

LIVELIHOODS, ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES AND EQUITY

Community Forestry and People's Livelihoods

Bharat Kumar Pokharel*

The author highlights the successes of community forestry in improving local livelihoods. Using a livelihood framework, he assesses the nature and extent of contributions of community forestry in improving the different livelihoods capitals – including social and human, natural, and physical. He also identifies broader positive changes in social, organizational and policy aspects. Finally, some challenges ahead are also identified.

This article specifically highlights the ways community forestry has contributed to improve people's livelihoods so as to reduce poverty of the rural population in Nepal. The article deliberately provides a positive side of community forestry. The other part of the coin will be brought in the next Volume with a critical assessment of community forestry, which in many cases has contributed negatively to poor people's livelihoods.

Nepal: a country of community forestry

Despite government's unpopularity in almost all sectors, why has the Community Forestry Programme become so popular in Nepal? The answer is simple. Community forestry is built upon the principle of devolution of power and authority to local communities, and both local communities and the Forest Department are working in partnership on the basis of mutual trust and cooperation. More than that, community forestry has made a significant contribution to improve the livelihoods of rural people.

Two thoughts come to mind when one has to introduce Nepal to outsiders: Country of Mount Everest and birthplace of Buddha. In recent years, a third thought is added: a country of Community Forestry. Some of the reasons and means through which Nepal's community forestry has been elevated to the global scene are as follows:

In the late 1980s, HMGN formulated the Forestry Sector Master Plan and recognised that the Community Forestry Programme would be the first priority forestry programme in the country in which villagers would be empowered to become organized into Forest User Groups (FUGs), and then given responsibility and authority to protect, manage and use the forests to the extent that the nearby forests are accessible to them, they are willing to take over the responsibility and they are able to manage the resources. This policy is reinforced and legally backed

by the Forest Act, 1993 and Forest Rules, 1995.

Recognition and highlight by Media. At home, forestry in the past used to draw the attention of the media and professionals mostly on the subject of deforestation focusing consequences on resource, without reference to larger socio-economic realities surrounding it. However, in recent times, the media has begun to provide a significant space to community forestry. The subject area in forestry at home and outside has moved away from deforestation to community forestry as part of efforts to seek broader solutions. Nepali journalists were able to discover the treasure of the country only after an article appeared last year in February (there were media reports even before this, I think, and this may have added another impulse) in "Down to Earth", one of the best selling journals of India which gave big coverage: a 16-page article on community forestry that stated: "Both India and Nepal have community forestry programmes. And forest bureaucracy, too. But the forests are greener on the Nepalese side because communities are given the forests to protect, manage and use". We must congratulate Richard Mahapatra together with Prakash Khanal for showing this hidden treasure of Nepal. Government, civil society and local bodies are the main agencies that help to promote community forestry in Nepal. Many donors have been providing support to these agencies for years both to formulate and implement the forest sector policy including community forestry. From the professional point of view, community forestry is a new meeting point for the natural and social scientists, community members, politicians and development activists. In this sense, there are various actors from different backgrounds with different knowledge, from different institutional contexts and with different agendas, missions, organisational and personal objectives. Recently, discussion, debate, resistance have intensified, and the need for adaptation, negotiation, compromise

* Dr Bharat Kumar Pokharel works with the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, Nepal.

and modifications in the community forestry policy and practice have become more important than ever before. The current debate between the government and civil society in Nepal on the proposed draft of the Forest Bill, 2001 for the amendment of the Forest Act, 1993 is a case in point.

Forestry officials, NGO activists and professionals from India, Pakistan, China, Indonesia, Burma, and South Africa have now become regular events and many donors and development agencies have begun to suggest national governments and INGOs to visit Nepal to get insight of the policy and practice of community forestry. All these led to highlight of success internationally.

Contributions of community forestry to livelihoods

Despite such rhetoric, there has little efforts to reflect on the livelihood impacts of community forestry. Attempts have therefore been made to provide a framework and discuss the linkages between forests and local livelihoods.

Community forestry, as the name implies has two major components: Forest resources and local communities.

Forest resources values.

Forests are an integral part of daily lives of rural population in Nepal. They provide food, wood, fodder, fuel, medicine and many more goods and services to rural people. In addition, forests provide habitat for wild animals and help to sustain soil quality, manage water and conserve soil and watersheds. Forests are the renewable natural resources, which means if managed properly and used wisely, can be reused and regenerated over and over again. Therefore the effective management of forest resources is one of the critical elements of community forestry.

Livelihood values of forest

Diverse livelihood perspectives exist within community. Nepalese community constitutes various groups of people from different class, caste, gender, ethnicity and political affiliation. The relationships between the forests and livelihoods of the members of the communities therefore



Cash-crop plantation within Community Forest has become an interesting issue for outside researchers and visitors

varies tremendously on the basis of their needs and interests. For example, those who have adequate private land with trees, may not need forest products at all, but may still have political interest to be included in FUGs. Others who have little or no private trees may genuinely need forest products and therefore want to become a member of an FUG to meet their needs of forest products and so on. This indicates that there are diverse perspectives of livelihoods in relation to forestry among the community members.

