Decision making process in community forestry : case studies from Kanchanpur and Kaski districts, Nepal

Ishwar Dhami[1], Chiranjibee Prasad Upadhyaya[2], Benktesh D. Sharma[3]

This paper describes the existing systems of decision-making in community forestry at various level and the factors associated therein and compares the process in the two different biophysical and socioeconomic settings of Terai and Mid-hills on user group level case study basis. Data sources include group discussion; field observation; rapid appraisal tools; questionnaire survey; and citation of relevant materials and their analysis for meaningful interpretation and comparison. Factors such as personal selfishness, caste, educational status, and political ethics were seen common in both studied areas. The factor *social status* was found dominating in hills while the feeling of regional belongingness was found greater in terai. Of many systems of decision making, consensus systems prevail most in hill where as majority systems prevails in terai. Irrespective of different biophysical and socioeconomic settings, users were well aware of decision making process. However the system of decision-making varies from one to another forest users group. The paper also reports that consensus system is considered to be the most participatory and easy to implement and also promising in managing conflicts. This papers attempts to compare aspects of decision process from two community forests to give a broader overview of situations. As far as generalization of this paper is concerned, this should be made only for the comparable situations only as there exist huge differences in various districts in studied ecological settings in Nepal.

Key words: decision making, systems, process, factors, conflicts, community forestry

The community forestry programme envisions ensuring the power of the community to protect, manage and utilize the forest resources after its handing over with the ultimate objective of raising the living standards of local community (Arnold, 1992). This underpins the notion that the state and the local community can jointly manage forest resources to the benefit of both parties (Anderson, 1995).

To data 28.57 per cent of the lands in the Midhills and Terai are being managed as community forests, which correspond to 68 and 17 per cent of total land area of the country respectively (HMGN, 2003). Forest Act 1993 and succeeding bylaws have recognized Community Forest User Group (CFUG) as an autonomous organization where decision made by it general body play crucial role in managing the forest and community development. There are different levels in decision process - ranging from simple decisions that can be made by individuals to complex ones involving the whole society.

Community forestry until the early 1990s, emphasized people's participation in reforestation of degraded lands. Forest have emerged thereafter management and community development issues (Regmi and Sharma, 2000). The changing role of community forestry is guided by diversified needs of the people involved in management. The benefits of Community Forest (CF) can only accrue if people are involved democratically and voluntarily in contribution, equitable benefit sharing, decision making in respect to setting goals, formulation of policies and planning and implementing economic and social development programme; (Nightingale, 2002). Hence the decision-making is the core of group cohesion to work for common objectives.

This paper discusses the existing systems, and factors affecting in the process of decision making in hills and Terai.

[1] Resource and Environment Conservation Society Nepal, PO Box No. 14193, Email: ishwarjee@hotmail.com
[2] Institute of Forestry, P.O. Box 43 Pokhara, Nepal, E-mail: cpupadhyaya@hotmail.com
[3] Annapurna Conservation Area Project, PO Box 183, Pokhara, Nepal, E-mail: bdsharma@kmtnc-acap.org.np

Materials and methods

This study was carried out at Torichour CF of Kaski district and Siddha CF of Kanchanpur district. The selection of these CFs were based on criteria like meeting up of all legal provisions of handing over process; forest condition, market accessibility, type of species in the forest, fund, number of households, forest area, literacy, dependency of users on forest; ethnic heterogeneity among the users; lack of similar studies in the past. The data were collected during March – June 2003 through discussion with committee members on issues such as strategy and approach of management, forest products availability and distribution systems, fund collection, decision making and information dissemination. The direct field observation were also made the study. Focus group discussions with members of each CFUG including women, disadvantaged groups, CFUC, *tole* and ward members were organised separately to analyse the prospects of their participation in decision-making. The key people who are familiar with the CFUGs were interviewed to validate the information. Semi-structured questionnaire surveys were conducted among the 15 % randomly selected households of CFUGs. The objective of this was to get information on socio-economic condition is study areas, perception of users on CF programme, demand and supply situation of forest products, and about decision making process in CF. Key informants like local political leaders, teachers, community leaders, local forestry staff, NGOs representatives and other influential persons were interviewed informally. Secondary sources of data such as operational plans, minutes of the committee meeting, assemblies of each CFUG were reviewed. The necessary information was also collected from DFO, DDC, CBOs, and NGOs/ INGOs.

