion. Finally, someone was assigned to present the

summary of the discussion followed by formal closing. This was followed by media interactions in TV/FM, documentary and feature articles in national newspapers. A booklet on each major policy issue documenting the substantive debate as well as methodological insights was prepared and published.

The *Ban Chautari* mobilized expertise and resources beyond the supporting consortium members for sustaining and expanding productive dialogue on forest policy agenda. In total, the *Ban Chautaris* were attended by 456 people representing MoFSC, civil society organizations, experts and researchers. *Ban Chautari* organized in 2011 are summarized in Table 1. One particular issue that needs to be made clear is about the challenge to ensure gender balance in the *Ban Chautari* process, especially the central event. Though efforts were made to increase the participation of women and marginalized people in the *Ban Chautari* forums, we had only satisfactory results (see Table 1). It confirms that there are very limited numbers of women and marginalized communities in forest sector policy process.

**Table 1: Summary of *Ban Chautari* processes organised in 2011-12**

S.N	Policy Issues	Central Event Organized	Participant Composition
1.	State-community contestations in governing forests: Reimagining regulatory framework	February 4, 2011	Male: 43 Female: 9 Total: 52
2.	Exploring legal and institutional reforms in buffer zone management	July 3, 2011	Male: 47 Female: 10 Total: 57
3.	Poverty reduction through forestry: Exploring strategies to realize economic benefits of timber management in Nepal	July 7, 2011	Male: 43 Female: 5 Total: 48
4.	Scientific forest management: opportunities and challenges	July 19, 2011	Male: 47 Female: 7 Total: 54
5.	Forest enterprise: opportunities and challenges in the context of Nepal	August 1, 2011	Male: 40 Female: 20 Total:60

S.N	Policy Issues	Central Event Organized	Participant Composition
6.	Revisiting Protected Area (PA) buffer zones:exploring legal and institutional reforms in buffer zone management	October 20-21, 2011	Male: 43 Female: 6 Total: 49
7.	Nepal's green forest: green economy or black money?	November 24, 2011	Male: 57 Female: 12 Total: 69
8.	Terai forest management: issues, opportunities and challenges	December 4, 2011	Male: 43 Female: 7 Total: 50
9.	Role of communities and challenges in Churia conservation	December 11, 2011	Male: 39 Female: 10 Total: 49

