



# Discussion Paper

## Improving Community-level Governance: Adaptive Learning and Action in Community Forest User Groups in Nepal<sup>1</sup>

January 2009

**Final Draft**

**Authors:** RB Shrestha, Sohan L Shrestha, Sudil G Acharya and Shrikanta Adhikari

**Discussion Paper Series Editor:** Hemant R Ojha

**Special editorial contributions:** Binod Chapagain and Anil Shrestha

**Address for sending comments:** [rbshrestha@lfptera.org](mailto:rbshrestha@lfptera.org)

### Summary

It is widely believed that participatory monitoring and evaluation can help community organizations improve their internal learning and governance. However, the processes of programme monitoring and evaluation as practised by many organizations lack the elements of community ownership and the appreciation of its ability to provide an opportunity for community learning. Only locally-initiated and community-led monitoring can improve their performance and change organizational practices. Drawing on the experience of Livelihoods and Forestry Programme in Nepal, this paper makes the case for community-generated planning, self-monitoring and evaluation for adaptive learning and good governance in community forest user groups (CFUGs) in Nepal. These processes, conceptualised as Adaptive Learning and Action (ALA), have enabled CFUGs to identify vision and its indicators, formulate activities to achieve the vision, and regularly monitor the progress against the indicators. ALA has also enhanced transparency, participation and accountability in CFUG governance. The process also enhances transparency and improves governance in local governments and other service providers working with CFUGs that have practiced ALA.

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<sup>1</sup> This discussion paper was prepared with support from Livelihoods and Forestry Programme of Department for International Development (DFID) and the Government of Nepal.

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## **Introduction**

Community organizations are increasingly being recognized as local foundations for grass roots development and democratization. In recent years, multiple agenda of change, including decentralization, good governance, natural resource management and livelihoods, have sought to place local communities at the centre of the change process. Amongst the diverse types of community groups, community forest user groups (CFUGs) are spread throughout the country, encompassing over ten million members. They are legally recognized and self-perpetuating community organizations (Hamilton, et al. 2000) that have common pool forest resources. However, as newly established community institutions, CFUGs generally do not have an established planning, implementation and monitoring system.

This paper argues for the case of Adaptive Learning and Action (ALA) process to improve governance in CFUGs. Based on over ten years of experience of the Livelihoods & Forestry Programme (LFP) of the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) in Nepal, this paper presents how the adaptive learning process takes place, including improved planning and self-monitoring, and contributes to improved governance in CFUGs. It demonstrates that adaptive learning-based governance process in CFUGs has significantly contributed to improving the livelihood outcomes, equity and inclusion, and forest sustainability.

## **Wider context of community-level governance and the space for adaptive learning and action**

The participatory approach to development seeks to provide greater space for beneficiary communities to influence the agenda of change. Two of the key ways in which development agencies seek to enhance community participation are participatory planning and evaluation and participatory monitoring. Such strategies, to some degree, recognize the need for engaging local communities in the processes of identifying development problems and devising and implementing their solutions.

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) has long been applied by governments and funding agencies to assess the actual change against the stated objectives and to judge whether

development assistance has been successful or not (Guijt 1999). Conventionally, M&E involves outside experts measuring performance against preset indicators, using standardized procedures and tools (IDS 1998). In such conventional monitoring systems, M&E is fully controlled by external experts. The community people and stakeholders only provide information to evaluators. The objective of M&E is mainly to report to donors or governments to justify the effective use of their resources and judge achievements against set indicators. However, neither the community nor the implementing agency gets sufficient opportunities for learning and improving from such monitoring and evaluation.

In recent times, however, organizations are increasingly using M&E for internal learning and continual improvement in their work (Guijt 1999). The growing interest in participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) has encouraged multi-stakeholder participation in programme planning and monitoring. PM&E involves the assessment of changes through processes that involve many people or groups, each of whom is affecting, or is affected by, the impact being assessed (Ibid). PM&E empowers stakeholders and enhances public accountability. Different development practitioners are applying it under different names, e.g. participatory evaluation (PE), community monitoring/citizen monitoring (CM), participatory planning, monitoring and evaluation (PPM&E), self-monitoring and evaluation (SM&E), and so on. Whatever the nomenclature, the ultimate objective of PM&E is to enhance the effectiveness of programme by promoting internal learning and improvement. However, members of beneficiary groups from rural communities generally have little influence over such processes due to the domination of external experts and stakeholders. Community-level institutions can enjoy and learn from the process only when monitoring against their own indicators of change. Use of well-defined indicators, effective networking and planning can improve micro-level governance of community organizations.

