

Community-based Forest Management Programmes in Nepal: An Overview of Issues and Lessons

Hemant R Ojha*, Netra P Timsina*, Chetan Kumar**, Brian Belcher** and Mani R Banjade*

* ForestAction Nepal, Kathmandu

** Centre for International Forestry Research, Bogor, Indonesia

Corresponding author: hojha@wlink.com.np

INTRODUCTION

The idea for this special issue of the *Journal of Forest and Livelihood* emerged during the preparation of a book by a joint team of researchers at ForestAction Nepal and the Center for International Forestry Research, Indonesia. The purpose of the book is to draw lessons from six different community-based forestry programmes in Nepal which are being implemented over the past three decades. While more detailed account is coming up in the form of a book within a year or so, we thought it would be useful to publish the key messages coming out of these chapters as stand-alone pieces of articles in this journal.

Over the past few decades, community-based forest management (CBFM) has evolved as a key strategy of conservation as well as promoting local livelihoods, especially in developing countries. One of the assumptions behind this strategy is that local communities, when legally empowered to take control of forest resources, can develop local-level institutions to organize sustainable use of forest resources. While important practical and policy insights have been generated worldwide as to what makes communities organize themselves for successful collective action, there is still a paucity of knowledge of how policy, programmes and practices can support the evolution of successful CBFM institutions in different socioeconomic and ecological contexts. In this special issue of the *Journal*, we do not seek to develop universal answers to when and how communities can organize for successful collective actions and sustainable management of forests, but hope to compile and document lessons from different CBFM initiatives that have taken place in Nepal.

Nepal appears to be at the forefront in formulating and implementing CBFM programmes (for most recent analysis, see Springate and Blaikie 2007, and for comparative review, see Carter and Gronow 2005 and Nurse and Malla 2005). In order to address the challenge of environmental degradation in the Himalayas and to contribute to the reduction of alarming level of poverty, Nepal has enacted various policies and programmes to support different CBFM strategies over the past two decades. These modalities, although different in terms of specific institutional arrangements, share a common direction of policy change—providing greater autonomy to local communities so that they can exercise greater authority and mobilize greater amount of local efforts for management, conservation and utilization of forests. The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS) 1989 provides foundations for the emergence of various Acts and Regulations governing community-based forestry programmes.

In this editorial introduction, we set the scene for subsequent articles which are structured in more or less similar way. The articles discuss how different CBFM programmes evolved in Nepal, under what conditions, and what lessons they have generated in achieving specific livelihoods and environmental objectives in different socioeconomic and ecological contexts.

This issue covers six modalities of CBFM in Nepal: community forestry (CF), leasehold forestry (LHF), watershed management (WM), collaborative forest management (CFM), integrated conservation and development (ICD) and buffer zone (BZ) around protected areas. Among these, CF is the pioneer and most widely known

approach, which has influenced other CBFM modalities in Nepal. CF was started in the late '70s and has been refined consistently in the successive years. It is implemented throughout the country, mainly in the middle hills, with a strong legislative backing to entrust resource management rights to local forest user groups. The six

CBFM modalities together provide a rich mix of experiences regarding the potential and challenges of achieving the twin goals of enhancing conservation and local livelihoods in different contexts. This analysis seeks to inform policy development both within and outside Nepal.

ISSUES

In the contemporary discourses on participatory forest management, at least four policy challenges are identifiable. The first issue is related to how and to what extent power is divided between the state and the local community in the context of forest governance. The issue of power sharing is critical as, despite the broad consensus on the normative agenda of decentralization, there is often a continuing tension between the local communities who depend on forests for livelihood and the state forestry agencies who seek to maximize state revenues from forests (see, for instance, Sarin *et al.* 2003).

