Assessing the Governance Quality in Community Forest User Groups: Insights from Makawanpur District, Nepal[1]

Pramod Ghimire

Abstract

In recent years, forest governance has received significant global attention as a key component of sustainable forest management and utilization. In the context of Nepal, good governance within community forestry is recognized as a vital mechanism for promoting inclusive decision-making, equitable benefit-sharing, and poverty alleviation. This study was conducted in three Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) in the Makawanpur district to assess the quality of forest governance. Both primary and secondary data were utilized, including a household questionnaire survey (n=244), key informant interviews, and discussions with executive committee members. The quality of forest governance was evaluated using four key criteria i.e. participation, transparency, accountability, and rule of law, along with their corresponding local indicators, assessed through simple quantitative methods. The findings revealed an average governance score of 69.38% across the CFUGs, with Ashok CF achieving the highest score (71.87%), followed by Okhe CF (70.31%) and Nawalpur-Saraswati CF (65.63%). Among the four governance elements, participation scored the highest, while transparency received the lowest rating. These results suggest that the quality of governance in community forests is moderately strong; there is still room for improvement. To enhance governance quality, greater emphasis should be placed on improving transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness in future interventions.

Introduction

The share and utilization of forest resources through participatory approaches are steadily increasing in developing countries. Globally, around 28% of forests, approximately 732 million hectares across 62 countries are managed under participatory frameworks (Gilmour, 2016). In Nepal, about 40% of national forests are managed as Community Forest (CF), benefiting nearly 3 million households (DOF, 2017; Ghimire & Lamichhane, 2020). According to the Forest Act of 2019, Community Forests are defined as "National forests handed over to the local user group pursuant to section 18 to develop, conserve, use, and sell forest products independently as per the approved Operational Plan" (MoFE, 2019). Nepal's CF model has emerged as a pioneering example of decentralized forest governance supported by progressive policies and legislation (Acharya, 2002; Dahal & Chapagain, 2008; Pokhrel & Tiwari, 2013). Over five decades, it has evolved from a state-controlled, top-down model into a people-centered, participatory system through policy and organizational reforms (Gurung et al., 2011; Ghimire & Lamichhane, 2020).

Community Forestry User Groups (CFUGs) in Nepal have gained recognition as effective institutions for local development and natural resource management. Despite their achievements, governance challenges persist in planning and implementation processes. Key governance challenges in community forestry include low participation of women and marginalized groups, elite capture in decision-making processes, deficiencies in transparency, accountability, and equity, as well as persistent social exclusion and inequalities within communities. These issues have contributed to a limited impact on poverty reduction and a misalignment between social needs and environmental goals (Dahal, 2002; Dahal & Chapagain, 2008; K.C., 2016; Ghimire & Lamichhane, 2020). Addressing these issues is critical, as improved governance within CFUGs significantly enhances decentralized forest management and contributes to sustainable livelihoods (Dahal, 2002; Lamichhane & Parajuli, 2014). One of the unique strengths of Nepal's CF model lies in the active role of Forest User Group (FUG) networks in building local capacity, promoting legal rights, and strengthening democratic governance at multiple levels (Bhattacharya & Basnyat, 2005; Dahal & Chapagain, 2008; Gilmour, 2016).

Governance refers to the process by which organizations and resources are managed, ensuring participation, transparency, accountability, and adherence to the rule of law-elements that collectively guide sustainable transformation (Gurung, 2002; Hoon & Hyden, 2003). In recent years, governance has become a central theme in the discourse on natural resource management. Good governance entails the implementation of plans and policies in alignment with the priorities and interests of the people, whether in an organization, state, or country (UNESCAP, 2006; Dahal & Chapagain, 2008; Adhikari et al., 2016). In the context of CF, governance denotes a community-based management and decision-making framework led by or on behalf of the community, primarily through community actors (Kimensi & Bhusal, 2022). This model differs from other governance structures as it emphasizes the role of the "Community" over formal institutions or corporate entities (Piabuo et al., 2018). Key attributes of good governance include effective participation, accountability, equity, transparency, and conflict resolution. These principles ensure that corruption is curbed, the voices of marginalized and disadvantaged groups are acknowledged, and the interests of vulnerable populations are incorporated into decision-making processes (Gurung, 2002; UNESCAP, 2006; Lamichhane & Parajuli, 2014). While the concept of good governance is often seen as abstract and challenging to implement in its entirety, it remains a foundational requirement for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UNESCAP, 2006; Dahal & Chapagain, 2008; Rijal et al., 2021).

