

Policy/Book Review

Department of Forest's new community Forestry Guideline

Reviewed by Hemant Ojha, ForestAction Email: forestaction@wlink.com.np

About the guideline

Department of Forest (DOF) has issued a new version of Community Forestry Guideline in May 2001, replacing the first version that was issued 10 years back. Officials engaged in developing this amendment indicate in their preface statements that a new version of the guideline was felt necessary in the changing contexts of community forestry policies and practices over the past several years in general, and in particular, to address the challenges of meeting escalating demand for increasingly diverse services to communities. The guideline was prepared with involvement of, and support from bilateral forestry projects, who deputed their representatives in the guideline review task force constituted by DOF. An outline of the draft guideline was discussed in two national level meetings of government forest officials and forestry project staff.

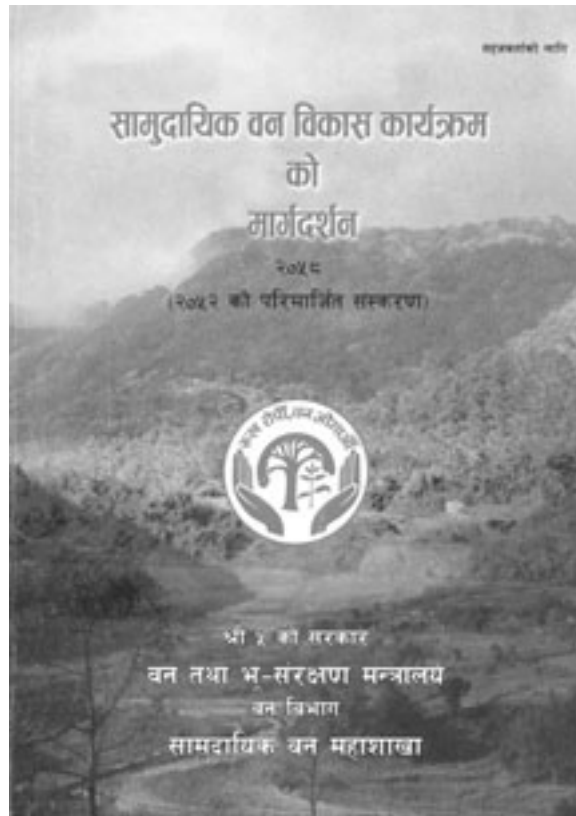
The guideline was discussed in two national level meetings of government forest officials and forestry project staff.

The guideline provides an official guidance to the implementation of community forestry at the field level. The document is aimed primarily at the facilitators who assist communities

wishing to get organized as forest user groups (FUGs) or the existing FUGs through various stages of community forestry. The 48-page document contains six chapters and eight appendices. Presented below are some highlights of the guideline, including the strong and weak elements.

Key stages of community forestry

The guideline stipulates that community forestry development process can be divided into five important phases: identification of users, FUG formation, CF operational plan preparation, implementation, and review and revision. The guideline suggests possible objectives and actions for each of the phases. The first three phases are concerned with forming FUG and preparing operational plan, whereas the last two are related to supporting the FUGs in implementing the plans. The five stages are briefly outlined below:



- **Identification phase** basically consists in establishing rapport between facilitators and forest users as a first step towards establishing a FUG. In this stage, facilitators can visit different existing practices related to forest management and utilization, and may be able to develop tentative understanding on the boundary of potential community forest and the areas from where households come to use the forest.
- In the **FUG formation phase**, guidelines are provided to accomplish two key tasks-FUG formation, and preparation and registration of the FUG constitution. Possible activities suggested in this phase include: formation of a support group, development of specific action plans in consultation with the support group, identification of different Toles and interest groups, and planning and organizing of Tole and interest group meetings. A general assembly of users should be called to finalize the constitution and elect an executive committee, which will then be assisted with the group registration process at the district forest office (DFO).
- The third phase consists mainly in **handing over the forest to the FUG** by preparing a forest management operational plan (OP). The guideline suggests ways through which intensive discussions may be held at Tole as well as interest group levels to identify and negotiate forest management options. A detailed forest assessment is also suggested before prescribing forest management operations. A detailed checklist of possible contents of the operational plan is also given. Once the operational plan is finalized through the users' assembly, it is submitted to the DFO for approval. If the DFO does not agree with any of the proposed provisions of the OP, or has some suggestions, s/he must return the OP to the respective FUG, asking for revision. The FUG should incorporate the suggestions and resubmit the OP for approval.
- The fourth phase is **the phase of actual operation**, in which facilitators are advised to concentrate in providing FUGs with needed technical and institutional support so that they can implement forest management and other group plans, developed in the first three phases.
- The fifth phase is related to **review and revision of constitution and operational plan**. Once the constitution and operational plan are registered and approved, the FUG becomes fully functional. With new experience, there may be a need to review these documents. This phase allows the FUGs to continuously improve their rules and provisions. An emphasis is given on monitoring, especially self-monitoring by FUGs, which may help promote internal learning within FUGs, as well as joint learning with other stakeholders. Some monitoring guidelines for DFOs, Range Post, and FuGs are given. The review process becomes mandatory once the fixed term of the management plan expires [as the guideline specifies that the period of operational plan should be less than 10 years].

