

## Advocacy Campaign to Improve Governance in Community Forestry: A Case from Western Nepal

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**Abstract:** Nepal's community forestry (CF) programme is regarded as a successful example of decentralization in natural resource management that fulfils people's forest product needs and enhances environmental sustainability. However, emerging evidence indicate that community forest user groups (CFUGs) - key institutions in managing community forests - are institutionally weak in ensuring good governance and equitable management of resources. CFUGs have been facing a major challenge of addressing issues of accountability, transparency, predictability and equity in CF. This paper is based on the findings from five CFUGs which are implementing governance strengthening programme by increasing women's participation and capacitating civil society organisations (CSOs) for advocacy. It describes the processes and activities in improving the CFUG governance. It also highlights the changes observed in those groups which include increased accountability, funds for pro-poor activities, improved transparency in decision making and increased participation of marginalised groups.

*Key words:* community forestry, governance, equity, poverty, Nepal.

### INTRODUCTION

Government of Nepal adopted a policy to transfer property rights of forest resources to the local communities for sustainable management through community forestry (CF). The CF is regarded as a successful example of decentralization in natural resource management that fulfils people's forest product needs and enhances environmental sustainability. It has been argued that the CF is successful in improving the supply of forest products, improving the environmental condition, rehabilitating degraded forests, conserving biodiversity, supporting community development and institutionalising democratic practices at local level (Kanel 2004; Pokharel and Nurse 2004; Acharya 2002; NPC 2001). Recent database indicates that about 11,88,447 hectares (30 per cent of the total potential community forest area) of forests have been handedover to 14,287 community forest user groups (CFUGs), benefiting 16,42,367 user households (35 per cent of the total households in the country) (DOF 2006).

The success of CF is increasingly understood in terms of CFUG governance which includes fairness, transparency,

accountability, benefit-sharing, efficiency, decision-making and inclusive participation (ICIMOD 1999; Hausler 1993). As the CF process comprises several technical and social processes, governing CF has become a complex issue requiring diverse sets of knowledge and skills. On the contrary, the CFUGs have limited technical, organizational and advocacy capabilities in governing and managing the forests in an equitable and sustainable manner. It has been increasingly reported that most of the CFUGs are captured by wealthier and upper caste men, and, therefore, the interests and concerns of the poor, women and *dalits*<sup>1</sup>, who depend more on forest resources for their livelihood, are not adequately taken into account in CF process (Iverson *et al.* 2006; Adhikari *et al.* 2004; Pokharel and Niraula 2004; Pokharel and Nurse 2004; Richard *et al.* 2003; Bhatta 2002; Nightingale 2002; Agarwal 2001; Chhetri *et al.* 2001; Warner 2001; Gentle 2000; Graner 1997). Inequity in benefits sharing between

<sup>1</sup> *Dalits* are defined as historically and socially discriminated so-called "lower caste" or "untouchable" according to Hindu caste division system.

different social groups in CFUGs explains low participation of women, *dalits* and other disadvantaged groups in the CF (NPC 2001; Maharjan 1998). CFUGs also tend to have poor accountability of duty bearers - executive committee (EC) members - towards the rights holders - the general users. The financial transactions and major decisions are less transparent to general users, resulting in poor governance. In this context the facilitation services provided by government and other agencies to address aforesaid issues have also been felt inadequate compared to increasing demand of CFUGs (Acharya 2003).

Meanwhile, several issues such as livelihood contributions, sustainable forest management and governance have emerged recently which are conceptualised as second generation issues in Nepal's CF (Bhatta and Gentle 2004; Kanel 2004). Advocacy as a tool for enhancing CFUGs governance has been suggested by researchers in order to address issues on gender, transparency and equity within them (Acharya and Gentle

2006; Maharjan *et al* 2004; Cornwall 2003; Baral 2002). Similarly, Poudel *et al.* (2002) have recommended improving strategic planning and monitoring system at all levels to improve governance. McDougall *et al.* (2004) have suggested for facilitating adaptive capacity and social learning among stakeholders to enhancing equity and livelihoods in CF.

The aim of this paper is to provide empirical evidences on the inputs, processes and outcomes of advocacy campaigns organized in the western Nepal. The paper is organized into seven sections. Section 2 focuses on concepts of governance and advocacy. Section 3 describes the case study sites. Section 4 presents the various interventions in the advocacy process. The outcomes in terms of CFUG policy and practice are discussed in section 5. The assessment of the internal governance and the implications for forest management and inclusiveness is presented in section 6. Finally section 7 concludes the paper.