The success of the CF approach is often evaluated based on its contributions to increasing the availability of forest products, promoting green economy initiatives, enhancing rural livelihoods, empowering women and marginalized groups, and restoring biodiversity (K.C., 2016; Ghimire & Lamichhane, 2020). Despite these achievements, CF in Nepal still faces several organizational and policy-related challenges. Various studies from Nepal and other countries have highlighted that Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) hold significant potential to function as inclusive and effective institutions for the sustainable management of forest resources(Pokhrel & Tiwari, 2013; Lamichhane & Parajuli, 2014; Piabuo et al., 2018). In this context, good governance is regarded as a critical factor for the continued success and sustainability of CF, particularly in developing countries like Nepal. Accordingly, this study aims to assess the quality of governance in three selected community forests in the Makawanpur district of Nepal.

Materials and Methods

Description of study area

The study was conducted in Makawanpur district of Bagmati Province in Nepal. Makawanpur district is one of the hilly district of Nepal which covers tropical to temperate climate. Fig. 1 below presents the geographical location of the district. CF is one of the major forest management programmes in the district with 404 CFUGs. The district is well diversified in terms of natural resources and social structures among the CFUGs (DFO. 2021a; DFO, 2021b). According to the 2011 national census, total population of the district is 420,477 of which the female represents about 51% (DAO, 2021).

Figure 1

Map showing the study area
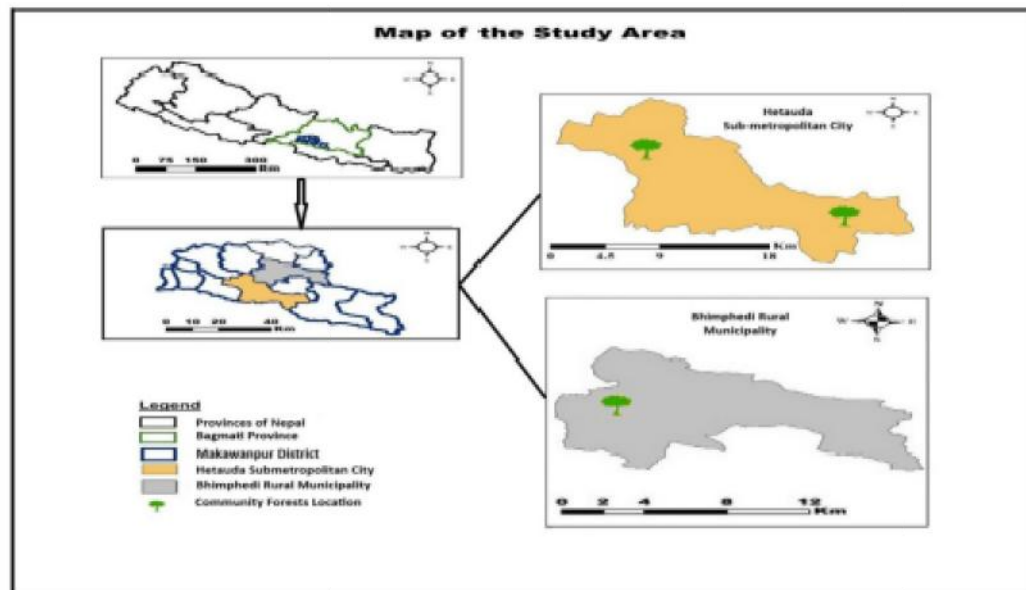
Three CFUGs namely Ashok, Nawalpur-Saraswati and Okhe were selected for the study in consultation with Division Forest Office (DFO) personnel using the following three major criteria: more than 10 years of management, heterogeneous in terms of socio-economic structure and active in forest management. Table 1 presents the general descriptions of selected CFUGs.

