Unintended outcomes of community forestry intervention in Nepal: some implications

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This paper illustrates how community forestry intervention, despite good intention, may produce unintended outcomes. The reason is mainly attributed to the practice, which tends to consider intervention as a blueprint approach than a process. This is in contrast to the policy, which essentially considers intervention as a process for devising a fair and equitable system, based on consensus derived from a number of informal dialogue and discussions. Arguments are put forward in favour of a process approach that do not necessarily limit itself to the problem of intra-community level but would go beyond and attempt to embrace wider issues pertaining to the inter-community or the region. It is pointed out that unintended outcomes do not necessarily limit themselves to the community forestry sector but extend to the field of development intervention in general.

Key words: Community forestry, intervention, decision-making, equity, outcomes

Community forestry intervention as a process

Nepal is renowned for its innovative community forestry policy (Mahapatra and Khanal 2000). Community forestry has been accorded the highest priority in forestry sector (HMG 1989) and for which supports are being received from a number of donor agencies. Over 848,000 hectares of forests have been handed over as community forests to nearly 11,000 user groups (approximately 1.2 million households), who are now managing these resources (DOF 2002). The current policy considers community forestry intervention as a process which essentially involves handing over use rights of the government owned forests to the indigenous groups of people, who customarily hold the *de facto* use rights of such forests (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). The Department of Forests staffs are expected to play facilitative role in the overall process. They would not only help the people in identifying who the use right holders are, but would also be intimately involved in sorting out potential inequity situations amongst members of the recognized group in the management of forests and in subsequent benefit sharing. *Operational Guidelines* guides the field people about the processes required. This is in theory if not always in practice. Addressing inequity issue is considered as a matter of paramount importance. This is given that community lacks homogeneity in terms of interest and capacity, which is in fact the reflection of socio-economic and cultural differences. Consensus building is the key to the overall process which, in a simplified form, gets captured in the simple *Operational Plans* and the accompanying *Constitution*. Once those documents are approved from the concerned district forest officer, the control would be officially shifted to the community of user groups. This situation is remarkable when looked at the fact that the government forests outside the community control have not got a chance to be put under any form of management, and where the resources are degenerating more than ever before. Equally remarkable is the fact that a number of user groups have been commissioning local development works from the money generated out of the community managed forests. Drinking water supply, irrigation improvement, trails construction, community house construction and provision of the furniture for the schools are some of the important areas covered by the funds (Baral 1999a).

Controversial views on 'intervention'

There are in fact different schools of thoughts, which values intervention differently. One school of thought views that there is little point in considering community forestry as a process in a way the current community forestry policy has envisaged. It pleads for a move whereby the government takes its hands off, so that the legitimate groups of people will take

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control of the resource by default. The role of forestry officials in the handover process is considered to be unnecessary or even counterproductive. For example, Pandey (1990) proposed to 'denationalize' the resource, and in such an event people will resume a proper form of control on the forest. Ostrom (2000), and Ostrom (2001) and Varughese (2001) tend to see that people in certain situation tend to be 'self organized' while in others they fail to do so. They attribute the reason to the local environment where the system operates, thus implying that external intervention may have little role to play. Pokharel (2001), while questions the role of bureaucracy in facilitating the decentralization processes, sees that the more committed forest professionals may contribute positively in such processes. Gilmour and Fisher (1991) see the role of intervention and argue that a failure to accept community forestry as a social process may create social inequity, as people will fail to comply at the same time. Baral (1999a) sees intervention as a social process but argues that even the best form of intervention may not be able to sort out the problem in an explicit way due to the fact that several problems are of generic nature, which may evolve over time. Varughese (2001) sees a need of working with villagers for identifying bonafide users, which he thinks, would help prevent 'free riding' and 'encroachment'. Adhikari (2001), based on literature review of the common property regime concludes that successful systems are linked with equitability. Though he does not really talk about the value of intervention as a process. Given the heterogeneity in the society in terms of wealth and power, the role of interventionists to accept community forestry as a process is clearly inevitable for ensuring a reasonable degree of equity.

