Conceptualising Meso-Level Governance in the Management of Commons: Lessons from Nepal's Community Forestry[1]

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Abstract: Most of the literature on common property resources is focused either on understanding interaction among users or on the macro-level policy issues that shape the management of the commons. However little is understood on the role played by the meso-level actors, institutions and processes in shaping the social and environmental outcomes of the commons. Based on the learning and reflections from an 'adaptive collaborative management' research project implemented in community forestry in five districts of Nepal, the paper: a) conceptualises meso-level governance as the level between micro (community forest user groups- CFUGs) level management and macro (national) level policy processes which plays key roles in policy interpretation and feedback, material and technical support, including help to develop linkage with the market and other opportunities, conflicts management, and introduction of new idea and discourses; b) describes how meso-level actors and processes can better respond to the increased demands of CFUGs for diversified expertise and resources; and c) shares action research insights on facilitating reflexive learning processes among meso-level stakeholders that could enhance community forestry outcomes.

Keywords: community forestry, meso-level, commons, governance, adaptive collaborative management

INTRODUCTION

This paper challenges conventional understanding of commons that emphasizes mainly the self-organization of local users for the sustainable management of the commons. Rather, we suggest that a better understanding of the dynamic link between the structures and agencies at different levels that interact with the management of the commons is needed in order to enhance their social and environmental outcomes. We identify meso-level actors, institutions and processes outside and above the local users who are involved in shaping the management of the commons. By meso-level we mean the level below the national level policies and above the local-level management actions that bridges the two while mediating the policy implementation.

The literature on common property resources emerged as a critic of earlier theories that highlighted the temptation of users to harvest resources unsustainably. These literatures analyze and appreciate the mutual interactions of users of the commons regarding production and appropriation of these resources. There is, however, relatively little attention paid to actors, institutions and discourses outside the users' domain that directly and/or indirectly influence the governance of the commons. As the meso-level shapes management processes and outcomes of the commons, studying its roles and contributions is necessary. A better understanding of the meso-level and its dynamic interaction with the management of the commons is helpful in the positive transformation of, and support to, the micro-macro links.

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Consequently, the social and environmental outcomes of the management of the commons may be enhanced over time (Banjade 2006; Banjade *et al.* 2006). Community forestry, the most widely and formally institutionalised forest commons in Nepal, which produced positive results in restoring forests in the country, is now facing challenges of governance, equity and livelihoods (Banjade and Ojha 2005; Malla 2000). The heavily degrading forests of Nepalese hills, which were described to be at the brink of environmental disaster (World Bank 1979; Eckholm 1976), were rehabilitated after handing over forest management responsibilities to local forests user groups. After the introduction of CF, there has been a resurgence of community groups to manage small forest patches as commons. Since halting environmental degradation was the prime objective of CF policies, management of community forests during these early periods were primarily guided by protectionist ideas. However, along with the improvement in the condition of the forests, discourses on the roles of forests have changed from protection to management and sustainable use. The Fourth Community Forest National Conference held in August 2004 identified livelihoods, equity, governance and sustainability as the key issues currently faced by the CF process in Nepal (Kanel 2004).

This shift of the CF programme, away from protection to supporting livelihoods, has created a need for increased collaboration between multiple actors: a) concerned government line agencies such as forest, agriculture, livestock, soil conservation and rural (local) development; b) civil society organizations (CSOs) including non-governmental organisations (NGOs); and c) private sector. However, this need has been constrained by the top-down and fixed management approaches, and narrow institutional mandates of most of the actors. While several policy initiatives have been taken to address these needs, less attention has been given by practitioners and theorists alike to the meso-level.

We explore existing spaces for sharing, learning and deliberation at the meso-level through facilitating reflexive learning and collaboration at meso-level forums. We illustrate the point by drawing from an action research project on adaptive collaborative management (ACM)[2] approach in the context of Nepal's community forestry (CF) programme. In this project, we are analyzing the intersection of different actors, which occupy the meso-level space of forest governance in Nepal. These actors are: a) state and donor agencies including policy and legal provisions of CF; b) market forces; and c) civil society, mainly community-based organizations/non-governmental organizations, networks and citizen forums.

