

Hamlet-Based Micro-level Action Planning: A Tool for Improving FUGS' Planning, Decision-Making, and Implementation

Om Prakash Dev DFID LFP, Nepal Email: omprakashdev@hotmail.com

Oliver Springate-Baginski University of East Anglia, UK Email: oliver.springate@uea.ac.uk

Nagendra Prasad Yadav DFID LFP, Nepal Email: lfp_npj@wlink.com.np

John Soussan Stockholm Environment Institute, York University, UK Email: js47@york.ac.uk

Abstract

Forest User Groups (FUGs) in Nepal have become established as permanent grassroots local institutions. The most dynamic FUGs illustrate the remarkable achievements that are possible: beyond successfully protecting and managing their forest resources they are also assuming a co-ordinating role for wider community development. However many are constrained by inadequate institutional processes, compounded by weak and poorly coordinated support from external agencies. One way to address these constraints has been developed: a micro-level action planning process, which has been piloted across 11 FUGs. This involves self-assessment by FUGs on the basis of process indicators, decision-making through hamlet-level discussion, and improved participation of marginalized groups in decision-making, and has proved to be an effective basis for targeted demand-led support.

INTRODUCTION¹

This paper focuses on the planning, decision-making and implementation functions of FUGs. It aims firstly, to assess FUG performance on the basis of forest users' own indicators. It then discusses the need for more decentralized, inclusive, *tole* (hamlet)-based processes and presents a method of moving in this direction, namely, 'micro-level action planning'. This simple approach was piloted in 11 FUGs during the study and led to significant improvements in terms of helping to address elite-biases in decision-making, and negotiating more inclusive and equitable livelihood and community development initiatives. The method also motivated FUGs to widen their scope of activities.

ASSESSING PLANNING, DECISION MAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION PROCESSES IN FUGS

Effective and democratic planning, decision-making and implementation processes are an essential ingredient if FUGs are to realize their potential for more effective forest management and community development activities. Box 1 provides a description of each of these processes. To assess how well the case-study FUGs had actually performed, discussions were held with FUG members to derive a number of indicators for various aspects of the planning, decision-making and implementation processes. The method used for defining the indicators across all the case-study FUGs is described in more detail in Springate-Baginski *et al.* (2003b). An assessment against each indicator was then carried out by FUG members and project staff during the initial visit in early 1998. This was followed up by a repeat assessment a year later which took into account any changes that had taken place in the intervening period due to the micro-level planning process described later in this paper.

¹ This is the fourth in a set of five papers presenting the findings of a three-year research project (1997-2000) on 'Community Forestry in Nepal: Sustainability and Impacts on Common and Private Property Resource Management'. An overview of the project methodology and study sites is provided in Springate-Baginski *et al.* (2003a).

Box 1. Planning, decision-making and implementation: the theory

'Planning' is the process of users collectively considering their own needs and wishes, and defining ways to fulfill them. In FUGs this primarily concerns managing the forest, and so involves seeking to harmonize these aspirations with the productive potential of the forest resource. This requires that FUGs gather information from users about the forest resource productivity, and plan how to use forest management techniques to enhance this productivity. Planning may also extend to other community development activities. Currently there are no formal systematic planning processes prescribed for FUGs; policy emphasis is on government-formatted 'Constitution and Operational Plans' (C&OP) as a guide for FUG activities.

'Decision-making' occurs at different levels in FUGs, and involves different combinations of local input and external input (after Ostrom 1993).

Constitutional level decisions: deciding how decisions will be made in the future (e.g. who to include and exclude; voting rights; the extent to which powers are devolved to the FUG Committee). Within FUGs, constitutional level decisions are initially determined by government policy and guidelines, with the institutional structure of the FUG specified in the C&OP, the registration certificate and the forest hand-over certificate. Revisions to these constitutional-level decisions require the approval of the District Forest Office (DFO).

Operational level decisions: choosing the forest management strategy and product extraction levels. This is also initially agreed with the *Range-Post* staff and enshrined in the C&OP. If the FUG wishes to change operational decisions they are legally bound to get approval from the DFO.

Activity level decisions: deciding what physical activities must be executed on the ground in order to achieve the operational objectives. This is entirely up to the FUG to decide in implementing the C&OP. The FUG committee takes activity-level decisions and day-to-day management decisions. FUGs currently need to take decisions in five main areas:

- forest protection / setting fines;
- planting trees and non-timber forest product species;
- forest product harvesting;
- fund management and utilization;
- development initiatives.

Decision-making processes are based on general assemblies (usually held every six months to one year) and FUG committee meetings (usually held every one to two months). General assemblies discuss and reach agreement on activities for the year ahead, as well as for amendments of rules, policy decisions, election of committee members and other issues.

'Implementation' is the responsibility of FUG committees based on the decisions that have been entered in the FUG record books. Implementation can be through paid staff or users.