Good communication linkages between people, groups and institutions in terms of sharing of power and responsibilities have been recognized as an element of good governance (Ojha et al. 2003, Ojha 2008). Transparency of organizational procedures, democratic decision-making and accountability of members to institutional objectives that benefit local people are important for good governance of community organizations. The District Forest Office (DFO) and forestry sector development agencies supporting

CFUGs have made rigorous efforts to promote a learning-oriented culture and good governance in CFUGs in Nepal.

Despite proliferation of participatory approaches, community organizations in Nepal, as well as globally, still suffer from weak internal governance. Most of the over 15,000 CFUGs still suffer from ineffective management of their forest resources, with little or no success in improving the livelihoods of rural people (Hamilton et al. 2000, Ojha et al. 2003). One of the reasons behind this is the limited use of the participatory approach in practice and continuation of the top-down approach in more subtle ways (Cook and Kothari 2005, Ojha 2008).

In recent years, there is increased appreciation of community-centred planning and monitoring systems, building on participatory and multi-stakeholder innovations in planning and monitoring, as well as recognizing the weaknesses of external influence over community-level governance in the traditional planning and monitoring processes. We conceptualize this approach as community-centred Adaptive Learning and Action (ALA). This approach shares some commonalities with multiple strands of innovative thinking such as adaptive management (Lee 1993), adaptive collaborative approach (McDougall 2008), learning organization (Senge 1990) and self-monitoring. In a nutshell, the ALA recognizes that a) communities are at the centre of learning process; b) the learning process starts with visioning and then passes through planning, self-monitoring and self-evaluation; and c) in all stages of the ALA, there are dynamic and interactive communication links with other stakeholders who provide regulatory, institutional development and technical services. The ALA enables CFUGs to change the process, if necessary, to deal with complexities and the changed context; improves governance; and enhances sustainable and equitable livelihood benefits. In other words, it enhances the community's competence to solve their problems using step-by-step procedure with the use and mobilization of their own skills and resources. In addition, it influences governance of other stakeholders who have links with the community applying the ALA. Using this approach, a number of CFUGs in the LFP areas were provided with support to apply the ALA.

## **History of learning and monitoring-related initiatives in Livelihoods & Forestry Programme**

CFUGs are autonomous community institutions with their own renewable resources, with which they can potentially, sustainably and equitably meet the community's basic needs. Application of the ALA contributes to continuous improvement and progression of CFUGs towards this goal.

Different programmes and projects on community forestry have made efforts to enhance effective and learning-oriented CFUG management systems. The DFID-supported Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP) piloted a couple of processes and monitoring systems to enhance the learning culture and good governance in CFUG management. Together with the DFO staff and CFUGs, learning-focused monitoring systems were promoted, and various tools and processes such as CFUG health check, user-generated pictorial decision-making in SM&E, SM&E in information management, and CFUG planning and self-monitoring and evaluation (PSM&E) were developed.

The CFUG health check used a checklist with four main sections: 1) forest resource management, 2) social and institutional development, 3) awareness and flow of information, and 4) skill development initiatives. The DFO staff used to collect information based on the checklist and select the best CFUG every year. However, the process was completely owned by the DFO staff with no opportunity for CFUGs to learn and improve. Later, the NUKCFP piloted user-generated pictorial decision-making in self-monitoring and evaluation with specific focus on enhancing the participation of illiterate CFUG members in the process. This process continues only in a few CFUGs. Some of the CFUGs practised participatory information management following self-monitoring and evaluation, with support from the NUKCFP. Later, in Sankhuwasabha district, the members of Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG and the NUKCFP jointly developed CFUG planning and self-monitoring and evaluation techniques that were completely led and owned by CFUGs. The process guides CFUGs to envision their ideal status considering holistic development needs; review their status; make plans to achieve their ideal status; and monitor their progress at regular intervals. Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG shared the advantages of participatory self-monitoring and evaluation with other CFUGs and forestry sector staff at the range post, district and regional

forums. Considering the heightened interest in, and effectiveness of, the process, the project team gradually scaled up its use in other CFUGs within and outside the district, developing facilitation skills of the DFO and NGO staff. To disseminate the process, the NUKCFP produced a process video and trained staff to effectively carry out the process. The process has been adapted and scaled up by users and implementing partners after the initiation of the LFP. The PSM&E process, which was later conceptualized as Adaptive Learning and Action (ALA), was launched in Sankhuwasabha. The process has been scaled up in eight other districts covered by the LFP: Koshi hills (Bhojpur, Dhankuta, Sankhuwasabha and Terhathum districts), Dhaulagiri hills (Parbat), Western Terai (Nawalparasi) and Rapti area (Dang, Rukum and Salyan).