Taking cases from Nepal's CF programme, we illustrate that a deeper understanding and appreciation of meso-level functioning and its role in modifying social and environmental outcomes can help to generate desirable outcomes of commons management and governance. The paper is divided into five sections. The second section draws from theoretical reviews and literature on the commons and shows that many existing theories have placed an emphasis on the self-organisation of the local users of commons, while mostly ignoring external factors in shaping the governance of the commons. The third section discusses the conceptualisation of the meso-level and its link with governance of the commons. The fourth section draws lessons from the CF programme experience in Nepal to illustrate some of the meso-level influences in the management of community forests. The fifth section brings insights from the ACM research project and extracts some lessons on strategies and actions that can strengthen the dynamic link between the meso-level and the commons. Finally, the paper concludes that an ACM approach is highly helpful in strengthening the meso-commons link that enhances the social and environmental outcomes of the commons.

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[2] For details of the project see the sub-section 'Adaptive Collaborative Management Approach in Community Forestry'.

MESO-LEVEL GOVERNANCE: THE MISSING LINK IN COMMON PROPERTY THEORY

Theories of common property have emerged since the late 1980s, parallel to an increased emphasis on decentralization and devolution in natural resource governance. These theories primarily analyse the complex relation between local users and governance of the commons, along with their social and environmental outcomes (Bromley 2004; Dolsak and Ostrom 2003; Pottete and Ostrom 2002; Agrawal 2001; Agrawal and Ostrom 2001; Baland and Platteau 1996; Ostrom 1990; Jodha 1986). Contrary to the earlier theories of commons in which commons were perceived as dwindling 'open access' resources (Hardin 1968), these theories appreciate the self-organising capacity of the users of the commons leading to their sustainable management (Ostrom 1999).

Since very recently, some limits of the common property resource (CPR) theories in providing an adequate explanatory framework for natural resource problems have been recognized. Campbell *et al.* (2001) warn about the existence of a fair degree of misplaced optimism about CPR management. Instead they observed a gradual breakdown of traditional institutions rooted in norms-based control and the lack of any emerging alternative institutions for such management. They suggest that advocacy of CPR systems has to be tempered with critical analysis. The limited consideration of the external environment affecting commons institutions has been highlighted by critics (Agrawal 2001). For example, even when CPR theories do address external forces, this consideration is often limited to policies and market forces at the macro level. Furthermore, critics have also suggested that the causal links explaining what makes commons work are underdeveloped (Agrawal 2001). The economic-institutional modelling of CPR systems in terms of sets of rules and cooperative equilibrium outcomes, internally sustained by a structure of incentives, have also been challenged recently (Mosse 1997). Its basis in rational choice theory, which assumes that all individuals are rational human beings, who make decisions based on cost-benefit analysis, has come under criticism for being too narrowly focused on the technical and economist aspects of resource management (Mosse 1997).

We suggest that the socio-ecological systems that govern commons are, in fact, too complex for narrowly focussed models to accurately predict directions. This suggestion implies a rejection of objectivist and reductionist approaches to the analysis of the commons, and instead indicates an appreciation for a social constructivists' perspective (Steins and Edwards 1999). Taking such a perspective to the management of the commons means that beyond the economic costs and benefits, users' behaviour towards commons are shaped by the wider socio-economic and politico-cultural systems in which users operate. This approach studies CPR as an entity within a wider external environment, and focuses on resource users' motivations for their action strategies. It views each social group as an essential part of the larger social system. The outcome of collective management is considered to be the result of interactions between actors and their natural environment, which depends on the way actors "socially construct" their everyday reality.

Cleaver (2000) illustrates this by questioning the prevalence of rational choice premises in defining the problem of collective action and the persuasiveness of institutionalism in offering solutions to it. He rejects simple evolutionary theorizing about institutions in favour of an embedded approach that allows for complexity, for the social and historical location of collective action and for an examination of the interface between agency and structure. The narrowly (*i.e.,* purely locally and/or economically-institutionally) focused CPR theories are inadequate in explaining the external forces that shape commons institutions and outcomes. Besides the need to recognize context and complexity of the management of the commons, we highlight the need to include the analysis of the governance processes that occur at the meso-level. Building on this view, we argue that collective management of the commons is shaped by multiple factors, including socio-ecological systems that are themselves complex, dynamic, uncertain, and evolving in nature.