The six modalities of CBFM in Nepal vary significantly with respect to the degree of autonomy the Nepali state provides to local communities. CF is a case where local communities enjoy rights to use all benefits arising out of the forest by excluding non-members. The community forest user groups (CFUGs) enjoy significant degree of autonomy from the state: the Forest Act 1993 guarantees that CFUGs are autonomous and perpetually self-governed organizations. LHF appears similar to CF except that it is targeted for the poorest households and the ownership is temporally defined (for 40 years). The ongoing LHF programme mainly focuses on degraded forest land. CFM entails joint control of local communities and the government over forest resource and also lacks provision for autonomous local institutions. WM seeks to consider upstream-downstream linkages and issues of equity, but watershed is not well recognized as an autonomous unit of governance in Nepal. The ICD modality offers some degree of local autonomy in promoting ecotourism benefits to local people from bio-resources. But it still involves significant degree of control by conservation agencies in the practice of resource management, especially in respect

of conservation of biological resources. Together the six modalities provide a wide spectrum of governance situation in the continuum between state control and local autonomy. From this experience, the authors draw important insights into whether and how the degree and nature of local autonomy are associated with the impact on resource sustainability and livelihoods.

The second issue is related to the practice and process of policymaking and programme planning and implementation (for instance, see Ojha *et al.* 2007 for a recent analysis of policy processes in Nepal's forestry sector). A key question in this regard is to what extent civil society groups, forest officials and political leaders engage each other in the policy development process. This is especially a critical issue in forest governance as the forestry sector has historically been a closed sector where forest officials enjoyed power to make major decisions that had impact at public level at large. As the discourses and movements on democratic governance have intensified in the recent years in Nepal, as well as internationally, it is important to know whether and to what extent forestry policy processes have changed.

The six CBFM approaches in Nepal represent diverse situations of deliberation in policy and programme development and practice. CF was initiated through a more experiential and collaborative experimental approach. CFM has been led by state forest officials with little involvement of affected people. WM is more at the level of government or bilateral projects. LHF is driven more by policy instruments with limited practical attention to local political deliberation. Although a big shift towards participatory conservation, BZ is considered more an extension of the national park than

a genuine political space for local people. ICD is largely driven by conservation agencies. The programme stipulates that the primary responsibility of local communities is conservation of natural resources than its utilisation for local livelihoods. Together, these approaches can inform how the nature and degree of deliberative communication among diverse stakeholders in the process of policy development and practice has influenced the outcomes.

The third concern is related to how the local social structure affects the devolution of policies in practice. More specifically, the issue at stake is how inclusive the local community groups are and whether the power or autonomy granted by the state is likely to create equitable benefits at local level. In this regard, the programme experiences in Nepal with highly differentiated society in terms of caste, class, gender and ethnicity, can offer important insights into the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in local-level forest governance.

The six modalities offer a very interesting mix of local-level institutional arrangements for collective action. CF and LHF are primarily based at the level of specific communities. LHF offers membership to identified groups of poorest households, whereas CF is open to all members of a community with heterogeneous households. CFM, WM, BZ and ICD promote collective actions at the level of landscape--a unit apparently larger and more complex than the community. Attempts at community

level are linked at the level of watershed or landscape through councils, networks and associations. These modalities seek to promote governance negotiations at higher levels.

Finally, an overarching concern of all community-based forestry programmes is to integrate both conservation and livelihood goals. As policy shapers and decision-makers are often divided according to their priority to either conservation or livelihoods goals, Nepal's recent experiences offer insights into whether, to what extent and how the twin goals of conservation and local livelihoods can be integrated using CBFM approaches.

While conservation movement has emphasized exclusive zones of biodiversity conservation, livelihoods-oriented rights-based movement emphasizes the primacy of local livelihoods in conservation. In the '90s, conservation discourse took a participatory turn, and a range of initiatives which provide spaces for local people to take responsibility for long-term conservation, were introduced. The articles in this issue present two different initiatives to community-based conservation (BZ and ICD) that have been practised in Nepal. The continuing challenge is to understand through what kinds of policy and programme strategies and to what extent the substantive goals of biodiversity conservation can be combined with livelihoods-related concerns, rights and interests of local people.