### **ALA: Elements, Steps, Tools and Techniques**

The ALA allows CFUGs to visualize an ideal situation and define its indicators in terms of organization, and forest and livelihood outcomes, and plans activities to achieve its vision. CFUGs implement their plans by mobilizing internal resources, as well as accessing external resources and services. They then assess the changes made to achieve the vision. Drawing pictures of indicators of an ideal CFUG creates a pleasant and more equal learning environment for the participation of both illiterate and literate members of CFUGs. The ALA process is presented in four stages, viz. preparatory; visioning and planning; putting the plan in action; and monitoring, review and revision (see Table 1).

**Table 1. ALA stages, process and outcomes**

Stage	Key process	Outcomes
<b>Preparatory</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meeting with CFUG office-bearers/committee members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clarity on what <a href="#">ALA</a> is, including processes and steps</li> <li>Increased ownership of users over the process</li> </ul>
<b>Visioning and planning</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizing of <i>tole</i>-level meetings</li> <li>Organizing of joint meeting of <i>tole</i> representatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Development of indicators for the vision indicators</li> <li>Areas of intervention prioritized and plan prepared</li> </ul>
<b>Putting the plan into action</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Delegation of responsibilities to members</li> <li>Implementation of plan</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action taken as per the plan to ensure that targets for each indicator are achieved.</li> </ul>
<b>Monitoring, review and revision</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Monitoring of progress towards vision</li> <li>Review and improve indicators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Progress towards the vision tracked</li> <li>Vision indicators improved</li> </ul>

Each of the stages is briefly described below.

### **Preparatory stage**

To ensure that the process is fully owned by the CFUG, sufficient understanding of the purpose should be developed among its key members. External facilitators discuss the process and advantages of ALA with executive committee (EC) members at their periodic meetings (which are generally held every month). Once the key members realize the value of the process, then they can carry forward the process themselves and also involve other members. If an agreement is reached, EC members make plans for applying the process.

Based on the size of the CFUG, they fix the number of meetings to be held, set a date and venue, and take steps to ensure participation of every household. They divide the responsibility for communicating about the meeting and organizing the meeting with the respective *toles*<sup>2</sup>. The ALA process facilitation team, which includes EC members, makes preparations to assist the CFUG. At least two facilitators are required in each *tole*-level meeting.

<sup>2</sup> *Tole* is a small settlement or hamlet.



### **Visioning and planning**

ALA is effective only if its users realize its value and take up ownership of the process. Facilitators should try to create an environment conducive to learning. The process should be led by CFUG members themselves so that other members accept this as their own and commit to its continuity without external facilitators.

Then, one of the facilitators introduces the process through a skit, asking a volunteer from the group to look in a mirror. The facilitator tries to confuse the volunteer by putting dry colour on her/his face and asking her/him to look in the mirror. Based on the views of the volunteer expressed before and after looking in the mirror, the facilitator will explain what is self-monitoring.

Then, the facilitators perform a role play, building on a conversation of rural farmers about the day-to-day observation of their paddy field and the activities they perform. Based on the feedback on the role play, the facilitator summarizes and explains to the members that monitoring is not a new practice and also not a one-time event, but should be conducted periodically for learning to take place. Based on the findings of the monitoring, appropriate and timely actions should be taken to achieve the vision.

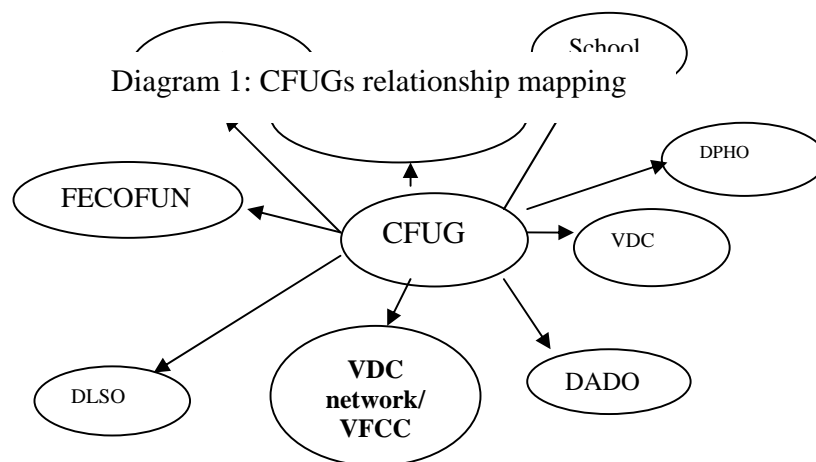
Once the members are ready to do self-monitoring and evaluation of their CFUG, a visioning exercise is carried out to envision the characteristics of an ideal CFUG in five to ten years' time. The facilitators help them to describe the characteristics of their ideal CFUG in terms of different categories, e.g. governance, social inclusion, forest management, pro-poor development and community development, networking and so on. Then these become indicators, which are noted down by another facilitator.