CONCEPTUALIZING THE LINK BETWEEN MESO-LEVEL GOVERNANCE AND THE COMMONS

We conceptualise meso-level as consisting of actors, institutions and processes, which influence the functioning of the commons in a variety of ways. The meso-level operates immediately below the national level and above the local level and is also the intersecting point of state, market and civil society, who often interact and influence the governance of the commons. Actors at this level transmit and mediate policies and, as such, influence social and environmental outcomes of those policies. District level and sub-district level government functionaries (District Forest Office (DFO), District Soil Conservation Office, and Protected Area Authority), local government bodies (District Development Committee, Village Development Committee), bilateral projects, civil society organisations including non governmental organisations, network and federation (federation of community forestry users of Nepal (FECOFUN) and private agencies are the major actors of meso-level governance.

Generally speaking, the meso-level actors may implement policy, draw lessons from management of the commons and provide feedback to policy formulation process (Figure 1). In addition to translating and implementing national policies, they also provide (or fail to provide) responses to local demand on services and resources, and coordinate with other meso-level actors on these issues. They often use their discretion to interpret the policies according to their own interests and agendas, with beneficial or deleterious effects on the users and the commons. The meso-level may also take the form of forums and networks of the users themselves at sub-district or district levels, which represent the voices and interests of the users, as well as their resistance against national policies on governing the commons. In other cases, they may take the form of hybrid forums – a mixture of CFUG members, civil society organisations and external agencies representing both government and non-government that are arena of contestation and negotiation over management of the commons.
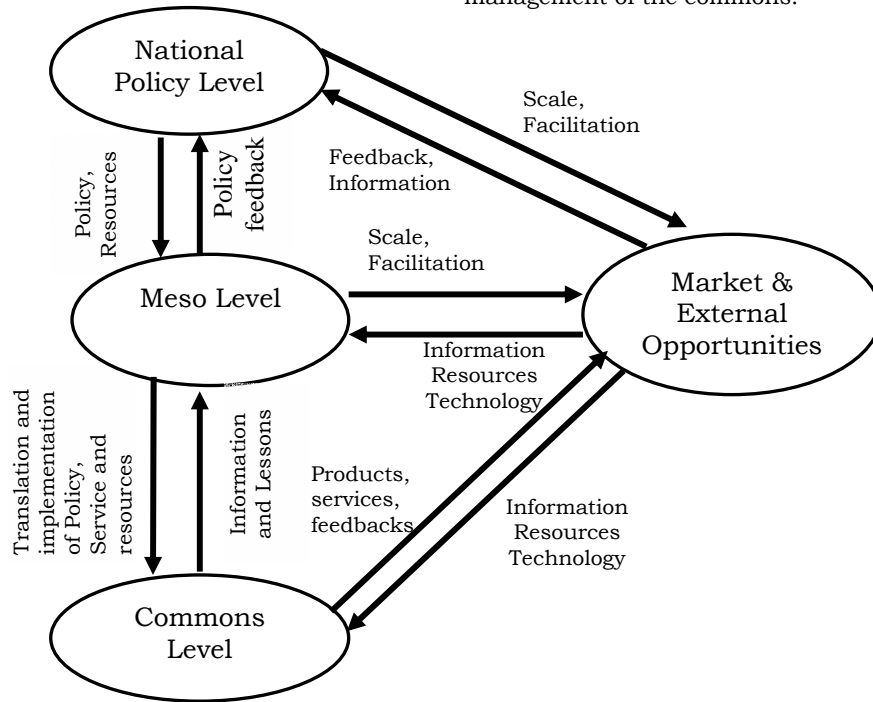

Figure 1. *Role and Linkages of the different levels of commons*

Furthermore, the meso-level actors, who operate under the central organizations, often represent their respective central [policy] level organizations in the district. However, in practice, they enjoy discretions in interpreting policy statements and implementing the same. In fact, they are partially detached from their institutional centres and often exploit the discretionary spaces usually for their own interests. This freedom and agency of the meso-level actors play significant roles in shaping the governance of the commons. In this process, they interact with both policy makers and local communities and mediate communication between them. DFOs, for example, implement CF policies, protect the national forests, regulate people's access to forests and fine offenders, etc. At the same time, they gather information and generate opinion based on their interactions with users.

