

Empowering local users in forest management of Nepal

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Community Forestry (CF) programme was initiated in Nepal in the late seventies. In the last twenty years, this programme has not only gained impressive international reputations but also fulfilled firewood and fodder demand of local communities. The programme has also generated some revenues for local community development. Being a new concept of forest management, new problems have been faced and are get solved simultaneously. One should not forget that CF is designed to suit the Nepali local conditions, and may need appropriate modifications to apply in other parts of the world. Other countries could learn a substantial lessons from Nepal's experience in this particular matter. The main lesson is that if the communities are empowered, the resources can be well protected, managed and utilised.

Keywords : Community forestry, forest user groups, forest act, legislation, rules, forest policy, empowering, handing over, Nepal

Forests are an integral part of the farming systems in Nepal. Traditional management of forests by specific local groups was common, especially among the hill communities. To recognise these traditional users and the traditional use practices of the forests, His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMG/N) realised the need of involving local communities in forest management in 1961. However, the regulation was not enacted until 1978.

The 1978 legislation gave authority to the Forest Department to handover forests to local village panchayat (the local government of that time). The executive body were elected, but despite the policy orientation to them, the legislation was very conservative and impractical. However, the stepwise amendments were enacted in 1979, 1986, 1993 (Act) and 1995 (Rules) (Annex 1). The programme went smoothly as the legislation became clearer to implement the CF policy. However, the recent Act and Rules also need some minor changes for more flexibility and community oriented.

The community forestry policy focuses mainly on :

- Handing over accessible forest to the Forest User groups (FUGs) irrespective of political boundaries. FUG is made up of households living near by and who have been traditional users of the forest resources.
- FUG to get all income generated from the community forest resources. As the FUGs start management they get Forest Products from

cleaning, pruning and thinning operations. They are distributed among the users and surplus is sold outside FUGs.

- Orientation of the entire forestry department staff to cater for change of their traditional role as a policeman to an extension worker (Joshi 1993).

Main clauses of the present community forestry legislation:

1. Any part of accessible forests can be handed over to the communities who are traditional users of the resources, if they are interested to manage the forests.
2. Any amount of National Forest can be handed over to the FUGs if they indicate that they are capable of managing the resources .
3. Conversion of national forests to community forest has priority over conversion to any other forest use such as leasehold, protected and production forests.
4. CF boundaries are fixed by traditional use practices rather than administrative boundaries.
5. Local District Forest Officers (DFOs) are authorised to hand over Forests to FUGs. This authority vested with higher officials or the center in the past.
6. FUGs have to manage the CF as per their constitution and Operational Plan (OP) which has been approved by the local DFO.
7. FUGs are autonomous and corporate bodies with perpetual succession.

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8. FUGs can plant long term cash crops, such as medicinal herbs, without disturbing the main forestry crops.
9. FUGs can fix prices of forestry products irrespective of the government royalty rate.
10. FUGs can transport forest products simply by informing DFO.
11. FUGs can establish forest based industries based on the resources available in their CF.
12. FUGs can use surplus funds for any kind of community development works.
13. FUGs can amend their OPs simply by informing DFO.
14. Any government and non-government agency can help user groups to organize and to manage CF.
15. FUGs can punish any members who break the rules of their constitution or OP.
16. DFOs can take community forests back from FUGs if they operate against the OP. However, the DFO must give the forest back to reorganised FUG as soon as the problem is resolved.

The three major constraints in the CF legislation:

1. FUG can punish their own members if they commit mistakes. The FUG can not punish to persons out side their FUG if they misuse the resources.
2. FUG can amend the OP and need to inform to DFO but do not need approval, which could divert FUG from sustainable management to uncontrolled quick exploitation of the resources.
3. If FUG commit mistakes DFO can take the forest back without intermediate soft punishment or provision to alert.

Why community forestry in Nepal

The Private Forest Nationalisation Act (1957) was enacted with good faith to protect forests and ensure a fair distribution of its products. However, the message was not communicated well to the farmers and resulted many of the forests and lands cleared by the *de facto* owners with the help of farmers (Joshi 1989).

