

Retrospective and Prospective View of Community Forestry in Nepal

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Abstract

Community forestry in Nepal has gone through significant changes since its inception in the late 1970s. On one hand, impressive gains have been made in terms of developing and applying methodologies suitable for conditions in the Middle Hills. On the other hand, major challenges remain in terms of achieving equitable outcomes and in having community forests become significant engines for community development in forest-rich communities. The current political instability also requires a questioning of the appropriateness of the implementation modalities developed during more stable political times.

Key words: Nepal, community forestry, civil society, policy

INTRODUCTION

Community forestry in Nepal has gone through considerable change since 1976 when the National Forestry Plan recognized the importance of encouraging the conversion of community or government land to "Panchayat Forests". This was followed in 1978 by promulgation of the first set of rules and regulations to make community forestry a legitimate form of forestry intervention in the country. This note gives a brief overview of the major changes that have occurred since that time, as a prelude to looking ahead at possible directions for the future.

THE FIRST 12 YEARS--1978 TO 1990

The first formal community forestry policy framework (The Panchayat Forest and Panchayat Protected Forest Rules and Regulations 1978) recognized two distinct forms of community forest. Panchayat Forests (PF) were to be plantation forests which were established on largely bare land by communities, and subsequently protected by them. Panchayat Protected Forests (PPF) were degraded natural forests which were to be rehabilitated primarily by community protection efforts. Income generated from PPFs was to be shared between the community and the Government. In fact, little income was generated by these forests during the early years, and this income sharing arrangement was dropped with the adoption of the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector in the late 1980s, which stated that all income from community forests was to go to the local community Forest User Groups.

During the early years the Government put its major focus on PF establishment (largely with bilateral donor assistance and World Bank loans) and its handover to the Panchayat administrative / political units. PPFs were largely neglected. The reason for this emphasis was because of the desire to create a large new forest resource. This was a time when the widely held view was that communities had destroyed the forest wealth of Nepal during the previous decades because of their ignorance and lack of foresight. This emphasis on resource creation was quite effective in those districts where forests had been heavily depleted and local people were keen to see new forests created so that they could benefit from improved access to fuelwood and fodder. For example, in Sindhu Palchok and Kabhre Palanchok districts about 20,000 ha of new forest was successfully established during the 1980s and early 1990s. However, in those districts where forest products were not in short supply, local communities had less interest in becoming involved in plantation establishment and protection, and many of the plantation establishment efforts produced little in the way of new forests.

While the PF and PPF Rules and Regulations set the regulatory framework for much of the community forestry activities during the 1980s, the real efforts in the field went into developing and testing modalities for planning and implementing community forestry. A major breakthrough came with the recognition and documentation of the wide spread existence of indigenous forest management systems in the Middle Hills (see for example Fisher 1989 and Gilmour and Fisher 1991). This provided much of the rationale for shifting the focus of community forestry responsibility and authority from the Panchayat administrative / political units to natural groups of forest users (Forest User Groups (FUGs)). In many cases these groups already had institutional arrangements in place to plan and implement forest activities, and they had a strong vested interest in ensuring that their local forests were managed sustainably for their own benefit.

The modalities that evolved in the late 1980s placed strong emphasis on identifying existing groups of forest users, and their forest, and on legitimizing the groups to act more effectively. The role of the Government in this process was seen to be a facilitating and supporting one, and the first draft Guidelines for Implementing Community Forestry were prepared in 1989 to assist the Government field staff with this task. In spite of the considerable expenditure of resources during this period, by 1990 only a handful of Forest User Groups had been formally established across the Middle Hills. However, the technical and social requirements for community forestry had been thoroughly tested and documented and an enabling policy environment had been established with the Master Plan emphasizing the importance of community forestry for the Middle Hills. The scene was set for a major expansion.

THE SECOND 12 YEARS—1991 TO 2003

Early in this period a new Forest Act was passed (1993), cementing in place the final piece of the enabling policy and legislative framework to legitimize community forestry. The revolution in 1990 and the embracing of multi-party democracy opened the doors for the emergence of NGOs. For the first time, civil society became a real force in the life of the country, and community forestry partnerships expanded beyond the previous narrow focus of Government and FUG. NGOs began to take on a wide range of roles including policy advocacy and service delivery. The emphasis of community forestry was focused on implementing the modalities developed during the 1980s and expanding across the Middle Hills.

The success has been spectacular, with around 12,000 FUGs currently registered and community forests covering some 850,000 ha of forest land. However, as implementation has proceeded, a range of second-generation issues has emerged. Issues such as income generation, equity, active forest management (particularly the development of “appropriate” silvicultural systems), commercialization of products from community forests and expansion of community forestry modalities beyond the Middle Hills (particularly into the Terai and the upper slope areas) have assumed importance. Work on these issues continues in order to further refine the way that community forestry is perceived and implemented. However, the rush to implement community forestry seems to have resulted in a push for quantity over quality. As a result, much of the earlier emphasis on the *process* of implementation and on quality outcomes such as equity (which is critical to long term sustainability) seems to have been glossed over. There also seems to have crept into official thinking a sense of complacency that “we know how to do community forestry, and there is not much more to be learnt”. Such complacency can be dangerous, and can lead to loss of innovation and questioning.

THE YEARS AHEAD?

As the 1990s drew to a close it became apparent that community forestry faced new challenges (apart from the second generation issues referred to above). The legitimacy of the Government itself came under challenge because of growing political instability. In particular, the ability of Government officials to move freely in the Middle Hills’ districts and work directly with FUGs is now limited, if

not completely curtailed in some districts. What does this mean for community forestry, which depends on a functioning partnership between FUG members and district Forest Department staff? If Government rangers cannot work freely in the field to facilitate the development and revision of community forestry Operational Plans, then village forest users will become disenfranchised as the legitimate forest managers and users.

Perhaps it is time to re-assess the relevance of the modalities developed during more stable political times. There is a need to explore ways in which community forests can continue to provide community benefits in the face of an increasingly dysfunctional Government. What role can civil society play in this situation, which is likely to continue into the medium if not the long term? Can the Government role be re-defined to become one of setting standards for implementing community forestry, and approving a process which is largely implemented by civil society? These and similar questions can only be addressed if there is a reinvigorated debate among those who really care about the relationship between forests and people in Nepal.

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