Contested Impact of Community Forestry on Equity: Some Evidences from Nepal

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Abstract

Despite large scale expansion of community forestry in Nepal, there is no clear and consistent contributions to the livelihoods, especially of the poor. While there are some studies presenting evidences to show this limited positive impact of community forestry, there is still limited understanding as regards why the poor have not been able to reap the benefits as expected. This paper discusses six key factors affecting the ways by which benefits from community forestry are generated and distributed, based on the findings of a recently conducted participatory action research with four forest user groups in the western hills of Nepal.

Key words: community forestry, equity, livelihoods, forest management, Nepal

INTRODUCTION

The Community Forestry (CF) is a principal program of the government, which intends to hand over all accessible forests to local communities for sustainable management and utilization. Forest Act 1993 and the forest regulation 1995 have guaranteed communities' rights to use the forest resources. A number of bilateral and multi-lateral donor agencies have been supporting Department of Forests (DoF) for implementation of CF policy especially in the mid-hills. According to a recent National Database record, there are already about 12000 Forest User Groups (FUGs) managing about 110, 000 ha of forests, with more than a million of rural households affiliated (CPFD 2002).

Some recent studies have indicated that the physical condition of community forests (i.e. degraded at the time of hand over) has generally improved (Malla 1992 and 1997, Branney and Dev 1993, Jackson and Ingles 1994). But there is a lack of evidences showing clear and consistent contributions to local livelihoods. Rather, there is a growing body of documented evidences indicating that in several instances, households, especially the poorer ones, have been forced to have reduced access to benefits from forests as a result of implementation of CF policy in the field (Neupane 2000, Malla 2000, Paudel 1999 and Maharjan 1998).

The majority of studies in CF are unable to give the reasons as to why the livelihood and equity impact of community forestry is not favorable. This paper analyzes some of the reasons relating to this based on a recent studies with four FUGs[1] of two hill districts in Western Development Region, Nepal. In particular, six factors related to the equity in benefit sharing within community forests are discussed. The methodology of research was largely based on the Participatory Action and Learning approach (Fals-Borda and Rahaman 1991, Branney et al 2000). In total, 128 households were interviewed from four different wealth categories and of four sites. The six factors analyzed are as follows:

1. Limited support from District Forest Office
2. Limited access of committee members to new information and knowledge
3. Limited knowledge and techniques for CF management
4. Limited access of the poor in Forest User Group (FUG) decision-making
5. Inappropriate arrangements for forest products distribution
6. Emphasis on forest protection, rather than management

FACTORS AFFECTING POOR'S ACCESS TO BENEFITS FROM COMMUNITY FOREST MANAGEMENT

Limited Support from District Forest Office

The District Forest Office (DFO) staffs seem to have little concern about the ways in which the forest user group committee (FUGC) members distribute forest products and control access to forest products., They indirectly support the committee members' actions to control access to forest products by the FUG households. One could postulate a few reasons for this. It is possible that the DFO staff, especially the District Forest Officer, may be unaware of the site. Even if the staff are aware of the facts, they may be simply ignoring them. In general, it is the most junior field staff with a very low credibility, the Forest Guards, who are most likely to be aware of the FUGC members' influence over the access to forest products. But these Forest Guards cannot do much about it as the FUGC members have more influence than the Forest Guards. Similar views were found by Hausler (1993). Besides, the Forest Guards and other DFO staff are more concerned about protection, rather than the utilization, of the forest resource, as their job depends on the existence of the forest. They seem to be happy as long as the forest resource is protected and utilized in a manner that does not threaten the existence of the resource and therefore their own jobs (Malla 1998).

The DFO field staff have largely concentrated on the formation of FUGs and handing over forests to them. After the completion of the hand over process, the DFO staff tend to withdraw their active support. It is generally assumed that FUGs can/should manage the community forest after hand over on their own. There has been the general tendency to view 'forest management' as the same as 'forest protection'. As a result of such an approach to community forest management, neither the productive potential of the forest resource is fully achieved, nor the FUG members' access to forest products improved.