It took about 20 years to realise the need of community participation in forest management programmes. There are many examples in the hills of Nepal, where communities continue to manage forests successfully irrespective of laws and ownership. Based on these experiences and the communities interest, the traditional policing system of forest protection has changed to a participatory

approach, ultimately empowering the users themselves, where the users are interested and capable to manage.

How community forestry worked

The amendment of CF legislation done in 1987 shifted the Village Development Commettes (VDCs) oriented legislation to the concept of FUGs which removed the political structures. This approach worked very well as it was based on local practices. After two years of implementation, the democracy movement occurred in 1989 when all political bodies were suspended including District Development Commettes (DDCs) and Village Development Committees (VDCs). The interim government took about three years to elect DDCs and VDCs members, and the three year gap of the local political body helped to implement the programme easily and successfully. Fortunately that was the year (1989) when the Master Plan for Forestry sector (MPFS) was published supporting the CF programme strongly, because the MPFS has given highest priority to the CF programme. That was also the time when regional and district training programmes for CF activities became well established and are conducted smoothly to bring changes not only among the field staff but also among the users, teachers, women and local leaders. The HMG/N and donors also became active at that time to lead the programme successfully through Forestry Sector Coordination Systems. Three years later when the VDC members were elected, in many cases, they were already personally involved and satisfied with the CF process, although the process had by-passed the VDC, making the FUG potentially rich but the VDC poor. It was believed that due to lack of dominating political bodies, even women and neglected groups of society became active in the programme. In some districts, women were leading to implement the CF programmes, and were more sincere in Forest Management because they are the real users. However, in many cases, the women and the poor do not appear in the meetings, and if they appear, they rarely speak and even if they do, the elite do not listen them (Joshi 1996). Involvement of women parallel to men in the decision making process is still a problem in many cases, although the MPFS (1989) stresses its importance.

The main causes making the CF programme successful are: indigenous knowledge is followed, the programme is protected by community oriented legislation, changed attitudes of the field staff, government's support, decentralised decision making processes, intensive country wide training

programmes and study tours, regular publications of guidelines, incentives to field staff, flexible support of the donors, coordination among donors and the government, supportive role of politicians and journalists and sound social structure of the communities. However, the main reasons for the success are that users are now truly the owners of the forest resources and the resources are potentially very productive to uplift their living standard.

Present status of community forestry

The progress is dynamic because of extensive demonstration effects, training and changed community oriented field staff. However, the progress reporting and networking is very poor and compilation of information is very slow. Figures are changing every day and the progress till May 1996 is shown in Table 1.

The Terai forest are mostly potential Commercial Productive Forests and Protected Forests. The progress of handing over in the Terai is very slow except in some bilateral supported districts. For CF in the terai to be successful, production forests are also to be managed side by side, which is not happening. The terai DFOs are hesitating to hand over CF due to lack of clear guidance. A rough estimate (Tamarkar and Nelson 1990) indicates that 61% of the total forests of Nepal are potentially community forest. By now about 11% of the potential CF is already handed over (Table 2). Only 64,000 households are managing CF in the Terai which is only about 12% of the total households involved in the community forestry process.

Income and impact of community forestry

The main objective of the CF programme was envisaged to meet basic forestry needs such as fuelwood, fodder, leaf litter, and timber for the communities. As the forest is managed by the users there is no need for special programmes and funds for protection (watchers), fire protection, and silvicultural operations. Harvesting and distribution processes, as per approved OPs, may need some special attention, but they also do not need money for most of these activities. Because, the funds are continuously collected from the sale of forest products, fines from offenders and contribution from agencies and user group members. Once FUGs start managing their CFs they generate income, they do not need funds for most of the management operations as those operations are conducted by their own members mostly voluntarily.

