

Participatory action and learning in forest management: A field worker's guidebook for supporting community forest management

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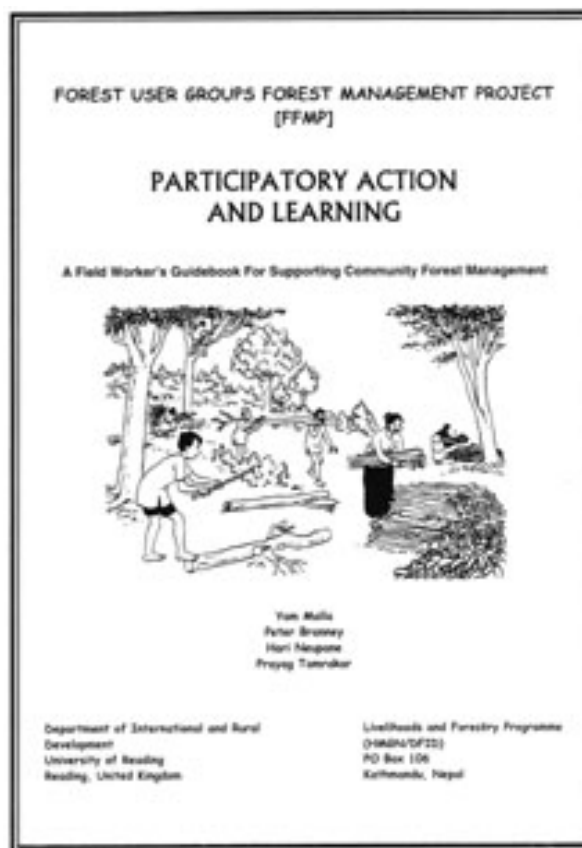
This guidebook is written by Yam Malla, Peter Branney, Hari Naupane and Prayag Tamrakar, team members of the forest User Groups Forest Management Project (FFMP).

Despite the scale of success of community forestry in the hills of Nepal, a number of challenges have emerged. One of them is the protectionist and passive forest management approach of the majority of FUGs. As a consequence, Community forest has livelihoods far less its potential. The guidebook has come out at a time when there is a growing concern and debates on these issues, and increased attempts as regards how to facilitate FUGs in the management of forests, making a move from passive to active and equitable management without compromising the future potential of the growing stock.

The guidebook introduces Participatory Action and Learning (PAL) as an approach for both FUG members and forestry field staff to learn together to promote active and equitable management of forest. Simply, PAL is about how facilitators and users act together to learn from experience, and hence continually update the plans and subsequent actions.

It is based on the concept of the learning cycle for participatory action research (PAR) used by FRP/DFID funded FFMP, a collaborative research project of Department of International and Rural Development, The University of Reading, UK, Livelihoods and Forestry Programme (LFP). It is a unique synthesis of experiences gained through intensive action research in forest management with four forest users groups in the middle hills, while at the same time enriched by the experiences of LFP.

PAL is a very reflective and anticipatory cycle of learning process in which reflections are made on actions, which are adapted continuously. In this sense, PAL process recognizes conscious learning through action as a core principle of creation of knowledge in a participatory way. The Authors of the guidebook are the researchers themselves who were fully involved in Action research and have long experiences with good understanding of community forestry in Nepal.



The beauty of the guidebook is simplicity in writing and presentation. Sixty pages of the guidebook have been divided into four major parts. First part describes core concept of PAL in a simple way. In the second part, the Authors have come up with 6 basic issues and factors that influence the forest management objectives and put forward stepwise PAL strategy to handle these issues, analyzing the overall context of community forest in the middle hills of Nepal. Part three discusses the four stages, 11 critical steps and their activity plan, providing a smooth flow of content to help readers clearly visualize the concept and approach of PAL. Part four explains in a simple language the examples of activity, methods, tools and techniques, which are presented and illustrated with local units of measurements.

No doubt, it is a very useful document ever documented to support active forest management by user groups in Nepal. This *"can make a positive contributions to sustainable livelihoods.... shifting FUGs from 'passive' to 'active' management of their forest resources, and " will help to improve the quality of support which FUGs get from DOF and NGOs staff"* are the impressions of the heads of LFP and Forest Department respectively.

This guidebook is mainly prepared for Ranger, Forest Assistant and Forest Guards of the DOF, Project field staffs, as well as staffs, activists and animators of 1/NGO/CBOs and FUG members. Two assumptions in which the guidebook would be useful as expected are: first, the field staff possess basic sets of knowledge and skills needed to form FUGs as outlined in the operational guidelines, and second, FUG members have the understanding of government policy on community forestry. The planned Nepali version of the guidebook will be more useful and accessible to large number of village forestry workers.

One aspect of improvement in the guidebook is to balance the operational and conceptual elements. In particular, the "critical steps" may be made more generic and applicable in a wide range of contexts, by incorporating the learning that will be gained through future experience. Also, it should be modified to better address the need of NGO workers, who are expected to play increasingly greater roles in the delivery of institutional support services to FUGs in the years to come.