Challenges to Participation: Lessons from Participatory Action Research with Community Forest User Groups in Nepal

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Abstract: Participatory approach to development is being increasingly tempered with criticisms that points out failure to address deeper issues of power relations. This article examines the challenges of participatory approaches to natural resource management drawing lessons from a participatory action research (PAR) with community forest user groups (CFUGs) in Nepal. Evidences show that the PAR process was effective in addressing the socio-political as well as institutional constraints at the CFUG level. Several positive livelihood impacts were also noted as a result of applying the process, although the exact nature of these impacts varied between the research sites. Some major steps of the PAR process were found to be effective and therefore were adapted by CFUGs both in the research sites and beyond.

Key words: participatory action research, community forestry, participation, adaptation, monitoring

INTRODUCTION

Participatory approaches have been widely applied in recent decades to natural resource management (NRM). However, the overwhelming optimism about these approaches has been tempered some what with critical analyses which question both their theoretical foundations and practical applications (Ojha *et al.* 2005; Mosse 2003; Cooke and Kothari 2001). The popularisation of participation, they argue, has been accompanied by a certain naivety about relations of power, both within and between communities. One commonly raised criticism is the persistent failure of participatory approaches to successfully target marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Elite domination, technocratic hegemony, gender discrimination and social exclusion have hindered the realisation of desired goals of such approaches. In addition, these approaches can both undermine local expertise, and may create false expectations (Brown *et al.* 2002).

Nepal's community forestry (CF) has been regarded as one of the major forms of participatory approaches to forest management. As such, CF can be considered as a rich arena to understand the complex institutional and socio-economic processes and outcomes of participatory approaches. The plethora of literature on Nepal's CF indicates that the programme has often not been able to produce the desired social, economic and environmental outcomes. The centre of criticism is on the elite domination and poor participation of disadvantaged groups such as women, the poor and *dalits* (Malla 2001; Neupane 2000; Paudel 1999; Hobley 1996). There are also conflicting reports on the environmental outcomes of the CF. For example, while Springate-Baginski *et al.* (1999) indicate an improvement in community forest conditions, Branney and Yadav (1998) report its deterioration, mainly due to overstocking and suppressed regeneration promoted by the 'protectionists' ideologies (FFMP 2000). In addition, there are several institutional challenges such as poor mechanism for identifying appropriate policies and support services and lack of learning-based approach to planning and implementation including monitoring (Paudel *et al.* 2003; Paudel *et al.* 2001; Pokharel and Grosen 2000).

In the context of such growing criticism, attempts have been made to better understand the socio-ecological complexities and dynamics of participatory approaches, and reconstruct the approaches to realise their empowering potentials. Using empirical evidence from a participatory action

research (PAR) project[1] conducted in collaboration with community forest user groups (CFUGs[2]) of Nepal, we explore how these challenges of participatory approaches can be addressed. The project aimed at assessing local perceptions towards CF and developing specific criteria and indicators for effective planning, implementation and monitoring. The project was initially implemented for two years and a follow-up study was carried out after 18 months of the completion of the first phase. The follow-up study looked at the continuation and adaptation of PAR elements by the CFUGs and also helped identify the extent to which original challenges of participation had been addressed.

The paper is divided into four sections. The second section describes the research sites and the PAR processes. The third section discusses the social and environmental outcomes of the processes. It is followed by an analysis of challenges of participatory approaches in NRM. Finally, the paper concludes with some implications for policy and practice.

THE RESEARCH SITES AND PROCESS

The research was carried out in five CFUGs of Baglung district in western hills of Nepal (Table 1). The selection of the research sites was based on criteria jointly developed by project researchers, government forestry staff and CFUG members. These criteria include diversity in: CFUG maturation in terms of the year of formation, legal status (handover and non handover), size of forests and the CFUGs, ethnic composition, and forest types (natural and plantation).

The project adopted PAR approach and focused on the CFUGs' collective action and learning processes in forest management. PAR is a process through which local people, with external facilitators, identify problems, collect and analyse information, and act upon to find solutions towards social and political transformation (Selener 1997). The three principal elements of PAR are research, education and action with the active involvement of local people who are likely to benefit from the process. The application of PAR process on NRM is relatively new, and is expected to contribute to developing relevant and appropriate practices in forest management.

