

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT THROUGH CRITICAL ACTION RESEARCH: REFLECTIONS ON TEN YEARS OF FORESTACTION NEPAL EXPERIENCE¹

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This paper describes a mode of 'doing civic action'. It is based on the experience of a large NGO in Nepal, ForestAction. It details the method that was developed, termed 'Critical Action Research' (CAR). CAR "emphasises learning from practice, collating and communicating critical evidence for transforming policy dialogue while also empowering right holder citizens and their alliances through sharing knowledge counteracting the dominant system". The paper also details the historical and political economic context in which CAR developed, provides examples of how CAR operated at different levels of forest and natural resources governance and outlines the challenges faced by CAR innovators. It suggests ways forward for NGOs wishing to bridge the divide of academic/research, advocacy, and service delivery.

INTRODUCTION

The idea of civic action has gained prominence in Nepal especially after the 1990 political change. Although community action and associational forms of social life are part of Nepalese society, the post 1990 situation heralded more modernist – and of indeed more self-assertive - forms of civic action – civil society organizations undertaking development functions and advocacy, community associations and federations, research groups, agenda based multi-stakeholder forums, issue focused social movements and campaigns, and mass movements for democracy and human rights. As a result, civic actions have become part of popular discourse, development planning and

political deliberations. Despite major strides made by civic actions on important fronts of social and political change – including the *nagarik andolan* (citizen movement) of 2006 - confusion and contestations persist over what constitutes a fair and effective mode of civic activism. The terms civil society and civic action are being constantly transformed in everyday social practice. There is no single, universally accepted way of organising civil society actions. Civic actions take diverse forms and are mediated by specific historical, political and environmental contexts. In most situations, civic activism has entailed a search for the effective combination of knowledge building and advocacy of the

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concerns of disadvantaged groups in society. This paper is an attempt to describe one way of doing civic action involving a) an organisational form created by citizens concerned with the issues of governance in forest and natural resource sector in Nepal, b) combined efforts to create critical knowledge and catalysing innovative actions, and c) a clear alignment with the agenda to inspire a robust social movement and meaningful political deliberations. As such the approach discussed here is different from the dominant civil society actions in Nepal, which tend to emphasise the advocacy of interests, delivery of development services, and the mechanistic and uncritical project-focused engagement of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) in Nepal. The Critical Action Research (CAR) approach we developed emphasises learning from practice and collating and communicating critical evidence for transforming policy dialogues, while also empowering rights-holder citizens and their alliances through sharing knowledge that counteracts the dominant system. The approach utilised the opportunities in the apolitical space within civil society [as conceptualised by (Heaton Shrestha and Adhikari, 2010)] in the post 1990 multi-party democratic system in Nepal, but still engaged explicitly on political issues related to rules, policies and laws related to forest governance that are rooted in politics.

In this paper, I reflect upon the experience of 10 years (from mid-2000 to mid-2011) of my engagement with ForestAction Nepal (FA) – a non-governmental organisation, taking a critical action research approach to civic activism in Nepal's forest and natural resource sector. This work has been largely oriented to democratising forest governance and empowering the local communities to manage and take control of forest resources that were historically controlled

by government institutions. This was attempted through the creation of counter knowledge in the forest governance discourse dominated by state-centric management, strict conservation thinking and larger and wider public goods, often at the cost of the local community's stakes and livelihoods. Our critical action research approach sought to first generate alternative explanations of the problem of socio-ecological issues, and then catalyse citizen-focused innovations through strengthening community based resource management. We also acted upon multiple levels of forest governance by bringing evidence from the ground to the meso and national level policy deliberations, while at the same time advising community rights movements through critical evidence and strategic analysis.

My experience with FA encompasses all key responsibilities within the lifecycle of the organisation – founding, leading, coordinating, directing, advising and finally chairing the board – over the 10 years since its establishment. Since September 2011, I have not taken any formal management and leadership roles, with the intention of doing critical review, reflections and research into FA's approach to civic engagement in retrospect. This paper is based on reflections upon my work at FA and also based on continuing conversations with colleagues within and around this organisation, with whom I worked over the past decade. I believe that the FA experience is rich and diverse when viewed from the lens of civic activism, and in some sense, unique among NGOs actions (such as those focusing on service delivery or rights movement) in Nepal. The approach to civic action in Nepal is also particularly interesting, as the forest sector in which FA work was focused primarily has one of the most centralised systems of governance in the country. Using the motto of 'science for

democracy', FA has made significant analytical contributions and facilitated constructive policy dialogues among multiple forest stakeholders to find ways towards democratic, equitable and sustainable forest governance in Nepal.

Yet the experience evolved over time and the actors of the organisation had to adjust with shifting and emerging 'political opportunity' (Tarrow, 1996) for collective civic action – particularly the constitutional rights to self-organise, freedom of expression, and also the flow of international development and conservation funding. But we had to question FA's relationship with the development funding world that always tends to see local civic actions as a development NGO. For instance, FA has critically engaged with donors who tend to view organised civic action merely as a service provider – in which a donor asks an NGO to deliver a service as per the contract specified by the donor. We have also tried to prevent FA from becoming an advocacy organisation itself – we rather supported networks of local people to carry out advocacy for themselves. We have also put emphasis on research – and also exploring new ways of doing research – in a way that contributes to the local change process, as well as question the larger discourses shaping local practices. We avoided becoming traditional academic researchers – who see research and policy as two different systems, and consider research outputs linearly feeding into the policy system. We actually went beyond the disciplinary boundaries in framing research and action, as we were very clear right from the beginning that disciplinary focus would only prevent us to see the reality and engage practically in the learning processes. In order to organise such critical and learning focused engagement, we had to experiment and innovate a more interactive and flatter organisational framework than is commonly found in the formally organised NGOs.