*Source: Khatri et al. 2012*

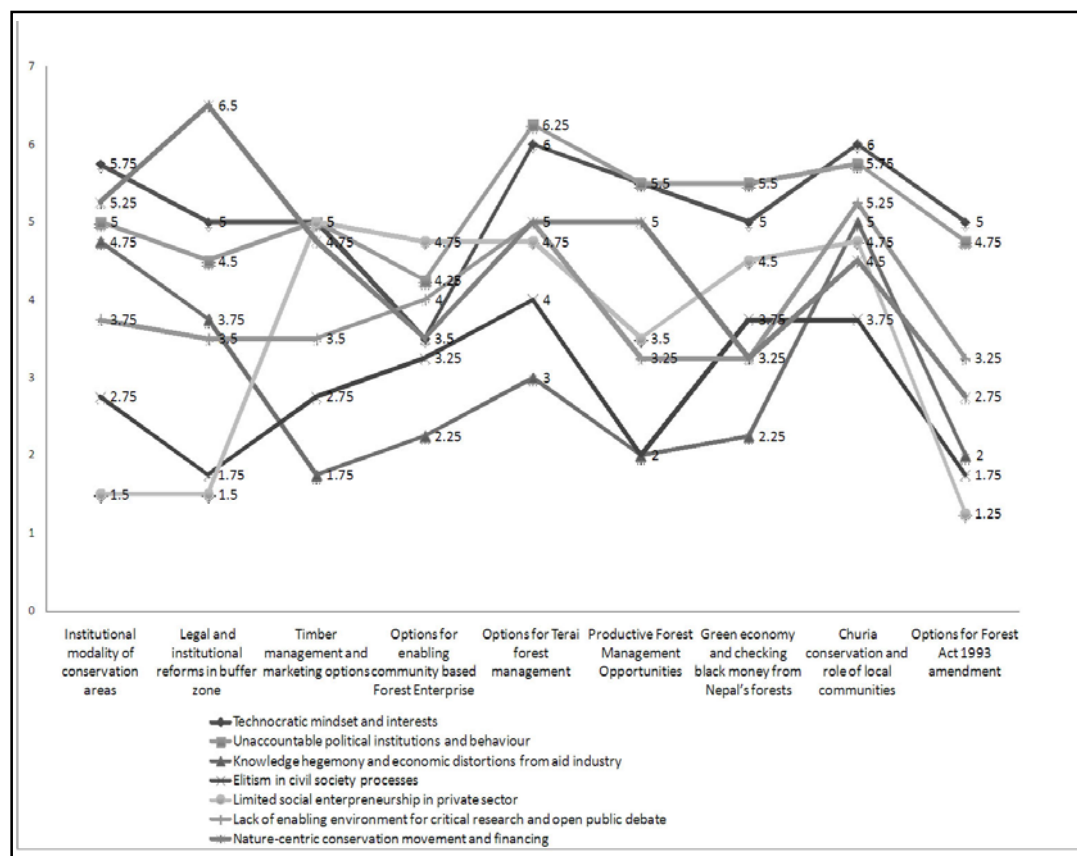


Figure 4 Factors Constraining Policy Learning in Nepal's Forest Policy Field



Figure 4 summarizes stakeholders' view on the extent of different constraints (identified in Figure 1) to nine policy threads<sup>2</sup>. Each line in the figure represents a specific constraint and its height against various policy issues indicates the extent of *Ban Chautari* influence on respective policy issues. We asked representatives of the government and non-government stakeholders to provide independent ranking on a scale between 1-7 (1 means low negative influence, and 7 means extremely high negative influence on collaborative learning among stakeholders). We calculated the average from all respondents across all categories with the purpose of assessing the overall perception in the extent of negative influence on collaborative learning, rather than to compare difference across stakeholder groups. The results show two remarkable observations. First, two policy issues that were under highest combined influence were Churia forest and Terai forest management options. This is because of the confluence of constraints coming from different directions – conservation, market and potential benefits, and problems in political accountability. Second, stakeholders viewed that two most important factors constraining policy learning were techno-bureaucratic dominance, and problems

in political accountability. This means the barriers to policy learning including how they affect vary with particular policy issues, and require different and customized Ban Chautari processes and interventions.

### Diagnostic Inquiry and Critical Evidence

The diagnostic research component within *Ban Chautari* was conceived as a way to generate critical evidence that questions the dominant narrative driving the policy issue. The research agenda for this component was identified through constant engagement with local actors and national level stakeholders. The regular meeting of the consortium members identified and prioritized the policy agenda for the *Ban Chautari* process. The nature of evidence sought was not to effect the decision directly and immediately, but to inform stakeholders and to spark wider debate on the issue from multiple angles. In order to induce more critical discussion, the research component helped to bring the missing dimension of the debate, along with some factual, historical aspects. Table 2 provides an overview of the studies conducted, including method and team composition.

Table 2: Overview of the diagnostic study conducted as part of the Ban Chautari process

Policy threads	Study method	Duration	Outputs
1. Forest Act amendment process and contestations	Media news analysis, field survey, consultation with experts (government officials and experts), review of literature, policy documents and gray literature, analysis of position of different actors	Three months	<p>Presentation</p> <p><b>Sunam, R.K., Banjade, M.R., Paudel, N.S. and Khatri, D.B.</b> 2010. Can Bureaucratic Control Improve Community Forestry Governance? An Analysis of Proposed Forest Act Amendment. Discussion Paper 10:1. ForestAction Nepal</p> <p><b>Paudel, N.S., Khatri, D.B., Ojha, H.R., Luintel, H.S., Banjade, M.R. and BK, D.</b> 2012. Forest Act Amendment Proposal 2012: Analysis and Suggestions (in Nepali). ForestAction Nepal</p> <p><b>Paudel, N.S., Khatri, D.B., Ojha, H., Luintel, H.S. and Banjade, M.R.</b> 2012.</p>

2. The results presented here are preliminary, and we hope have more robust conclusion as we further improve this tool and sampling base.



Policy threads	Study method	Duration	Outputs
			Forest Act Amendment Proposal: Analysis and Suggestion. Policy Note Series 2012:1. ForestAction Nepal.
<b>2. Governing protected area and local people</b>	Institutional memory, experiences of policy engagement and lobbying, review of literature and policy documents and consultation with BZ council members	One week	Presentation <b>Paudel, N.S., Jana, S. and Rai, J.K.</b> 2011. Contested law: Slow Response to Demands for Reformulating Protected Area Legal Frame Work in Nepal. Discussion Paper 11.5. ForestAction Nepal
<b>3. Timber in policy discourse and everyday practice</b>	Review of gray literature, policy documents and literature, media news analysis, rapid field observation, consultation with experts, stakeholders and communities and content analysis of policy and legal documents	Three months	<b>Banjade, M.R., Paudel, N.S., Karki, R., Sunam, R.K. and Paudyal, B.R.</b> 2011. Putting Timber in the Hot Seat: Discourse, Policy and Contestations over Timber in Nepal. Discussion Paper 11.2. ForestAction Nepal. <b>Banjade, M.R., Paudel, N.S., Karki, R., Sunam, R. and Paudyal, B.R.</b> 2011. Forest and Poverty: Economic Opportunities and Challenges of Timber Management in Nepal (in Nepali). Booklet. ForestAction Nepal.
<b>4. Productive management of forest</b>	Practical experiences and review of literature and documents	2 months (over the period of two years)	Presentation
<b>5. Community based forest enterprises</b>	Review of literature and policy documents, researcher's observation of policy process and experiences and consultation with entrepreneurs and experts	1 week	Presentation <b>Pandey, G.</b> 2011. Community Forest Enterprise: Challenges and Opportunities. Kathmandu: Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal and Global Alliance of Community Forestry.
	Review of policy and legal documents and relevant literature, and consultation with BZ council members	1 week	Presentation





Policy threads	Study method	Duration	Outputs
<b>7. Green economy or black economy from forest</b>	Observation and experience of the activist	5 days	Presentation and booklet
<b>8. Terai forest management</b>	Field observation, experience as government officer, review of literature and documents and case study	2 months (In the period of two years)	Presentation
<b>9. Churia forest management challenges</b>	Review of policies, legal documents and directives, telephone interaction with community leaders and media news analysis	1 week	Presentation

The initial framework of each diagnostic study was developed by the *Ban Chantari* coalition, and significant freedom was given to the researchers, who were chosen very carefully on the basis of their ability to bring evidence and analysis in critical perspective and in a robust way. The patterns of researchers conducting the nine studies is as follows: Researchers at ForestAction Nepal, PhD student from Australian National University, Advocate (lawyer) working with FECOFUN, Joint Secretary in Department of Forests, Forest Officer of Department of Forests, Former Secretary of Government of Nepal, local governance expert, Under Secretary of Department of National Park and Wildlife Reserve, independent expert on participatory conservation, and former Chairperson of FECOFUN.

