INSTITUTIONS AND SOCIAL PROCESSES

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Local Level Monitoring Systems in Community Forestry: Challenges, Opportunities and Directions for Future

A recent study has demonstrated that local level monitoring systems, that could encourage learning and adaptiveness in forest management, are poorly developed, and that this presents a constraint to equitable and active management of forests. This paper reviews the contextual factors and emerging concepts of monitoring, and identifies gaps and prospects. Based on lessons gained thus far, strategies for facilitating local level monitoring are also explored.

Introduction

Despite two decades of supporting local level forest management practices, we still lack appropriate approaches to assist communities and local forest stakeholders in developing monitoring systems that could effectively help them to reflect, review and adapt their forest management processes, and through this maximize impacts on forest condition and rural livelihoods. Although many institutions facilitating community forestry recognize that there exist a multiplicity of stakeholders in local level forestry, and that they have a wide spectrum of common and conflicting monitoring interests with regard to forest management, little is understood as to how these stakeholders communicate their interests, review current situations and trends, tap new learnings and reflect on them, and negotiate conflicting interests among each other, and how far this process has been helpful in promoting adaptiveness of management systems.

ForestAction recently started to review local level monitoring systems in forest management in collaboration with Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), Indonesia, and initiated participatory action research with local level stakeholders (FUGs, Range Post, FECOFUN) in eastern part of Baglung (Kushmishera Range Post, in central middle hills of Nepal) in collaboration with The University of Reading, UK. While these studies are still on-going, some key findings are highlighted here.

In this paper, some core concepts in monitoring are briefly highlighted, and some historical and social issues relating to monitoring at local level forest management are discussed. Different perspectives and potentials of monitoring by different groups of stakeholders are then outlined. Finally, potentials for improvement are identified with some preliminary guidelines for facilitators.

Concepts related to local level monitoring

Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) has emerged as a key concept in community development. A basic shift from traditional monitoring approaches to PM&E is the recognition of the interests, values and roles of project stakeholders, particularly those of local people. PM&E recognises that the participation of all affected people is emphasised in monitoring and evaluation.

There are two threads to PM&E. The first approach is a slight adaptation of conventional methods (with criteria and indicators predefined by outsiders, in a similar fashion to scientific research) that was found to be inaccurate, irrelevant and too costly to collect information. Thus they have tried to involve local people (or beneficiaries) in defining criteria and information requirements according to their interests. However, the analysis of this information may still be reserved for the outsiders, and although this may improve the relevance of their interventions,

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there is not necessarily any shift in power to create knowledge locally.

The second thread is influenced by participatory action research (PAR) principles and practices that emphasise local people's access to and control over information and its analysis. The authors contend that the second approach is a prerequisite for developing relevant monitoring systems not just at the local level, but ultimately for all stakeholders. Developing monitoring systems to reflect local people's priorities can be a strong vehicle to strengthen knowledge generation processes and shift power relations within social and 'interest' groups at community level, as well as among outside stakeholders.

Monitoring systems can only be effective if information analysis is carried out at the level at which resultant action can be made, and by those that will be most affected by the outcomes. As the goals of forest management (in particular, community forestry) are to improve the condition of forests and livelihoods, local communities must be the most prominent actors in learning from and adapting forest management practices. However, to date people-initiated group level monitoring systems have been unrecognisable.

Stakeholders involved in policy development, technical and managerial service delivery, and social and political interactions, should be able to orient themselves to location specific demands put forward by the local communities. Impact of their service is maximized if they are connected to the monitoring and learning cycle of the local communities.

Contextual issues relating to local level Monitoring in Forest

A dense natural forest in Royal Bardiya National Park — the rich biodiversity may be of interests to all around the globe.

Management

Historically, social structures and nation building processes in Nepal have left few opportunities for collective action in forest management. Where there has been collective action it has been dominated by elite groups within the community. In the research sites in Baglung District, we observed that historical instability in access rights is one of the factors contributing to the alienation of the majority of rural people from forests, and a lack of confidence to make decisions for communal forest management. This has left few incentives to monitor and adapt collective forest management practices at the local level.

Although the democratic processes emphasised in the community forestry programme present huge potentials for sustainable forest management, with few exceptions, community forestry practice has not reflected the interests of the majority of FUG members. The impacts on the psychology of local people of the oppressive conservation policies of the past decades (originating in industrialised nations) that have forced them to be passive, coupled with new found power to elite groups have meant that these potentials have not been recognised.

The power of the outsider over local people often means that external knowledge systems, viewed as generic and objective, are applied with little attempt at adjusting to local conditions - even less so with the full understanding of local people.