## GOVERNANCE AND ADVOCACY

Governance refers to the process of decision-making and the process by which decisions are implemented (or not implemented) (UNESCAP 2004). In other words, it focuses on the 'rule of the game' and highlights the question on whom and how decisions are made and enforced (PROFOR 2003; UNDP SLU 1998). Governance can take place at many levels - from the local up to the state and even global. At its wider sense, governance is a pattern of relationship between state, market and civil society in the process of making decisions in regulating the public sphere (Hyden *et al.* 2004). In general, governance includes all methods, both good and bad, that society uses to distribute power and manage public resources and problems in response to the critical needs of the society. Thus, effective democratic governance depends upon the level of public participation, accountability and transparency (Court *et al.* 2002; Tendler 1998; UNDP 1997). Hyden and Court (2001) presented a consolidated and empirically tested framework about the principles of good governance, which includes: participation, fairness, decency, accountability, transparency and efficiency. On the basis of these principles, good

governance is described as a responsive system of public services, which can work in constructive ways with private and voluntary sectors and strengthen civil society to counterbalance the power of the state.

In the case of forestry sector, the goal of achieving sustainable forest management depends critically on matters, which are beyond the forest itself. It depends on the extent and quality of enabling policy, legal and institutional conditions and forest governance. These have a direct influence on how a society organizes itself in developing and managing forest, producing forest products and environmental services and using them (Mayers *et al.* 2002). Governance in forestry sector has a particular value as forest is used by many, managed by a few, and involves the interests of multiple groups at different levels (Brown *et al.* 2002; Doornbos *et al.* 2000). For example, local communities are more concerned about sustaining their livelihoods and meeting their economic needs from the forest, whereas national governments are interested in generating more revenue through timber selling, while the international communities are concerned with biodiversity and

ecological conservation (Prabhu *et al.* 1998). Therefore, the issue of governance in forestry sector is more complex and therefore important to consider consciously and critically.

Based on broader concept of governance in forestry sector, it looks clear that maintaining good governance in forestry is the joint responsibility of state, market and civil society. However, the particular forest management regime will determine the extent of involvement of particular actor in ensuring the quality of governance. For example, in CF regime, CFUGs (as a civil society institution) have key role in maintaining good governance in forestry.

*The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* defines advocacy as “giving of public support to an idea, a course of action, or a belief”. CARE-USA defines advocacy as a deliberate process of influencing those who make

policy decisions (CARE USA 2001). Similarly, National Centre for Advocacy Studies, India has defined advocacy as “a planned and organized set of actions to amplify the voices of poor and marginalized to make them able in claiming their rights effectively so as to influence public policies and practices”. Therefore, advocacy is an important means for building political commitment to put priorities and policies in place. It is an action of presenting an argument in order to gain commitment from political and social leaders about a particular issue. It is also a process that involves selecting and organizing information to create a convincing argument and communicating it through interpersonal and media channels. It has implications to either effective implementation of the existing policy or amendment in the existing policy or formulation of new policy.