Regular Committee and Assembly Interaction

Most of the 11 FUGs hold regular committee and assembly meetings: nine FUGs had regular FUG committee meetings, and eight had regular assembly meetings. Those FUGs that were not able to hold assembly meetings regularly faced problems due to low attendance, which meant a quorum was not achieved. This was caused by a combination of factors:

- Low exposure to the community forestry process and lack of awareness amongst users;
- Poor advance communication regarding meeting schedules;
- Lack of spare time, especially among poorer groups;
- Apathy due to low expectations of influencing decisions;
- Users from distant locations not motivated to travel to meetings.

Some FUGs took specific steps to ensure good meeting attendance, such as (i) writing to all users to invite them, or ensuring in other ways that there was good awareness of forthcoming meetings; (ii) rotating meeting locations around *toles* to share the burden of travel; (iii) imposing penalties for non-attendance such as fines or exclusion from the FUG; and (iv) only requiring attendance of 'primary' users to achieve quorum (i.e. not including 'occasional' or 'future' users).

Transparent and Inclusive Decision-making

For transparent and inclusive decision-making, users must be aware of their rights and the proper processes, and the elected representatives must ensure that users are kept properly informed. Users' awareness levels were far from ideal in most of the FUGs, as the elites of the village tended to dominate the seats on the committee, particularly the positions of chairperson and secretary. This apparently gloomy picture may seem inevitable due to the socio-politics in rural Nepal where, until recently, feudal patronage prevailed.

However, there is plenty of evidence for optimism. Over the last ten years the FUGs have, in many cases, supplanted the traditional feudal rights over forests. It is true that the more wealthy and powerful assumed dominant roles in the FUGs, but they were often not the traditional feudal elites. Rather, they may genuinely have been chosen as the best leaders, as they had the most time, higher social status, better networks of contacts outside the village, and more 'clout' at district level. Control of the FUG by elites, therefore, did not inevitably mean domination and manipulation for their own interests. Committee domination of decision-making happened in some FUGs but not in others, apparently depending on the leadership qualities of the committee and assertiveness of the general body of users.

In six of the 11 FUGs, decision-making was found to be transparent in the sense that users knew times of meetings, shared the setting of the agenda, and were involved in decision-making. Of the remaining five FUGs, three had poor transparency in decision-making. Transparency and inclusiveness in decision-making is more difficult to achieve in larger and more heterogeneous FUGs. In all FUGs where inclusiveness and transparency were not good, the interests of poor and marginal groups suffered.

Inclusiveness was not helped by the fact that the OPs impose static 'blue-print' on FUG activities. The title of OP is rather misleading as they are not actually plans, but conceptual documents addressing technical forest management issues for the forest in question. They do not provide a basis for inclusive community planning, and consequently were rarely used as a working document by forest users and FUG committees, even though they are legally binding. Many of the FUGs had difficulties in going through the lengthy and bureaucratic revision process for OPs (or were unwilling to do so) and therefore simply did not notify the DFO of changes in their forest management practices. The actual activities of all FUGs studied diverged from the OP to a greater or lesser extent. The most effectively functioning FUGs encountered in the study had no OP at all (as the DFO had not returned them after they requested amendments). A related problem with C&OPs is that they only specify forest-related activities and there were many examples of FUGs taking decisions on wider development activities (e.g. water management). Often, however, members were uncertain as to whether they were allowed to use FUGs as a forum for wider community development activities.

The lack of a proper planning process was found to be a major block to the real participation of forest users. In the case-study FUGs any internal planning that occurred to fill the gaps, tended to be *ad hoc*. More commonly it was virtually non-existent. Such informal planning does not challenge elite control of the FUG agenda, nor does it provide any process for involving the marginal and needier members of the community.

Tole-level Interaction

FUGs are 'created communities'. Members are identified on the basis of their traditional use of the forest, and their proximity to the forest. Ward, Village Development Committee (VDC) and even district boundaries have not acted as a restriction. This has ensured that all the case-study FUGs generally reflect the 'actual' users of the forest, irrespective of their administrative location. While this is beneficial in providing the proper basis for management of compact forest areas, it can often have the side effect of leading to large FUGs that are difficult to manage in terms of internal communication and decision-making. Distances between users may be many miles, and they may not even know each other, leading to practical difficulties and poor social cohesion. In reality, 'communities' exist at the level of *toles*, which may have very different priorities. But for an FUG to represent the diverse interests of its *toles*, they need formal recognition and involvement in planning and decision-making. Formally, *tole* interaction is emphasized as an important part of FUG formation procedure, but, in the case-study FUGs at least, 'short-cuts' were generally taken and so *tole*-meetings rarely became institutionalized as ongoing FUG practice.