Table 1 Summary information about research sites

Characteristics	Research sites				
	Bhane	**Jana Chetana**	**Jyamire**	**Pallo Pakho**	**Sirupata**
FUG establishment	1997	1999	1989*	1995	1995
Handover status	Handedover	Handedover	Non- handedover	Handedover	Handedover
Major caste/ethnic group	Bramin/ Chhetri	Magar	Bramin/ Chhetri	Bramin	Bramin/ Chhetri and Magar
Households	59	136	80	81	150
Area (Ha.)	5.00	105.25	8.00	9.00	6.34
Type of forest	Natural	Natural	Natural	Natural	Plantation
Species	Sal, Katus, Chilaune	Rachan, Chilaune, Khasru, Gurans	Sal, Katus, Chilaune	Sal, Tiju, Chilaune	Khote Salla

* Date of Co-ordination Committee formation

[1] The project 'Development of monitoring process and indicators for forest management, Nepal' (DFID/NRSP project R7514) was implemented jointly by the University of Reading, Livelihood Forestry Project, ForstAction and Environment Change Institute of University of Oxford.

[2] Local communities around certain forest patches form community forest user groups (CFUGs) - a specific group of people who share mutually recognised claims to specified user-rights to a forest (Marhajan, 1998) - who then take responsibility for the management of the forests and subsequently are entitled to the benefits the forests provide. Under the CF programme, more than 14 thousand CFUGs have been managing over one million hectares of forest (CFD 2006).

Adoption of a PAR process in the project site was considered to be vital to stimulate action and learning at the CFUG level, through the active participation and collaboration of internal (sub-groups) and external stakeholders. The idea was to understand and transform the power dynamics among stakeholders at the local level so as to provide opportunities for CFUGs for creation of negotiated knowledge and actions. The increased dialogue among the interest groups within the CFUG may contribute to recognize multiple interests and possibilities leading to democratic and equitable governance. Similarly, the increased interface of CFUGs with external experts would provide them with opportunities to reflect on their practices and modify their plans and actions as per need.

A general method of PAR was developed with a series of logical sequential steps, each step having specific objectives (Figure 1). The key idea to develop PAR process and its various steps, though appear generic in CF process, was to addressing the challenges of conventional approach to participation. The process was primarily aimed at enhancing awareness and communication, addressing the power imbalance among the users, and promoting learning-based approach to planning and implementation in the CFUGs. The main features of the process include: a) consideration of unequal relations of power both within the CFUGs and between CFUG and external stakeholders, b) conscious attempts to maximise learning and using it in the planning and implementation processes, c) reaching to each sub-group including disadvantaged and marginalised communities beyond formal decision making bodies.

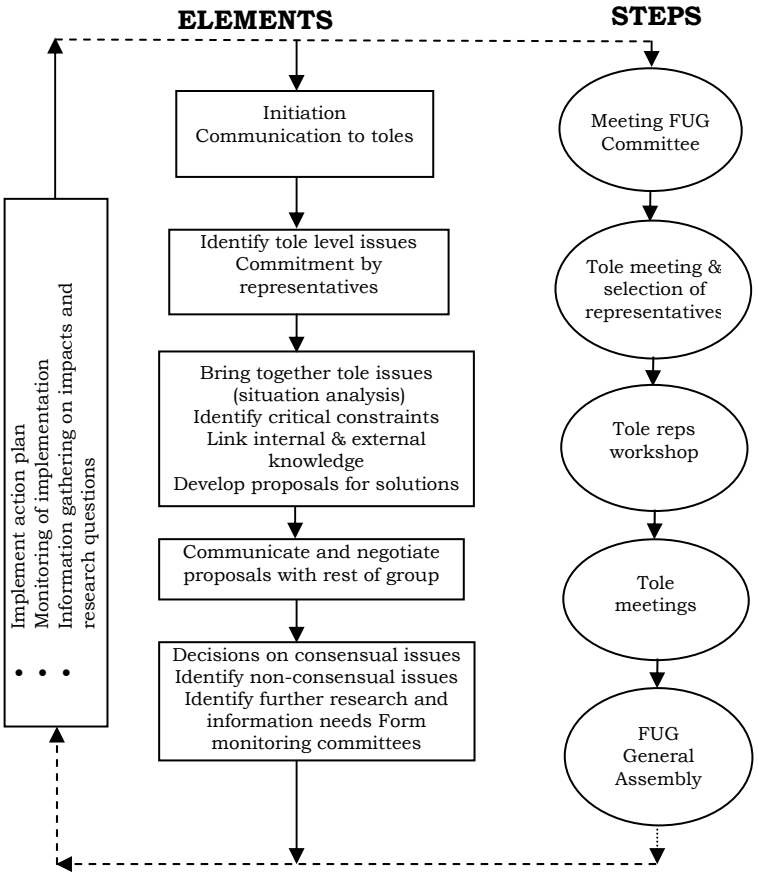

Figure 1: *Outline of the project's PAR process (Adapted from Malla et al. 2002)*