Study sites

Torichour CFUG at Kaski district

Torichour CF is located in Kaski District at ward no 3 of Bharatpokhari VDC at an altitude of 810 m asl. It covers 33.75 ha of natural forest divided into 5 management blocks. Previously the forest was degraded and since the formal handing over in 1997, people are active in forest management and social development activities.

The Siddha CF at Kanchanpur District

Siddha CF is situated in Kanchanpur District ward no 7 of Mahendranagar municipality, Haldukhal. Its area is 153.5 ha which is divided into three management blocks. It consists of both natural and plantation forest. It is at an elevation of 176 m asl. From 1966 to 1993 deforestation occurred and forest patches were cleared for cultivation. In 1993, plantation had been carried out by District Forest Office with participation of local people. People's interest and extension of community forestry programme resulted in to the formation of conservation committee in 1994, which was officially handed over as CF in 1999.

Results and Discussions

Table 1 provides an overview of the profile of studied CFs with some basic information for making a general comparison of the biophysical and socio-economic conditions. In addition it also provides information on woman's involvement in decision making.

Table 1: Overview of studied CFUGs

SN	Description	CF-1	CF-2
1	Name of CF	Torichour	Siddha
2	Forest Area (ha)	33.75	153.5
3	Forest type	Natural	Natural and plantation
4	Species composition	*Schima wallichi, Castonopsis indica, Shorea robusta, Diospyrus melanoxylon* and *Madhuca indica*	*Adina cardfolia, Acacia catechu, Dalbergia sisso* and *Mallotus philippensis*
5	No of user household	156	304
6	No of FUC member	17	14
7	FUC Meeting frequency and user's assembly	One per month and once a year respectively	One per month and once a year respectively
8	No of Women in FUC	4	2
9	Male to female ratio in FUC	3.25	6
10	No of lower caste in FUC	1	1
11	Handover date	1997	1999
12	Ethnic profile	Brahmin, Chhetri, Occupational Caste, Magar	Brahmin, Chhetri, Occupational Caste

The field observation identified trees on private and marginal lands in both CFUGs. As forest is not fully stocked, people collect only dead and dry fuelwood from forest. Presence of trees outside forest in the household periphery can also be considered as people's strategy in meeting the deficit supply from the forest.

Level of decision process

Different levels of decision making, ranging from simple that can be made by individuals to complex decisions involving the whole society are required at time and space in CF (complexity, here, refers to the degree of extent of involvement of actors). This level varies by culture and can be illustrated by a complexity continuum (Figure 1) which explains that more we go towards the individual level, the simple the decision process becomes and more we go towards a group the complexity increases.

The current research identified a set of decision process as schematically presented in figure 2.

Decision systems

The heterogeneity in caste, income, education, religion and occupation in CFUG makes a group rich in ideas, knowledge, and experiences. For the achievements of the common goal in CF, users are adaptive to different sets of decision systems (Miller, 1990). These sets as identified during the study are described in subsequent paragraphs.

Consensus system: Participants openly discuss about statements sharing their ideas and experiences to come to a common conclusion unanimously to make decision. Sets of logical arguments are also put forward before reaching a consensus. This system was seen prevalent for deciding regular activities like collection time of fuelwood and fodder from forest.

Propose and accept system: If an idea proposed by an individual is accepted by all, it becomes a decision. This system was seen common at FUC level and when elite person has some influences.