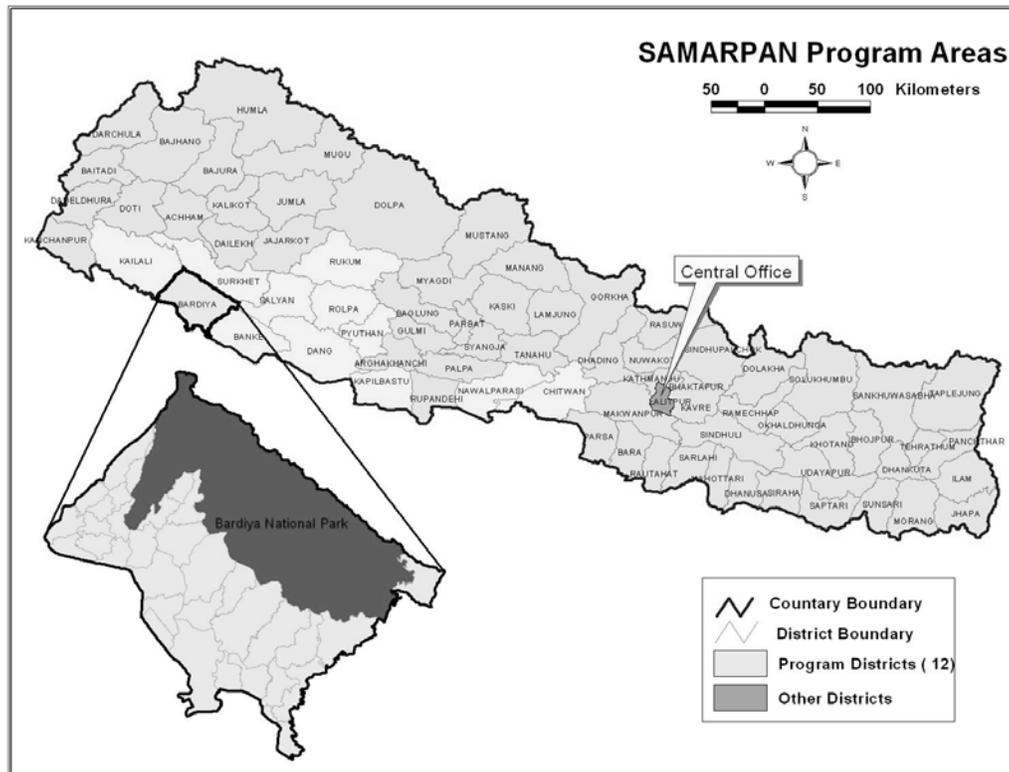


Figure 1: SAMARPAN project districts and location of Bardia district

## CASE STUDY

The paper draws information from two USAID funded projects<sup>2</sup> in five CFUGs of Bardia district, which were implemented by CARE Nepal. Both the projects supported CFUGs and other service providers in the management of natural resources to ensure that the natural resources are managed in a democratic way; the institutions involved meet the principles of good governance and, in particular, the benefits derived from natural resources are distributed equitably to the local communities. One of the major objectives of the projects was to increase advocacy capacity of selected civil society groups at community and federation levels. The main approach of this programme was guided by a Rights Based Approach (RBA) to development, which explicitly focuses on

people, particularly marginalized ones, realizing their human rights (O'Brien and Jones 2002). It empowers people to claim and exercise their rights and fulfil their responsibilities. Advocacy has been applied as a major tool which aims to hold development agencies responsible for their actions and/or omissions, and potentially, in the process, to encourage and assist them to meet their responsibilities.

The information was collected through the review and analysis of advocacy diaries, CFUG constitutions and forest operational plans (OPs) and project reports. Other methods used were interview with EC members and general users, and use of secondary information.

## THE ADVOCACY PROCESS

The projects intervene with the CFUGs through different activities to accomplish the package of advocacy campaign. Some of prominent activities are discussed below.

### Trainer's Training on Basic Advocacy

A two-tiered training approach was adopted. A 14-day-long advocacy training on facilitation skills was given to the local resource persons representing project implementing partners, non-government organizations, federations of user groups and other civil society organizations (CSOs). The project trained 41 advocacy facilitators, including 21 women and 10 *dalits*. Among them, 35, including 17 women and 8 *dalits*, remained active during the project period. A four-day-long refresher training was provided to the facilitators to review understanding of facilitators and practical problems and issues they faced during the facilitation at community level advocacy training. The trained advocacy facilitators, in turn, conducted community level advocacy trainings. They also supported target groups in preparing and implementing group level

advocacy plans, monitoring and documenting the changes.

### Community Level Advocacy Training

Three-day advocacy trainings were the major input to the CFUGs. The participants for the training were selected from different groups of people such as women and *dalits*, EC members and different stakeholder groups such as representatives of local government bodies, etc. Facilities were also provided to baby caretakers to promote participation of women in the training. The objectives of having different types of participants were to promote affirmative actions in favour of marginalized communities and to forge linkages between target groups, CSOs and government agencies so as to enable them to facilitate better participatory planning and good governance processes. Similarly, participation of EC members was considered to be crucial to finalize, endorse and implement the advocacy plans. Inclusion of different stakeholders in the training and advocacy campaign helped to minimize possible resistance from power holders and/or duty bearers.

<sup>2</sup> Strengthening the Role of Civil Society and Women in Democracy and Governance (SAMARPAN) implemented in 12 districts of Nepal during 2002 to 2005 (Figure-1) and Strengthened Actions for Governance in Utilization of Natural Resources (SAGUN) implemented in Banke, Bardia, Kailali, Dhading districts and Buffer Zone of Shey-Phuksundo National Park during 2002 to 2005.