Presented below are the strong and weak points in aspects of format, readability, interpretation of rights of forest users established in the forest acts, provisions for service delivery through various types of service providers, and other key aspects of community forestry addressed by the guideline.

Strengths

The guideline can be considered an innovative document in various aspects. It recognizes various types of services to FUGs before and after formation, allows flexibility to facilitators as regards what action should be taken at different stages of the community forestry process in different situations. It also specifically points to the need for addressing the interests and concerns of the poor, women and marginalized groups within the community, and provide a list of possible actions, particularly at the first three phases of the process.

The guideline recognizes the possibility of three different types of users based on the extent of their dependency on forest, which may allow more flexible and collaborative institutions to emerge at the community level. From the gender perspective, the guideline is strong in that it stipulates the inclusion of names of both male and female members of households in the FUG records.

In terms of process, the guideline allows facilitators to form FUG formation support group at the early stage of community forestry. Also, the emphasis on household level interaction of facilitators may help contribute to the better participation of disadvantaged users. Two consecutive rounds of Tole meetings - for constitution and operational plan - may facilitate better negotiation of rules among men and women of various wealth classes, with different interests on forest.

Finally, the guideline is commendable in terms of weight and options given for the promotion of monitoring systems at FUG as well support institutions. In particular, the information checklist provided for FUG, Range Post, Ilaka, DFO, DDC, regional and central offices, along with some formats and process of information analysis may be an important point of departure towards strengthening the monitoring systems of community forestry at different levels.

Weaknesses

Although the five phases are more or less clear and understandable, the guideline does not flow from a clearly designed conceptual map of specific contents, it is particularly difficult for an average facilitator to pick up ideas and apply in the field. Several key concepts are not adequately explained and elaborated. In this sense, it loses the very essence of a guideline, which should smoothly flow and be easily conceptualized by its targeted users.

One reason for the low readability is the poor organization of contents. There are very long lists of points without short headings for specific points or category headings [such as 26 points of operational plan contents in pp 18-19], and this makes it difficult to internalize the ideas suggested. There are many repetitions and overlaps within [such as training in p 23] and between sections [such as phase 4 and 5], and the structure of presentation fails to clarify linkages between sections, especially when there is a need for repeating the same thing. The headings are sometimes misleading [for example: p 14 "constitution endorsement" contains "FUG election"].

The guideline in some cases fails to clearly recognize the arrangements made in the Forest Act 1993, that legitimizes it. There emerges a confusion regarding the roles of facilitators and users. The Forest Act 1993 gives users the responsibility to prepare plans, whereas the guideline emphasizes the role of facilitators. In addition, FUGs are mandated to repeat the process of operational plan development in case the DFO does not agree with FUG proposal (or has additional suggestions), in contrast to the legal provision that FUGs can continue with their decision, unless DFO objects on the ground of serious environmental effects of the proposed action.

The guideline recommends very intensive involvement of services providers but still fails to indicate how different types of service providers could be engaged in the process. Although community forestry operates at micro, meso, and macro levels, the guideline focuses mainly at the micro level processes. In other words, it focuses on FUG development alone, and does not touch on how various stakeholders manage their interrelationships in relation to community forestry. Although NGOs are accommodated in the name of "other institutions", the explicit focus of the guideline is only on government facilitators.

In the suggested outline of agreement between DFO and FUG concerning forest hand over, an explicit statement mandates FUG to comply with any instructions of rangers and DFOs. This raises a serious debate regarding the autonomy of FUGs. The guideline also intends to retain the previous agreements between DFO and other agencies, even after the hand over of forest to communities. Also, there are no 'social' mechanisms and processes suggested for the resolution of

conflicts between FUG and DFO. Any instructions of the DFO are made mandatory to FUGs, thus creating a critical imbalance in the power relations between the FUGs and the DFO. One reason for this character of guideline could be the imbalance in the involvement of GOs and NGOs, including the representatives of forest users themselves, during the guideline preparation.

There are several other technical and process guidelines relating to community forestry, prepared by either DOF itself [such as Forest Inventory Guideline], or by other agencies such as resource inventory guidelines of Swiss supported community forestry project. Since the community forestry operational guideline is a more inclusive document, it could have referred to these guidelines for extra technical details to be considered at any relevant action or phase of community forestry development.

Coaching is a great way to bring about other people's self-development.

Competency - assess current level of performance

Outcomes - set outcomes for learning

Action - agree tactics and initiate action

Checking - give feedback and make sense of what's been learnt

When coaching

- *Don't ignore what happened yesterday*
- *Use what's happening today*
- *Think about what you want your people to be doing tomorrow*