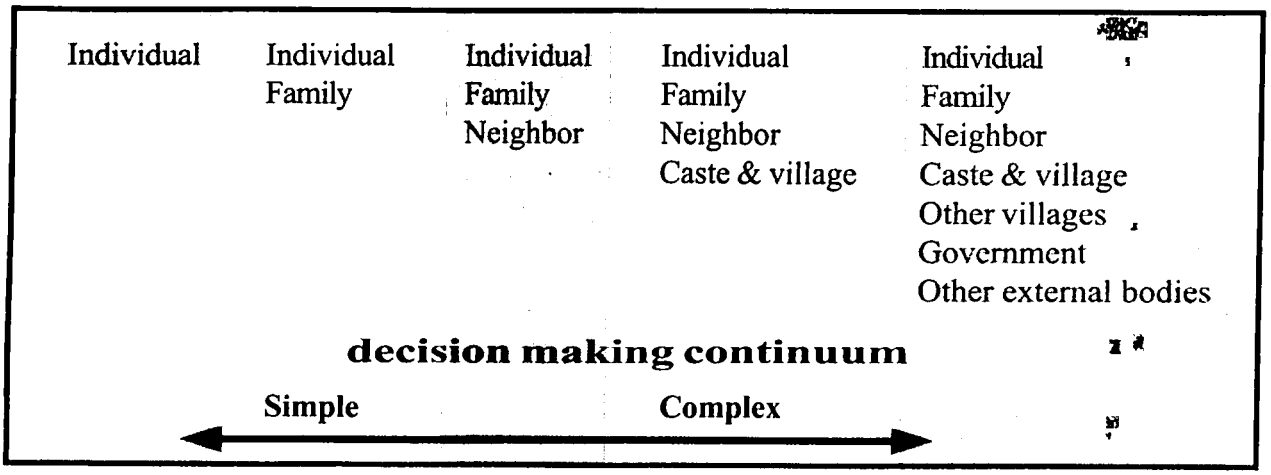

Figure 1: Decision making continuum - individuals and groups involved in decision making process (Poudel, 1995)

f. Decision	The best alternative – efficient in barring conflicts is chosen. This is announced by the secretary and put in minutes embarking the signature of the participants indicating their agreement to the decision.
e. Discussion	People share ideas, knowledge, willingness and experience to reach the conclusion by analyzing alternative course of actions and their consequences.
d. Presentation	Statements on agenda are presented one by one in the meeting –by the Chairperson of the meeting - usually the CFUC chairman.
c. Putting the agenda	Formal agenda is prepared and put forth for discussion and decision at meetings
b. Call for meeting	Call for meetings for participatory discussion at group and committee level based on the nature and complexity of the problems and issues
a. Define problems / issues	Investigation and diagnosis of the problem and objective identification by collecting relevant information

Figure 2: The decision making process as identified in this study

Majority system: This system exists when there is more than one idea arising but consensus is not reached. The decision is made upon the opinions/ vote of the majority of participants. This system was seen in cases like electing the committee members in both the CFUGs.

Clapping system: If any one or some proposes an idea is agreed upon clapping is done by others to make a decision without discussion. People having societal reputation were found to be the key players in this type of system.

The decisions are made both at CFUC and CFUG level. The nature and purpose of decision made at two levels are different and so are the practiced systems. In this study, systems named consensus; propose and accept; and majority were found in CFUC level while consensus; clapping; and majority systems were found at CFUG level.

The decision systems at CFUG level since the formation of group at each CF is presented in Figure 3 which shows that consensus system in Torichour CF and majority systems in Siddha CF is practiced more than other forms of decision making.

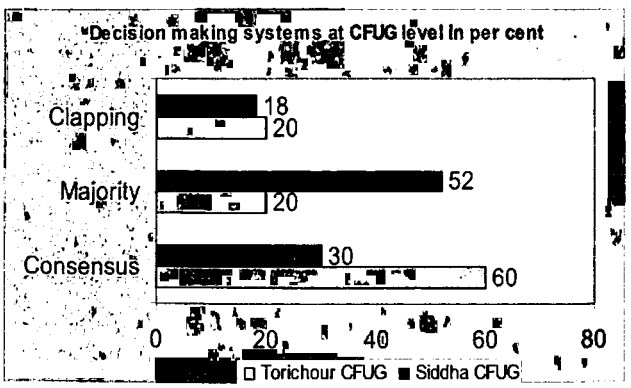

Figure 3: Decision making systems at CFUG level

Roles of stakeholders in decision making

Though women are primary users of forest and are involved in collection and utilization of forest products, their active participation in decision making level was not observed. In latest users' assembly, only 12 % women were present at Siddha CF and were simply listeners and silent observers of their male counterparts. While at Torichour CF, 24 % women were present and they were found active in discussions. For this paper, a higher role means that actors discuss and adhere to their views or go against others' ideas during the decision process; a medium role means they support others' ideas; and low role means they are passive. The role of occupational castes and the elites in the decision process is plotted in graph by analyzing their views during the discussion.