Table 1

General descriptions of the studied CFUGs

Name of CFUG	Address	Year of handover	Area covered (ha)	Number households	Sample Taken
Ashok	Hetauda-17	1994	148.78	222	45
Nawalpur-Saraswati	Hetauda-11	1995	234.21	717	144
Okhe	Bhimphedi-9	2002	277.54	172	35

Data collection and analysis

For the study both primary and secondary data were collected using the participatory approaches such as household questionnaire survey, discussion with executive committee members, and interviews with key informants.

The total households from the each CFUG are the total population for this research. Well-being method was used to determine the socio-economic status of each household in each CFUG. The households are already well categorized and documented in the CF constitution in different strata of well-being ranking such as: poor, medium and rich based on their land holding, food sufficiency, source of income, and education status. Further, triangulation was performed with some key informants of the CFUGs to verify the well-being ranking. To reduce the chances of error stratified random sampling method was used where well-being class of household is the strata. Then, a sample of 20% households from each well-being class was taken as respondents for the household survey.

Both qualitative and quantitative analysis methods were used to analyze the collected data. Information collected from the field was carefully recorded, compiled, coded, tabulated and analyzed as per the nature of the information. Simple statistics such as mean, and percentage were used to interpret the results. The results of both qualitative and quantitative data were presented and interpreted in tabular and graphical forms. To calculate the degree of good governance four criteria (i.e. participation, transparency, accountability and rule of law) each having four indicators were used (RIMS Nepal, 2003). Each indicator was further divided into four grades (1 to 4, i.e. poor to excellent). With the help of Governance assessment matrix score of each element was determined (Table 2). The maximum value per element is 16 with lowest value 4. Each element

was then judged according to its score and ranked using the ranking table as presented in Table 3 adopted from RIMS Nepal (2003). Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) tool was used to analyze the data.

Table 2

Criteria and indicators used for governance assessment

Criteria		Indicators
Participation	I.	Participation in CFUG meeting
	II.	Participation in CF activities
	III.	Participation in constitution and plan preparation/ review implemented
	IV.	Participation in decision made by CFUG
Transparency	I.	Do you know every decision made by CFUG?
	II.	Do you responsible in setting prices of the forest products?
	III.	Do you agree with the current system of forest products distribution?
	IV.	If you have free access of information regarding decisions, funds and so on.
Accountability	I.	The CFUG committee is biased to any CFUG member or not
	II.	If CFUG committee members are accountable to all CFUG members or not
	III.	Has the CFUG committee been guided by CFUG general assembly?
	IV.	Have you ever read the constitution and operation plan of CFUG?
Rule of law	I.	Is the current constitution and operational plan is revised and updated?
	II.	Does the CF objectives are consistent with the prevailing forest laws?
	III.	Does the reward/ punishment mentioned in legislation properly endorsed?
	IV.	Role, responsibility and work performance of CFUG

Table 3

Ranking table for governance assessment adopted from RIMS Nepal (2003)

Rank/Level	Poor	Medium	Good	Excellent
Criteria	1	2	3	4
Score in indicators	0-4	5-8	9-12	13-16
Total score of each criteria	0-16	17-32	33-48	49-64

Results

Score of governance elements

The score of good governance elements of three CFUGs were presented in the Table 4. Four indicators/grades for each good governance criterion were used depending on the information and data that were available. The indicators were chosen on account of pretested survey and formal discussion with various stakeholders. The four specific indicators shown in Table 3 were chosen with consideration for the nature of the criterion

in which the respondents could provide the greatest amount of information as possible. Out of the four criteria studied rule of law got highest score (81.25%) and transparency got lowest score (62.5%) in Ashok CFUG (Table 3). Accordingly, in Nawalpur-Saraswati CFUG participation got highest score (75%) and transparency got lowest score (56.5%); and in Okhe CF participation got maximum score (81.25%) and transparency got minimum score (59.38%) respectively. These results indicate that, although user participation and adherence to rules are relatively strong, transparency and accountability require considerable improvement.