Some subsidies received from the government for protection, nursery raising, planting and weeding are saved and deposited by the FUGs by doing the works voluntarily. As funds is accumulated and forestry operations were not costing, the government was compelled to amend the legislation to "the surplus fund of the FUG can be spent for other community development works", such as drinking water, irrigation, school, health, sanitation, roads and social activities. This amendment made the communities educated, healthy and developed socio-economic status. In many FUGs the fund is also used for small loan mobilization which is cheaper and easily managed and refunded by the groups. These developments would not be possible using government funds alone. This change created positive impact on the commitment of the users. The previous legislation compels to use the income of the FUG only for forestry development works. If the compulsory use of the fund for forestry development was not amended the fund could have heavily misused and traditional voluntary activities would have disappeared. There are many examples, such as Bagmare FUG of Dang district, who are running a secondary school paid through FUG funds.

An example of income and expenditure of Karkitar FUG of Sindhupalcok district is given in (Table 3) which indicates sources of income and how the funds are utilised on forestry and other community development works. Similarly, table 4 gives a rough picture of funds of FUGs and expenditure in 38 out of 75 districts. It is also clear from table 3 that if surplus funds are not allowed to use in community development works, the expenditure in community forestry development programme is negligible. This is really a good incentive to manage the natural resources and environment and a direct decentralised support for the community development.

Based on the experiences of the CF programmes HMG introduced this concept in the watershed management programmes and to manage buffer zones around protected areas. This has become very effective in conservation of biodiversity and control of poaching. About 30-50 percent of income from protected areas can be spent for community development programmes in the buffer zones (Joshi 1996).

The overall impact of the CF programme is so high that besides the physical achievements the demonstration effect is very dramatic and there is more larger impacted area. Many applications for handing over from the user groups are in queue for legitimisation in district forest offices and many

more communities are protecting the forests without FIMG support.

Problems encountered

The CF programme is the best solution to manage degraded forest resources of Nepal. The empowering process is progressing smoothly, and there are no serious problems faced so far. The legislation is very supportive and field staff are committed. However, a few minor problems have occurred in some places, such as in Tanahu and Lalitpur districts each harvested more than the OP allowed. The blame goes to bad intention of the FUG leaders and weak interaction of DFO staff. The FUG chairmen wanted to harvest more to raise funds which was not fully supported by the FUG members. The forests were taken back by the DFOs. However, the DFOs have to return the forests once the problems are solved. These cases are still in the courts. (see constraints on page 33).

Some constraints for discussion

1. Despite substantial achievements that have been made, there are still bureaucratic weaknesses on long term vision of the programme. Many FUGs which have potential to set up sawmills or furniture factories are not encouraged but delayed for all development. The government gets high excise duties and income tax from the industries.
2. As the number of FUGs increase they need more post-formation support and frequent visits of technical field staff. The need for more field staff for new and old FUGs is increasing. In practice, field staff are decreasing in the new organisational changes. The lack of frequent field visits, interactions and supervision may lead to wrong directions and decisions made by FUGs may go against the policy.
3. The delay in legitimising FUG will delay income to the FUG thereby delaying management operations. This could create conflict through the misuse of resources in unofficially managed forests by the communities, mainly due to lack of sufficient field staff. So, the field staff have to be increased immediately.
4. Due to limited post-formation supports, several problems were observed where the POs are not followed to get more benefit. FUGs can easily amend their OPs through a FUG assembly if they can justify the changes technically. Hence, regular technical support and interaction is needed. However, the DFOs should try to make FUGs self operational and ensure the rules are followed. Too much intervention by DFOs should be avoided to allow FUGs to follow indigenous practices (Cheetri and Pandey 1992)
5. Once FUGs begin to manage their forests they can increase more biomass. Where the communities do not need all of the forest products for their basic needs, organised commercial forest utilisation may start. For this, the majority of products are either sold in the open market or there is a need to establish forest based industries.
6. It is more practical if one big agency (donor) instead of many is involved to make it easy to coordinate. Some times, many donors are good to share ideas. Involvement of governmental and non-governmental organisations and other related sectors such as agriculture, live stock and water resources with the communities should also be supportive and aware of the problems. The soil conservation and protected area alongwith other community related sectors should be integrated for mutual support and socio-economic development.
7. The contribution of the CF development programme on agricultural farm land and livestock is very significant. Forest contribute 49.8 % of total digestable nutrients to livestock (Raut *et al* 1997) most of which is supposed to come from near by CF. About half a million hectare of forests are now managed as CF by the farmers who get more fodder for livestock and more leaf litters for compost fertiliser. This is a huge contribution on food production and economic development of the communities which is not considered at all in the newly approved National Agricultural Perspective Plan. Nor, forestry sector also has consider potentiality of community forestry to improve livestock management.
8. The working relationship between local communities and field staff has to be very friendly and supportive. Dahal (1994) indicates that although the progress is going well the relationships are still very poor. However, in due course of process it is expected that this relationship will improve.