These researchers used diverse tools of qualitative methods though some quantitative data was also used to develop graphs, charts and tables. The tools most commonly used

were: interviews, observations and other participatory appraisals at the local level, interviews and interactions with stakeholders, content analysis of policy/legal documents, and analysis of secondary information. The methods were varied for each issue under study – some required field work and evidence from the community level, while others required evidence from the government offices. To deliver the research results in a short amount of time, usually two to three months, we had to have at least a senior researcher, two to three research assistants, and local facilitators. This allowed good division of labor at conceptual and operational levels, and the collection of data from different areas simultaneously.

Diagnostic studies under *Ban Chantari* adopted an interactive and engaging method for information gathering and analysis. Local communities and stakeholders at different levels with different levels of resources and governance and decision-making power were involved in reflective discussion and interactive



evidencing. Interviews and informal interactions were organized with policy makers at the MoFSC, FECOFUN, and other citizen networks, CSOs, media and forestry professionals as a part of the research process. These actors substantially contributed to the analysis.

The analysis was synthesized and disseminated to diverse audience in the form of a discussion paper, policy brief and booklets both in English and Nepali. The English version was targeted to a wider audience including researchers, donors, international policy makers, and agenda setters. The Nepali version was targeted to local community leaders, political party leaders and the wider public, including the media. The research results were actively fed into mass media to get the key messages and facts across to a larger audience mainly through newspaper articles, roundtable interactions on FM radio, and documentary broadcast through TV.

A number of challenges were faced while conducting the diagnostic studies. First, it was very difficult to get government decisions,

circulars and reports of different commissions formed by the government. Second, we experienced a lack of consistency in information contained in government reports, independent studies and project reports. Third, there was a shortfall of funding to conduct rigorous and credible research. Fourth, it was difficult to get official government perspective in some contested issues, such as the amendment of Forest Act. Fifth, forest business groups were not open to sharing information related to trade of non-timber forest products. Sixth, as the studies were conducted with limited budget and time-frame, most of the studies were based on the review of literature and secondary materials. Primary data collected for a few studies were taken from small sample sizes.

#### **Reducing Deliberative Inequality in Collaborative Learning Processes**

Unequal deliberative competence among stakeholders is one of the most common challenges of multi-stakeholder policy dialogue, as listed in Box 1.

#### **Box 1. Key forms of deliberative inequalities that affected collaborative learning**

- There is differential competence in English language, but the tendency to draft reports and presentations is in English.
- Some actors are paid salaries and remuneration for attending the meeting while others are volunteers.
- Some actors have access to policy drafts and documents well ahead of discussion events while others struggle to access such drafts from the government offices till the meeting or even afterwards.
- Women members are generally not given serious attention when they express their views, and there is a usual practice to assign women supportive roles such as 'announcer' of the program.
- Programs are held either early in the morning or run late in the evening (especially the receptions and informal discussions that usually follow formal policy discussion events) – disadvantaging women actors who have competing obligations at home.
- Limited time between when one has access to policy drafts and the actual meeting – disadvantaging the group with larger constituency – as it is difficult to collect the views of key member groups within the limited time.

Deliberative inequality in the policy process was experienced in relation to information access, capacity to communicate and argue institutional and professional identity. The information

access was particularly critical, as some actors had long been working on a particular policy issue under discussion, while others being new to the process had little information about it.



The unequal access to information, combined with inadequate time and ability to comprehend any issue, has resulted in deliberative inequality in such contexts. We adopted the following approach to address this challenge.

**Raising awareness on the issue through prior communication:** We circulated the synthesis paper prepared by the diagnostic study team along with other related literature, well ahead of the *Ban Chantari* event so that all participants had at least some idea of the subject matter. The participants read the discussion papers and other relevant materials on the issue. They had opportunity to become aware of and develop deeper understanding on the topic. Besides, they also identified possible questions to raise in front of the panelist during the debate.

**Moderated discussion:** The conventional policy debate forums were usually captured by a few talkative people who could better articulate their points, leaving limited opportunity for the majority of participants. We believed that *Ban Chantari* forum had to be designed carefully to structure the debate and to provide opportunity to all participants. *Ban Chantari* forum had three elements – presentation of key research paper, responses and presentation by the panelist and finally moderated discussion among the participants. This made it possible to encourage all the participants to ask questions and make comments. As a result, even the marginalized groups with less articulating ability were able to express their views.