The meso-level forums are unique arenas of continuous struggle and contestation over not only conflicting and competing discourses on environment and development but also on identities, positions, resources and goals. It is important to note that the meso-level is more than an aggregate of individual actors. The diverse actors generally follow different institutional practices and discourses that are historically rooted in different social and cultural systems. For example, Nepal's community forestry has historically been dominated by protectionist ideologies giving a heavy emphasis on environmental aspects in management, usually at the expense of livelihood outcomes. However, there are initiatives largely led by civil society organizations (NGOs for instance) that challenge the existing conception of either focussing mainly on 'conservation' aspects or 'people only' aspects and advocates for a balance of conservation and livelihoods by managing the commons. Meso-level forums may create opportunities for transforming meso-level actors' roles further towards enhancing equity and livelihood benefits from the management of community forests.

COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN NEPAL: THE ROLE OF THE MESO-LEVEL

Policy and Practice of Community Forestry in Nepal

Nepal's Forest Act 1993 recognises community forest user group (CFUG) as an autonomous and corporate body with perpetual succession in managing the handedover forests. CFUGs prepare a constitution of the group and register in the District Forest Office (DFO). They also prepare a forest operational plan (OP), which is then submitted to DFO for approval. However, in practice, some DFOs put special provisions at the end of the OP such as: "whatever is written above, the CFUG should comply with periodic orders, instructions and circulars from DFO". While this is a conflicting clause that undermines CFUG autonomy, it is often argued by DFOs as a requirement to ensure sustainability of the forests. A DFO, using this provision, may influence CFUGs affairs. For example, the DFO of one project district chastised some CFUGs for their participation in the 'people's movement' in 2006, despite CFUG's constitutional and legal rights to exercise political agency for protecting civic and human rights.

In many cases, verbal understandings between DFO staff and CFUG leaders guide management operations. For example, the Chautari CFUG in Nawalparasi (a research site), allegedly with verbal permission from the ranger, made a fire line within its forest that involved felling eight standing green trees. Later, the DFO filed a case against the CFUG. This brought a crisis within the CFUG leadership to resignation of the members and deep misunderstanding among leaders and users. However, recently a new DFO, with the collaboration of some neighbouring CFUGs and FECOFUN, took the case positively and helped resolve it.

When meso-level 'actors' increase their interaction, learning and collaboration with a purpose of improving community forestry processes and outcomes, these are possibilities that they increase effective service delivery, regulatory support and exchange of knowledge, skills and opportunities. We provide outcomes and insights of ACM project, which encouraged multi-stakeholder deliberation and learning for improving CF management and governance.

Adaptive Collaborative Management Approach in Community Forestry

In this section, we explore the dynamic link between meso-level processes and governance of the CF, drawing insights from a research project conducted in Nepal. ForestAction, Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and New ERA have been conducting a PAR project entitled *'Improving Livelihoods and Equity in Community Forestry in Nepal: the Role of Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM)'* in seven districts of Nepal (Figure 2) with financial support from IDRC. The project seeks to examine the potential of an adaptive collaborative management approach to improve governance in community forestry and thereby to enhance livelihoods and equity. ForestAction leads the research (that combines traditional research and participatory action research (PAR) methodologies) in six CFUGs and five meso-level forums in five districts of Nepal from east to west and from hills to Terai regions, whereas New ERA leads in two districts. The research
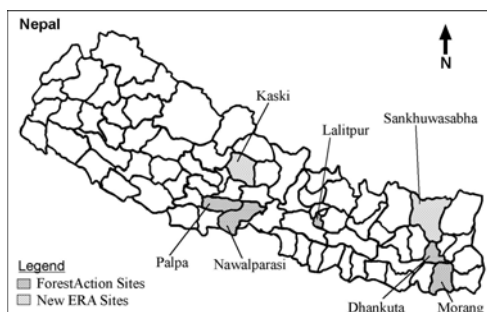

Figure 2*: ACM Research Sites*

focuses on three different levels: a) the local level where local forest users directly engage to protect, manage and use forest resources; b) the district and sub-district level, i.e. the meso-level as defined above, and that includes both governmental and non-governmental actors involved in the implementation of forest policies; and c) the national level, which draws information and critical learning from field activities through the meso and CFUG levels and feeds that into policy making processes.