The CFUG members are asked to draw pictures to represent each indicator. As some of the members might never have used a pen, the facilitators encourage them to start using one. Once they start drawing, the environment becomes more pleasant to all. When this task has been completed, all members share their pictures and take each other's feedback.

The facilitators help the group to assess the status of each indicator by comparing it with different phases of the moon. Generally, four stages of the moon, viz. no moon, early moon, more than half moon and full moon, are presented, and the members are

encouraged to discuss and put each picture below an appropriate stage of the moon to represent the status. Then, the participants prioritize the most important indicators for immediate achievement.

The CFUG also maps out its internal resources and potentials of different stakeholders to support its plan. It may need external assistance for implementing its plan. So, it maps out possible organizations for support and lists the potential resources and services provided by them. This helps it to make a realistic plan based on available resources.



After the *tole*-level ALA exercise, a small team comprising facilitators and CFUG EC members compiles the indicators and assessments. They are presented at a *tole* representatives' meeting, where indicators are refined and priority areas confirmed. The group then prepares long- and short-term plans on how it is going to work towards achieving the vision, considering the internal and external resources it has access to. Once the CFUG finalizes its plan, it formalizes it at its periodic meeting and assembly in accordance with its constitution.

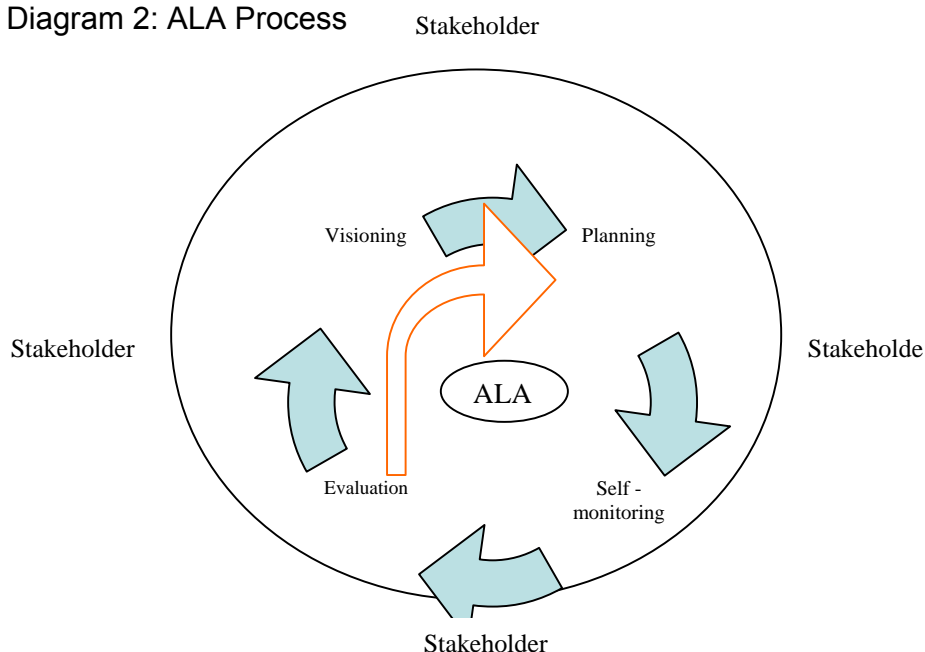
### Putting Plan into Action

The CFUG implements its plans to achieve its visions. Responsibilities are delegated to the EC members and *tole*-level subcommittees to implement the plan effectively. It coordinates with the different stakeholders and mobilizes support for its plan. Sharing of responsibilities among the EC members and *tole*-level subcommittee contributes to improving and accomplishing the plan in time.

**Monitoring, review and revision**

The CFUG regularly monitors the progress towards its vision through self-monitoring and evaluation every year. It shares its success story with all its members and identifies the areas for improvement. Progress towards its vision may encourage the CFUG to take further initiative and make further efforts. The identification of areas for improvement makes its realize the need for further improvement. It updates its constitution and operational plan in accordance with the indicators and long-term plans, which make implementation of activities legitimate and easy. It revises or improves its vision indicators in accordance with the needs identified by its members. The process helps CFUG members to continuously learn and act accordingly. Regular review, improvement of indicators and actions guide the CFUG towards the achievement of its vision indicators which it has envisioned as its ideal situation.