The PAR process intended CFUGs to develop participatory processes by experimenting on the issues of CFUG governance and forest management with sub-groups (both interest based and spatially differentiated *toles*[3]). The experimentation involves analysis of information and development of negotiated action plans at the sub-group and assembly levels. The additional spaces created by the PAR process were expected to increase disadvantaged people's access to decision-making processes so as to enhance the democratic culture in the CFUG functioning. Ongoing monitoring over time and space was an in-built element, allowing continual review of the process in the light of new ideas, conflicts or experiences. Due consideration was given to capacitate the CFUGs so that they could fully control, own and institutionalize the PAR process.

INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

The CF programme has been operating within the specific institutional and socio-political contexts of Nepal which include: a) resource based development planning process, b) contested understanding and interpretation of policy documents, c) inadequate financial, human and material resources to support development processes, and d) persistent elite domination in the society. These factors jointly have constrained open dialogue and deliberation among different stakeholders of forestry sector. The shortcomings and growing criticism of Nepal's CF process can largely be attributed to these constrained deliberations (Ojha *et al.* 2005). These aforementioned factors have also hindered the effectiveness of any innovative practices such as PAR which aim to enhance the social, economic and environmental outcomes of CF programme.

Since DFO is the key institution supporting CF process in the field, its role is vital in adopting and institutionalising PAR in the CFUGs. As the implementer of government's CF policy, it can facilitate in enhancing CFUGs' capacity, bring them with other district level support agencies and may jointly implement various development projects with external stakeholders. Moreover, it may facilitate intra-group communication, and promote equity and good governance in CFUGs. Apart from providing institutional and technical support to the CFUGs, the DFO staff are responsible for protecting forests, and increasing the area under plantation (Hobley and Malla 1996; Gilmour and Fisher 1991).

Unfortunately, DFO service delivery is largely a supply driven with a series of targeted interventions often planned at the centre with little regard to the actual need of the CFUGs. However, the current level of material (e.g. financial and equipment) and human resources (e.g. skill and knowledge of staff) of DFO is inadequate in responding to the ever increasing demand of CFUGs. More over, with the emergence of second-generation issues in CF such as equity, good governance, livelihoods and social justice, there is increased demand of new sets of skills and institutions to effectively facilitate the CF processes. Consequently, local communities have been unable to receive adequate and timely support in handing over new community forests and in reviewing and revising forest operational plans (OPs).

Each CFUG has to develop its OPs simply to guide its members in forest management activities which is also a legally binding document and acts as a memorandum of understanding between the DFO and CFUG. However, in practice, it usually works other way round. Considering OP as a tool for monitoring the CFUG performance, the DFO staff usually prepare it with detailed technical specifications of forest management often little understood by the users. These OPs are often prepared without proper analysis of social and ecological aspects and without adequate deliberation among CFUG members. As a result, many of the CFUG members knew little about their OPs. The condition is worse particularly in cases where most of the users are illiterate.

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[3] *Tole* refers to a hamlet or small settlement representing a cluster of usually 10-20 households identified by the users. *Tole* members often interact with the forest in a similar fashion and therefore may have common interests on forest management.

There was a poor information exchange among CFUG members and between CFUG and other stakeholders. It was observed that little opportunities are available for CFUG members to discuss openly on their concerns during general assemblies and other decision-making forums. In many cases, the users were neither fully aware of their rights and responsibilities to use and manage the forests nor were they aware of the costs and benefits of participating in CF processes. Similarly, the DFO staff, other stakeholders and the CFUG members hardly met for serious reviewing and planning forest management activities. Moreover, they rarely engaged in genuine dialogue for developing shared objectives, methods and procedures of CF process, and to define their respective roles. Possibilities of such genuine dialogue are usually obstructed by the existing unequal relations of power among the stakeholders (being DFO often powerful and CFUG powerless).