At the local level, we are working with the CFUGs. A plan of action was prepared during the inception workshops with CFUGs, and some local 'change agents' (CAs) were selected and trained in ACM approach and practices. Those CAs facilitated ACM in their respective CFUGs. They did it by applying ACM elements (Box 1) in CFUG management and governance. The trainings and their engagement with the ACM process helped the CAs to gain deeper understanding on the CFUGs functioning, their constraints and opportunities, and spaces available for meso-level actors to contribute to improve CFUG situation.

Similarly, the purpose of the 'National Policy Learning Group' at the national level was to critically reflect and draw lessons from the local and meso-level actions. Moreover, this forum identified specific areas of knowledge gaps and implemented small research initiatives including study on 'policy processes', 'issues of Terai forest management' and 'determining factors for forest cover change' to address these gaps. The group later reflected upon the finding and synthesised lessons to inform the policy process, mainly through informal channels. Interaction with this national learning group has also encouraged meso-level actors to espouse a learning approach.

At the meso-level forums, we bring together various stakeholders working at district and sub-district levels, who are responsible for implementing forest sector policies. These include DFO, FECOFUN, NGOs and bilateral projects. These forums discussed common concerns of CFUGs such as improving and renewing their constitutions and OP, inter-group issues such as boundary conflicts, and reflected on the ongoing actions to learn from them. In such forums actors planned, implemented and reflected upon various initiatives that either support local level activities or relate to a separate agenda of collaborative action for learning. Moreover, such forums are important in responding to local interests and voices. The forums were facilitated by the trained CAs selected from meso-level organizations.

Box 1. ACM Elements

1) All relevant stakeholders are involved in decision-making and negotiation, and have the 'space' and capacity to make them heard.

2) Stakeholders effectively communicate and transfer knowledge and skills in multiple directions.

3) Stakeholders effectively manage conflict.

4) Stakeholders implement actions together, as appropriate.

5) There is (shared) intentional learning and experimentation in the forest management process, including information feedback loops.

6) Learning is internalized and consciously applied as the basis for refinements in their community forestry management activities and processes.

7) Planning and decision-making include attention to relationships within and between human and natural systems.

8) Planning and decision-making clearly reflects links to the 'desired future,' and take into account information about key past and present trends.

9) Institutions identify and deal effectively with uncertainties, including risks, in their planning processes.

10) Stakeholders join together in reflection and social learning processes in a way that understanding or knowledge is co-created and learning is 'transformative'.

The ACM research at the meso-level involved a number of steps that helped bring the stakeholders together in a forum. First, discussions were held individually with all potential meso-level actors at the district and sub-district levels. They were then brought together for an inception workshop. Some CAs were selected during this meeting and were trained in facilitating an ACM approach. Regular joint meetings of meso-level forums were held that provided opportunities for assessing their existing activities, their effectiveness and possibility of collaborative efforts. Moreover, meso-level actors have developed a collective vision of the meso-level, and a 'terms of reference' related to institutional arrangements for meso-level stakeholders for promoting learning-based collaborative initiatives. As a part of their reflection, the meso-level actors assessed the district and sub-district level situation using ACM elements (Box 1). Critical analysis of the meso-level situation was carried out by meso-level actors based on reflective learning process, which directly feed to the planning. It is then followed by implementation of action plans and constant monitoring of the process (Figure 3).
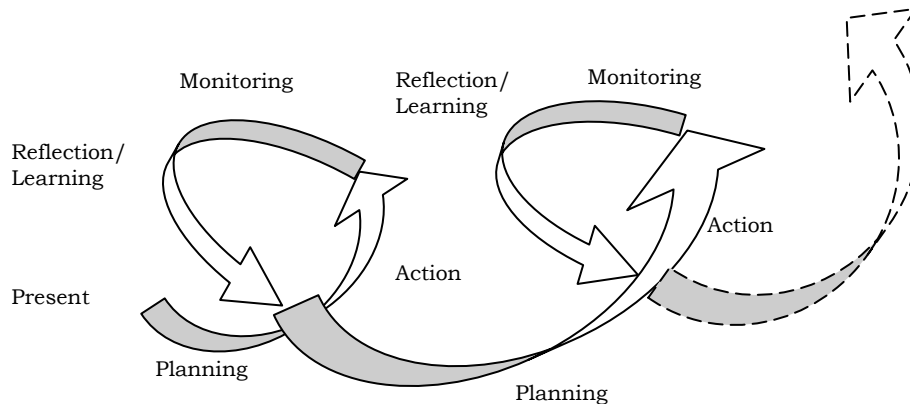