Livelihoods are simply a means of living for which resources or assets are needed. Various macro and micro level factors such as natural calamities, shocks, policy, legislation, government and non-governmental structures and agencies, market, social processes (cultural norms, values, customs, festivals and traditions) affect the livelihoods of people. Moreover, the capacity of the individuals and communities to increase the resources and the ability to cope with the factors of various types, the better will be the livelihoods of an individual or of a group. Community forestry contributes to the improvement of the livelihoods of rural people in three ways, namely:

- a) it helps to increase resources;
- b) it contributes to reform organizations, agencies and policies, and
- c) it facilitates to bring social changes.

Contributions to livelihoods

Capital building. community forestry has become a means to increase natural, social, human, financial, and to some extent the physical capital of community forest users. Community forests handed-over to community are users' *natural capital*. Evidence shows that there are positive changes in both forest condition and the availability of forest products, with a concurrent reduction in the time spent for collecting forest products. It is reported that the community forestry process has increased social cohesion, which has enhanced *social capital* of those who have been powerless, left in isolation and excluded from mainstream social and political processes. Since the inception of the Community Forestry Programme a number of trainings, workshops and exposure visits have been conducted for a number of organisations and individuals related to community forestry that have increased knowledge and skills related to forest silviculture, community development, organisational management and leadership development, all of which are basically *human capital*. The group funds generated from the sale of forest products, levies and outside grants is the *financial capital* created through community forestry. It is reported in DOF's FUG Database that there is a balance of about of 100 million Rupees among 10,000 FUGs in the country. This amount is almost equivalent to government's annual forestry development budget allocated to all districts. There are numerous examples where many of these FUGs have established low interest credit schemes as well as

grants to the poorest household members from the FUG fund. Numerous FUGs have carried out many community development activities on their own. Construction of village trails, small bridges, community buildings, schools and temples are good examples of *physical capital* created through the community forestry programme.

Organizational and policy reform. Through the Community Forestry Programme, re-orientation of Forest Department staff to move away from their traditional role of policing to a role of facilitator and advisors has been possible. As a result, community forestry has contributed to bring changes in attitudes and behaviour of government staff (mainly Forest Department staff). Community forestry is the only national programme in the country by which creation of thousands of local institutions at community level (i.e. FUGs) and continuously building their capacity as an established institution in order to effectively carry out forest protection, management and utilization of forest resources has been possible. In addition, nested enterprises such as user group networks and Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) have been established to safeguard the rights and responsibility of forest users. In this way community forestry is no more a programme rather it has become a system that will go on forever.

Following the implementation of the community forestry programme, all forestry development programmes have been designed in a participatory way through bottom-up planning processes. Bi-directional flow of information from community level to the central level takes place vertically and horizontally.

Vehicle for social change. community forestry has become a vehicle in bringing change in social processes empowering poor and disadvantaged members of the community. The aim of community forestry has been to build FUGs' institutional capacity so as to ensure that awareness will be raised among disadvantaged and marginalised members of the group in matters related to inequality, social injustice and their exclusion from social and political processes including the benefits from mainstream development. It is reported that community forestry has made a significant contribution in increasing people's participation of many marginalized sections of the community. In many FUGs, their representation has increased in users committees and many of them have begun to be vocal in meetings and assemblies. They have also begun to demand services from government, other service delivery agencies and powerful members of FUGs. In addition, community forestry has become a platform for various stakeholders to work together. These major stakeholders include: District Forest Office, local government, user federations, and non-government organisations and academic and research institutions.

Summary and Conclusion

The examples above clearly indicate that community forestry contributes in a number of ways to improve people's livelihoods. Experience of community forestry



A forest user looking after Cardamom plantation in Community Forest in eastern Nepal.

so far has shown that it is possible from community forestry to reduce poverty by securing resources for the poor, increasing the availability of a range of resources and providing potential for income generating activities.

In sum, community forestry has contributed significantly in a number of ways. The major areas include: building *social and human capital* through training and networking, intensive management of *natural capital* (forests) to optimize productivity, development of *physical capital* such as community infrastructure – roads, drinking water, rural electrification, telecommunications and so on. In addition, community forestry has built the capacity of government and non-governmental organizations on planning, management and decision -making processes both at local and national levels.

Despite the success story, community forestry faces many difficulties and challenges. In particular, management of high value forests in the Terai and possibility of scaling up community forestry in high altitude and low lands; closer working relationships between government bureaucracy and local communities and the issue of equity to benefit the most vulnerable group of the society are the main challenges that need to be debated and addressed collectively.

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