Lessons for other countries

Other countries can also learn from Nepal's CF programmes. The main lesson is that, if communities are empowered, the resources can be well protected, managed and utilised.

Only involvement of local communities in government programmes will not be successful. The users should get feeling of ownership and benefit. Joint Forest Management (JFM) in India did not progress well because the government still owns decision making authority and the programme is not protected by suitable legislation.

The CF programme of Nepal is designed to suit the development of regional ecosystem, subsistence agriculture in mosaic with forests, indigenous knowledge, etc. It also addresses the problems such as misuse of resources by the government and people, linkages of forestry with subsistence agriculture, open live stock grazing, forest fire, fragile himalayan physiography and coordinating attitude of the mountain people, the political situation and so on.

Table 1: Forest handed over till May 1996

Year	Handed over	Area (ha)*	Household (No.)
1987/88	3	79	398
1988/89	34	518	2732
1989/90	29	1916	5356
1990/91	54	1949	5189
1991/92	354	1991	37506
1992/93	634	3592	73303
1993/94	950	63308	99249
1994/95	1390	*98530	141159
1995/(May 1996)	(325)	26983	39255
Not Mentioned	(1583)	116446	181531
Total :	5,356	362,551	585,658

* Total Forest area of Nepal = 5.5 m. ha.

Potential CF area = 3.355 m. ha. (61%)

Percent of Potential CF already handed over = 11% (362,551.5 ha.)

Through this rate, it will take 20-30 years to handover all potential CF in Nepal.

Table 2: FUGs in Terai and Hills till May 1996

	Household (no)	FUG (no)	Area (ha)
Terai	270	31,596	64,293
Hill	5086	330955	521,365
Total	5356	362,551	585,658

Table 3: Income and Expenditure Karkitar Sathimure FUG, Sindupalchok District

Village profile:

Name of Village Development Committee :

Sangachok

Range Post : Sukute

Handover date: May 1993

Households: 142

Members: 784

Area: 75 ha.

Forest type: Riverian Sal Forest

Number in FUG committee: 15 members

Operational Plan Period: 1994 -1999

Income (Rs) up to March 1997

Activities	Income
1. Grant from District Forest Office	13000
2. Sale of Forest Products	169628
3. Penalty and fines	960
4. Application fee	1030
5. Prize	5410
6. Fees from FUG members	--
7. Visitors donation	--
8. Others	1083
Total	191,111

Expenditure (Rs) up to March 1997

Activities	Expenditure
1. Stationaries (Office Support)	8566
2. Forest Watcher Salary	3937
3. Forest Development	--
a. Nursery operation	
b. Plantation	
c. Others	
4. Community Development	
a. Drinking Water	46744
b. Irrigation	92519
c. Temples and public place	6864
d. Road Construction	00
e. School Construction	00
5. Prize/Donations	00
Total	158630
Bank Balance	32480

Source: DFO, Sindhupalchok, May 1997.

Many other developing countries have similar situations. However, a carbon copy of the system will not work. It needs detail study of their own countries to make programmes suitable and acceptable. Modify or amend the legislation as it faces problems as they are implemented. The initiation should be with positive pictures and supportive views. Negative views at the beginning will never make the programme successful. The team of communities, government field staff and projects have undergone a long learning process to reach the present level of CF programme of Nepal (Hobbley *et al.* 1994). The approaches should be upgraded as experiences are gained from the field.