The imposition of external knowledge can have an almost hypnotic effect amongst local people, and the outsiders themselves fail to recognise the gaps and even the possible irrelevance of certain elements of their knowledge in particular situations. It is important therefore that both local people and outsiders can identify priority issues, and the strengths and weaknesses of each other's skills and knowledge bases in relation to these issues.

Forest user groups typically consist of settlements, which are sometimes a few hour's walk away, that do not perfectly match with the traditional forestry institutions. in this sense, the CF came into existence with an effort and interest of outsiders' intervention. The current FUGs that are registered at local DFOs consider themselves as being accountable to DFOs, and less so towards people in the community. The constitutions and forest operational plans are

externally enforced institutional instruments, and this is why there are several great discrepancies between the provisions of operational plan and actual practices. Above all, forest users have not got adequate freedom to design an institution that best matches their needs and perspectives.

These historical and contextual factors either constrain or influence the forest users' capacity to drawing on their own knowledge in collective discourse towards actively managing forests.

Local Level Monitoring Systems – Gaps and Opportunities

Both within and outside the community, there exist diverse patterns of needs and interests of stakeholders, who have diverse perspectives/visions on local level forest management based on their socio-economic status and expected benefits. Active involvement of all members of the group and external stakeholders depends on how the multiple interests and concerns of all of them are addressed in planning, decision making and implementation. As a FUG is generally not a homogeneous group, different interest groups within FUGs have different interests and process of monitoring. Although the authors do not intend to make any analysis of sub-group level

monitoring, future research may need to be directed to this dimension as well.

Table 1 summarizes the monitoring interests of key local stakeholders. The Table indicates that while there are some of the common issues where different stakeholders have focused their monitoring priorities in a local level forest management, there are plenty of issues that reflect the divergence of interests among the stakeholders. To deal with this situation, collaboration and negotiation is needed. In fact, presence of multiplicity of stakeholders within and outside FUGs with a different perspective and interests of monitoring is unavoidable, and they have to be recognized in the prevailing cultural, socio-political and geographical contexts.

We have observed that four main types of monitoring systems can exist at local level: a] FUG self monitoring systems, b] self-monitoring systems of service providers/local stakeholders, c] collaborative monitoring between local stakeholders and FUGs, and d] collaborative monitoring among non-FUG stakeholders. A brief description on their status, gaps and opportunities are presented below.

Table 1: Key local stakeholders in forest management and their monitoring interests

Stakeholders	Monitoring Issues/Interests
Forest user Groups	Forest condition, institutional processes of FUG, FUG member responses, outsiders' interest on forest resources,
Specific interest groups within FUGs	Power relations, FUG decisions and their effects on respective interests, potential of forest in fulfilling their needs,
FUG Households	Costs, benefits, influences of FUG decisions , private tree plantation decisions,
Range Posts/DFOs	Forest condition, management actions, forest protection and development works, compliance with OP, use of funds, impact on other national forest
Range Post FECOFUN	Resolution of conflicts, impact on community development, protection of rights of the users,
Local NGOs/Projects	Benefits sharing mechanism, governance and institutional arrangement, potentials of collaborative actions in resource management
Other local institutions	Contribution to local development, mass awareness and mobilization,
Neighboring FUGs	New experimentation and learning, cooperation and forest product exchange, networking for mutual benefits
Neighboring communities	Cost and benefit from the community forestry, regeneration of resources, forest condition and impact on other national forest
Local units of political parties	Decision making process, distribution of benefits, income and resource generation

FUG Self-monitoring systems

FUGs as the managers of the forest resources need to have a self-monitoring system in place to contribute to effective management of forests. But due to various contextual factors (as discussed in previous section) and limited external recognition and assistance by support agencies, very few FUGs have established self-monitoring system in place. Our experiences in Baglung has indicated that helping FUGs develop self-monitoring systems takes enormous time and efforts, and this should be built on the existing forms and patterns of learning, communication and monitoring rather than trying to impose an indicator based monitoring systems. Working for a year in five community groups, we could find a significant changes in FUG organizational processes within the FUGs, such as in terms of decision-making, participation of women and disadvantaged groups, exploring visions, facilitating intra-FUG negotiations.

The same study revealed that self-monitoring can be facilitated through a participatory action research initially, and FUGs become active and conscious learners in community forestry issues. As the self-monitoring system is strengthened, it opens up new areas of actions, new ways of doing things and new prospects for FUGs which may push service providers with added requests for technical supports. Also, as a result of learning getting expedited, implication on policy was also identified – one of the FUGs wanted to amend its forest operational plan based on new learnings but the two year constraints (as per the current community forestry rules, FUGs cannot amend operational plans within two years of its preparation and approval) discouraged them to do so. This implies that effectiveness of FUG self-monitoring system is connected to monitoring systems of other stakeholders, particularly the DFOs and Department of Forests so that instantaneous macro level responses to local level forest management can be made.