Table 4

Score of governance elements in the studied CFUGs

| Governance criteria | Total attainable score | CFUG | | | | | |
| | | Ashok | | Nawalpur Saraswati | | Okhe | |
		Obtained score	Percentage score (%)	Obtained score	Percentage score (%)	Obtained score	Percentage score (%)
Participation	16	12.5	78.12	12	75	13	81.25
Transparency	16	10	62.5	9	56.25	9.5	59.38
Accountability	16	10.5	65.62	9.5	59.38	10.5	65.62
Rule of law	16	13	81.25	11.5	71.88	12	75
Total	64	46		42		45	

Despite having structured executive committees with representation of women, Janajatis, and Dalits, active engagement of these groups in decision-making remains limited. The findings suggest that while institutional frameworks are in place, meaningful participation and openness in management practices still need enhancement.
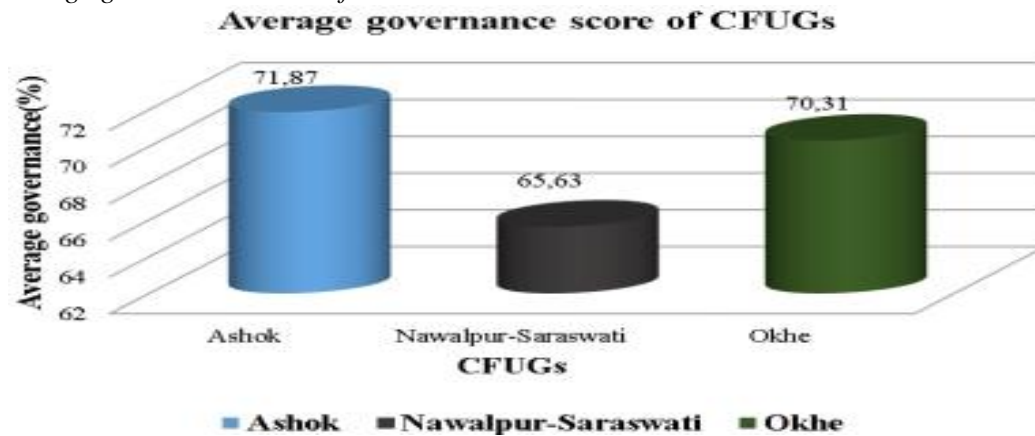
Status of overall governance

The result showed that Ashok CF has the highest average governance score of 71. 87% followed by 70.31% in Okhe CF and 65.63% in Nawalpur-Saraswati CF respectively (Fig. 2). In all three studied CF transparency and accountability is the weakest aspect while participation and rule of law were found in stronger. The average governance score across the three CFUGs was 69.38%, which falls under the "good" governance category according to RIMS Nepal (2003). Although this indicates a moderate level of success, persistent weaknesses in transparency and accountability suggest areas for further improvement. To strengthen governance performance, CFUGs need to improve the implementation of their operational plans and constitutions, ensure

equitable distribution of forest products, enhance capacity-building for marginalized groups, and promote transparent financial management systems.

Figure 2

Average governance status of studied CFUGs

Average governance score of CFUGs

Discussion

This study assessed the quality of governance in three Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) of Makawanpur District based on four major criteria: participation, transparency, accountability, and rule of law. The overall governance score of 69.38% indicates a moderately strong governance condition, consistent with findings from other community forestry studies in Nepal (Lamichhane & Parajuli, 2014; Rijal et al., 2021). While this suggests that the CFUGs are functioning fairly well, persistent gaps in transparency and accountability reveal the need for targeted institutional strengthening.