Tole-level interaction was the most frequently raised issue in group discussions on indicators of good FUGs. Many users (especially women, agricultural laborers employed by elites, and those indebted to money lenders in the FUG) found it difficult to speak out in assemblies with typically 50-100 people present. *Tole* meetings were considered a more comfortable forum for users to speak their minds and reach consensus. In over half of all group discussions held, users stressed that for decision-making to be inclusive and representative it needed to be based at *tole*-level. Many users expressed a vision of regular *tole* meetings to raise awareness, circulate information, and discuss both FUG and other local development issues. It was suggested that, as stated in the byelaws, male and female *tole* representatives from each group could then take agenda points to the FUG Committee and assembly meetings on behalf of the *tole*. Particular livelihood groups (such as resin tappers or fuel wood sellers) could also have group meetings to contribute on a similar basis. In practice, however, FUG committees and their decisions were frequently dominated by elites from particular *toles*. It was felt that *toles* could take on more responsibilities within the FUG (e.g. supervising product distribution) and also act more independently for their local development, especially where the FUG committee was not fully responsive to *tole*-level needs.

Most *toles* already had a number of *tole*-level groups such as saving and credit groups, women's groups, youth clubs, milk production groups and groups managing drinking-water supplies. Yet, in spite of this experience, of the 11 FUGs studied, six had little or no FUG-related *tole*-level interaction, four had a moderate amount and only one had a high level of *tole*-level interaction. Nine of these FUGs recognized this as a serious short-coming in their activities, and identified *tole*-based meetings as an urgent objective of the micro-level plans developed as a result of the project's first visit. By the time of the second visit a year later, eight of these FUGs had succeeded in increasing *tole*-level interaction. And all the FUGs had *tole* interaction in at least some *toles*. Through the micro-level planning process all FUGs recognized that *tole* interaction could promote FUG cohesion and trust, and improve participation in decision-making, leading to a more democratic FUG.

Effective Leadership and Implementation of Decisions

'Effective leadership' is perceived by FUG members as visible initiative, effective implementation of decisions, and leaders who are considerate of users' needs. Two of the 11 FUGs had 'effective leadership'. In one case this was due to trusted individuals discharging their responsibilities well over a long period, and in the other case due to FUG committee members assuming leadership responsibility on a well managed rotation basis. In five FUGs leadership was poor, due to the leaders being detached from the concerns of the general body of users, and often centralizing control. In four FUGs, leadership was assessed as 'medium' quality. A common problem was a poor handover procedure when leadership changes. In most FUGs studied there was little forward planning, for instance in terms of preparing second-line leadership to take over management in the future. New

committee members were usually not given any induction support from the previous members. Documents were often not formally handed over, especially documents relating to funds, causing problems of transparency.

Another problem was the inability to implement decisions taken in assemblies. Many decisions were entered in the FUG record books without responsibility for implementation being allocated. Although FUG committees should ensure implementation, the FUG record books showed that often the same decisions were taken by FUGs in meeting after meeting, but were never institutionalized into ongoing practice. This contributes to inconsistency in management practices, and the feeling amongst users that it is easier just to close the forest than to reach complex agreements on a regular basis.

No Political Interference

In general, politicization of FUGs by political parties was not found to be a serious issue, though it has been present. Any 'politicized' FUG committee members (i.e. those active in a political party) were generally just as motivated to perform as those who were 'non-politicized'. Many FUGs served as training grounds for local political leaders. Whilst it is inevitable and normal that politics may affect the FUG, political 'interference' was highlighted as a problem in four FUGs where FUG management was in danger of becoming polarized along party political lines, leading to schisms. In an extreme example, an autocratic chairman sought to maximize his control of the FUG by granting favors to sympathetic groups, with a view to future VDC elections. In another FUG the Chairman was a local politician, but not an active forest user, nor even a local inhabitant. There was a concern that such 'politicized' leaders might avoid taking decisions unpopular with their supporters, leading to 'short-termism' in policy-making, and partisan behavior by committee members.

Participation of Forest users in FUG Activities

Users indicated the importance of the general participation of users in FUG activities. As record books showed only the attendance levels at meetings, active participation could only be assessed through a qualitative evaluation based on group discussions and observation. Participation was found to be poor in two FUGs, and moderate in six others, with some social groups participating more than others. Only in three FUGs was participation observed to be good – mainly stemming from good social cohesion and high dependency on forest product flows. In one FUG, good participation stemmed from the high fund level, which focused the users' attention on community development planning.

OUTCOMES OF PROBLEMS IN FUG PLANNING, DECISION-MAKING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Shortcomings in planning, decision-making and implementation have led to an overall weakness in the case-study FUGs, to the extent that many reflect 'Committee' or 'Chairman' forestry, rather than 'Community' forestry. Some commentators are quick to dismiss all FUGs as suffering from 'elite-domination' and attribute all problems to this. It is certainly the case that in all the FUGs studied elites are in controlling positions, although in some cases the FUG committee is constituted of a good balance of different *toles*, ethnic groups and genders. In all FUGs studied, secretaries and chairmen were invariably from the highest wealth-rank in the FUG. However, a careful analysis of local institutional dynamics leads us to conclude that this is not inevitably a 'cause' of problems, but may be a 'process' issue. According to our subjective categorization, three FUGs represent genuine 'Community Forestry', seven represent 'Committee Forestry', and only one represents 'Chairman Forestry' (Table 1).