It can be inferred that FUG self monitoring system and practices can have an impact on the empowerment of local communities, influence the service delivery by other organizations in a more effective way, and provide inputs to policy development.

Monitoring systems of other local stakeholders with respect to community forestry

Self-Monitoring by other local stakeholders such as Range Post, DFOs, FECOFUN (Range Post and District Level), NGOs and bilateral Projects is also equally important, and only through an established self-monitoring system, they can collaborate effectively with communities in one direction and the macro level institutions on the other. A review of self-monitoring systems of these stakeholders is briefly outlined below:

DFO and Range Post: Our observations through several hills districts indicate that DFOs and Range Post emphasize monitoring FUGs (first thread of monitoring discussed in the earlier section), and hardly recognizes self-monitoring as a tool for organizational learning. However, in many districts and Range Posts, staff meetings and internal reporting have been a regular feature, which covers some of the monitoring related functions. But these activities focus more on the managerial and administrative issues as part of fixing problems rather than going through a whole reflection of actions to generate lessons. There exist some formal self-monitoring elements such as performance evaluation of staff and financial control, which have no or little relevance to the central issues of monitoring in community forestry.

These local level Government institutions have tremendous scope for developing their own self-monitoring systems connecting themselves with FUGs self-monitoring system. They are the most authentic links between local communities and the central level policy making units, and hence their monitoring systems is crucial in contributing to enabling environment at macro level, as well as streamlining service delivery at community level.

FECOFUN. At local level, FECOFUN exists at district and range post levels, which parallels with the structure of the Department of Forest. Since FECOFUN consist of FUGs as its members, self-monitoring of FECOFUN encourages all FUGs affiliated to it towards self-reflection and learning. If monitoring systems at local FECOFUN is strengthened and connected to central FECOFUN, the latter's interventions can be further strengthened and made more responsive to local level forest management issues.

DDCs and VDCs. As the local government bodies have been legally empowered to lead and coordinate the local development processes, including forestry. They are keen to monitor community forestry and its connection to local livelihoods, institutional processes, particularly in terms of decision-making and party representation, and the level of power gained by FUGs. Their monitoring systems is based on occasional flow of information, and a proper monitoring system would enhance their contributions to community forestry by not only

helping to streamline the services but through advocacy at local as well as national levels. As there are mandatory links between DDCs and DFOs (annual forest development programs of DFO must be endorsed by DDC council before they are implemented), they can develop collaborative monitoring systems to support each other (and hence to contribute to local level forest management).

NGOs. Their contribution in community forestry is highly variable depending on the locations, issues, type and capacity of the NGOs. They have either focussed on local community level actions or national level advocacy actions, and few work in the interface between micro and macro levels. They also have limited internal self-monitoring, and great scope of collaborative monitoring exists with DFOs, projects and FECOFUN. NGOs are expected to take increasing roles at micro and macro levels in forestry in the years to come, with increasing unmet demand for such services.

Forestry Projects. Several bilateral forestry projects have tried to implement one or the other forms of monitoring, which are mostly designed to feed information to project life cycle, and yet there are few attempts in developing FUG monitoring systems. These PM&E initiatives have been confined to pilot actions, and no scaling up experiences has existed.

Absence of self as well as collaborative monitoring has limited the connections between community management of forest with service providers as well as policy makers at macro level. Linkage between community and Government is often recognized but no efforts made in terms of monitoring systems to date. Even when monitoring of any form exists, they are mostly oriented to extract information from others, and do not make real contributions to stakeholders' own organizational learning. In addition, despite having many cross-cutting interests, stakeholders have very limited collaboration in monitoring and learning.

Collaborative Monitoring Interface among the Local Stakeholders

Self-monitoring should precede monitoring of others. Collaboration between FUGs and other local stakeholders may be made effective through collaborative monitoring. Local level forest management may be strengthened if collaborative monitoring between the principle local stakeholders and FUG is strengthened.

Between FUG and Range Post. There are many common elements between FUGs and Range Posts regarding processes and outcomes of community forestry. They can therefore assist one another in how best such variables may be monitored for generating lessons that are useful to both the organizations.

In many respects of designing and implementing monitoring systems, the two institutions can work in a synergistic way. FUGs can contribute local knowledge, and manage human resources for information generation. Range Post, on the other hand, can contribute by bringing external perspectives and knowledge, and policy requirements.