A special emphasis was given to adopt transparency in the training cycle as well. The budget of the training was made transparent, allowing the participants to audit the expenses at the end of each training event. Social and stakeholders analysis; concepts of RBA, advocacy, governance and power dynamics; and practical application of advocacy including formulation of strategy and plan, were the major contents of the training. The training concluded with the preparation of an advocacy plan which defines advocacy issues, the deprived groups, their advocacy strategies, time frame of the action, result indicators, possible risks and monitoring responsibilities.

Later on the advocacy plans were discussed in, and endorsed by, the general assembly and/or EC. Participants also categorized the issues for intra-group advocacy and external advocacy. The CFUGs implemented the intra-group advocacy plans whereas the issues for external advocacy were forwarded to their district level federations who compiled, analyzed and prioritized such issues and prepared a district level advocacy plans. The project also conducted refresher training to review previously prepared advocacy plans and progresses made by participants. The constraints, challenges and risks faced by the groups were analyzed and the advocacy issues, strategies and plans were revised to make them practical and effective.

### **Assessment of Governance Status of Community Forest User Group**

The project, along with its partners and target audience, developed, field-tested and practiced a participatory guideline to assess the internal governance status of CFUGs and their networks. This tool has shown a tremendous potential to provide a status and preparing an action plan to improve the internal governance of the CFUGs (Bhatta and Gentle 2004). The assessment is based on a spider web, a participatory self-assessment tool. The guideline has defined the four basic attributes of governance - transparency, accountability, participation and predictability. Each attribute is divided into four grades or levels (values). Based on the grades of each attribute, the group members identify their relative positions (score). The score sheet is then translated

into a visual diagram based on spider web tool. The presentation of the diagram helps to visualize the current, proposed and ideal situation of their governance. Then the area covered by the rectangle is measured in percentage considering the maximum possible value to be 100 percent (if all the attributes have a value of 16). This percentage is taken as the overall expression of governance status of the group at the time of assessment.

The assessment also identifies the current status of the governance and the gap between the current and ideal situation. Based on the results of the assessment and discussions to improve the weaker areas, finally the group members prepared an action plan to address the gaps. The reassessment after the implementation of advocacy campaign has demonstrated significant changes in overall governance status of CFUGs.

### **Stakeholders' Power Relation Analysis**

Stakeholders' power relation analysis was conducted by using a 3Rs (rights, responsibilities and returns) tool<sup>3</sup>. The tool was used as part of the process of stakeholder analysis to characterize the rights, responsibilities and returns (benefits) accruing to different stakeholders, and by implicating the relative power of concerned stakeholders. The position of stakeholders was scored using different parameters for rights, responsibilities and returns. The rights (statutory or customary) characterize in terms of access to and use of resources, ownership of resource and decision making authority over resource use and management. The responsibilities characterize in terms of stakeholders roles in undertaking management tasks and implementing rules and regulations and abiding by them. Similarly, returns characterize direct benefits from resource use, employment, and empowerment opportunities including power, authority and prestige. Each stakeholder group completed a matrix of rights, responsibilities and returns with score depicting the extent to which these are achieved, that later, was

<sup>3</sup> Power tools: Tools for working on policies and institutions, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), <http://www.livelihoods.org/>

shared among the concerned stakeholders for detail analysis. At the end of the analysis, stakeholders developed action plans to improve the power relations between them.

### **Maintenance of Advocacy Diary and Production of Training Materials**

A simple and practical advocacy diary was maintained by the facilitators to monitor and document the changes during project intervention. The advocacy diary was found to be an effective tool for monitoring and tracking the changes over time. A training manual, resource books on advocacy, and other educational materials were developed and distributed. These materials were focussed on group governance, advocacy, role of watchdog group, women's participation in local government and

appreciative planning process. One of the mass communication materials targeted to community members was prepared in local ethnic dialect of *Tharu* community as well.

### **Review and Reflections**

The project regularly conducted review and reflection meeting with implementing partners, facilitators and target beneficiaries. During the project period, there were 10 events of review and reflection workshops those reviewed project strategies, approaches and achievements collectively. Similarly, at district level the implementing partners organized such meetings on a regular basis. The regular review and reflection at all levels has increased the commitment and ownership of all stakeholders.

## **CHANGES IN COMMUNITY FOREST USER GROUP POLICY AND PRACTICE**

The following changes in CFUG policy and practices were observed which could be largely attributed to the project interventions.