Table 1. Community or committee forestry?

Characterization of FUG	Sub-category	Incidence observed in study	Indicators
Community		3 (27%)	Inclusive decision-making, equitable product distribution, high level of user satisfaction
Committee / Chairman	By default: Benign & evolving	4 (36%)	Difficulties in raising awareness, co-ordinating decision-making in heterogeneous user group, and resolving conflicts.
	Malign: Elite-dominated	2 (18%)	Autocratic leadership, disaffected users
	Poorly institutionalized	2 (18%)	Lack of regular meetings and activities

The question that needs to be asked at this stage is not so much “What is the social background of the FUG committee representatives?” but rather, “Do they perform their role as leaders and representatives for the interests of the general body of users?” In three FUGs decision-making proceeded in a fairly democratic manner, and reflected the interests and wishes of the general users. In the remaining eight, decision-making was controlled (to differing degrees) by elites. Two of these were very poorly institutionalized, partly due to the poor performance of committee leaders, and urgently required outside support. Two of these FUGs were operational but dominated by elites who ignore the voices of general users. The remaining ‘committee’ forestry FUGs lie between these two extremes, where the FUG is institutionalized, but is beset by conflicts and problems, and has not reached a sufficient level of self-confidence and maturity. In these examples, ‘elite domination’ of decision-making stems from institutional weakness, and a sense that the committee has to lead ‘by default’, as the general body of users is not sufficiently empowered to direct them collectively.

THE NEED FOR A NEW APPROACH TO FUG PLANNING PROCESSES

Based on our experience in the case-study FUGs, we can see that a number of changes are urgently needed in order to improve FUGs’ performance in decision-making, planning and implementation:

(a) Moving from static planning to dynamic planning and action orientation

Currently formal planning procedures in FUGs are based on the implementation of the C&OP, which is a ‘static’ strategy document. FUGs generally don’t have ongoing ‘dynamic’ development plans that respond to changing needs. Record books are used as the ‘institutional memory’ of the FUG, but this is a very weak system. The current C&OP format and revision procedure obstructs FUGs’ development and does not serve their needs. FUG legal documents and their formats need to be distinct from working documents. The practical difficulties of revising these documents means that most FUGs’ C&OP documents do not reflect their actual practices. Instead, most FUGs adopt informal documentation and implementation of decisions. As a result, FUG operations are poorly institutionalized, i.e. decisions can be quickly forgotten and have to be reconsidered regularly. FUGs need to have institutionalized procedures, but these must be flexible enough to evolve along with the FUG, and allow a degree of independence and autonomy. Updating management plans should be a straightforward matter for all concerned.

(b) Moving from forest-only activities to holistic livelihood development activities

Rural development is an overwhelming priority in the middle hills of Nepal, where a harsh environment, inaccessibility and lack of infrastructure and facilities combine to create poverty indicators that are among the lowest in the world. Currently, DFO staff are mainly concerned with supporting the FUGs’ forest-related activities. However, forest users have many other livelihood needs. Many FUGs are becoming institutions through which local people can pursue and achieve their

wider livelihood and community development objectives, one of which is forest resource development, with the participation of support providers (e.g. DoF, bilateral projects, other line agencies). This is a trend, which can and should be supported.

(c) Moving from centralized committee planning to inclusive *tole*-level planning

Currently the ‘community’ in community forestry is poorly conceptualized. FUGs are made up of a group of *toles* sharing the same forest, and so are constructed communities, with the ‘actual’ community existing at *tole* level. This existing model does not explicitly address the differences between *toles* in terms of ethnic group, livelihoods, wealth and so on. The issue of relative power across groups is not resolved and there are no safeguards against marginalization. There is a fundamental gap in the general understanding of the FUG decision-making process: it is widely believed that all people can and should sit together and take decisions by ‘consensus’ (e.g. voting for candidates by clapping). Decision-making genuinely based on consensus is the normal practice only in some FUGs. More commonly decision-making is dominated by the FUG committee. Without formalized decision-making practices based on inclusive *tole*-level interaction, the needs of only some of the users are considered. On the other hand, where there is a good awareness level amongst FUG members, and where there is strong outside support, FUGs do tend to become equitable and inclusive.

Tole meetings can be very effective for identifying the needs of users, and a formal planning process based at the *tole* level encourages FUG development to become ‘demand-driven’. *Toles* need to become stable fora, independent of ephemeral project agendas and inputs. *Tole* groups need to be owned by the *tole* itself, to identify their own needs, plan actions, and co-ordinate collaboration with external partners. This will also ensure that the FUG is ‘owned’ by the community and not by outside agencies setting boundaries on what it may or may not address.

