

Viewing FECOFUN from the Perspective of Popular Participation and Representation

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Abstract

The Federation of Community Forestry Users-Nepal has become the largest civil society organization not only in the forestry sector, but also in the country. This paper discusses the achievements of FECOFUN as a civil society organization and examines the way in which it has represented the interests of common forest users, and in particular, the poor and marginalized. It briefly discusses the major activities of FECOFUN aimed at advancing its interests at both national and local levels. It raises some issues as regards the ways in which it represents the common forest users, its governing structure and the resources it depends upon. This paper concludes that it is vital to review FECOFUN's current policies, strategies and activities in order to better represent the interests of the poor and disadvantaged sections of society.

Key words: Nepal, FECOFUN, civil society, community forestry, networking, advocacy

INTRODUCTION

Changes in the political climate in Nepal in 1990 have allowed the rapid growth of a large number of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs). The term civil society refers to a forum in which citizens come together to advance interests that they hold in common (Edwards 2001). Many of these NGOs and CSOs are now involved in the promotion of community forestry programs. The Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) is one example of this, and has in a very short time span, developed to be one of the most powerful NGOs/civil society in the country, representing thousands of Forest User Groups (FUGs) throughout the country. FUGs are independent local institutions for forest resource management and supported by the government's Forest Department, forestry field projects and NGOs. These FUGs are federated at district and regional levels giving rise to FECOFUN at the national level.

Not only has FECOFUN been voicing the concerns of forest users, but it also has a membership provision exclusively for FUG members in Nepal. Some 7000 FUGs (70% of the total number of FUGs formed to date) from sixty-one districts are reported to be the members of FECOFUN (Ambus and Shrestha 2001). The organization has office structures spanning from the central level in Kathmandu to the district and Range Post (or sub-district) levels. In this respect, FECOFUN has grown to be the largest civil society not only in the forestry sector, but also in the country as a whole.

The main objective of FECOFUN, as stated in its policy documents, is to raise the awareness of the forest users about their rights of access to, and responsibilities for, the management of the country's forest resources as outlined in the government forest policy documents. The other objective is to take on a lobbying and advocacy role on behalf of the forest users and to ensure that the community forestry policy objectives are accomplished.

The paper will first highlight the ways in which FECOFUN has advanced its interests at the local and national level, and then analyze its capacity for meaningful representation of common forest users, with reference to its governing structure and financing. The information presented in this paper is largely based on interviews with forest users and FECOFUN officials and other observations.

Why FECOFUN?

The concept of FECOFUN developed as a result of dissatisfaction, among forest users and field projects, with the speed and effectiveness with which community forestry programs were planned and implemented by the Forest Department (Shrestha and Britt 1997, Malla 2001). The pace of FUG formation and forest handover was very slow. Not only was the process of forming a FUG and handing over the forest was top-down, but it also reinforced the existing power structures in villages. Consequently, there had been very limited involvement of poorer household members, women and other disadvantaged members in the community forestry process. FECOFUN, as a CSO, aimed to change this. Stemming from this, FECOFUN wished to develop itself as an autonomous, self-reliant network organization.

How FECOFUN Advances its Interests?

In order to meet its objectives, FECOFUN's executives take different actions at both national and local levels. The major actions are as follows:

- Advocacy campaigns to put pressure on the government for policy implementation
- Lobbying with political leaders and NGOs to protest against anti community forestry activities
- Building alliances with donor-funded forestry projects for funds and other support
- Networking of FUGs

Advocacy Campaigns to Put Pressure on the Government for Policy Implementation

FECOFUN wants current community forestry policy to be implemented on the ground. The policy has clearly defined the rights of users in forest resource management. Therefore, FECOFUN, along with other NGOs, have been putting pressure on the government towards achieving this end. FECOFUN, with the support of forestry field projects and international and national NGOs, has launched such campaigns and also has provided legal support to FUGs, in order to prevent any curtailment of rights by the government.

Lobbying with Political Leaders and NGOs

FECOFUN has opposed previous attempts made by the government to restrict the rights and responsibilities of forest users. For example, it transpired that FECOFUN, with support from various NGOs opposed the government's plan to amend the forest acts, orders and circulars that proposed many restrictions to the rights of forest users. In this instance FECOFUN organized a mass demonstration in Kathmandu. Similarly, it has organized mass rallies at the local level, demanding the hand over of forests as per the acts and legislation (Britt 2001, Shrestha 2001). It has also organized meetings with members of Parliament and the parliamentary committee for natural resource management. From time to time it has submitted protest letters to the Prime Minister and the Minister of Forest and Soil Conservation, demanding the proper implementation of community forestry policies throughout the country. These activities were supported by various national and international organizations in Nepal (Shrestha 2001). As a consequence of these pressures in that particular time period, the government decided to postpone the amendments to the forest acts and legislation.

Building Alliances with Forestry Field Projects

FECOFUN builds alliances with forestry field projects and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs). Table 1 summarizes the magnitude of donors' support to FECOFUN.

Table 1: Donors' support to FECOFUN as of 1999.