Unintended outcomes of community forestry

Based on some field examples this section will present the unintended outcomes of intervention. It will be seen that the cause of unintended outcomes is primarily due to the fact that intervention failed to accept community forestry as a process. The role of intervention as a social process is thus justified.

While there are encouraging results of community forestry, a number of unintended outcomes (term credited to Gilmour and Fisher, 1991) are also apparent. It may be useful to cite examples from some places to figure out what might have contributed to such anomalous situation. It is hoped that policy makers and field interventionists will pay attention to these matters and thus help avoid or minimize such undesirable situations.

In Siraha district, over 6,000 hectares of forestland have been handed over as community forests to 54 user groups. The concerned forest patches lie in the southern fringe of Churia range, the only remaining tract of forestland (28,000 ha) in the district. While the said handover has contributed to regeneration of the resource in the area and help generate funds for commissioning local development works, it has a clear implication to the main tract of Churia that just adjoins those handed over patches. While restrictions are imposed in the community forests, the demand for forest products has continued both within the forest user groups, and the settlements extending as far as to the Indian border. These groups of people though resort to some alternative measures (for example, meeting parts of the need from private plantations), are unlikely to meet their demands in a significant way, and therefore have no options but to continue rely on Chure more than ever before. The restrictions in the community forests have resulted into more extensive use of inner part (*mani-land*) of Chure. This as a consequence causes massive destruction in the hinterland of Chure (DFO Siraha and FOBAS 2001).

Problem exists in the intra-group level as well. While money has been available for commissioning a number of development works, people of many user groups are skeptic about appropriate use of such funds due to lack of transparency. One group, for example, built a temple, which, cannot actually be visited by lower caste *Musahars*, and *Chamars*. There are examples, where assembly meetings could not take place ever since the handover and that people at large do not know the financial status of the available funds. The people in the committee take decisions on *ad hoc* basis.

Several anomalies in the community forests have been observed in the Terai Region (Baral and Subedee 2000 a and b; Baral and Subedee 1999 and Baral 1999 b). In Kailai district of the far-west, for example, a group of households numbering around 1600 in Chhatiwan received as much as 4,000 hectares of prime Sissoo and Sal forest. This handover witnesses a number of problems with repercussions to both inside the group and outside. The ones to have received the resource

are relatively new migrants from elsewhere in the hills. This handover has implications on the use rights of the indigenous ethnic Tharu communities of the adjoining Bardiya district who until then had been using the forest for various purposes. They now have little alternatives available to meet their need of forest products. Clear problems also lie within the group itself. The group members in general feel that the forest is more like a 'chairman forest' rather than a 'community forest'. They are least happy about the way the restrictions are made in terms of product collection, about the sale arrangements and about the use of the funds that have been generated. The said accounts relate to the local problem. Problems of the regional nature (or national for that matter) are also apparent. It is an open question whether people living next to the rich resource deserve all these resources. Such questions can be raised looking at the fact that the resource poor areas like Bajura, Humla and Dolpa are quite underdeveloped, and the government has got moral responsibility to contribute to the development process of such areas by providing funds that have been generated from the forestry sectors as well.

The term 'major five', is widely used in Jhapa district, which they say, make decisions about all community forestry matters. The term has been used to denote people who hold key positions in the committee namely: chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, joint secretary and the treasurer. People, in general, thus have least role in decision-making. No wonder, the executives from one of the user groups of the district tried to sell substantial quantity of timber outside the user group without due consultation with their group members. The unhappy people thus found no option but to report it to the district forest office. Apparently, this incidence eventually turned into a court case.