(d) Moving from supply-led to demand-led support

Each FUG requires support appropriate to its current needs in order to evolve. FUGs themselves need to be able to identify their support needs and convey them to the appropriate agencies (e.g. DoF field staff), as it is unlikely outsiders will be able to do this accurately. One effective way of doing this is a *tole*-based micro-level action planning process. This method, outlined below, was tested across 11 FUGs during the Leeds / NUKCFP study. One of the key findings was that when FUGs assumed a demand-led orientation to support, they also increased their ability to support themselves. Once an improved planning, decision-making and implementation process was facilitated within the 11 case-study FUGs, FUGs showed rapid and sustained development, according to their own terms, and after the initial support input, FUGs’ need for external support often declined as they became more self-sufficient; increasingly capable to identify and implement actions which didn’t require external support. Appropriate facilitation became the primary outside support need.

MICRO-LEVEL ACTION PLANNING: A PROCESS FOR IMPROVING COMMUNITY PLANNING

As outlined in the last two points above, there is a real need to move towards a more demand-led system based on *tole*-level planning if FUGs are to represent the needs of all forest users. This is particularly true in large FUGs, where decision-making is often cumbersome and responsibility may go, by default, to committee members who might then influence matters for their own benefit. By providing a smaller, more familiar setting, *tole*-level interaction can increase the active participation level of each user.

Toles have a number of other strengths that can be tapped in order to improve FUG functioning:

- Ethnic homogeneity promotes social cohesion and strong bonds between members.
- Geographical proximity facilitates regular informal interaction.

- Women can interact regularly in evenings, despite household responsibilities.
- Specific common interests can provide the basis for interest groups within *toles*.
- External agencies (e.g. NGOs) work at *tole* level, and can be tapped for need-based support.
- Many FUG committees already have *tole*-representatives, so *tole*-based micro-level planning can evolve easily from the current situation.
- *Tole* interaction can serve as a basis for wider livelihood development and planning.

A micro-level planning process can clarify the specific development needs of each *tole*. It can improve communication within the FUG, improve decision-making and implementation, and promote decentralization within the FUG committee. This process can help broaden the role of the FUG from mainly forest-related management to a wider community development role. However, in the current practice of establishing new FUGs or supporting existing ones, there is no agreed process for ensuring that planning does take place at micro-level. The Leeds/NUKCFP research project therefore developed a micro-level planning process, which is presented schematically in Figure 1, and piloted it in the case-study FUGs. During the first research visit, the process was facilitated in each of the 11 FUGs. Over the next 12 months the FUGs sought to implement their plans. The action points identified were seen as priority issues requiring urgent attention. The contents of the plans mainly emphasized simple local actions. After a year had elapsed the FUGs were re-visited and progress was assessed.

FUG Micro-level Action Planning: the Suggested Process

Outside facilitation from DoF field staff or project support staff may be needed to initiate a micro-level planning process. Their role, however, is just to facilitate and provide technical advice, and not to intervene in discussions on content and the agenda. The seven key elements of the process are:

1. Initial FUG committee planning meeting.

- Initially the FUG committee meets to agree on the procedure to be followed. It is important that the Committee is constituted of representatives from each of the main *toles*. It is best if both male and female representatives are involved. Where the committee is not constituted in this way, it will need to address this and re-constitute itself to fulfill these conditions.

2. *Tole* and occupational group meetings

- *Tole* representatives call *tole* meetings (separate meetings for men and women if possible). Where there are particular occupational groups (e.g. blacksmiths and fuel wood sellers) living across a number of *toles* it is probably in their interests to meet separately to discuss their needs and aspirations regarding the FUG.
- Development priorities are discussed in the *tole* meeting. Needs and wishes regarding the forest as well as other areas are identified.
- A plan of action points is drafted in each group. Some points may be dealt with within the *tole*-group. Some points may refer to issues to be dealt with at the FUG level.