Limited Access of Committee Members to New Information and Knowledge

There are a variety of ways through which new information and knowledge may be passed from one person to another and this may be done formally and informally. In planning community forestry activities in villages, training and extension activities form a main program. A lot of resources in terms of funds, time and human effort have been invested by DFOs and bilateral projects in training and extension programs. Who have been involved in such program and in what ways? Once again, the same two groups of actors, DFO staff and FUG committee members, figure prominently.

Among the four different cadres of DFO staff, the District Forest Officer and Assistant Forest Officers seem to have got most opportunities to participate in the workshops and extension programs. On the other hand, the Forest Guards have very little opportunities of exposing themselves to new information and knowledge. Yet these Forest Guards form the key cadre to be in close contact with the FUG members. One may argue that once the senior DFO staff are trained, they should pass the new knowledge and information thus gained on to the junior members of the staff. But in practice, it does not usually happen.

In FUG level too the situation is not different. Table 1 shows that, within FUGs, participated in the training/workshop/study tour programs organized by the DFO by wealth categories. As is obvious, some 80 percent of the total participants are from the two wealthier categories. Most well paid programs and those that are conducted out of the district, are attended by committee officials. From such trainings and related project activities, the existing local power structure has been reinforced (Hausler 1993) because it is the more powerful people who have been getting new information, knowledge and skills.

It was also observed that the trained persons do not participate in the harvesting activity as demanded by users, nor they did share the knowledge of CF management gained through training. In addition,

DFO or the training organizing institutions have limited follow up /monitoring on the processes resulting from the training.

Table 1: Participants in the DFO's training and extension programs by wealth categories and committee and non-committee members (since FUG formation)

Total number of participants in the DFO's training/workshops/study tours	FUGs				
	Bhirpani	Jyamire Satbise	Jamale Chisapani	Khotegairo Sattale	Total
FUGC members	11	7	8	12	38
FUG general members	-	2	3	7	12
No. of participants from different wealth categories					
Wealth class 1 (Rich)	4	7	4	7	22
Wealth class 2	3	-	5	9	17
Wealth class 3	2	2	1	2	7
Wealth class 4 (Poor)	2	-	1	1	4

Source: Neupane 2000

Limited Knowledge and Techniques for Community Forest Management

There is a tendency to assume that all the FUG members are aware of CF activities. However, this is not the case. Even five years after FUG formation and hand over of a forest to a group, a considerable proportion of the members do not seem to know the objective of the government community forestry policy. Very few household members are aware of the existence of an 'Operational Plan (OP)' in their village, most of the user have not seen the document yet, and few have actually read it.

There is another tendency, especially among the DFO staff, to view the 'forest operational plan' as the 'forest management plan', the assumption being that the operational plan contains all the key information required to manage a community forest effectively. The 'OP' usually includes information about rules and regulations on what to do and when, and what not to do, as well as sanctions and fines for breaching these rules and regulations. It also provides some information about the forest resource, such as forest type, size and boundaries and tree species. However, although these aspects are important, the information is not sufficient for the FUG members to move ahead and to plan and carry out forest management activities in ways that will allow them to make full use of the productive capacity of their community forest resources. The present form of the 'OP' cannot be expected to lead towards a more active forest management by the FUG members.

Due to the limited knowledge of forest management, either DFO field staff or FUG members have not critically analyzed the demand-supply situation and productivity of the forests. Can the supply of forest products from the community forests be increased? If yes, to what level? If not, why not? For this, one needs to look at the potential productive capacity of community forests. During the three years of project period, three FUGs, namely Bhirpani, Jamale-Chisapani and Khotegairo-Sattale, were encouraged to establish a series of plots and to use different intensities to harvest 'green' firewood. Before the intervention, an area-based harvesting system was mostly followed by FUGs in which a given area (according to OP) is worked each year in turn. It means that the existing harvesting system is more or less similar to passive harvesting regime. The objective of these plots was to compare the yield under the current harvesting system with the yields obtained under the different harvesting intensities.

The analysis showed that the potential productive capacity of the community forests is much greater than the current extraction rate under the current management systems. With more active management, the total amount of forest products harvested from a community forest can be increased significantly. According to the estimates by Forest User Groups Forest Management Project (FFMP)[2] (2000), an average of at least 64 % of the household firewood requirements could be met from the community forests if managed actively, compared with only 18 % under the current harvesting

regimes. In addition, this percent could be increased even further depending on the intensity of the harvesting. In some cases, it may even be possible to generate a surplus of firewood from the community forests.