The problems mentioned above are related to the Terai districts where relatively nominal efforts were made in terms of carrying out social processes for community forestry. Apparently, the handover took place without much consideration as to who the indigenous use right holders were and whether there was a genuine form of consensus amongst the members regarding the forest management and the use of the funds. Terai, until recently, failed to get attention of the major donors. As a result, required social processes are lacking and reduced to official formalities of writing the operational plan and the constitution, which in fact seem to have significantly contributed to the problem in a major way.

This, however, is not to suggest that problems do not exist in the hills, where more intensive homework is done during the handover process with supports available from the donor assisted projects. Lacks of democratic decision-making process have been reported in districts like Dhankuta and Parbat, where there are extensive degree of support from the British funded project (Pandey 1995; Shrestha and Shrestha 1997). Problems are also reported from Kabhre Palanchok and Sindhu Palchok districts (Chhetri and Nurse 1992) where such supports are available through Australian funding. The examples of misuse and manipulations of the resources are also reported from districts like Tanahu and Lalitpur where supports were available from Denmark aided community forestry project. Baral (1999a) and Karki, Karki and Karki (1994) have similar observations in Palpa and Kaski district respectively.

Implication and conclusion

The community forestry intervention has not been free of problems. Inequity situations may lie in the intra or inter community level and sometimes even between the state and the communities in question. Similarly, there may be cases of 'pressure shift', which might ultimately lead to degeneration of the forest resource not covered by the handover. In the context of such emerging problems, some people would apprehend that it might have been in fact erroneous to handover forests at all. When they say so, their thrust is in the Terai where commercial value of forest is very high. However it is very clear from the experiences so far that stopping handover does not stop the state of forest degeneration, for anyone to bother about anything else. The forests under the control of the government machinery have not performed any better (Baral and Subedee 1999). Given these situations, there is little choice left other than mobilizing the people for the management of forest resources.

From the examples cited above, one could infer that intervention could play a meaningful role provided that it is carried out carefully. This is testified by the fact that places with more careful intervention have much lesser degree of problem than the places where interventions were made in haste or done with a 'blue print approach' with little homework. The social

processes are carried out in a relatively more rigorous way in the hills thus resulting into a less problematic situation. The acute problem, particularly, in the Terai is indicative of the fact that the processes expected for community forestry have largely been ignored. Intervention there happened to be more like a 'blueprint approach' as social processes were replaced by official formalities.

A better and more improved intervention is required to meet the twin goals of sustainable forest management and social equity. Proper institutions have worked reasonably well in the direction of conserving forest resources in many places. Apparently, institution is the key thing. A search for a proper form of local institution is the prerequisite for a more sustainable and more equitable forest management system, and that intervention may be helpful in creating such institutions. This, however, is not to suggest that careful intervention may bring flawless community forestry. However, it may help minimize the problems we face today, and that can be rectified over the years through experiences gained.

A very well intended endeavours may have unintended outcomes, particularly in situations where intervention failed to become a social process. The intention of community forestry is not 'the lack of transparency', 'deprivation of indigenous use rights' and 'pressure shifts' as has been observed at present. Emergence of unintended outcomes, however, should not mean as to forgo the attempt altogether. It should rather be used to find why the problem arose in the first place and to improve the future interventions.

It may however be pointed out that unintended outcome is neither a unique case of Nepal nor that just of the forestry sector. The problem may be faced worldwide in the development field in general, and India may not be an exception, which has embarked on a Joint Forest Management (JFM). Irrigation projects provide benefits to the large landholders rather than the poor, and agricultural projects to the benefit of those who can heavily invest on capital than those who employ menial labour. Similarly, the education projects provide benefit to the elites than the unprivileged class. Such common problems are likely to crop up during the intervention process, in the development field in general. Watchful and learning from the mistakes is needed for any meaningful intervention. Well-intended projects may yield unintended outcomes sometimes by default and sometimes due to poor extension. The best bet would be to acknowledge these realities and accept intervention as a process, and learn from the mistakes that have been made.

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