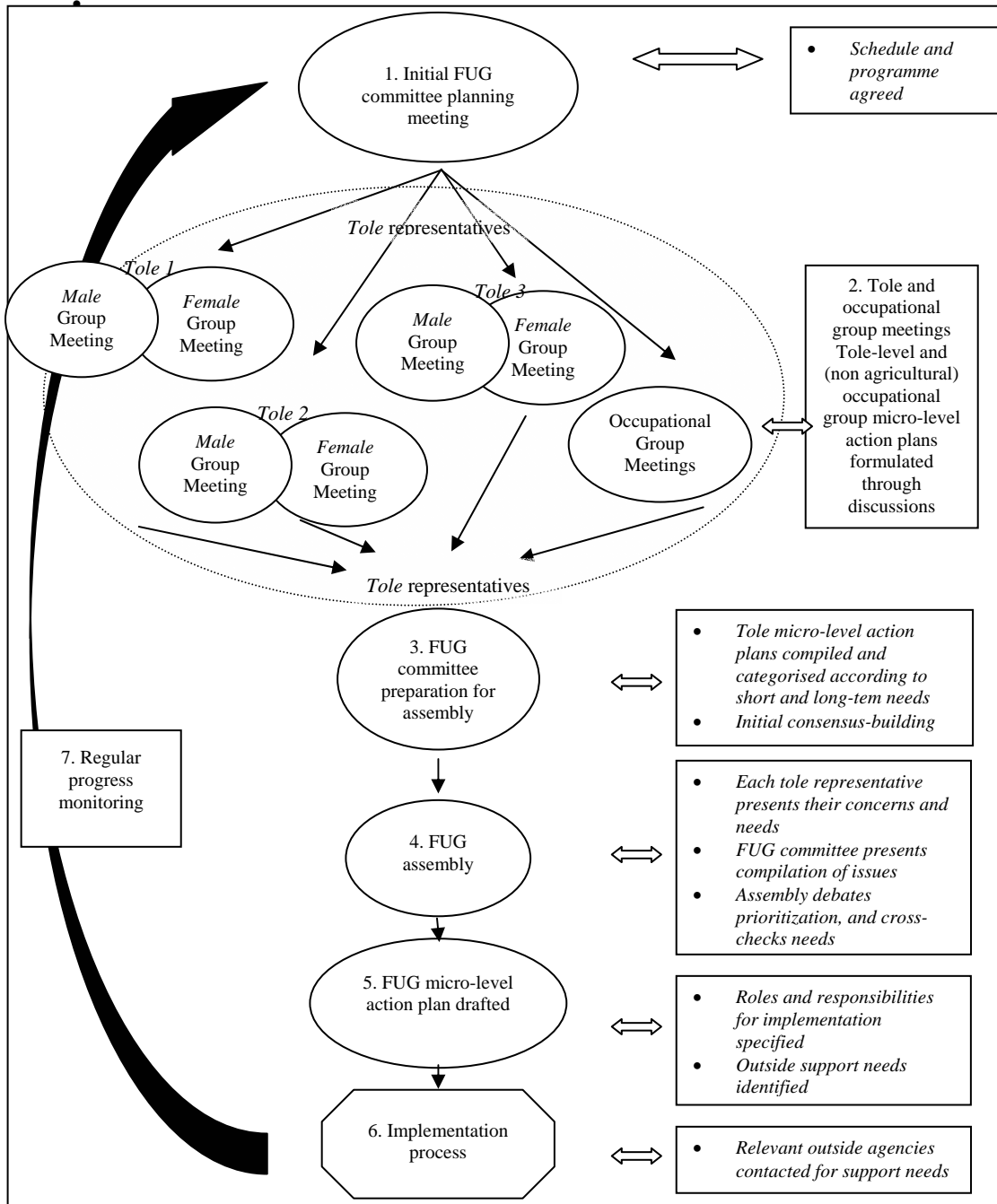
3. FUG committee preparation for assembly

- The *tole* representatives then meet together in a committee meeting to compile the FUG-level action points. The initial negotiation of conflicting wishes and consensus building can be facilitated at this stage, and an assembly meeting agenda is drafted.

4. FUG assembly

An FUG general assembly is held. Each *tole* briefly presents its priority issues and action plan. The FUG committee then presents a provisional compilation of *tole* plans, and a suggested agenda for negotiation.

Figure 1. FUG Micro-level action planning process



5. FUG micro-level action plan drafted

- Through discussion and negotiation a FUG-level micro-level action plan is formulated. FUGs may wish to revise their C&OP in the light of this.
- Responsibilities for implementation are allocated.

6. Implementation process

- Some action points can be dealt with within the FUG, others require outside support.
- The micro-level plan is shared with the *Range-Post* staff and other agencies, where specific action points require outside support. Revisions to the C&OP can be presented for approval at this point.
- The *Range-Post*, furnished with specific support needs of each FUG, can then plan and target support effectively.
- VDCs will be able to plan development support more clearly on the basis of needs expressed by the *toles*. District-level development support agencies will also be able to plan focused development support on a demand-led basis.

7. Regular process monitoring

- The process is repeated when the FUG is ready to review its progress and identify new action-points. The progress review can also be a self-monitoring exercise.

