KEY MESSAGES

1. Policy decisions and instruments on Chure emanate and flow through centralised bureaucratic structures and processes rather than participatory and deliberative ones.
2. Policy provisions are guided by techno-bureaucratic rationale, and are translated into practice by reshaping the operational plans and management of community forests.
3. Increased role of forest officials in planning and management combined with constraints on sustainable use of forest resources has alienated the local people and undermined their collective actions.
4. Strengthening community institutions and integrating environmental interventions with socio-economic objectives are vital for addressing Chure degradation.

INTRODUCTION

Recent policies, institutional arrangements, and initiatives of the government aimed at responding to the environmental challenges of Chure are shaped by the dominant narrative of Chure ecological crisis and urgency to protect its geologically fragile landscape and ecosystem. The key drivers of the recent environmental changes are pointed to illegal logging, unregulated extraction of sands and boulders, and environmentally unsustainable land use practice by the Chure inhabitants. However, the underlying causes of Chure deforestation and degradation are complex, multiple and multi-scalar and often beyond the scale of local communities.

Despite the government’s rationale to address the ecological crisis and threats to Chure, launching of large-scale conservation program, public position to address the need and participation of local communities, recent policy interventions have met with local resistance. State efforts have been criticised for failing to curb deforestation. In the light of successful experiences of community based conservation and forest management, it is imperative to inquire implications of the Chure conservation program and policies for community forestry. This policy brief scrutinizes the government policies, pathways and their consequences for community forests (CFs); and highlight possible policy directions that can be followed.

METHODOLOGY

This policy brief is based on the study conducted between 2013 and 2015. The information were generated from the members of Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) in Nawalparasi, Kapilbastu, Bara, Makwanpur and Udayapur districts, and interviews with the forest officials and Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) leaders. During the study, five multi-stakeholders policy dialogues at the national and sub-national levels, six district level workshops, and eight local interactions were organised. The researchers also observed policy deliberations and community protests and relevant policy decisions and documents, operational plans, study reports, media coverage, published articles, and social media were also reviewed and analysed.
PATHWAYS OF POLICIES
Explicit policy interventions have been top-down and passed on through the bureaucratic channels of the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MoFSC) and associated institutions including Departments and District/Protected area level offices (see Figure 2). Non-state organisations, for example, the CFUGs, get such information usually through an informal channel. Involvement of local government however is dismal.

Conservation oriented policies and restricted access to forest resources
Policy decisions and instruments are established primarily on biophysical aspects and the ecological understanding of environmental changes by adopting a conservation centric approach as evident in the following decisions and provisions:
- Prepare and implement ‘Conservation Oriented Operational Plan’ (COOP) as per the concept of ‘limited use zone’;
- Divide CF areas in different ‘zones’ (see Figure 3 for criteria) and follow it properly even for ‘limited’ management interventions;
- Suspend Annual Allowable Interventions (AAC) and apply ‘physical rotation’;
- Locate Global Positioning System (GPS) points and get photos for each tree to be felled;
- Focus more on plantation, ‘hot spot’ management, grazing control, and fire line management.

Figure 3: Suggested criteria for zoning of CF area in Chure

All these provisions are made part of the OP through strategic manipulation using administrative authority and technical expertise of the forest officers. Current policies alter CF management outlined in Table 1 below:
Table 1: Comparison of CF management provisions before and after the Chure conservation programme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Forest management</th>
<th>Provisions in CFOP</th>
<th>Provisions in COOP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Block division and zonation</td>
<td>Divide forests area in different blocks mainly to facilitate forests management</td>
<td>Divide forests area into blocks; identify ‘hot spots’ for biodiversity conservation; divide each block into zones as per Figure 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annual Allowable Cut (AAC)</td>
<td>Prescribe based on mean annual increment rate</td>
<td>AAC as per CFOP; suspended AAC in practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harvesting of fuel wood and timber</td>
<td>Prescribe to harvest 75%, 60% and 40% of mean annual increment based on forest quality; forests management activities include thinning, pruning, and singling; provision to sell forests products outside CFUGs</td>
<td>Follow the concept of ‘limited use zone’ and the ‘physical rotation’; no green felling; harvest Dead and Dying (2-D) trees for internal use only; harvest Dead, Dying, Diseased and Deformed (4-D) trees only if internal demand does not suffice from 2-D; no harvest from ‘highly sensitive zone’ and for commercial purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chure forest conservation program</td>
<td>Plantation and soil conservation but no Chure specific provision</td>
<td>Added separate provision to conserve Chure forests exclusively; provision on plantation of trees and bamboo species</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also implicit ways in which government’s Chure conservation interventions affect local communities’ access to forest. Despite the fact that hundreds of local groups have been forming groups, requesting CF and are protecting patches of forest in their proximity, there is little handover these days. Figure 4 below shows that the emphasis has rather gone to revising the existing OP as per the conservation priority.