**Empowering the marginal groups:** We equipped the marginal groups with relevant information and critical questions to enable them to effectively participate and contribute to the debate. In many cases, prior to holding the central *Ban Chantari* event, several small and informal meetings were organized among the community representatives, leaders of citizen networks and CSO activists as preparatory

work. These meetings helped them increase their understanding of the issue and identify critical questions to experts. In some cases the historical analysis of the issue was presented and discussed with these people so that they had adequate knowledge of the topic. These pre *Ban Chantari* meetings helped increase confidence of the participants and comprehension of the subject matter that enabled them to pose critical questions to the panelists.

#### **Collaborative Leadership**

The collaborative partnership around *Ban Chantari* brought four agencies with unique strengths, a) independent policy analysis and research capacity, b) national level foresters association – a professional body of foresters most of whom work within the government system where the techno-bureaucratic mindset prevails in relation to forest policy processes; c) nation-wide federation of community forestry groups that earlier directly confronted the government policy decisions and hence was the major opposition to the government when it made policies from the top; and d) a women-focused local NGO feeding grassroots and marginalized voice at all levels of the process. These organizations formed an alliance that acted as the catalytic agency in organizing *Ban Chantari* processes. They chose to act together as they all see benefits in acting together – in term of collective credibility, complementarity of strengths, and the prospect of more interactive learning process through cooperative action.

ForestAction and FECOFUN have been working together since the beginning of ForestAction, towards promoting community rights and optimizing livelihood benefits from forest resources. Yet, both organizations were in agreement to look for ways to engage with other actors in the policy system. In this process NFA and Asmita were invited in the



consortium. Right from the beginning, the consortium adopted a deliberative discussion and consensus based decision. Members worked out to set the broader objective of the initiative. As there was diversity of views on substantive policy questions, they agreed to facilitate a healthy and informed debate from all possible angles. They agreed not to express their own strong views; but instead to facilitate informed, democratic and inclusive policy debate.

The policy issues for research and dialogue were jointly discussed and identified. These issues were based on the contemporary policy debate and state-community contestation on key policy issues. The knowledge gap was identified and the role and responsibilities for each coalition member were assigned. *Ban Chautari* forums were organized collectively once the analysis was complete. Apart from providing a platform for multiple views, the collaborative leadership provided confidence in the debates being communicated to all forest sector stakeholders. The collaborative leadership of the *Ban Chautari* process gave it a high profile and better public legitimacy, drawing attention from all stakeholders, including the government policy makers.

#### **OUTCOMES OF BAN CHAUTARI MODEL IN POLICY LEARNING**

The outcomes of *Ban Chautari* process can be evaluated in terms of the extent to which five interventions (identified in the preceding section) helped overcome the effects of seven policy barriers (identified in section two) in the policy learning process. As *Ban Chautari* approach was not designed to affect technocratic push in the policy process, and was instead a catalytic action in policy learning, we targeted a wide range of potential outcomes, not just the actual policy change directly attributable to *Ban Chautari* interventions and processes. In this section, our aim is to illustrate different types of policy

learning outcomes that can emerge through such approach to policy facilitation, albeit with a potential to make concrete difference in the way policy decisions are made and implemented in practice.

On the policy process aspects, at least five types of procedural outcomes were achieved in improving policy learning:

- 1. Agreement among the stakeholders on the option to go:** In the forestry sector, and more generally in the public policy field of Nepal, stakeholders often do not have a common view on whether there is a policy issue at all, and if there is one, whether there is need to act on it immediately. In many situations, stakeholders do recognize the need to act on a particular policy issue, but they differ starkly on how to go about it. The *Ban Chautari* process has been found a viable model to iron out the differences among stakeholders and identify an agreeable strategy to understand and address the policy issue. This can be exemplified by policy cycle on Buffer Zone (Issue no. 6) in which stakeholders agreed that Buffer Zone program needs revision including its foundation law, Protected Area Act 1973. Likewise, at the central *Ban Chautari* event, stakeholders unanimously agreed that Churia region needed immediate attention due to ecological, socio-economic and political significance (policy issue no. 9). They all agreed that it requires technological and institutional innovation to deal the current conservation challenges. With this realization, the stakeholders agreed to sit on further debate and discussion for improvising the President Churia Conservation Program that is mandated to handle the policy issue at implementation level.
- 2. Appreciation of the new dimensions to be included in the policy dialogue:** At times, policy actors often see and frame the



problems from their own standpoints, and they fail to acknowledge equally important aspects. As a result of participation in the *Ban Chantari* process on timber governance issue (Issue no. 3), stakeholders underscored the huge potential of timber to contribute in national economy and employment, and called for attention to bring the timber policy and associated issues in public debate and policy priority. This was primarily as a result of critical evidence generated by the diagnostic study, which exposed startling figures and data on the current practice of mis-management of timber, and also the potential economic contributions.

**3. Recognition for the shortcomings of the existing policy framework:** Still another procedural outcome of *Ban Chantari* has been found in policy situations where an existing policy framework is considered successful and adequate, lamenting any change or improvisation as conspiracy and the acts of regression. When *Ban Chantari* process revealed the subtle ways in which community forestry operates in practice, demonstrating the subtle institutional failures and enduring and successful models, stakeholders were able to recognize the shortcomings with existing models and saw opportunities for more democratic and participatory management models for the community forestry system (policy issue no. 1). This was possible as a result of the multiple effects of *Ban Chantari* interventions – new evidence, empowering the marginalized voice, and structured and facilitated dialogues. Prior to this, stakeholders were divided in pro and anti community forestry camps, when it came to revising the regulatory framework. The debate created a whole new ‘third way’ beyond the binary mode of policy conflict. A similar outcome was also achieved in the policy issue related to community and forestry enterprise (policy issue no. 4). Key policy

gaps and practical hurdles for community-based forest enterprises were identified and attention of the government has been drawn for revising the policies and correcting in practice.