The institutionalization of the CFUGs differs significantly by size and condition of forest areas, village structure and demographic situation, historical background and ethnic heterogeneity are the major general factors influencing the CF strategy and concept in the Terai (Skarner 1999).

The occupational castes like *kami, damai* and *sarki* the ethnic minority were found less active in discussions. Similarly, elites were found to play important role in decision making. They could influence others easily and decisions are made in compliance with their opinion. The DFOs at both sites were found acting as catalyst in decision-making process by advising and facilitating in the process.

Figure 4 shows that higher proportion of occupational castes have low level of participation in Terai while medium level. This fact could also be ascribed to the better awareness of such people in hills where CF programs has a longer history than that in terai (Regmi and Sharma, 2000). Similarly, elites had significant roles at higher level in Torichour CF than that in Siddha CF ascribing to the fact that in terai, there are diverse community and ethnicity in one settlement.

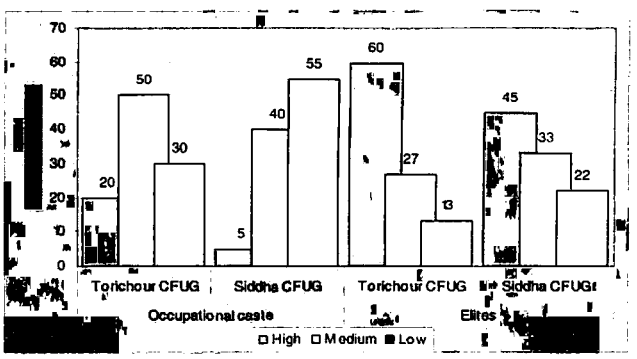

Figure 4: Role of occupational castes and elites in decision making

Factors affecting decision making

Williams (1988) describes factors of different nature and origin affects decision making process in the forest management and based on the observation and analysis of the role of different stakeholders in the decision process. A set of factors ascribing to

their roles were identified and categorized and are described in Table 2 with illustrations and examples in figure 6.

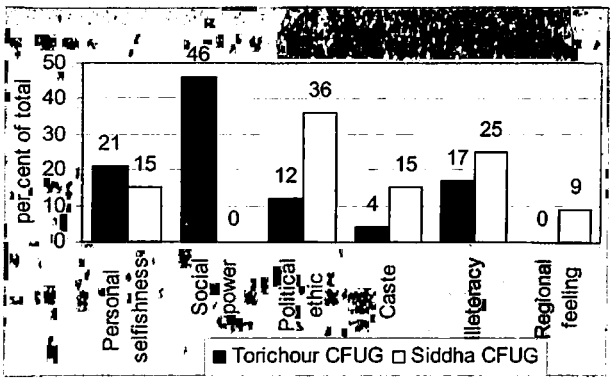

Figure 5: Factors affecting decision making in studied CFs

Figure 5 shows the factors that are prevalent in the decision process the studied CFUGs. It shows what type of factors were influencing on what scale upon the decision making process.

Conclusion

Irrespective of being at different biophysical and socioeconomic settings, users are well aware of the different systems and process of decision making. Certain factors such as personal selfishness, caste, education level, and political ethics are commonly found influencing the decisions in CF. Role of elites was found highly influential in hill CFUG where people still follow the traditional norms and respect social elites. Users of Terai CFUG are found to be