Donors	Amount contributed	Percentage
Nepal-UK community Forestry Project	585,200	8.40
Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project	11,86,600	17.30
Danida	11,25,200	16.31
Ford Foundation	39,79,989	57.81
Action aid	6,500	0.09
Watch	6,500	0.09
Total donors contribution	68,84,139	100.00

Source: FECOFUN 1999a

The table indicates a high level of dependency on donor funding for FECOFUN's activities. As an example, FECOFUN's annual budget for 1999 was about Rs. 6.9 millions, out of which about 85.5 percent was secured from external donors. It does draw a small amount from its own internal resources (e.g. membership fees), of which sixty percent goes to the district level office and forty percent is deposited in its trust fund. The Ford Foundation has added an amount equal to the amount deposited from the membership fees in the trust fund. A new FUG member is required to pay Rs.235 as an enrolment fee and Rs.100 as a renewal fee each year (FECOFUN 1999b).

FECOFUN's strategic importance to donor agencies makes it well placed for funding. By providing both financial and moral support to FECOFUN in opposing any government plans that may be detrimental to the implementation of community forestry, donor agencies can avoid direct confrontation with the Forest Department. The truth still remains, however, that FECOFUN has no choice but to depend on alliances with donor agencies both for its survival and effective functioning as an independent organization.

Networking and Support to Forest User Groups

FECOFUN aims to develop and promote a FUG network in order to share experiences and ideas among themselves and learn from each other. It also aims to develop the institutional capability of FUGs. The central level executives of FECOFUN facilitate the networking process through its Range Post and district level networks. They raise the awareness of the district and Range Post level members of local facilitators and FUG leaders of the importance and scope of networking. FECOFUN also facilitates the process of forming user groups, preparing operational plans and maintaining the accounts. In 2000-2001, FECOFUN's central office conducted twenty different training activities at district and village level, in which some 420-community leaders, motivators and women participated (Ojha 2002).

The Issue of Representation

One objective, which FECOFUN executive members in the central office in Kathmandu have frequently stated, has been to support and develop FUGs as self-reliant local level forestry organizations. However, the executives have been less successful in advancing this interest. There are two reasons for this. One is that the majority of forest users know little about the existence of FECOFUN either at the district/range post level or at central level. This has been reported in other studies too (see Malla 2001, Malla et al 2002). The other is that FECOFUN executives at all levels do not seem to represent the interests of the poor and marginalized household members who exhibit the greatest dependence on forest resources. Indeed, almost all of the FECOFUN executives are from the more elite sections of their communities (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Representation of users in FECOFUN at national level by class, caste and gender as of 2000

Wealth categories ►		Rich	Medium	Poor	Total
Caste categories ▼	Gender				
Brahamin/Chhetri/ Shrestha	Men	7	6	-	13
	Women	6	6	-	12
Other castes	Men	-	-	-	
	Women	2	-	-	2
Occupational caste	Men	-	-	-	
	Women	-	-	-	
Total	Men	7	6	-	13
	Women	10	4	-	14

The occupational castes (Damai, Kami, Sarki) constitute 20 percent of the total population of Nepal (CBS 1999) and are distributed throughout the country. Yet there is no representation of these castes in the central executive committee of FECOFUN.

Despite the fact that the majority of forest users fall into the poor and marginalized categories, they have no representation in FECOFUN, and are thus greatly inhibited in their ability to raise their voices within and outside the forum. Although the members of the executive committee are attempting to raise their voice on behalf of these marginalized groups, hierarchical relationships within society in general, prevent these interests from being properly articulated within FECOFUN itself.

FECOFUN movement is not sufficiently linked to the real users at the grassroots level. If FECOFUN could build its movement based firmly on the 7000 FUGs (its members) in a more coherent manner, there might be a more significant impact on the country's forest management in Nepal, with particular reference to creating livelihood opportunity to the poor. Therefore, it is time now to reflect on its current activities and mechanism of representation, and aim to be a real civil society, through which to advance the interests of the forest dependent poor and marginalized people. The real issue is how the poor and forest dependent people themselves can own FECOFUN.

Relating to the discussion above, FECOFUN's governance structure emerges as another important issue. As it has a structure with a central office in Kathmandu extending down to district and range post level offices, the question arises as to what extent the poor and marginalized users are involved in the decision making processes within the organization.

At present, FECOFUN has very limited resources of its own. While it depends on outside donor funded field projects for the support of the majority of its programs and activities, it has yet to mobilize resources and capacity to raise its own funds and to function as an independent organization. This dependency on external funds results in a diversion of efforts away from building these relationships with the local people, and towards building relations with donors. It is worth quoting a former FECOFUN chairman's saying "if each FUG contributes a piece of wood to FECOFUN, hundreds of thousands of rupees can be deposited in its funds". However, how FECOFUN will translate this into reality is yet to be seen. They may have a plan, but the majority of the members are unaware of it.

CONCLUSIONS

FECOFUN, being in a strong position as the largest CSO in the country, must be judged within a civil society framework, and that should guide its goal and activities. It is important to reflect as to whether FECOFUN is truly advancing the interests of the users that they claim to represent.

The evidence in this paper leads to a conclusion that, although FECOFUN has an impact at the national level, the impact at local level, particularly on poor and marginalized users, has yet to materialize. It is time to reflect upon its own activities and to find out a way forward as a real CSO, which takes account of the concerns of the forest dependent poor across the country. The question to be raised is how the poor forest users themselves can own FECOFUN and the elite members themselves provide a space to real forest users, and pave a new direction in the civil society movement in Nepal.

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