**4. Identified opportunities for multiple actors to contribute:** Nepal’s Terai has some of the largest forest blocks in South Asia – sometimes regarded as the last remaining forest frontier of the country. The question of managing these forests has always been a contentious issue – as stakeholders take multiple ideological standpoints, from a state centric model, through a localized community based model to a market oriented liberal model. Very little progress has been made in regards to how best to go about resolving these value-conflicts in forest governance. A large body of foresters, mostly working within the MoFSC, believes that the large block forests require ‘scientific forest management’ under the leadership of foresters. Community forestry activists on the other hand advocate community rights over all block forest areas in the country. A *Ban Chantari* process on this issue enabled the stakeholders to help recognize the need to reconcile scientific management needs with a democratic governance process that recognizes the rights of local communities as well. Moreover, they all recognized the intricacy and scale of the problem and unanimously called for piloting productive forest management options in different management regimes (policy issue no. 5)

**5. Need for better conceptual clarity recognized:** The stakeholders recognized the need for better conceptual understanding of the issues, including how services, technologies, and policy and legal barriers operate, such as in the case of forest based trade and enterprise policy thread (policy issue no.5). These interactions sometimes brought deeper conceptual and intellectual insights beyond



everyday struggle over resources that helped stakeholders to imagine new ways of resources management (policy issue no. 7). The idea of green economy, for example brought broader issues of sustainable development, possibilities of transforming economies towards productive, yet sustainable forest management. Discussions on such issues encouraged participants to make arguments from diverse angles and helped them rethink the actor relations in different ways. In fact, *Ban Chautari* helped them realize that there needs better conceptual clarity

in many issues around forest management that may help transform the existing impasse in many areas.

Figure 5 summarizes stakeholder perceptions on the substantive outcomes of *Ban Chautari* in the policy process, using ranking scale of 1-7 (1 = low influence, and 7 – extremely high influence). The method was similar to Figure 3. Here, the value indicates any substantive effects generated by various *Ban Chautari* interventions during the actual policy discussion process, and subsequent decisions or implementation.

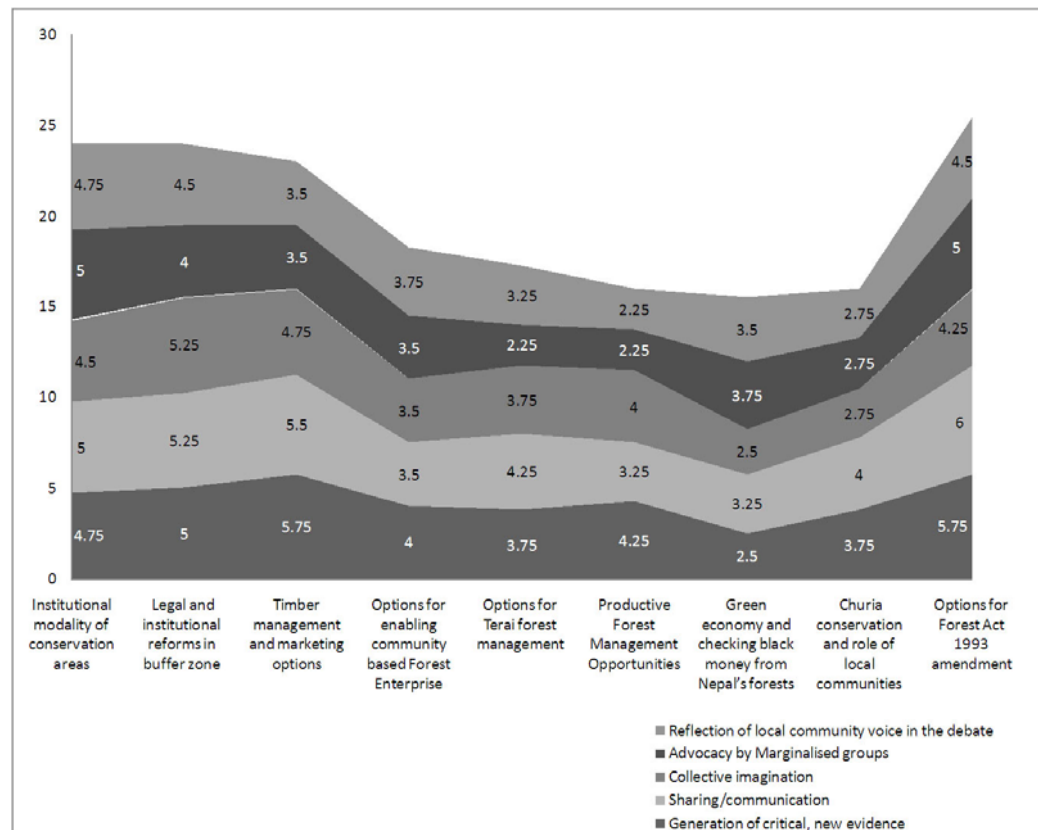


Figure 5: Contribution of *Ban Chautari* in improving collaborative learning

As shown in the figure, the five color band tentatively represent scale of effect each of the five interventions of *Ban Chautari* process had on the nine policy issues considered. The idea here is not to establish the policy change as a result of various interventions that were part