Between FUG and local FECOFUN. FECOFUN is an emerging network organization of FUGs with a mission to safeguard users' interests and rights over forest resources. In this context, they both can work collaboratively to monitor policy environment potentially impacting community rights and roles in forest management as this is an area of common interests.

While FECOFUN can bring experiences, information and ideas relating to policies, markets and service industry, FUGs can bring the issues, problems, needs at local level forest management.

Between FUG and Other Service Providers. Other service providers may include NGOs, projects and field offices of government organizations. These institutions can collaborate with FUGs to identify service needs, negotiate delivery arrangements and strengthen delivery system.

Between local level service providers. DFOs, FECOFUN, field projects, NGOs, DDCs/VDCs also have at least some areas of common interests with regard to community forestry. This indicates a possibility of collaborative monitoring, which could not only reinforces each other's action learning but also project local level issues and perspectives more effectively to the macro level institutions.

To date each of these monitoring systems are very limited in existence and effectiveness, and also the linkages between them is poor. These systems should be strengthened at each level as well as at the common interface so that lessons on all dimensions of forest management generated and shared, interests negotiated and power relations balanced for equitable and effective management of forests.

Strategies for Facilitating Local Level Monitoring Systems

Based on the review of context of local level forest management, the emerging concepts and

the various forms of monitoring within and between stakeholders that can potentially improve the learning cycle of FUGs as well as other collaborating stakeholders, following strategies (for use by NGOs, projects or DFO/ Range Posts) have been suggested to facilitate local level monitoring system in community forestry:

Develop and strengthen FUG self-monitoring systems. Taking some pilot FUGs at each range post, within a district, facilitators may work with FUGs to assist their monitoring system, and then the pilot experiences should be linked to other FUGs at the Range Post Level. Non-pilot FUGs within Range Post should get opportunities to learn from pilot experiences, and Range Post level support institutions should provide assistance in an on-going basis.

The field research should be done with an emphasis on the development of group level internal monitoring processes, as a part of their overall action-learning cycles in forest management. This must be seen as distinct from developing a participatory monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) system tailored to a particular project/ programme intervention. However, if there is already an 'ambient' internal monitoring system in place at the local level, this will facilitate the development of more realistic monitoring.

The values, perceptions and knowledge base of the forest users must be recognised from the starting point of the action-research in developing the monitoring process. These issues are critically important in recognising the current challenges to knowledge generation in community forest management.

Outsiders should facilitate the mediation of diverse perceptions regarding forest management. Very often interest groups or even previously segregated communities may have to come together for the first time to negotiate a common action plan. Active involvement of all members of the group depends on how these multiple interests of all users are raised in a group discussion, drawing up of proposals and options and final decision making. The critical change occurs with the development of group level awareness in which individuals can place their own interests in context.

Strengthen self-monitoring systems of other local stakeholders. Like FUGs, each of the stakeholders working in community forestry should have self-monitoring system with respect to their community forestry activities, which could improve their action learning.

Facilitate collaborative monitoring systems between a) FUGs and other local stakeholders, and b) between the local stakeholders. These can be fostered by holding workshops of stakeholders who have worked out self-monitoring systems.

Participatory Action and Learning (PAL) approaches, in which local people and the outsiders (foresters and experts) collaborate in planning and analysis for forest management, can be used to address these issues. Local people have a wealth of location specific knowledge that can be transferred to collective forest management though there appear to be some major areas in which both insiders and outsiders can collaborate in Knowledge generation.

Continue on-going review and reflections at all levels. Regular review and reflections should take place at both self-monitoring and collaborative cycles at all levels.

Conclusion

The historical and socio-political contexts of local level forest management poses great challenges for effective monitoring, reflections and learning that can be accessible to disadvantaged and marginalized groups of communities. Also, the stakeholders implementing or facilitating community forestry have also limited self-monitoring practices. Although there exist several common interests between stakeholders, there exist hardly any collaborative monitoring that recognizes and reinforce action learning of each stakeholders.

Initial experiences and review indicate that monitoring can help local level stakeholders better match their efforts with expectations by continually generating learning and adjusting management arrangemsnt. It can help balance perspectives, interests, and contributions and enhance efforts for active management of forests, and returns thereof. Facilitating monitoring at different levels across diverse perspectives is a key activity for facilitating active forest management in the years to come in Nepal. The monitoring process should originate and expand from FUGs to supporting stakeholders, and then finally to macro level institutions. For this, further participatory action researches are required to develop adaptive methodologies and guidelines.

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