It has been proved that the organised communities are the better managers. They should be empowered and supported. Government should formulate procedures to implement programmes that depend upon indigenous knowledge, socio-political situations and ecological conditions of the region with legal protection specially ensuring security to local communities. The bureaucrats have to be positive and supportive. The journalists and media have to play major roles in communicating government policy and successful cases from one corner to another. Intensive training of field staff for new orientation and preparation of clear cut guidelines also play key roles to make the CF programme successful.

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Annex 1 : Evolution of CF Rules in Nepal

Subject	By-Law 1978	1979 Amendment	1987 Amendment	New Act 1993 (1995)
CF area	not more than 125 ha (PF) 250 ha. (PPF)	125 ha. 500 ha	no limit no limit	no limit no limit
benefit share % to community	40%	75%	100%	100%
To be spent from the benefit	50% (for forestry)	50% (for forestry)	100% (for forestry)	Surplus fund for any community development as per FUG's decision
Pricing of products	not less than royalty by DFO	not less than royalty by DFO	not less than royalty by community	by community
Plan approved by	Conservator Political	Conservator Political	Regional director Political	DFO
Boundary Management units	Panchayat (political unit)	Panchayat	User's committee under panchayat	Use practices User Groups (assembly)
Chaired by	Elected village leader	Elected village leader	selected any body by political body	Selected by the assembly by consensus

Table 4: Districtwise expenditure (NRs) of FUG II May 1996

S. No	District	Income	Forest Development	Community Development	Miscellaneous	Total Expense
1.	Aachham	813601	0	0	357106	357106
2.	Arghakhanchi	1258443	663285	20200	207976	891461
3.	Baglung	1068883	271824	145109	72255	489188
4.	Banke	58206	0	0	10000	10000
5.	Bhojpur	133680	0	0	25207	25207
6.	Dailekh	89897	0	0	40417	40417
7.	Dang	1512230	611483	0	0	611483
8.	Dhading	9900	0	0	500	500
9.	Dolakha	834536	278257	0	109750	388007
10.	Gulmi	362467	293731	38550	0	332281
11.	Kabreplanchowk	232307	0	0	119205	119205
12.	Kailali	159551	20000	0	139551	159551
13.	Kapilbastu	3600	0	0	1500	1500
14.	Kaski	965200	0	0	24000	24000
15.	Kathmandu	383893	0	0	276456	276456
16.	Khotang	161169	0	0	88071	88071
17.	Lalitpur	1005960	0	0	452599	452599
18.	Makwanpur	388126	0	0	397068	397068
19.	Mustang	28184	197600	0	0	197600
20.	Myagdi	470976	0	48240	235108	283348
21.	Nawalparasi	3466387	28220	0	229267	257487
22.	Palpa	382671	102689	3917	37262	143868
23.	Parbat	814249	107276	48462	282610	438348
24.	Pyuthan	1057397	357630	8972	55275	421877
25.	Ramechhap	1146838	487976	31650	181774	701400
26.	Rautahat	1400	0	0	1400	1400
27.	Rolpa	79877	0	0	25055	25055
28.	Rukum	290209	211420	1000	18800	231220
29.	Rupandehi	608477	25665	371337	0	397002
30.	Salyan	1629849	0	0	1016505	1016505
31.	Sankhuwasabha	1236285	0	0	584268	584268
32.	Sindhuli	455603	0	0	319136	319136
33.	Sindhuplachowk	1833641	0	0	570850	570850
34.	Siraha	35719	0	0	315686	315686
35.	Surkhet	900000	0	0	0	0
36.	Syangja	346202	0	0	176519	176519
37.	Udayapur	640153	18007	9500	289298	316805
38.	Wokhaldhunga	272595	0	0	209577	209577
	Total	25138361			6870051	11272051

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