of *Ban Chautari*, but to give an idea, based on the perceptions of key actors involved in the process, of the extent to which these different interventions were considered significant in improving the policy process. What is interesting here in the diagram is that the nature of policy



issue – with the extent of the available space for policy discussion and learning (as previously outlined in Figure 1) – significantly explains the scale of the intervention's effect. This is visible in the green economy/timber issue – which was really hot as it involved direct economic interests of many players. For this reason, the effect of the *Ban Chautari* toolkit involving critical evidence, learning, dialogue, advocacy and imagination was the least of all. *Ban Chautari* interventions pushed the policy learning on forest act amendment – centered on community rights and institutional arrangements – to the highest level of all the nine issues, as it was enriched by better evidence, more transparent stakeholder engagement and strongly organized community voice.

Several institutional outcomes of *Ban Chautari* can be identified. First, key civil society actors of the forest sector in Nepal agreed to form a civil society consortium with the aim of catalyzing restrictive forest sector policy process towards deliberative and democratic process. The formation of the consortium itself became a huge achievement in terms of building trust among the civil society actors with different interests and stances in many forest policy issues. The members expressed appreciation of the link between timely policy research (diagnostic studies) and multi-stakeholder dialogues to support the national policy process.

Second, the consortium members jointly organized a series of forest policy dialogues from community to national level. As discussed earlier, the *Ban Chautaris* conducted in 2011 were instrumental to inform the stakeholders on key policy problems, sensitize the policy actors on selected policy issues and develop common understanding over the policy options.

Third, because of such dialogues, the policy actors including senior officials from the MoFSC, community leaders of FECOFUN, politicians and experts actively engaged in the dialogues and got informed on many contested

policy issues in the sector. The diagnostic studies conducted around the key policy issues were found to be very much helpful to unpack the policy gaps and hurdles and contributed to effective and engaging dialogues. Such reflective dialogues were instrumental to understand positions of key policy actors over various policy issues.

Fourth, though not directly intended, the policy dialogues contributed on positive policy decisions. For example, because of continuous advocacy by FECOFUN, policy dialogues and publications by ForestAction, the government of Nepal has been compelled to rethink over the proposal of amendment of Forest Act 1993. The government has withdrawn the draft bill and has been interested in engaging in dialogue with concerned stakeholders. Similarly, after a series of dialogues and protest, the government agreed to form a joint committee including FECOFUN representatives to draft regulations of Gaurisankhar Conservation Area.

At the end of nine *Ban Chautari* cycles, an overall reflection workshop was organized, providing stakeholders to share their reflections on the strengths and weaknesses of previous *Ban Chautari* processes. An overview of previous *Ban Chautari* processes and discussions were shared, and then participants were invited to comment.

The Secretary of MoFSC appreciated the *Ban Chautari* and opined that the government could provide funding and other support for furthering this process. He assured that the senior officials would participate in future events, provided that they are informed in a timely manner. One of the ex-secretaries, who was involved in a number of events, suggested that the government should own and support the process, as it would help make informed decisions. He urged senior officials to manage time to participate in *Ban Chautari*. A joint secretary at the MoFSC underlined 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. The Director General of Department of Forest appreciated the process and expressed that the Department would benefit from such dialogue process. Similarly, the chairperson of the Federation of Timber Industry and Trade stated that the private sector has been involved in forest policy issue for the first time through *Ban Chautari*. He highlighted the role of private sector and sought a greater cooperation from the government, civil society and private sector to realize the economic potential of forest resources in the country.

Some participants also warned against potential pitfalls of externally funded initiatives. The Division Chief of Biodiversity at the MoFSC, and few other ex officials at MoFSC and National Planning Commission (NPC) 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. They suggested working closely with the government authority to increase the policy intake. Apart from this, many participants commented on the substantive aspects – what should be the priority policy agenda for discussion? The Director General of Department of Forest Research and Survey (DFRS), Member-Secretary of the National Trust for Nature Conservation (NTNC) and the joint secretaries of the MoFSC suggested taking sustainable forest management, ecosystem services and

biodiversity conservation as agendas in future debates. There were concerns that *Ban Chautari* sometimes appeared to be tilted towards CSO agenda and biased towards rights issues and thus required balancing by responsibility.

NFA chairperson felt proud of being a member of the *Ban Chautari* consortium and said that the *Ban Chautari* has provided a common forum for NFA, FECOFUN, government agencies and research institutions to discuss key forest policy issues. It has effectively combined strategic policy analysis, structured and moderated dialogue and engagement with media through TV, radio and feature articles. It was able to bring the issue of sustainable forest into the forefront, an issue that has been grossly ignored for a long time. Other NFA leaders claimed that forest officials have historically invested in decentralizing forest management and should be credited for that.

Similarly, the CSO leaders suggested the consortium members to reflect back and address the sustainability issue of the *Ban Chautari* process. General secretary of FECOFUN admires the *Ban Chautari* process saying ‘the good part was that there weren’t such traditional format where organisers try to impose the issues. ...the series of discussions were fruitful and very open. But repetition of speakers and even the participants, needs rethinking’.