Diagram 2: ALA Process



### Changes in CFUG's governance through ALA

The ALA is a process owned and led by CFUGs for improving their governance. It is being replicated in more than 550 CFUGs in nine LFP programme districts in the East, Mid-West, West and the Terai. The LFP has been supporting capacity development of facilitators, particularly staffs of DFO and NGO partner and CFUG network members. CFUGs and facilitators are encouraged to share the methods and advantages of the ALA process with other CFUGs at various forums and network meetings. The process has strengthened development initiatives, governance and social inclusion in CFUGs. It has guided CFUGs towards their visions, which has become the basis for their planning. A member of a CFUG in Mid-western Nepal said that they used to prepare plan only at the time of implementation. Now, they had learnt the importance of advance planning with clear guidelines through the ALA process. Furthermore, the process encourages members to seek transparency within group as well as from their service providers.

It helps members to realize the value of commitment and participation for development of the group. Identification of different stakeholders helps in working actively to get support from each of them, thus promoting useful linkages between service providers and CFUGs. The approach, which has the advantages of common vision of all

members, joint action for achieving the vision and regular reflection, guides CFUGs towards adaptive learning, and reinforced commitment can guide users towards managing their forests successfully, equitably and in a sustainable manner.

**Common vision: A way of better targeting**

A common vision with identified indicators is important for steering the users towards their aspirations within the defined timeframe (5 or 10 years) and acting accordingly. The ALA supports the building of common vision and plan with active participation of all members. The process of using pictorial indicators and reflections of change in different stages of the moon makes even the illiterate clear on what they want to achieve. Regular assessment of progress enhances the internal learning culture and encourages the members to achieve their vision. CFUG members internalize the need for continuous efforts once they identify their status compared to the condition they expect to achieve within the defined timeframe. This is often specifically with regard to group governance, social inclusion, social change, community development and networking. The expected ideal condition encourages them to work proactively for improvement. The common understanding of group vision enhances uniform and consistent dealing among CFUG members. This may promote the trust of service providers and VDCs in CFUGs. Their proactive behaviour, common understanding and learning-oriented working approach aid them in receiving assistance from service providers.

*We have found planning and implementation with adaptive learning approach by the CFUG itself an effective means for improving CFUG's governance for the betterment of their livelihoods.*

Chairperson of Garayala CFUG, Rukum, Mid-West Nepal

**Active Participation: Enhancing ownership of group activities**

People actively participate in those activities that they themselves decide to carry out. The development of common vision and plan with mass participation enhances ownership of group activities. Use of pictorial vision and indicators further strengthens active participation and ownership of illiterate members. The culture of seeing the EC as a controlling body and general users as mere recipients has changed to that of shared responsibility and ownership.

As a member of Paluthan CFUG in Mid-Western Nepal claimed, participation of members in meetings, discussions, and forest management and development activities has increased after the introduction of the ALA process. Similarly, a former chairperson of Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG in Sankhuwasabha in Eastern Nepal observed increased participation and contribution of women members in decision-making and forest management since they started practising ALA in their CFUGs.

Formation of *tole*-level committees and delegation of CFUG EC's authority to them have promoted regular discussions and participation of users. The practice of conducting *tole*-level meetings has helped development of alternative leadership within the group.

**Increased accountability of members: Facilitating implementation of group activities**

The ALA process sets a common goal and the practice of delegation of responsibilities and authority among users. A jointly agreed plan, shared responsibility for implementation and an open review system help make all users more accountable for their group's activities. The EC gains the confidence of the general users through its more accountable and responsible behaviour towards their needs. This, in turn, increases the contribution and support of the users to the EC members in plan implementation. In the beginning, CFUGs were formed through DFO staff. Therefore, monitoring was perceived to be solely the responsibility of the DFO. When CFUGs introduced the ALA, they realized the importance of joint responsibility in all development initiatives. The role of external facilitators has always been understood as guiding the CFUG in accordance with the interest of the local community.

As part of the process, the CFUG members analyse the available resources and approach relevant stakeholders to support the implementation of their plan. They often mobilize and access resources and services jointly.