Figure 3. *Continuous learning cycle of planning, action, monitoring and reflection (adapted from Hartando et al. 2003)*

For effective communication with the users, the CAs organized joint workshops with CFUGs, and brought them in other meso-level forums. In these workshops, CFUGs presented their plans including the expected roles of meso-level actors, which provided meso-level actors with opportunities to identify their roles within the broader framework of those plans. They (both meso-level actors and CFUGs) developed mutual understanding and began collaborative actions.

INSIGHTS INTO IMPROVING MESO-COMMONS LINKAGES

The PAR applied by meso-level forums in seven districts of Nepal provides important insights on strategies and tools to improve the meso-common linkages. Although similar strategies were adopted in all the sites, the nature and the features of meso-level forum varies greatly. In some cases, the meso-level forum was formed around district level stakeholders, whereas, in other cases, stakeholders at sub-district level were the 'hub'. Further, the meso-level forum also took a form of a network of CFUGs that facilitated CF process at the CFUG level, and represented the CFUGs in their interaction with the DFO or other stakeholders. Given the diverse and changing forms of meso-level forums, they can be conceived of as fluid and evolving platforms that are constantly transforming both their structure and functions in response to their contexts.

The PAR process of planning, action and reflection is embedded in various strategies of our engagement with the meso-level forums. While meso-level forums plan and implement different activities, the CAs consciously catalyse the forum in adopting ACM approach. The major emerging meso-level strategies in adopting ACM include: the formation of multi-stakeholder forums; development of common vision through reflective processes; consideration of complexities, risk and uncertainties; and planning and collaborative actions. These and some of the other ACM-based strategies developed by meso-level actors to enhance the meso-common link and their social and environmental outcomes are given below (Table 1).

It is learnt that meso-level actors often had latent interests in participating meso-level processes. For example, the DFO in one case was encouraging initiatives for a joint CF project because he would gain professional reputation from this. The meso-level NGOs are interested for the same because this would bring them closer to DFO, whose cooperation is valuable in many instances for their successes.

Table 1 Strategies and activities for increasing meso-common link and their outcomes

Strategies and Tools	Activities	Outcomes
Multi stakeholders forums	• Establishment of meso-level forums • Regular meetings	• Improved links with private sector • Improved communication between meso-level actors
Reflective process: Facilitating regular self-assessment and critical reflections by the CAs	• Reflective workshops • Seminar on special issue	• A culture of regular sharing established • Use of learning through collaborative actions are being used within individual organizations
Critical enquiry: PAR on policies and practices	• Select and train CAs	• Have identified the learning questions of PAR for pro-poor CF
Interaction with CFUG: planning and bilateral meetings	• Joint meetings and workshops • Presentation of CFUG planning • Bilateral meetings between CFUG and meso-level actors	• Relationship of meso-level actors with CFUGs has improved • Meso-level actors have started joint development actions. ▪ Meso-level actors have shown increased response to local demand
Learning oriented central mechanism	• CF learning group at the centre	• Started engaging higher level actors in meso-level initiatives

Similarly, FECOFUN is interested in mediating between the CFUGs and the DFO in order to build its image as one of constructive actors of forestry sector while continuing its advocacy roles. Whatever the intention may be, the appreciation received by the project from meso-level actors has encouraged the CFUG members in CF processes.