### **Displaying Information in Public Places**

All the studied CFUGs began to publish their annual plan, budget and EC decisions in public places. They also demanded such practice in related organizations including their own networks and federations (Box 1). The practice of publishing information in public places increased awareness of people to analyze budget and programmes of different organizations and contributed in making service providers more accountable to the citizens.

#### **Box 1 Example of demand to publish organizational affairs in public places**

- The Tharu CFUG demanded VDC budget to be publicly posted.
- The Sati CFUG advocated and supported nearby Siddhartha Primary School to publicize their income and expenditure status.
- The Siswara CFUG demanded the budget and expenditure of road gravelling work. Following the posting of budget on public place, the user groups monitored all activities of the contractor through the formation of a watchdog group.

### **Practicing Public Hearing and Public Auditing**

All the studied CFUGs conducted public audit of their plans, progresses and financial transactions on a regular basis using a simple and practical guideline. Emphasis has been given to institutionalize this process by practicing it in their general assemblies. The groups have practiced public hearing and public auditing before their formal financial auditing by a registered auditor. The practice of public audit has contributed in recovering misappropriated or misused funds in the CFUGs. Similarly, it has significantly contributed in reverting EC's decisions, where the decisions were not in favour of general users. For example, Tharu CFUG decided to disapprove the provision of the allowances to the EC members. Similarly, the Sishwara CFUG altered the EC's decision of selling *Acacia catechu* (Khair) in low price (NRs.<sup>4</sup> 10 per kilogram) and decided to sell the same in a higher price (NRs. 15 per kilogram). The new provision had significantly increased the group funds.

### **Fund Recovery**

The CFUGs recovered significant amount of misused group funds. It has been observed that the user group members were able to

<sup>4</sup> One USD is equivalent to NRs. 71.00 in 2006.

recover NRs. 37,82,519 in such funds in all the project districts and NRs. 5,70,893 in the Bardia district alone from 27 CFUGs. Besides, they were also able to get the commitments to pay back worth additional NRs. 35,330. A sum of misused NRs. 1,39,022 had recovered from four studied CFUGs and utilized it in different activities prioritized by the general assembly (Table 1).

The recovered fund has been deposited in CFUG accounts and invested in various community development activities, including income and employment generation activities to the poor. It has been realized that the collective action of local level CSOs against corruption has enhanced confidence of the citizens, demanding such practices at different levels of stakeholders.

**Table 1 Details of fund recovery from CFUGs**

CFUGs	Fund misused by	Amount recovered (NRs.)	Utilization of recovered fund
Tharu CFUG	EC members	25,374	Road construction
Lakhana CFUG	EC members	69,348	Construction of office building,
Sati CFUG	Ranger, Government of Nepal	15,000	Scholarship for poor students, pro-poor income generation activities
Kalika CFUG	EC members	29,000	Regular activities of CFUG

### Affiliation of Community Forest User Groups with Their Federation

The CFUGs involved in advocacy process increasingly realized the importance of networking and coalition with other like-minded organizations to amplify their voice collectively and systematically and to bring synergic effects. As a result, many CFUGs increasingly affiliated with their national level federation - Federation of Community Forestry Users of Nepal (FECOFUN). The number of affiliated CFUG as such has increased from 1,066 in July 2002 to 1,627 in June 2005 in 12 project districts. Among them 72 CFUGs were affiliated to FECOFUN in Bardia district alone. The trend of getting affiliation to the federations continues. The increased affiliation of CFUGs has increased the advocacy strength of FECOFUN.

### Increased Number of Women in Key Positions

The participation of at least one woman in key positions of CFUGs (chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary and treasurer) in Bardia was increased from 189 in 2004 to 260 in 2005. The increased participation of women in key executive positions of CFUGs has significantly influenced several decisions in favour of women and marginalized people. The provision has also been institutionalized through the incorporation of such provision in the constitution of CFUGs. For example, Sati CFUG has mentioned the provision of at

least two women and *dalits* in the key positions of CFUGs.

### Pro-Poor Activities Promoted

The CFUGs have tremendous potential to contribute to poverty reduction through equitable and sustainable management of forest resources and proper utilization of their funds. Many CFUGs have made efforts to provide funds for pro-poor activities and have incorporated such provisions in their constitution and OPs. Among the studied CFUGs, Sishawar CFUG provided NRs. 20,000 as scholarships to *dalit* children for school education; Sati and Kalika CFUGs have started to practice differential (equitable) prices of forest products based on well-being status of CFUG members, and have allocated group funds for pro-poor income generation activities.