The persistent feudal socio-political structures compounded with fatalistic cultural practices in Nepalese society have resulted elite domination in CFUGs, with a subsequent exclusion of women and disadvantaged groups in decision-making and benefit sharing. The CFUG formation process, in the study sites, had mostly started with the identification of forest patches rather than considering livelihood needs of local people. Little analysis was carried out on the potential consequences of CF processes to the different sub-groups within CFUG. These forest resource-centred and elite-led CF processes have resulted in alienation of local communities from the processes and consequently poor participation of users, particularly women and disadvantaged ones.

Moreover, the CFUG members perceived that even the general assemblies were organised just to legitimise the EC decisions. They felt that they had little influence over the decisions. This is particularly true in case of poor and disadvantaged groups mainly because: a) they have to incur high transaction costs in participating CF processes that they can hardly afford; and b) they are tied up in a patron-client relations with the local elites and are, therefore, too weak to oppose the agenda forwarded by the elite which often undermine their interests and knowledge. Elite often develop power nexus with other stakeholders at village and district levels and use the same to remain influential at the CFUG. Resource-rich farmers have more trees in private lands usually sufficient to meet their forest product needs and are, therefore, interested in conserving the forests for long-term gains, often in line with the interests of the DFO staff. On the contrary, the forest-dependent resource-poor farmers are found to be interested in using the forest for immediate livelihoods benefits.

ADAPTATION OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Evidences indicate that the application of the PAR process was able to: a) address power imbalance among CFUG members; b) enable wider and active participation of different sub-groups; c) enhance responsiveness of elective committee (EC) to the poor and disadvantaged groups; and d) increase responsiveness and accountability of service providers, particularly DFO. The PAR process had been institutionalised by all the studied CFUGs by adapting or adopting its steps in varying degrees. The extent of local variation in the adoption and adaptation of these steps provided further critical insights into the reasons for, and constraints to, the application of PAR process. The adaptation and outcomes of various steps of PAR process are discussed below.

Tole Meetings

Effective communication among CFUG members was enhanced through revitalised *tole* meetings, which were not active since the formation of CFUG. The *tole* meetings, which were initiated during the first phase of the project' were largely found to be continued during the follow-up study. Low transaction costs and risks involved may have contributed to the continuation of these meetings. *Tole* meetings were perceived positively, as they were built on existing communication networks and they provided opportunities to raise common issues, resolve conflicts, encourage negotiation, and build consensus in planning and implementation. These meetings helped identify the issues, leading to increased general awareness and critical reflection of the CF processes. These also provided opportunities to develop innovative

ideas in addressing CFUG problems and enhancing CF benefits.

Tole Representatives: from Selection to Election

Now *tole* representatives become elected by the *tole* residents, who, previously, used to be selected by the EC. This has made the *tole* representatives accountable to their respective constituencies, i.e. *tole* residents. Once *tole* residents elected the *tole* representatives, they began to actively participate in the CF processes and aired their voices to the EC and general assemblies. Moreover, open and transparent *tole* meetings encouraged users to participate in such meetings. Consequently, the users participating in CF activities, including themselves in general assemblies, had increased in all the study sites. The *tole* representatives played an effective role in facilitating communication between the *tole* residents and CFUG and in mobilising *tole* residents. Effectiveness of *tole* representatives have been influenced by the level of CFUG awareness and institutional development, and perceived value of the forest resources. *Tole* representatives had to put more efforts in mobilising *tole* residents where the perceived value of the forest was low. For example, in Sirupata CFUG, the *tole* representatives had to play a greater role in mobilising users in CF activities due to its low potential benefits.

Institutionalisation of Review and Negotiation Procedures

Review and negotiation procedures continued in all sites albeit at varied scale. As part of these procedures, regular meetings between *tole* representatives and the EC were organized regularly. However, the degree of interaction varied from simply listening to EC decisions and passing these over to the *tole* residents to actively participate in developing agendas for general assembly. In the more active sites *tole* meetings were proved to be effective for exploring new ideas which helped build users' confidence enabling them to put forward ideas and promote collective actions.

Analysis of forest product supply and demand and equitable distribution of CF benefits had been institutionalised (e.g. by using wealth rank categories). All study sites established regular forest visits to assess forest condition. These visits enabled them to reflect on their management practices and to plan for the future. Roles and responsibilities were shared among CFUG members, mainly by forming sub-committees (e.g. monitoring sub-committee). This division of responsibilities has reduced the power of the elites and increased the capacity of CFUG members to develop their leadership qualities.