THE IMPACTS OF MICRO-LEVEL PLANNING

During the second research visit in the 11 FUGs, project staff and FUG users jointly assessed the impacts of the micro-level planning exercise. In the period of just one year, micro-level planning was found to have led to significant transformations in FUGs. Although it is difficult to distinguish how much credit to attribute to the micro-level planning process and how much to the normal functioning of the FUG, many issues which had been languishing for long periods were resolved and it seemed to be the case that the planning process accelerated the normal institutional development of the FUG. Specific impacts included:

- Elite-bias in decision-making was reduced and in some cases reversed, mobilizing consensual collective action, and moving decision-making from 'Chairman' and 'Committee' forestry to 'Community' forestry status.
- The wider needs of users were being assessed and addressed by the FUG. Different groups within the FUG (e.g. from different *toles*) had begun to be involved in setting the agenda of the FUG general assembly, and were actively contributing their priorities to discussion. Empowerment of poor and marginalized groups was occurring: they had begun attending FUG meetings and challenging the FUG committee to consider their needs and wishes.
- Equitable livelihood and community development initiatives were started.
- Implementation of FUG decisions had become more effective. This had led to improved forest resource management and many other community development activities, such as irrigation, drinking water supply and micro-credit (which in the past might have only been points on a 'wish list').
- The various skills of local residents had been identified and mobilized through planning. Training needs were also identified.
- The FUGs were more motivated to demand specific support from the DoF, and had widened activities to pull in services from other district agencies. FUGs were able to distinguish what they could achieve independently, and which activities would require external support.
- More development-oriented relationships between FUGs and VDCs were evolving on the basis of development planning.
- A genuine 'bottom-up', demand-driven development approach was being promoted.

Between them, the 11 FUGs identified 66 action points, of which 47 (71%) had been achieved within one year. The best performing FUG implemented 83% of its action points, while at the other end of the scale were two FUGs which implemented only 10% of their action points. Of 11 FUGs, eight had implemented at least 50% of their action points. A clear pattern emerged in the different action points identified by different FUGs. Less developed FUGs were pre-occupied with basic boundary definition, user identification and organizing their decision-making procedures. More institutionalized FUGs looked towards economic and community development issues.

As outlined in Springate-Baginski *et al.* (2003b), the project had worked with FUG members during its first visit to define a number of process indicators to assess FUG performance (e.g. User Organization, Forest Management, Decision-Making, etc). The action points identified by FUGs during their planning exercise can be categorized into these processes for analysis. Action points related to certain processes tended to be implemented with more success than others. The reasons for the success or failure of the action points were often to do with (1) FUG institutional functioning; and (2) external support. While some activities could be accomplished independently (and required good institutionalization of the FUG), the success of some (especially conflict resolution, boundary clarification and C&OP revision) was dependent on external support (primarily from the DFO).

Among the more successful action points were the following (the process category is in brackets):

- Membership and user identification (User Organization): Two FUGs sought to identify the actual users, and distinguish the role of occasional users. Both were successful, one through simply completing the incomplete FUG formation process, the other by organizing a membership card system.
- Clarify and Improve Decision-Making (Decision-Making and Implementation): Three FUGs planned to improve decision-making and strengthen implementation of decisions. These points were highlighted due to concerns over dominating FUG committees. All three FUGs successfully implemented this action point by clarifying roles of the committee members, and re-constituting the committee to include *tole*-representatives.
- Start *tole*-meetings on a regular basis (Decision-Making and Implementation): Nine FUGs sought to initiate regular *tole*-level meetings with the aim of identifying users' needs, information-sharing, awareness creation, and promotion of *tole*-level development planning. Seven were successful.
- Information flow (Communication and Awareness): Four FUGs aimed to improve communication and information dissemination. All felt they were successful, through introducing a *tole*-representative system.
- Form Women's Group (Gender and Equity Consideration): One FUG planned to form a women's group to address women's needs and increase awareness of women's issues. This was successfully implemented, despite some difficulties, through local Non-Government Organization (NGO) support. Another FUG, which aimed to begin women's income generation activities, was also successful with Women's Development Office support.
- Plant Bamboo/Cardamom (Economic Development): Four FUGs sought to utilize forest land for plantations in order to generate funds. Three were successful. Factors contributing to the implementation were a grant from a project and the DFO, mobilization of the FUG fund, the availability of suitable land, and the motivation of FUG users to raise funds.
- Saving and Credit Scheme (Livelihood and Community Development): Two FUGs planned a saving and credit scheme, to reduce dependency on money lenders and provide credit at lower interest rates. This was successful due to good cohesion within the group, and due to support from an external agency.

Partially successful action points included the following:

- Forest Protection Activities (Forest Management): Four FUGs sought to improve their forest protection, by addressing illegal cutting and unmanaged grazing. Two FUGs achieved this by using a combination of awareness-raising and allocating protection responsibilities. However, two FUGs were unsuccessful. In one, the motivation to participate was low because many users were not getting much benefit from the forest. In the other, the elite had opposed the FUG and discouraged participation. Users are not fully aware of their legal rights, and so follow the statements of the elite. In this case, more external support is needed to endorse the FUG's authority and raise legal awareness.
- Nursery / Seedling Development (Forest Management): Two FUGs sought to improve their nursery and forest seedlings. One was unsuccessful, mainly due to poor management decisions (e.g. inappropriate location for nursery; poor choice of species).
- Fund Generation (Economic Development): Two FUGs planned to raise funds for community development. One was successful, through a combination of charging a levy from members, sale of forest products within the FUG, and sale of resin to a company. The other FUG was not successful because the commercial sale of timber was obstructed by the DFO, and also because there was low awareness of the rules regarding this.
- Non-Formal Education (Livelihood and Community Development): Four FUGs planned to increase literacy, especially of women. Two succeeded in implementing adult literacy classes with help from VDC or FUG networks and NGO support. Two others did not, primarily due to lack of external support with respect to supply of teachers and materials.
- Skill-Based Livelihood Activity Promotion (Livelihood and Community Development): Two FUGs aimed to organize skills training for members to provide alternative sources of income. One FUG achieved this by providing loans to poorer households and requesting support from agencies such as the Office of District Cottage Industry to provide training. The DFO provided seed money and linked the FUG with relevant agencies. The other FUG was not successful, partly due to weak coordination with the relevant agencies, partly because the FUG hesitated to provide loans to members for fear of loan defaults, and partly due to the underlying lack of a market for handicrafts in remote areas.

Relatively unsuccessful action points included the following:

- Resolving boundary conflicts (Conflict Management): Seven FUGs had boundary conflicts, but only two planned to resolve the disputes. Neither was successful. In one of the FUGs the matter is in court. FUGs tend to view boundary disputes as beyond their capacity to deal with, and once the matter reaches the courts, they feel it is no longer their business.
- OP&C Revision (Decision-Making and Implementation): Four FUGs wished to revise their OP&C and bring it up-to-date in terms of current decisions. Only one was successful. The failure of the other three was due to a lack of understanding of revision procedures within the FUGs, and a lack of support from DFO staff.

CONCLUSIONS

Extension and support methods can be either enabling or disempowering. DFO field staff may often behave according to a hierarchical culture and give solutions 'from above' which encourages FUGs to be dependent on them. The micro-level planning process described here strengthens the capacity of FUGs to find their own solutions. It helps them prioritize their needs and broaden their activities to consider immediate forest management issues as well as wider development needs. *Tole*-based FUG planning, decision-making and implementation improves communication and awareness-raising through *tole*-representatives. Micro-level action plans provide a basis for informed, demand-led support, whereby district agencies can focus their support activities on specific local priorities. Poverty alleviation support can also be focused to reach the poor *toles* within FUGs.

The process of supporting FUGs on the basis of their micro-level plans needs to evolve organically from within FUGs themselves. Micro-level action planning is a means of concentrating users'

attention on issues, and focusing the attention of DFO staff on priorities for action. It will not work properly, however, if it is structured or imposed on FUGs by DFO staff 'from above', but instead it must be led by FUGs, with facilitation offered by the outside agencies. External agencies could support the whole process of *tole*-meetings, cluster meetings, women's meetings, occupational group meetings, and FUG committee meetings in the first year, and train FUG members to run the process themselves as an ongoing, perhaps annual, cycle.

Micro-level planning helps forest users to define their own objectives and so manage support from other stakeholders, including DFO and projects, in a planned way. This would improve upon the present situation where line agencies offer support according to their perceptions of FUGs' needs. Line agencies and bilateral projects tend to look for programs to scale-up across large areas. The micro-level action planning process produces site-specific and needs-based plans that can help outside agencies to define a relevant role for themselves in consultation with FUGs, so that activities of other support agencies are not duplicated.

FUGs can fit into the existing local government structure by feeding their micro-level plan 'upwards', and demanding specific support to achieve the identified action-points. VDCs can allocate their budgets more effectively, on the basis of identified *tole* needs and considering the fund-levels of the FUGs to fulfill them. For example, in one VDC, a wealthy FUG has been funding its own electrification project, and the VDC has reduced its allocation of funds to this FUG in order to focus on needier areas. FUGs can help to co-ordinate funding in this way to ensure that funds are optimally used.

One issue which will need to be addressed by outside facilitators during the process is whether there are actual users who are marginalized from membership of the FUG, and who ought to be incorporated.

Ownership of the micro-level plan must be with FUGs themselves, thus encouraging users to take responsibility for their self-development. Support to the micro-level plan can include the following:

- Technical advice, for *toles* to identify their own needs in terms of forest management as well as community development.
- Invitation by the nodal district office (e.g. DFO) for FUGs to submit their micro-level plans, so that support to FUGs can be targeted to help FUGs achieve their priorities.
- Planning process by district agencies to co-ordinate support.
- Regular contact visits to FUGs by DoF field staff with prior notice given so that meetings can be organized in advance.
- Outside support for conflict resolution, especially over forest boundaries – the most common and urgent FUG requirement.
- A speedy process of C&OP revision.

At present the level of field support to FUGs is very low, due to lack of planning and weak incentive structures within Range-Posts and DFOs. Improving their performance and changing their working practices towards being demand-led by FUG needs, is an important step towards supporting micro-led action planning which, in turn, may be the key to achieving successful community forestry.

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