Limited Access of the Poor in FUG Decision-making

A close field observation of how general assemblies are organized and decisions are made for the harvesting of forest products gave the author further insight into the ways the FUGC members reinforce their status in the village. All four FUGC key officials fix the time for harvesting whenever it is most convenient for them. They delay or bring forward the dates of the FUG general assembly and harvesting, and show no consideration for the users who are affected by their actions.

Table 2: FUGC members by gender, caste/ethnicity & wealth categories in 1997 in four FUGs

Caste/ethnic Group	Wealth Categories				All Categories Combined
	1	2	3	4	
Brahmin/Chhetri					
Male	11	11	5	2	29
Female	1	3	1	0	5
Magar					
Male	3	1	-	1	5
Female	1	0	-	0	1
Occupational caste					
Male	-	1	1	2	4
Female	-	0	0	0	0
Newar					
Male	1	-	1	-	2
Female	0	-	0	-	0
All combined					
Male	15	13	7	5	40
Female	2	3	1	0	6

Source: Neupane 2000

According to Barnett (1979), "poor people rarely meet; when they meet, they often do not speak; when they do speak, they are often cautious and deferential; and what they say is often either not listened to, or brushed aside, or interpreted as a bad light" (cited in Chambers 1983). This applies to the poorer households in Nepal's CF program. As one poor member of a FUG puts it "*Basera bhandaa kasaile nasunne, uthera bhanda hawale udaaera laijaane*", meaning "if we say something while sitting nobody listens, when we stand up and say something it gets lost in the air". Normally, FUGs make decisions at two levels: FUGC meetings and FUG general assemblies. Both of these forums of decision-making do not seem to take into account the needs of poorer households. As was shown in Table 2, the FUGC is dominated by the wealthier high caste Brahmins and Chhetris, and it is their own interests which are discussed generally.

Inappropriate Arrangements for Products Distribution

Table 3 summarizes the amount of firewood obtained from different sources by the average household under different wealth categories. Although the total amount used by the average household in all the categories is more or less the same, the amount which is obtained from the private sources decreases from the richest category to the poorest category. This suggests that the richer households are able to meet a greater proportion of their firewood needs from the private sources. In contrast, the amount obtained from the common land (community and government forests) increases from the richest category to the poorest, reflecting the latter's greater dependence on the common forests. The figures in the table also indicate that none of the four FUGs' average household meets all its firewood requirements from private sources and community forests. The household members, especially the poorer households, are still required to go to an adjacent government forest.

Further they are also required to purchase additional amount to meet the household's needs for firewood.

Table 3: Quantity of firewood received from community forests in 1997 (*bhari *per h/hold per year)

	Wealth Categories				
	1	2	3	4	Average
Average amount consumed per year	68	54	63	57	60
Amount obtained from private sources	25	21	16	12	18
Amount obtained from community forests					
Distributed by FUG COMMITTEE	10	10	10	10	10
Additional amount collected	20	12	15	15	15
Additional amount collected from govt. forest	8	8	13	16	11
Amount purchased	5	3	9	4	5

1 bhari = 30 kg. Source: Neupane 2000

Table 4 provides information on the amount of leaf-litter collected from community forests in 1997 by different wealth categories in all four FUGs. The average household in the richest category collects 23 *bhari* compared to only 10 *bhari* collected by the average household in the poorest category, with average weights of 25 kg. per *bhari* (dry weight). It is interesting to note that the poorer households collected 50 percent less in the total amount from community forests. Under the current system of forest product distribution, households from the richer categories in all four FUGs have generally received greater quantities of all four types of forest products in all four FUGs.