Impact on Livelihoods

The PAR process has shown some visible trends in improving livelihood outcomes of CFUG members. These outcomes are closely related to the types and conditions of the forests and the institutional growth of the CFUGs. The product supply and regeneration potentials of the forests had influenced users' perceptions of the immediate and long-term benefits of CF. It was observed that CFUGs with valuable forests were found more actively managing the forests than those with less valuable ones. Plantation forests in one of the study sites provided little immediate benefits to the users. In this case, long-term commitment was required without immediate benefits. It, therefore, demanded extended external facilitation in involving users in forest management for future benefits. As the community was more heterogeneous it further demanded extended external support. In fact, social relations of power defined by class, ethnicity and gender had influenced the level of awareness, participation and institutional growth of the CFUGs.

In four of the study sites there was increased supply of forest products, CFUG funds and income generating activities. More equitable CF benefits distribution system has been established in three sites. In some sites, it is clearly noticed that the PAR process led to an increase in democratic functioning within the CFUGs. In Jana Chetana and Bhane CFUGs, for instance, there was regularity in group meetings, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities to the *tole* residents and *tole* representatives. Although it is difficult to assess improvements in livelihoods that could be directly attributable to the PAR process, the process showed considerable potential for enhancing livelihoods capitals, including a general shift towards more active forest management.

DISCUSSION

Although there was considerable variation between the sites, there was continuation of most of the steps of the PAR process. Among these *tole* meetings, mobilisation of *tole* representatives and monitoring through sub-committees were the most common. However, the effectiveness of these steps were largely influenced by the relations of power within the CFUGs, institutional maturity of the CFUGs and the perceived value of the forests.

The PAR process was able to address some of the institutional constraints at the CFUG level. Joint learning between the CFUGs and DFO staff enabled the former to place realistic demands, and the later to be responsive to the CFUG demands. The facilitation role played by DFO staff contributed to changing perspectives and positions of both CFUGs and the staff themselves. The DFO staff were found appreciating the perspectives and demands of the CFUGs. In due course they also developed expertise and confidence in facilitating the CF processes. Despite these changes little change has been observed in enhancing the quality and relevance of OPs.

The PAR process was also found to be effective in addressing the local socio-political constraints such as elite domination in CF process. Appreciating this role of PAR process, many neighbouring CFUGs in the district have applied the process (particularly the key steps). Moreover, it is learnt that these steps had been initiated or continued with little or no external facilitation. The positive impacts on communication and participation within CFUG and low transaction costs involved in these steps might have encouraged CFUGs to use the PAR process.

A major strength of the PAR process was its focus on the *tole* level. Focusing on this level allowed greater access of all CFUG members to the CF processes, and encouraged their active participation. Election of *tole* representatives has ensured greater responsibility of the *tole* representatives to voice the concerns and priorities of *tole* residents in various forums. Similarly, the election process drew increased interests and commitments of the *tole* residents that they began to participate actively in CF processes. Revitalisation of *tole* meetings and mobilisation of *tole* representatives created opportunities for CFUG members to shape CFUG policies and practices.

CONCLUSION

This article presented the experiences of PAR process applied in CFUGs in western hills of Nepal. The process was developed and implemented with a view to facilitating CFUG planning and monitoring. The process faced considerable challenges, notably problems in ensuring full participation of CFUG members, primarily due to elite domination, and inadequate support services. However, these challenges were gradually tackled by the process itself. The issue of elite domination in the CFUGs was addressed through ensuring wider inclusion and deliberation to planning and monitoring processes mainly through *tole* meetings, mobilisation of *tole* representatives and monitoring by sub-committees. These steps were not only continued in the study sites but also were adapted by the neighbouring CFUGs.

The institutional constraints for PAR were addressed by enhancing interactions between DFO staff and the CFUG members which helped create mutual understanding and reciprocal relations. The continued interaction further imparted responsiveness and accountabilities of both the DFO staff and the CFUG members. Moreover, the staff developed their capacity in facilitating CF processes, while CFUG members were capacitated to voice their concerns and demands. Reorientation and capacitating DFO staff with facilitation and group mobilisation skills made DFO's role effective. DFO staff could also help CFUGs to prepare simple and practical OPs so that the users easily understand and apply. Moreover, they could enable CFUGs to enjoy autonomy in forest management operations by simplifying the process of approving, revising and implementing the OP.

Acknowledgement

This publication is an output from the research projects funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of DFID. We also acknowledge the intellectual contribution of Yam Malla and Anna Lawrence as the members of the research project team.

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