### Major Issues Identified and Addressed

The studied CFUGs have identified several issues of CF and attempted to address them at different levels. These issues have been categorized into two groups. Firstly, CFUG level issues which include low participation of women and *dalits* in key positions of CFUGs; less transparent user group policies, plans, funds and decisions; inadequate prioritization of pro-poor activities while mobilizing the CFUG funds; and lack of awareness about CF processes including the autonomy of CFUG. Secondly, external issues which include imposing tax on the

forest product sale; imposing double hammering system by both CFUGs and the District Forest Offices, and government's

reluctance in handing over of Terai forests to the communities.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Capacitating local activists including representatives of different stakeholders for advocacy was at the core of the governance improvement strategy. The major capacitating strategies included: a) various training packages, targeting both the representatives of stakeholders and members of CFUGs; b) support in analysis of governance status, stakeholders' power relations, and maintenance and analysis of advocacy diary; and c) review and reflections among the training participants, CFUG leaders and stakeholder representatives. All these strategies have helped increase participants' understanding and skills on advocacy strategies.

The outcomes of advocacy campaign were observed in three key areas of CFUG policy process. Firstly, these campaigns had contributed in effective implementation of existing policies. Secondly, they had identified several areas where existing policies and rules require modifications, and therefore, have been amended. Thirdly, many of the emerging issues could not be dealt with the existing policies or rules requiring development of entirely new policies. The programme took the constituency building approach that bring together different stakeholders into this process and help enhance their capacity in implementing various advocacy campaigns in favour of marginalised community. Although it took a multi-stakeholder process, the approach focuses on empowering the voiceless and powerless people so that they become active agents of governance improvement mission. This approach had also helped leaders of CFUGs and CSOs develop new skills to work with different stakeholders.

Special attention was given to selecting people from different socio-economic groups, clusters and power holders to be involved in the process of issue identification and prioritization and advocacy training. It contributed in developing a greater understanding and realization of issues among the CFUG members and the concerned stakeholders. Similarly,

endorsement of advocacy plan through a general assembly and EC was equally important to develop ownership and commitment among the members in its implementation. Participatory monitoring tools were very important to assess the progresses in social transformation over time. The local partners and target communities were equipped with the tools to assess the changes in behaviours and power relations. The use of advocacy diary was found very effective in documenting the changes in each group.

The advocacy campaigns had been able to increase awareness amongst poor, marginalized and women on their rights and responsibilities. It helped them organize and claim their rights and engage in negotiation with other stakeholders. Although stakeholders hold differing views and understanding of advocacy campaign and that the government authorities often regarded this approach as confrontational, efforts had been made to bring all stakeholders in a constructive dialogue. They collectively discussed on issues of poor and marginalized people's role in CFUG governance and their access to CF benefits. However, as the RBA directly deals with social and political issues of unequal power relations they were expected to produce outcomes only in the long-run. Therefore, the tangible outcomes were not visible within the period of a short-term project.

The advocacy process had also created multiplier effects where users had moved beyond the CFUGs' territory and held the local governments' transparency and accountability by demanding to publicise their plan and budgets, encouraging participation of local people in planning process, and forging a linkage between CSOs and local governments.

Diverse and inclusive group of local facilitators, their active role in preparing and implementing advocacy plans, locally relevant educational material in vernacular language, and building a critical mass of local constituencies for campaign were very important aspects of this programme. A

reflexive process within the broadly defined action research mode that involves the facilitators and other representatives of local constituencies in a cycle of action and reflections was crucial in linking critical knowledge with desired social change. Specially designed training packages, involving facilitators in social and policy analysis, using locally relevant issues for reflection were some of the major strategies for equipping the facilitators with critical knowledge so that they could better facilitate the process of improving CFUG governance.

The findings indicate that CFUGs adopting good governance practices are able to ensure equity, livelihoods and sustainability in

community forests management. The advocacy campaign process remained an effective tool to influence policies and practices to strengthen good governance practices among CFUGs. It is learnt that a systematic advocacy process can empower weaker sections of the community to voice their concerns; and to claim their rights by making powerful people and institutions accountable towards them. It has also been concluded that the ability to claim community rights is highly dependent on the effectiveness of a critical mass generated through an empowerment process and a constituency on their own behalf.

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