Table 4: Amount of leaf-litter received from community forests in 1997 in four FUGs (average bhari per h/hold per year)

	Wealth Categories			
	1	2	3	4
Average amount of leaf-litter used in 1997	23	20	13	10
Amount collected from community forest	10	10	7	5
Additional amount collected from govt. forest	13	10	6	5

1 bhari = 25 kg. Source: Neupane 2000

Emphasis on Protection, rather than Management

Malla (1998, 2000) discussed in detail the reasons for a strong emphasis on the protection of community forests. According to him, the performance of both the DFO staff and FUGC members in community forest management is judged on the basis of whether or not the resource is well protected, rather than whether or not the forest resource is utilized sustainable. As long as the forest is well protected, both the positions of DFO field staff and FUGC members are secured. The District Forest Officer never asks questions to his/her staff why the forest resource is not harvested. When the DFO receives a message about some FUGs harvesting forest products, he sends his staff to ensure the forest is being harvested according to the OP and asks them to keep a record of forest products harvested. So the forestry field staff sees that his credibility lies in the protection of the forest, not in its utilization by the FUGs. Besides, forest product harvesting places additional workload on them, as they are then required to visit the sites and record the amount of forest products harvested and report to the DFO.

Similarly, much of the credibility of the FUGC appears to lie in the protection of community forest resources, not so much in its utilization. Although the OP states that the FUGC members are responsible to the FUG members in general, in actual practice they seem to consider themselves responsible to the DFO staff. Consequently, the FUGC members feel more obliged to report to the concerned DFO staff than to the general FUG members. As these FUGC members are well aware of

the fact that the DFO staff are concerned about forest protection, they ensure that their community forests are well protected. As these committee members are usually wealthier than the rest of the FUG members with a lot of trees on their private lands, they do not rely much on community forests for forest products. In other words, both the DFO staff and the FUGC members have no real reasons to try to spend time and energy on utilizing community forests. Not only will such effort place an additional burden on them, it will also put their own credibility at stake (Malla 1998, 2000).

CONCLUSION AND WAY FORWARD

The current approach to CF views that once the FUGs are formed, social processes are also complete. Such a view must be changed. The hand over of a forest to a FUG is merely the beginning (not the completion) of the forest management process by local communities. The formation of a FUG and the preparation and approval of an OP, should be seen as setting the stage for the complex social processes to follow. Many of the issues relating to community forests management will become apparent only when the FUG members actually start to manage their community forests, interact with one another and make decisions.

After a forest is handed over to the concerned FUG, the position and role of DFO staff and villagers will not be the same. The DFO staff will be required to adopt a different approach from that they used for the formation of the FUG and handing over the forest. During the process of the FUG formation, the DFO staff concentrate on the activities and process required to shift the locus of control over the forest resource from the government to the local communities. Here, the DFO staff still acts very much as the government's authority. However, following the forest hand over, the DFO staff's role becomes more of an advisor and facilitator to help the FUGs. They are required to support FUGs (not only FUGC) in building their capacity in both forest management and in the operation of FUGs as a local forest management organization. For this, the DFO staff will require not only the technical knowledge and skills of forest management, but also the understanding of social processes within and between the FUGs.

Most decisions are made either at the committee meeting, or at the FUG general assembly. Both of these means of decision-making have failed to effectively involve all the FUG members. The decisions made in the FUGC meeting are not usually communicated to all the households, in addition the FUG general assembly is often too large for the women and other disadvantaged household members to contribute. Therefore, while the importance of FUGC meeting and FUG assembly remains, there is a need to find ways to reach all the FUG households, not just the FUGC members, especially women and other disadvantaged members. One way of reaching the greater number of women and other disadvantaged members of a concerned FUG is by organizing meetings at the *Tole* (hamlet) level, usually after the FUGC meeting and before the FUG general assembly.

One of the underlying reasons for inequitable distribution of forest products is that the current arrangements do not seem to consider the inherent economic differences among the FUG households, and their dependence on community forests for forest products. Action is therefore required to reconsider the current arrangements for distribution of forest products and other benefits from community forests.

The support to move from a 'passive' to more 'active' forest management and the development of guidelines for forest management and participatory action and learning are important. However, these actions may have little impact as long as the credibility of the DFO staff and FUGs, especially the FUGC members, lies in the protection of community forests. Therefore, there is also a need to ensure that the sustainable utilization of community forest resources in fact enhances the credibility of the DFO staff and FUG members. Finally, there is a need to engage a wide array of civil society actors, including Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and locally based private rangers acting as consultants to FUGs to supply the escalating demand for the post formation technical and institutional support services.

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