Reflective processes within meso-level forum helped actors to rethink existing static and/or isolated approaches and moving towards ACM. In these processes, it is important to build confidence that meso-level actors would not lose their identities in collaborative efforts. Instead, collaborative efforts need to seek ways to build their role and clarify their identity with a wider group of stakeholders in the sector. On the other hand, there are risks to be isolated from the process if an actor remains passive.

Series of multi-stakeholders discussions in the meso-level forums helped recognise the limitation of central policies and orders in many cases that these are inadequate and sometimes constraining to address the specific problems of CF management. Instead, meso-level actors appreciated learning from CFUGs and emphasised the need for such learning to address CF issue.

In our experience, meso-level forums have also been helpful in bringing a pro-poor livelihood agenda into CFUG planning. In one of the project districts the meso-level actors appreciated and induced the pro-poor provisions during the CFUG planning process. Similarly, 'peer pressure' created due to meso-level processes promoted such provisions in another project district (*e.g.* Chautari CFUG Nawalparasi was highly motivated by Sundari CFUG, which is recognized as one of the best in Nawalparasi district).

CFUGs often plan their activities and make decisions according to, or sensing, the interest of external donors or support agencies. For example, Chautari CFUG of Morang district planned to distribute goats to the users when they received information from donors so that they might provide support in goat raising. In Lalitpur, one ranger wrote to the CFUG to make specific arrangements for pro-poor activities and also to get approval from the range post before harvesting the tree from the community forest.

There are also examples of meso-level actors revitalizing CFUGs. In Handikharka CFUG of Dhankuta district, meso-level actors collectively put their efforts into the reinvigoration of this CFUG. The CFUG had become completely defunct and was being misappropriated by two or three persons– the forest was destroyed, no general assembly had been called for about seven years and the users were frustrated. Due to the collective efforts of meso-level actors, the users became able to change the CFUG leadership, resulting in improved governance. Meso-level forums have also been influential in managing conflicts between CFUGs. In Lalitpur, for example, the meso-level forum was able to resolve the conflict over boundary between two CFUGs (Patle and Pandali).

In this way, the influences include both increased legal and administrative constraints, and are helping to improve management by resolving conflicts or by bringing livelihoods agenda into the planning process as well. These influences are the results of the direct engagement of meso-level actors, institutions and processes with the forest management and governance of local users.

Provision of material and technical support to CFUGs has been appreciated by many meso-level actors as a – if not the - main role they are there to provide. However, the service is sometimes based on top-down planning that may not be relevant in many cases. ACM approach encouraged meso-level actors to understand and appreciate the complexity of social and ecological systems, and to follow participatory and adaptive approaches to CF governance.

Meso-level actors play a critical role in feeding field-based learning into the policy process. Meso-level forums increasingly have taken a reflective look on the CFUG and meso-level processes and provided critical feedback to the policy formation process. The lessons from the critical reflections at the meso-level have been packaged in the form of notes, reports and second order articles, which contributed to the policy process through informal channels. In addition, these forums informed national policy makers when they had of interface during workshops and meetings.

CONCLUSION

The meso-level of governance can be conceptualized as the level between the national policy-making level and the management of the commons at the user's level. This level plays a range of roles and functions including policy interpretation, material and technical support, resolving conflicts and introducing new ideas and discourses. While most of the meso-level actors, institutions and processes are 'arms' of the national policy-making mechanisms, in many cases they work in a relatively autonomous context and are thus capable of having their own significant influence on users of the commons. They transmit not only central policies, but also their own perspectives through their individual or joint interactions with users of the commons and other meso-level actors.

Based on insights from the ACM research, it appears that the existing linkage between the meso-level and the commons can be improved through the use of an ACM approach in meso-level forums. The findings from the ACM research indicate that such an approach can have positive impacts in the areas of generating contextual and relevant knowledge at the meso-level, effective support to CFUG governance and forest management, and feedback to the national policy processes.

For common property theorists and natural resource practitioners alike, we suggest the need of focusing on meso-level governance to better understand and manage the commons. Beyond attention to commons users' behaviour and institutions and to national policy, increased understanding of, and attention to, enhancing meso-level governance will contribute to the larger complex of equity, livelihoods and sustainability of the commons.

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