EXPERIENCES AND REFLECTIONS FROM CBFM PROGRAMMES IN NEPAL

Experiences in Nepal show that, throughout the modern history of the country, there has always been a tension between the local people and the state in relation to controlling local forest resources (Malla 2001; Regmi 1978). Until 1990s and even afterwards, the Nepali state has always been controlled by specific groups of ruling elite, who always sought to expand networks of local functionaries deep into rural areas by patronizing local feudal lords. State control over forest and land resources continuously strengthened till the emergence of decentralization policies in the late 1970s (Malla 2001; Timsina 2002; Ojha 2006). It is

during this period of state management that the country lost most of its forest areas.

While the six CBFM programmes emerged in different socioeconomic and ecological contexts within the country in different times, they all have at least two commonalities: first, all seek to devolve some level of forest management authority to local communities, and, secondly, all retain state ownership over the forestland. Out of the six programmes, community forestry is found to be the mother programme, whereas others evolved either as expansion of this programme or as a way of addressing some of the limitations which community forestry developed in practice, especially since the

mid-1990s, when the limitations of community forestry became more visible such as elite domination in decision making and inequitable benefit-sharing practices. Similarly, the livelihoods contexts of the regions in which these programmes are being implemented are also more or less the same: significant local dependence on forests for livelihoods, notwithstanding the growing variation in livelihoods patterns between the areas adjoining roads and small towns and remote locations. Apparently, all CBFM programmes have emerged partly in response to the need for engaging local people in the management of natural resources. While all programmes have a common element of devolving power to local communities, they differ in the extent to which they devolve power as well as the processes through which they do so, both at policy and at programme implementation level.

As the authors have stipulated, the six programmes do not always occupy exclusive space, and have overlaps in terms of beneficiaries to be served, forest areas to be managed, institutions to be involved and inputs to be allocated. As a result, there are often conflicts and contradictions among the proponents of various programmes, most notably between CF on the one hand and LHF, CFM and BZ on the other.

Power-sharing between the state and local communities

Does increased community control over forests help achieve the goals of poverty reduction and forest conservation? The proponents of decentralized management of forest have been facing hard times in persuading policy changes in the direction of devolution. This is especially critical in the context of the South Asian society where societies are differentiated not only in terms of economic inequality but also in terms of cultural factors such as caste. The six programmes offer diverse attempts, successes, failures and lessons with regard to how heterogeneous actors within the community organize collective actions that favour or constrain equitable sharing of costs and benefits.

Authors have drawn a number of specific insights. Leasehold forestry entails a policy instrument to assign exclusive use right to

poorer groups over forests. These have created some successes, but it is still unclear how these innovations will be institutionalized. A related lesson is that the pro-poor policy instruments do not necessarily create pro-poor outcomes without adequate mechanisms to put such policies into practice. Different programme experiences indicate that the links between policy and livelihood outcomes are found to be more complex than is generally assumed by policy makers and programme planners. Even when there is no mandatory pro-poor policy, sensitization of local elites through social mobilization and empowerment processes can sometimes yield equitable forest management outcomes (as in the case of CF). A combined lesson from CF and LHF is that who benefits from forest management is significantly shaped and determined by the ways in which community-level deliberations on forestry practices, rules and institutions take place. Here, civil society groups have a key role to play. In any of the approaches, inventing ways to reaching the individual households is important. While on the one hand there is a need to target poorer households, programmes such as ICD and watershed demonstrate that benefit flows and conservation results require working beyond community level, at regional, watershed and landscape level.

In some innovative cases of community forestry where intense negotiations and deliberations have taken place between the less poor and the poor, often with support from critical civil society activists, more equitable benefit-sharing rules have evolved. The capture of forest benefits by local elites is in part related to the lack of effective and empowered deliberation and negotiation during the formulation of rules and norms. Often the target-driven and technocratic approaches to programme management has led to minimization of deliberative processes at community level. What is critical in this regard is the promotion of equity as a human rights agenda and delivering services that empower the poor rather than offering 'quick fix' solutions. In cases where government programmes and civil society groups have recognized the importance of this approach, they have been able to create deliberative spaces for community-level interest groups to formulate collective rules

and practices of resource governance that favour the poor.

Policy processes

Another issue where lessons are sought is how policy processes can become more deliberative and inclusive. In Nepal, the evolution and practice of a CBFM programme often follows a complex pathway, and the success depends in part on how such processes are organized, who control these processes, and whether the affected or intended people have a meaningful say.