Participation received the highest score among all governance criteria, suggesting that CFUG members are actively involved in meetings, forest management activities, and operational plan preparation. This outcome aligns with the principles of community forestry that emphasize local engagement and collective decision-making (Ghimire & Lamichhane, 2020). However, the study also observed limited participation of women and marginalized groups in decision-making processes. This finding is in line with earlier studies by Pokharel and Tiwari (2013); and Lamichhane and Parajuli (2014), which noted gender-based participation barriers and social exclusion as enduring challenges in CFUG governance. These limitations indicate that participation, though quantitatively strong, may not yet be fully inclusive or equitable. Transparency scored the lowest in all three CFUGs, revealing significant weaknesses in information disclosure and communication

practices. Most respondents reported inadequate access to financial records and limited awareness of decisions made by executive committees. This mirrors Kanel's (2004) observation that financial disparity and weak communication are key governance issues in Nepal's community forestry. Transparent practices such as open accounting, accessible meeting minutes, and regular reporting could enhance trust and legitimacy within CFUGs (Adhikari et al., 2016). Without such mechanisms, community confidence in leadership and collective management may erode over time.

Accordingly, accountability was also rated relatively low, indicating that executive committee members are not consistently answerable to general users. Biases in decision-making and limited feedback mechanisms were evident, particularly concerning marginalized users. Similar challenges have been documented by Dahal (2003) and Rijal et al. (2021), who emphasized that accountability deficits weaken the democratic foundations of community forestry. Strengthening internal monitoring, performance evaluation, and sanctions for non-compliance could promote greater responsibility among committee members and reinforce equitable governance practices. Among the governance criteria, rule of law received consistently high scores across all CFUGs. Most users were aware of the operational plan and constitution, and these were being implemented and periodically updated. Such adherence to established rules reflects the institutional maturity of Nepal's community forestry framework (MoFE, 2019). However, procedural compliance alone does not ensure justice or fairness. Effective enforcement of operational plans must be accompanied by participatory rule-setting and fair dispute resolution processes (Piabuo et al., 2018). Continued government oversight and user capacity building can help sustain this positive aspect of governance.

The study's findings suggest that while community forestry governance in Makawanpur is generally sound, it remains vulnerable to internal inequities and weak transparency mechanisms. Good governance is foundational for achieving sustainable forest management and local empowerment (UNESCAP, 2006). To strengthen governance quality, CFUGs should institutionalize participatory monitoring systems, promote inclusive leadership training, and ensure that financial and operational information is publicly accessible. Furthermore, integrating social accountability tools such as public hearings and social audits could enhance transparency and user confidence. Overall, improving governance quality is not only essential for forest sustainability but also for achieving broader development goals such as poverty

reduction, gender equity, and local resilience. Enhanced transparency, accountability, and inclusiveness will ensure that community forestry continues to serve as a model of participatory natural resource management in Nepal.

Conclusion

This study evaluated the governance quality of three Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) in Makawanpur District; Ashok CF, Nawalpur-Saraswati CF, and Okhe CF, using four key elements: participation, transparency, accountability, and rule of law. The overall governance performance, with an average score of 69.38%, indicates that governance practices in these CFUGs are moderately strong but not without challenges. Among the four elements, participation and rule of law emerged as the strongest aspects, reflecting active community involvement in forest management activities and adherence to operational plans and constitutions. Conversely, transparency and accountability were identified as the weakest governance elements. To strengthen governance, CFUGs should enhance transparency through open record-keeping and regular public reporting, while promoting accountability by establishing clear feedback channels and monitoring systems. Capacity-building programs targeting women, marginalized groups, and executive committee members can further support equitable participation and responsible leadership. In conclusion, the study affirms that while community forestry governance in Makawanpur is generally in a good state, substantial improvements in transparency and accountability are essential to achieving the principles of good governance. Strengthening these areas will not only enhance local trust and participation but also contribute significantly to sustainable forest management, social inclusion, and community resilience in Nepal.