Figure 4: New CF hand over and conservation oriented OP revision trend in Chure region (based on data available in Udayapur, Bara, Makwanpur, and Nawalparasi)

Below we discuss how these policy provisions undermine and constrain access to forest and management rights of communities.

**Regulating and restricting timber harvesting and sale:**
First, the new provisions substantially reduce timber and fuel wood management, use and sale hitherto enjoyed by the CFUGs. Second, the conservation oriented approach in Chure overlooks the economic potentials and benefits to the local communities accrued by selling 4-D trees in CFs. The CFUGs have ample stock of timber (up to 25,000 cft) only from 4-D trees, while the current AAC is only 2,000 cft. Similarly, some tree species such as Khayer (*Acacia catechu*) which are never used internally but fetch high market value are banned for sale.
**Zonation and block divisions:** CF members feel disempowered and often struggle to get required technical service from the relevant forest officials which has largely delayed their forest planning and management. The CFUGs are required to provide photos and GPS points for each tree to be harvested that fall under the 2-D or 4-D category. Given the limited technical capacities to adopt these provisions, CF members have to rely on forests officials and experts. Moreover, given the chronic challenges of a quality human resource with the District Forest Office (DFO), it leads to decreased access to such services, slow processing and non-renewal of OPs which encourages illegal activities and bribing.

**Weakening of community governance:** Contribution of CF in Chure conservation is not duly appreciated despite the well-established social scientific evidences on the benefits of tenure security, decentralised governance, and strong collective actions for the forest management. Rather, CFUG members often suspect that conservation activities are focussed in CFs more than other regimes of forest management thus increasing bureaucratic surveillance. Technocratic conservation interventions such as zonation, GPS point and photo taking, etc., have entrenched techno-bureaucratic control in the management and planning of CFs. For instance, the provisions of ‘high sensitive zone’, practice of regular monitoring or technical support are often vested on the authority and discretion of the forest officials.

**Growing frustration, demotivation, and consequences on collective actions:** Bureaucratic interference and reliance on DFO amidst constrained access to forest resources have compounded frustration among the CFUG members. Disincentives in conserving Chure forests pose a risk of further alienating the communities from forest conservation. These are evident in the observable trends such as reduced efforts in forest conservation, patrolling and community vigilance; reduced participation in general assembly and meetings; decreased interests of CFUG members in executive committee elections and leaderships. In some occasions, CFUGs have also warned DFO to give up their conservation stewardship. Delay in CF handover in Chure, imposing restrictions on use and sale, making increased demand for extra paper work, and increased interference in management activities have induced frustration and demotivation and consequently, there have been increased cases of illegal logging.

**POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Support and strengthen community governance and management through meaningful state-community partnerships that are imperative to counteract crisis and conservation challenges of Chure conservation; balance community rights and responsibilities in Chure conservation.
- Ensure meaningful participation of CFUGs in policy processes and mechanisms and conservation programs.
- Explore economic potentials of Chure forests to support sustainable local livelihoods.
- Initiate capacity building of CFUGs in community planning and management as per the provisions of Chure conservation.
- Promote community-state dialogues at the grassroots to foster partnerships; mutual deliberations on ecological and scientific rationale; threats to Chure; local knowledge, livelihoods, concerns and contributions to conservation; and to facilitate community planning and management for conservation and sustainable use of Chure forests.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

We would like to express our sincere thanks to Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI) for supporting the study on Chure conservation program and its impacts on community forest rights. This policy brief is an outcome of the study.

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**Photo 2: Settlement in Chure region**

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