Good policy intentions are not automatically translated into practice. Actors who interpret and define policy into practice determine how policy is translated. Unless civil society groups, including the networks of users' groups, mobilize themselves to have a voice in interpreting policies in practice, there is a likelihood of technobureaucratic domination in policy development and implementation processes. The case of Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) is an evidence of this (Pokharel *et al.*, this volume).

A CBFM programme is a more complex social system than a linearly structured government programme. Programmes such as community forestry have now become a complex self-regulating social system, not entirely under the grip of a government agency which designed it initially. This is both a good and bad news: good because it becomes self-sustaining and self-regulating institution for forest governance; bad news because the programme participants seem to have started defending the boundary of the respective programmes rather than maintaining open communication to redefine the boundaries of the programmes (for a detailed analysis of CF-CFM boundary, see Ojha 2006). This is reflected in the ongoing tensions between CF and LHF, and CF and CFM.

LESSONS

Despite rich experiences and significant progress made, Nepali stakeholders continue to face challenges as regards sustaining livelihoods, democracy and ecosystems through CBFM. Stakeholders continue to

Integrating conservation and livelihoods goals

Still another issue which we have looked at is: how and to what extent the goals of conservation and local livelihoods can be reconciled in a CBFM programme? CBFM programmes have emerged in response to two interrelated key problems that were highlighted since the 1980s. The problem statement was like this: 'Poor people are destroying forests and there is an urgent need for action.' Two parallel processes started in response to this problem: conservation without people (establishment of protected areas) and conservation with the involvement of local people (initiation of community forestry in the hills). Later, the protected area model was contested locally and therefore opportunities for community involvement were created, principally in two ways: establishing buffer zone management regulations (Paudel *et al.*, this volume) and entrusting communities with the responsibilities for conservation in what is known as integrated conservation and development (Bajracharya *et al.*, this volume). The community forestry stream, representing conservation with people-centric approach, also sought to reverse the ongoing trends of deforestation, while trying to meet local forest product needs. Irrespective of the point of origin and approach used, all programme modalities involve intersecting goals of livelihoods and conservation. But each varies in its relative emphasis on either of the two goals, as well as in terms of approach used. A key lesson coming from all these programme experiences is that conservation forestry cannot exclude the goals of local livelihoods, and livelihood forestry can inevitably result in conservation outcomes. What is needed is integration of both the goals in all kinds of programme management modalities, although to varying degrees in different contexts.

face challenges with regard to what modalities of programmes, tenurial structure and sharing power can help meet the goals of poverty reduction in different socioeconomic and ecological contexts.

Given the three-decade-old experience of CBFM in Nepal with the formation of milieus of institutions, processes and policy innovations, there are some concrete lessons to be learnt. The articles in this volume together generate the following key lessons:

- *Success of a CBFM programme depends to a significant degree on the extent to which policy and practical innovations go side-by-side, rather than one after the other.* Putting too much emphasis on policy development at the outset sets unrealistic framework, while also running the risk of becoming too technocratic. Similarly, practical innovations without linking with policy processes are less likely to be sustained and institutionalized. This lesson emerges particularly from the comparative analysis of CF and CFM in Nepal: CF processes (where efforts were made to link policy development and practical innovations through experiential and consultative processes) became institutionalised without much interruption and resistance, while CFM (where policy framework was developed with little consultation and field-level experimentation) is facing continuous contestations.
- *Implementing a programme without basic consensus on the broad framework and process of decision making can leave the programme highly contested in practice, resulting in slow progress.* When programmes are formulated without enough deliberation among the key stakeholders, including the local communities, conflicts among stakeholders may last for long, thus hampering the implementation of the programme itself, as in the case of CFM.
- *Civil society action at multiple scales of governance is crucial in making forest governance transparent, accountable and democratic.* The emergence and development of FECOFUN, a strong civil society in forestry sector, has proved that civil society has a vital role to play in improving the governance of forest bureaucracy and government. In addition, after 1990, a wide array of civil society groups in forestry sector have influential roles, through innovative research, advocacy actions and policy discourses. This was partly because the constitutional space for civil society (with a guarantee of fundamental rights to organize) provided important opportunities to act in favour of democratization of forest governance in Nepal.
- *Still limited attention has been paid to meso level governance such as district, watershed and landscape.* CBFM programmes often focus on communities, without looking at how communities are linked to upper layers of governance, such as district or other sub-national arenas of governance. As a result, not only questions of economic efficiency (which requires economy of scale in production and marketing of forest products), but also issues of equity and rights at larger scale (beyond a specific community) are ignored. CBFM programmes need to recognize the meso spheres of governance more explicitly and seek to link community level governance to meso-level governance by strengthening the meso institutions. Where some attention has been paid to this aspect (as in the cases of BZ, ICD and CFM), more efforts need to be invested in developing empowered and internally accountable meso institutions.
- *Moving power from state to community is necessary first step, but is not sufficient, towards empowering the poor. The next step is to build up the capacity of community organizations to become effective and equitable managers of forests.* The lessons of some of the forestry programmes (most notably CF) show that if sufficient local autonomy (legally recognized perpetually self-governance and access to cent per cent benefits from forests) is provided to the community, followed by capacity development opportunities, communities can organize activities that contribute to both conservation and livelihoods. However, in most cases the subtle agenda of centralization in the name of participation is still strong, particularly in conservation-oriented forestry programmes. Sufficient degree of autonomy can provide a condition for effective local-level collective action and

resilient institution to sustainable management of resources and livelihoods of the local people.

- *CBFM programmes gradually develop into a social arena in which programme participants compete with each other for spaces and valued resources.* A successful programme develops defensive routines with the idea of a new and competing programme. This can create both opportunities (concerted efforts in institutionalising innovations) and challenge (rigid boundaries and deliberative closure). A particularly serious challenge arises when dominant participants of the programme contest with each other for their own gains and profits, while ostensibly seeking to serve the poor and marginalised programme beneficiaries. In the worst scenario, as in the escalating tension between CF on

the one hand and LHF and CFM on the other, the dominant participants of competing programmes focus on defending the boundary and space of their respective programmes, rather than openly look at opportunities to serve the poor.

- *Processes of learning, negotiation and experimentations are critical to the successful development of a programme.* The processes, tools and techniques developed by various CBFM programmes in Nepal proved to be important in facilitating reflective practices, democratic deliberation and transformative learning, often leading to equitable governance of forests. The practice of action learning in community forestry appeared to be an important process for inclusive and democratic forest governance in Nepal.

REFERENCE

- Carter, J. and Gronow, J.** 2005. Recent Experience in Collaborative Forest Management - A Review Paper. Bogor, Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR).
- Malla, Y.B.** 2001. Changing policies and the persistence of patron-client relations in Nepal: Stakeholders' responses to changes in forest policies. *Environmental History*, **6**: 287-307.
- Nurse, M. and Malla, Y.** 2005. *Advances of Community Forestry in Asia*. Bangkok: Regional Community Forestry Training Center (RECOFTC).
- Ohja, H.R.** 2006. Engaging Bourdieu and Habermas to reframe forest governance in Nepalese Terai, *PhD thesis*, UK: The University of East Anglia.
- Ojha, H., Timsina, N. and Khanal, D.** 2007. How are Forest Policy Decisions Made in Nepal? *Journal of Forest and Livelihood*, **6**(1): 1-16.
- Regmi, M.C.** 1978. *Land Tenure and Taxation in Nepal*. New Delhi: Adroit.
- Sarin, M., Singh, N.M., Sundar, N. and Bhogal, R.K.** 2003. Devolution as a Threat to Democratic Decision-Making in Forestry? *Findings from Three States in India*. London: ODI.
- Springate-Baginski, O. and Blaikie, P.** (2007). (Eds.) *Forests, People and Power: The Political Ecology of Reform in South Asia*. EarthScan Forestry Library. London and Sterling: Earthscan.
- Timsina, N.P.** 2002. Political economy of forest resource use and management: An analysis of stakeholders' interests and actions in Nepal's community forest management, *PhD Thesis*, UK: The University of Reading.