Table 2: Factors affecting decision making

Factor	Description
Personal selfishness	The users who are engaged in forest-based enterprises (e.g. saw mill, furniture industries) attempts to extract forest product at low prices and the ones with private forest goes against the earlier one. *As example from Siddha CFUG, two committee members were suspected in smuggling timber from forest and CFUC decided to expel them from CFUC. After one month, these members gather their supporters and argued to withdraw the decisions. The committee is then forced to withdraw the decision in order to resolve the conflict.*
Political ethic	The political inclination of the users affects decision process. If users violate the rule and regulation of the group, those who follow his/her political streams argue in support whereas other users who follow a different political belief stand against. *In Siddha CF, the CFUC fixed the date of cleaning and weeding in CF in Feb 2000. The chairman of the committee and the secretary were from two different political backgrounds. During the time of decision, secretary was absent. Later he argued if the time were not suitable and proposed for postponing till the next year. The chairman denied the change of date. Later the supporter of the secretary also forced the committee and decided on the postponement of the program. year.*
Social power	Social dignitaries had dominating role both CFUGs. Elderly people, local leaders, rich people have influential role in meetings and assemblies. Their views and ideas that may or may not be beneficial for CGUGs, are accepted. *In Torichour CF, in an assembly of Dec. 2001, CFUG decided to make provisions for collecting fee on annual renewal of membership. The amount of such fee was not declared at that time and suggestions on this were being collected. Later, local dignitaries suggested the committee should not be making such provisions with argument that such provisions are not in favor of poor. And this was followed.*
Caste and ethnicity	Discrimination in caste was found in the studied sites. The so-called higher caste (i.e. *Brahimins, Chhetries*) had domineering roles and Kami, Damai, Sarki have little role in decision process. *In Torichour CF, during the assembly of May 2002, Kami users asked to provide stump for charcoal making to support their metal work. But all other users refused to make such provisions suggesting that all are same in sharing benefits.*
Illiteracy/Educational status	Most illiterate people had common understanding that educated people know more than illiterate ones. During meetings and assemblies, illiterate people, therefore, agree on each and every decision made by educated ones whether they are beneficial to the group or not.
Regional belongingness (Cohesion)	All adjoining settlers had right over the utilization of forest which is an open entity prior to CF. As CF is handed over on the basis of accessibility, the users may belong to various settlements, villages and wards. The users of one settlement/village/ward always try to make decisions in favor of that region. Further, in most of the cases political boundary is taken as the demarcation line of CFUG formation though it is against the CF handing over process. *In Siddha CF the whole one ward of municipality is taken as one group. The people close to the forest from the neighboring ward are not allowed to be the forest user.*

motivated by regional feelings during decision process. This could be ascribed to that fact that the Terai CFUG studied (in Kanchanpur) was primarily composed of hill migrants and due to their limited awareness they prefer to support the idea of people from within their inner circle. The case of other Terai district might be different from that of the studied districts.

Woman's participation was found higher in hills than in Terai. Occupational castes were more active in decision making in hills than in terai. This could be due to their higher dependency on CF for forest products. Women's very limited to no roles to affect or shape decisions. Women extension workers are recommended to encourage women's active participation in Terai CF and trainings in similar line is suggested required.

Consensus system of decision making was found most participatory, easy to implement and efficient at managing conflicts than other existing ones. Thus, consensus systems in decision making should be prioritized over other forms so far as practicable.

References

Anderson, KE. 1995. Institutional flaws of collective forest management. *Ambio* 24 (6): 349-353 pp.

Arnold JEM (edit). 1992. Community forestry: ten years in review. Forests, Trees and People – Community Forestry Note 7, FAO, Rome.

HMG/N. 2003. FUG Database Record available in MIS, 2002, Community Forestry Division, Department of Forest, Kathmandu.

Kayastha, BP. 1991. Elements of Community forestry in Nepal. Sabitri Devi. Katmandu.

Miller, CJ. 1990. Decision Making in Village Nepal, Sahayogi Press, Kathmandu.

MPFS, 1988. Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, Nepal. His Majesty's Government of Nepal. Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, Kathmandu, Nepal, HMG/ADB/FINNIDA.

Nightingale, AJ. 2001. Participating or just sitting in ? The dynamics of gender and caste in community forestry. *Journal of Forest and Livelihood* 2(1):17-24 pp.

Poudel, SK. 1995. Decision making process in community forestry. A project paper at Institute of Forestry, Pokhara.

Regmi, B. and Sharma, BD. 2000. Identification of conflicts in community based Tropical Forest Management in Nepal. *A fellowship report submitted to International Tropical Timber Organization (ITTO), Japan.*

Skarner, G. 1999. Community forest management aspects in the Terai region of Nepal. *In* Mathema, P.; IC Dutta; MK Balla; and SN Adhikary (eds). Sustainable Forest Management, Proceedings of an International Seminar, August 31 – September 2, 1998. Institute of Forestry, Pokhara. 152–159 pp.

Skarner, G. 1995. Forest utilization expert technical report no 14. Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation, Forest Management and Utilization Development Project, Kathmandu

Williams, MRW. 1988. Decision Making in Forest Management. International Book Distributors, Dehradun.