#### KEY ISSUES AND LESSONS

Despite significant procedural and institutional outcomes of *Ban Chautari* model, several challenges were experienced in organizing it, as summarized in Box 2.

##### Box 2. Key challenges to enhancing collaborative learning in policy

- Many stakeholders who participated in the *Ban Chautari* process appear to have greater expectation of substantive policy outcomes as a result of the process than the *Ban Chautari* could deliver, as the emphasis was more on procedural and institutional outcomes.
- Senior MoFSC officials did not prioritize attending the central *Ban Chautari* events, especially in the first few *Ban Chautari* cycles.



- It was difficult to involve the members of parliaments in the *Ban Chautari* events/processes.
- The whole process was influenced by elitism – such as use of English language, power point presentations, written papers, formal meetings.
- Participants and panelists were repeated in different debates.
- Facilitating strategies employed were still inadequate to achieve mutual understanding among the policy actors who have very divergent views.
- The whole discussion around *Ban Chautari* was held within a background of *Chalta hai* attitude – a pessimistic attitude to comply with existing practice, without questioning it and within the culture of non-appreciation of new efforts made by others.
- Limited government take up of the process, as it was considered led by NGOs.
- In the later rounds of *Ban Chautari*, key stakeholders were found to share readymade views, showing limited reflexivity and learning attitudes.
- The central *Ban Chautari* events had repetitive and uniform discussion structure – such as presentation, panel running across all *Ban Chautari* cycles, with limited methodological innovations.
- Maintaining research quality was a challenge, especially under situation of resource scarcity (as Kathmandu based donors and government found such processes too critical and not adequately ‘objectively verifiable’ to fund).

Designing panels and choosing panelists also became difficult because of lack of critically and passionately engaged people on various policy issues, with an ability to articulate empirical reality and policy problems and solutions.

Nepal’s forestry stakeholders and sometimes even the members of *Ban Chautari* consortium initially had high expectation of policy change through its processes. The expectations rose particularly due to the engaged and lively discussion involving high level political and bureaucratic leaders, and high enthusiasm among the participants. In one of the events, the Minister committed to form a multi-stakeholder mission to review and recommend amendment in National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973. However, expecting such a prompt response from policy makers was a naïve understanding. The poor understanding of the policy process, temptation of choosing a fast track to policy decision by

some activists and showing frustration due to slow response by the policy makers were some challenges within the team. There remained a constant latent tension among the members around these expectations and frustration.

Despite the collaborative initiative and high enthusiasm around the *Ban Chautari* process, we could not adequately engage with the senior forest officials. Though many of them participated in different events, the level of constant engagement of the senior officials remained limited. Many participants felt that the senior officials could have benefitted from rich and intensive discussion so that they could make informed decisions. There are several reasons why the *Ban Chautari* process could not adequately engage with senior officials. Firstly, it was led by an external consortium with external funding and therefore was not mandatory for the government officials who often rely on legal, official mandate. Second, as the policy decisions are often determined by



political maneuvering, the senior officials tend to ignore such knowledge forums as these are of little use to their everyday decision-making. In this context, involving senior officials in these forums and engaging with them was a continuous challenge.

The term *Ban Chautari* implies a very open, inclusive and comfortable platform for sharing, exchange and learning without any fear or difficulty. However, the *Ban Chautari* events adopted use of power point slides, usually in English. Also, most of the panelists were senior forest bureaucrats, who often used difficult disciplinary jargon. Many of the reports were produced in English. Selection of technology like multimedia presentation, panelist, language and format is said to have disempowered many enthusiastic participants. Some participants complained the forum was elitist.

The team developed a standard robust method and encouraged members to adopt it in order to maintain the brand of *Ban Chautari*. This was agreed in meetings and shared through internal communication. However, as the process involved a large number of individuals and institutions both from within the consortium members and associate partners, it was sometimes challenging to maintain the methodological standard. The robustness of the research, identification of right presenter and panelist, pre-*Chautari* events, engagement with the panelists, selection of relevant participants collectively determined the quality of *Ban Chautari*. However, we felt maintaining expected standards in all these elements a real challenge. We had to compromise several times due to the short deadlines, lack of knowledgeable people in certain topics, or lack of enthusiasm or the widespread *Chaltabe*<sup>3</sup> attitude among the organizers.

Panelist and participants showed little reflexivity during the discussion. They repeated their stereotyped views and tended to take defensive

position when challenged. This was particularly visible as many participants were repeated in several *Ban Chautaris*. It was observed that people had readymade views or responses irrespective of the topic under discussion. For example, whereas the representatives of FECOFUN saw all the solutions of forest management challenges through community forestry, the representatives of Ranger Association Nepal often pointed out problems with the Community Forestry programme. The government officials often saw law and order as the major issue, and timber businessmen saw problems with regulatory constraints. The poor reflexivity on the part of major actors and all participants has hindered possibilities for better solutions to many of the current problems in forest sector. Despite the poor reflexivity, many participants had begun to develop confidence on the process and feel comfortable in sharing their views.