As the mutual respect and cooperation between EC members and users build up, they speak with one voice while dealing with stakeholders. CFUGs are taking initiative for the holistic development of their communities. Besides forest management and distribution of forest products, they are carrying out activities for social transformation, infrastructure development and education as identified by the group members. For example, Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG prohibited open sale of alcohol in the community

following a majority decision. Continuous efforts and improvements in the CFUG's activities helped them to gain respect and recognition from other groups, and stakeholders from other communities visited them to learn. This has broadened their exposure.

The ALA is an effective tool for CFUGs for preparing realistic plans with full ownership and accountability. Its effectiveness depends on how much all users understand the process and contribute sincerely and honestly. The process contributes towards effective planning and mobilization of internal resources, apart from access to external resources and services.

### **Transparency: Promoting trust**

The ALA enhances transparency in the planning, implementation and monitoring of activities by the group. This directly promotes trust between the general users and EC members. *To/e*-level meetings, regular assessments and delegation of authority to *to/e* committees enhance transparency in CFUG activities. Joint planning effectively clarifies the roles of different users. When they jointly assess progress against each indicator, all users are regularly updated about their progress towards their destination as well as achievements. They regularly review the effectiveness of their plans and actions. This automatically contributes to learning and improvement in user groups.

This process has established a culture of regular interactions at *to/e* level between CFUGs and EC members. In the interaction, users are encouraged to ask questions about fund utilization, external assistance and other initiatives of the CFUG. Some CFUGs have initiated transparent planning mechanism and developed implementation guidelines.

It promotes transparency in CFUGs. Transparency is one of the indicators of the ideal situation of a CFUG. The EC internalizes transparency as a regular phenomenon. In the same way, general users question the CFUG EC if transparency is lacking, as shared by a treasurer of a CFUG in Dang district. In the same way, the ALA promotes systematic and transparent mechanism in CFUGs. Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG has developed a rule for allocating 20% of its budget for a pro-poor revolving fund, 10% for child education and the rest for community development activities, including forest

management. This has helped CFUGs to carry out systematic and transparent decision-making. Increased transparency has reduced conflicts between the general users and the EC members, as well as promoting trust between each other.

### **Transformation in CFUG's Governance through ALA: A case study of Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG, Sankhuwasabha**

Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG in Khandbari Municipality in Sankhuwasabha district is one of the biggest CFUGs in Nepal's hill districts. A total of 205 households were organized into this group to manage 218 hectares of well-stocked *sal* (*shorea robusta*) forest. The CFUG, being close to district headquarters, had to face tremendous pressure for supply of forest products, especially fuelwood and small timber. The community is heterogeneous and comprises people who had migrated from the nearby areas to the district headquarters. Because of these characteristics, the group had limited collective ownership over the forest, which used to be controlled by the DFO before its handover as a community forest in 1993.

During a regular follow-up visit by Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP) (DFID's forestry project before the LFP) staff in 1997, the CFUG EC shared the problems faced by it while managing the group. The EC was of the view that, because of the diverse backgrounds of the CFUG members, unity and commitment towards forest management activities were lacking in the group. The CFUG EC members complained of not getting support from general users. There was almost a consensus among the CFUG EC members that the group was facing a number of problems, including unauthorized extraction of forest products, conflicts between CFUG EC and general members, passive involvement of members in forest management and other developmental activities. There was a crisis of trust between the CFUG EC and the general members, which made it difficult to manage the groups to promote sustainable management of their forest.



The CFUG EC members and NUKCFP staff discussed these issues, and designed a CFUG PSM&E process (in this paper, re-conceptualized as Adaptive Learning and Action [ALA] process). Following the



discussion, the CFUG EC members and the NUKCFP staff planned a joint ALA exercise. Based on the number of households and their locations, the CFUG members were divided into ten *toles*. The date and venue for *tole*-level meetings were fixed and communicated to all members by the CFUG EC members. The CFUG office-bearers and range post<sup>3</sup> staff played the role of frontline facilitators. Following this plan, the CFUG EC and the NUKCFP team, together with range post staff, jointly facilitated the ALA process at the *tole*-level meetings. At the *tole*-level meetings, the facilitators guided the CFUG members in finding out how their CFUG looked from the perspectives of governance and group management, pro-poor development, forest management, and coordination and networking. The facilitators helped them list their views, but without any interference. This allowed the CFUG members to develop their indicators free from the domination of external individuals.