Acknowledgements

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Full text can be downloaded: https://www.nepjol.info/index.php/craiaj & http://www.craiaj.info/

References

Acharya, K.P. (2002). Twenty-four years of community forestry in Nepal. *Int. Forestry Rev,* 4(2): 149-56.

Adhikari, S., Kingi, T., & Ganesh, S. (2016). Incentives and Community Participation in the Governance of Community Forests in Nepal. *Small-Scale For,* 15:179-197.

Bhattacharya, A.K., & Basnyat, B. (2005). Decentralization and Community Forestry Programmes in Nepal: Issues and Challenges *Int. Forestry Rev,* 7:147-155.

Dahal, G.R. (2003). Devolution in the context of poor governance: Learning from Community Forestry in Nepal. *Forest and Livelihood*, 2 (2):17-22.

Dahal, G.R., & Chapagain, A. (2008). Community Forestry in Nepal: Decentralized Forest Governance. Lessons from forest decentralization: money, justice and the quest for good governance in Asia-Pacific. Colfer, C.J.P., Dahal, G.R., Capistrano, D. (eds.), 65-79.

DAO, (2021). Makawanpur district profile. District Administration Office, Makawanpur, Hetauda. Available on: https://daomakawanpur.moha.gov.np

DFO Makawanpur, (2021). Annual report of Divisional Forest Office Makawanpur. Makawanpur district, Bagmati Province Nepal.

DOF, (2017). Hamro Ban. Annual Report of Fiscal Year 2016-2017, Department of Forest.Kathmandu, Nepal.

Ghimire, P., & Lamichhane, U. (2020). Community Based Forest Management in Nepal: Current Status, Successes and Challenges. *Grassroots Journal of Natural Resources*, 3(2):16-29.

Gilmour, D.A. (2016). Forty Years of Community-Based Forestry: A Review of Its Extent and Effectiveness; Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO): Rome, Italy, ISBN 978-92-5-109095-4.

Gurung, S.B. (2002). Governance and Decentralization in Achieving Sustainable Development is Essentially a Task of Transforming Governance, Policy Input in Governance Issues, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Gurung, A., Karki, R., & Bista. R. (2011). Community-Based Forest Management in Nepal: Opportunities and Challenges. *Resources and Environment,* 1(1): 26-31.

Hoon, P., & Hyden, G. (2003). Governance and Sustainable Livelihoods. Available on: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/4a6a/b7fa25713d2b09d316e426aba181345b64f0.pdf.

Kanel, K.R. (2004). "Twenty five years of CF: contribution to millennium development goals," in Proceedings of the 4th National Workshop on Community Forestry, Kathmandu, Nepal, pp 4–18.

K.C., A. (2016). Community Forest Management: A Success Story of Green Economy in Nepal. *Journal of Environmental Science,* 2: 148–154.

Kimengsi, J.N., & Bhusal, P. (2022). Community Forestry Governance: Lessons for Cameroon and Nepal. *Society & Natural Resources,* 35(4): 447-464.

Lamichhane, D., & Subedi, R. (2014). How Good is the Governance Status in Community Forestry? A Case Study from Midhills in Nepal. *Journal of Ecosystems,* 541374:7.

MoFE, (2019). Forest Act 2019. Ministry of Forests and Environment (MoFE), Government of Nepal, Kathmandu.

Piabuo, S.M., Foundjem-Tita, D., & Minang, P.A. (2018). Community forest governance in Cameroon: a review. *Ecology & Society,* 23 (3): 34. Available on: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26799156

Pokharel, R.K., & Tiwari, K.R. (2013). Good Governance Assessment in Nepal's Community Forestry. *J Sustain For*, 32 (6): 549-564.

Rijal, S., Subedi, M., Chhetri, R., & Joshi, R. (2021). Good Governance Assessment in Community Forest of Nepal. *Journal of Forest and Environmental Science,* 37(3): 251-259.

UNESCAP, (2006). "What is Good Governance? United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific". Available on: http://www.unescap.org/pdd/prs/ProjectActivities/Ongoing/gg/governance.pdf.