#### **Several Lessons have Emerged from the Analysis of *Ban Chautari* Model of Policy Experiment**

*Discussion informed by the diagnostic analysis can substantially add quality in policy dialogue.* *Ban Chautaris* adopted the distinctively unique approach to combine scientific knowledge with citizenry politics around contemporary public policy issues. In most of the policy dialogues, a very thin overview of policy problems was presented and the debate was largely dominated by the stakeholders' narrow interests that at times clashed with other stakeholders' interests. However, in this case, the discussion was supported by a diagnostic analysis covering the width and depth of the issues linked with actor positions and avenues for transforming the policy and practice. Presentation of the study findings of diagnostic analysis at the onset of the debate posed challenge to the participants to question their understanding and rethink their respective views and positions.

<sup>3</sup> Ignoring the seriousness of the business, lack of required appreciation of the task and its consequences.





***Policy dialogue must be embedded with several other elements of analysis and synthesis before and after the actual dialogue:***

Policy dialogue must be conceived as an integrated and ongoing process that consists of several action elements tied to a larger cycle. This differentiates *Ban Chautari* from other normal policy dialogue forums. Several activities precede the event and many others succeed. However all these activities contribute to the single goal of helping stakeholders understand key forest policy issues that ultimately results in democratising policy and practice.

***Diagnostic analysis informed by political agenda for transformation has potential to engage stakeholder and increase their ownership:***

The research carried out by pure intellectual curiosity may have its own merit. But to effectively engage stakeholders, the research questions must be informed by the contemporary political debate. In the case of *Ban Chautari*, only the political and policy relevant issues were selected for diagnostic analysis. Consequently, it gathered sufficient attention and interests of the stakeholders. The stakeholders largely owned the outcomes of the dialogue, showed preparedness to implement recommendations and take further actions. This was primarily due to the high relevance of the policy issues identified for dialogue.

***Preparation work, especially equipping panelists and participants on the issue under discussion, is critically important for effective dialogue:***

Huge variation was observed in the quality of the discussion based on the level of pre-event preparation. Apart from preparing a well developed key note presentation, intensive communication between the moderator and the panelist on diverse aspects of the issue in question helped bring them to the same page. In some instances, well thought out and stakeholder customized

questions were shared in advance with the panelist that helped them organise their thoughts and articulate the arguments before the actual event. Therefore, it is important to communicate, share and prepare the panelist so that they can effectively deliver their oral presentation.

### CONCLUSION

At a time when idealistic approaches to policy analysis are meeting with increasing frustrations emerging from the encounter with the complex and dynamic world, the experience of the *Ban Chautari* model of collaborative policy learning in Nepal's forest sector has some good news to share with the wider public policy research community. But, it has also generated evidence that warns the advocates of participatory and collaborative policy processes on the more subtle, and fundamental challenges that surround any attempts to foster collaborative learning.

The good news is that conditions for collaborative policy learning can emerge when a) a broad based catalytic agency sponsors diagnostic research that interrogates values and meanings around contested policy issues, and also systematically presents 'critical facts' to question the assumptions of the dominant actors, b) the agency organizes well-structured deliberative forums inviting actors representing all different perspectives, c) attempts are made to foster dynamic communicative links between small deliberative forums and the wider public by providing critical facts and stories to the media, and d) local community-focused CSOs are self-mobilized to empower and represent the local communities and marginalized groups. In other words, this strategy could be seen as the one that combines critical inquiry with carefully organized deliberative forums, thus enhancing understanding among actors about what options could generate the best public results.



We also analyzed the extent to which seven fundamental drivers constraining collaborative policy learning were counteracted through *Ban Chautari* model of learning, critical inquiry, stakeholder engagements and dialogues. This is critical as any attempt to foster and deepen collaborative learning is essentially a critical political process. The *Ban Chautari* experiment has certainly expanded the deliberative space, and hence, has positively impacted the policy learning culture of forest stakeholders. However, several fundamental drivers are too big for sectorally focused and issue focused policy learning processes. Experience demonstrates that development aid context has strong influence on the learning process by distorting the structure of material incentives and symbolic legitimacy of the actors involved in the process (e.g researchers being seen as delivering reports to donors). It was also applied to *Ban Chautari* process, which was initially thought of as just another donor funded 'project', but later was better accepted by actors from all categories. The research and alternative inquiry is under-funded and considered too hot by the government and donor groups. The dominant theory of change constructed by aid agencies favored apolitical service providers and friendly consultants, and the *Ban Chautari* agency had to struggle with resources to undertake studies and hold policy-focused dialogues.

It was also challenging for the catalytic agency to counteract attitudes to superficial and ritual participation in policy foras – for fear of moving out of the comfort zone of the policy actors. The mainstream politics also remained disengaged from the process partly due to political transition in the country (and hence the need to pay greater attention to constitutional issues) but mostly because it is historically established belief that forestry issues are not considered political.

The outcomes of such debates were limited to generate understanding, and to make it more effective in driving substantive policy decisions. Thus, it is essential to conceive *Ban Chautari* part continuous process of policy learning.

Another issue that surfaced through this is about who is best suited to organize such policy learning processes. Non-state actors largely drive the current model, and yet state officials have become quite positive about the way it engaged multiple actors and helped to shape new thinking. This indicates a possibility of having government sponsor the process, but there is a fear that the process then becomes too government centric, losing its autonomous and spontaneous character. And if state ownership is not enhanced, the process can become part of NGO practice and never realize its potential to influence the internal decision making within the government. There could be a way in which state offers public support to such process but at the same time provides full autonomy in critical research, dialogues, and agendas as they come from the process itself.

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