In each *tole*, the users drew up a list of indicators of an ideal situation in which they wanted to see their CFUGs to be. Then, they drew pictures to illustrate each indicator with the help of facilitators. Each member showed his or her picture to other members and received feedback. Once they had shared their pictures, they assessed the situation, using indicators against four stages of the moon<sup>4</sup>, which symbolized the various stages of the indicators (*see the table below*). The process of drawing pictures and carrying out assessment against the stages of the moon created a joyful and reflective learning environment for the users, and allowed them to envision the desired future as well as potential stages to pass through. Collective assessment of, and reflection on, the outcomes of the assessment helped them realize the importance of their intervention to achieve the desired situation. After completing *tole*-level assessments, they compiled the scores of indicators for the ten *toles* and developed common indicators, reflecting the existing status of Dhungedhara CFUG. They also analysed their available resources and mapped out possible stakeholders that could support their plans to achieve their desired status. Based on their assessment, they prioritized areas for intervention and made necessary plans.

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<sup>3</sup> Range post is a lower administrative and development support unit of the Department of Forest in Nepal.

<sup>4</sup> Different stages of the moon reflect different levels of progress in comparison to the expected output. No moon means no progress, new moon presents some progress and the need to do more, three quarter moon means remarkable progress but still some more to do and full moon means progress as expected.

**Table 2: Assessment of Dhungedhara CFUG in 1997 and 2007**

Main category	Indicators of CFUG they want to look like	Assessment 1997				Assessment 2007			
		No moon	New moon	Third quarter moon	Full moon	No moon	New moon	Third quarter moon	Full moon
Governance and group management	All members are aware of, and follow, the OP and constitution		√						√
	Equal participation of both male and female members in CFUG decision-making	√							√
	CFUG has own office and open it once a day	√							√
	CFUG decisions are communicated to all	√							√
Pro-poor development	Poor households access loan for IG activities from pro-poor revolving fund	√							√
	Specific provision for women and <i>Dalit</i> representation made in constitution	√							√
	Poor households benefit from subsidization of forest products	√						√	
Forest management	CFUG general members are aware of basic forest management knowledge and skills	√							√
	All the barren land within forest area covered with forest		√						√
	Timber extracted from selected felling of mature trees as per plan	√							√
	Over-mature and deformed trees are used for firewood	√						√	
Community development	Wide and comfortable foot trails between <i>toles</i>		√						√
	Each <i>tole</i> has electrification		√					√	
	Every household has toilet		√						√
	Each household has improved house with subsidized timber access	√							√
Coordinati	CFUG share its							√	

on and networking	experiences with neighbouring groups and support them for improved governance		√						
	CFUG establishes linkages with service providers of their areas		√					√	
	Joint activities at least in health and education start in CFUG with service providers' support	√							√
	CFUG has played an active role to establish a network of CFUGs in the district	√							√

Source: Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG.

After introducing the ALA process in the groups, it made an annual plan and implemented it with the active participation of the CFUG general members and EC members. They formed *tole*-level subcommittees, shared the CFUG constitution and operation plan at *tole*-level meetings, constructed foot-trails for linking different settlements within the group, and provided 6 cubic feet of timber to each of those houses that had built toilets. Similarly, the CFUG established a pro-poor revolving fund, and provided loans to the needy poor households in accordance with the decision of the *tole* subcommittee. The CFUG run non-formal literacy classes for their illiterate members with the support of the District Education Office. They also conduct an outreach health education campaign with the District Public Health Office and health clinics in each settlement. These activities helped make the users aware of the health issues. Every year, they assessed their progress towards the full moon and plan for the coming year. The planning, action and reflection process regularly guided Dhungedhara CFUG towards achieving its ten-year vision.

As can be seen in the above table, Dhungedhara CFUG tracked its progress against each indicator every year. It reviewed its indicators after an annual assessment and improved them where it felt it appropriate in the changed context. The CFUG had almost no moon or new moon stage in most of the indicators in 1997, and had achieved its expected targets in 2007 as a result of its continuous efforts for ten years. Strong commitment of the EC and *tole* subcommittees, apart from regular follow-ups and actions, enabled it to achieve its desired or ideal situation. Stakeholders concerned with

their vision indicators provided necessary support to achieve their common vision. The CFUG was able to develop leadership at *tole* level, and is continuing the process with changed leadership. After ten years, every household has a toilet; each *tole* has electrification; and more than NRs. 200 thousand is being mobilized as pro-poor income-generating activity (IGA) revolving fund in the CFUG. Poor and *Dalit* women, like Mithu Biswakarma, are sustaining their livelihoods from small businesses that they started with the support of the CFUG revolving fund. The users have become more supportive of the EC in its forest management activities, with resultant increased forest productivity and regeneration. Open grazing has been controlled and stall-feeding is being practised. Being encouraged by the successful achievement of its vision, it is now envisaging new visions.

### **Issues and Discussion**

The ALA has been found as a practical process for defining the indicators of expected changes in CFUGs, as well as for planning and implementing activities under their own leadership. However, its effectiveness depends on the commitment of, and acceptance by, the community, effectiveness of facilitation, availability of resources and time to implement their plan, and on the follow-up mechanism.

Effective communication of the process and its benefits for CFUG office-bearers and the elite in the community is important before introducing the ALA process into groups. If the process is not fully accepted by CFUG office-bearers, then it will be almost impossible to implant it in CFUGs. Generally, CFUGs are encouraged to adopt the ALA process when they observe the effectiveness of its application in their neighbouring CFUGs. Therefore, this is a gradual and time-consuming process. External facilitators can accelerate the scaling up of the process through frequent sharing and communication.

The scaling up of the ALA varies, depending on its internalization by facilitators and their commitment towards it. Although the LFP has clear organizational interests in promoting the internal governance of CFUGs, scaling up varies. ALA activities across programme districts have remained limited due to the varied commitment and understanding among the LFP staff. The ALA process has been adopted by almost all the CFUGs in Sankhuwasabha and is gradually being extended to other hill districts in Koshi district. But the rate of adoption of the process is slower in Western, Mid-western and Terai

districts. This is due to limited exposure and internalization among the LFP staff and CFUGs. The staff members who have either practised or observed the process of ALA implementation have internalized it as a practical tool and extended this process in CFUGs. Sometimes, the process might be mechanical, rather than self-learning and empowering, even if practised in CFUGs.

Application of the ALA helps in the transition of the top-down approach to participatory learning. It has initiated new roles for CFUG EC and general members, and started a culture of shared responsibility. This not only enhances commitment and responsiveness among members but also challenges some of the existing practices. This creates some sort of transition in CFUGs towards the new shift. It takes time to adjust and establish the ALA as an institutional mechanism.

The effectiveness of the process varies, depending on the availability of resources for achieving their vision. Both internal and external resources are important for achieving the common vision. If CFUGs lack internal resources and cannot access external resources from potential service providers, they might feel frustrated and become disillusioned.

Although the application of the process can be facilitated by CFUG members themselves, users are still dependent on external facilitators. Dhungedhara Thulopakha CFUG is seeking assistance from the LFP even after more than ten years of having adopted the ALA and having achieved most of its expected outcomes.

## **Conclusion**

This paper shows that CFUGs can improve their internal governance by following the ALA processes and steps. This process helps CFUGs in their day-to-day functioning, and guides them towards their destinations. It encourages them to learn from their own performance and enhance their effectiveness. It promotes accountability and responsiveness of CFUG members towards their groups. The ALA can strengthen CFUG members' understanding, skills and practices in relation to participatory and learning-oriented group governance. Clear understanding aids management of resources for sustainable livelihoods. The process guides CFUGs to proactively mobilize both internal and external resources. If members are clear on what they want to achieve,

if they participate more actively, and if the process is more accountable and transparent, then internal governance is very likely to improve.

Visioning, planning, action and self-monitoring are the key elements of the ALA process. The ALA, which is a participatory process, guides CFUGs to envision what they want to achieve and act accordingly. The CFUGs reflect and act, taking their visions as their destinations. A learning-oriented monitoring system continuously contributes to the improvement of CFUGs' governance and development. The ALA helps improve internal governance at micro level.

Effective participation with clear objectives and actions guides CFUGs towards a successful path. Commitment of CFUG members builds up mutual respect, and also enhances the accountability of CFUG EC towards general members. Better performance motivates and encourages members, which, in turn, enhances the effectiveness of the group. The effectiveness of a CFUG influences other CFUGs and service providers at meso level. Transparency in group management encourages CFUG members to demand transparency and responsiveness from various service providers, e.g. DFO, range post and other service providers, too. An active and transparent CFUG induces the VDC and other development actors to become more proactive, pro-poor, transparent and responsive towards the community needs.

Although the ALA is a simple and easily applicable process for community facilitators, it has not been sufficiently scaled up across CFUGs in Nepal. Various reasons for this include: transaction cost (of interaction and participations), limited commitment and internalization by the staff of facilitating organizations and CFUGs, and their dependence on external development facilitators. Sometimes the whole process of ALA may become a mechanical rather than an organic and dynamic learning process.

The ALA needs to be scaled up to promote learning-oriented community governance. The implementing organizations and development facilitators should be exposed to the changes made by the ALA process to raise their interest and commitment. ALA-induced micro-level governance can influence meso- and macro-level organizations. At the same time, meso- and macro-level agencies need to learn from the community and practise the ALA within their organizations.

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