In writing this paper, my hope is that a careful reflection upon a decade long experience around these aspects will make some contribution to the body of knowledge about how civic actions emerge and become organised in the context of a fragile state, social inequality, and rapid environmental transitions. I also anticipate that my story around FA can provide a framework for critical action researchers to present their work in a reflective way. Four findings from this paper are noteworthy. First, civic actions should not just be considered as involving the advocacy of interests but more about constructing an engagement in demonstrating solutions that work. There are clear cases in which mere advocacy actions failed and when combined with CAR interventions had more favorable outcomes. Second, the dominant neoliberal and developmentalist power and mindset tends to limit organised civic actions as contractual service providers, and it is critical that organisations act as producers of counter-knowledge rather than reproducers and disseminators of current hegemonic knowledge systems that sustain exclusion, domination and inequities. Third, based on the continued and determined practice of critical social science and the production of counter knowledge; it is possible for the dominant state and donor actors to become more interactive and collaborative in the planning and governance process. Fourth, it also reveals the adaptive approach to organisation building, so as to become effective in critical action research.

The next section outlines the conceptual framework of CAR, followed by a brief description of the historical and political economic context of the forest sector in which FA and its CAR approach emerged. In the third section, I provide a few examples of how CAR actually operated at different levels and aspects

of forest and natural resource governance. The fourth section then identifies and analyses several frontiers of CAR engagement and challenges that the leaders and innovators of CAR have to face. I will then conclude with some key insights and lessons of wider relevance.

Methodologically, this account may be seen as a combination of auto-biographical and auto-ethnographic methods, informed by critical social science perspectives, although I did not use these in a fully conscious way right from the beginning. It is more of a retrospective analysis from these perspectives, drawing on a number of previous analyses of various aspects of CAR (McDougall et al., 2007; Ojha, 2008; Ojha et al., 2008; McDougall et al., 2009; Ojha, 2009).

CONSTRUCTING THE MEANING OF CRITICAL ACTION RESEARCH

ForestAction was not created to implement something called CAR that was out there already. Rather, it is through the experience of FA over time that the CAR approach evolved. FA as a living organisation and its approach co-evolved through action and reflection processes over the years – conducting dozens of small action research projects in about 15 districts and several dozen villages. Right from the beginning, we were concerned with the dominant knowledge systems and mindsets behind the techno-bureaucratic, top-down, state-centric governance of forest and natural resources. But we were also aware of our own limits, working as a formal organisation, not directly dependent on natural resources for livelihoods, and external funding of our work. Our CAR approach evolved as we worked with selected Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) registered at the local District Forest Office as legitimate managers of

the designated forest patch, as per the 1993 Forest Act. The approach embraced multi-level engagement as we moved up from local communities to district stakeholders and national policy makers. We tried to dig out why problems of inequity and exclusion occur and persist at local CFUGs level, and also explore the dreams and imaginations of disadvantaged groups at the community level. We compiled evidence for counter knowledge from the field and also strengthened local community groups in better and more equitable management of forests. These experimental activities – with varying levels of success and failure – provided critical knowledge resources to advance policy debates at district and national levels.

We were doing critical action research into our own evolving approach to research and action – and thus developing it through successive cycles of action and reflection. As part of organising diverse collaborative activities with donors and international organisations (on which FA has to rely for funding and to some extent learn what is happening outside), we of course, used a number of phrases offered by our collaborators in different times – such as action research, action learning, participatory action research, adaptive management, social learning – linked with various research and action projects we did over the previous 10 years². But as we were able to exercise some choice over what partners we wished to work with and how, many of the phrases we had to use eventually constituted CAR. In particular, the following research work helped FA develop and refine its CAR approach:

- a) Participatory action research on community forest user groups conducted in collaboration with the University of Reading (2001-2004).

² For a detailed description of this, see Banjade forthcoming (Adaptive collaborative approaches in natural resources governance, edited by Ojha et al.).

- b) Adaptive Collaborative Management research conducted in collaboration with the Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and with support from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and Canadian International Development Research Center (IDRC) (2002-2007)
- c) Knowledge systems and natural resources management research in which we studied how actors learn in natural resource management (with support from Canadian IDRC)

What exactly was CAR in the life and functioning of FA then? Let me first define the three parts of CAR and then give a summary of the approach:

- **The Approach is Critical:** Being critical means taking positions in the world replete with discourses, institutions and practices of injustice, hegemony, and domination. We drew inspiration from critical social science literature that social research is not a politically neutral act. We, therefore, focus our work to generate counter knowledge. This closely resonates with unraveling hegemony through critical inquiry and discourse – in Gramsci's sense (Gramsci, 1990). We believed that hegemonic formations and practices of forest governance can be challenged and questioned in the domain of civil society and on the realms of knowledge, discourses, and practices. This also resonated with Habermas' formulation of critical theory as an endeavor to unpack 'systematically distorted communication' in society (Habermas, 1970). In Pierre Bourdieu's language, this is about critiquing symbolic violence by questioning the unquestioned beliefs (doxa) and also creating an 'epistemological break' (Bourdieu et al., 1991) with the primary experience of the people accepting established order.
- **The Approach is Action-oriented:** At FA, we are also inspired by Kurt Lewin's view that "You cannot understand a system, unless you

try to change it"(Lewin, 1951). Professionals and researchers can do excellent and critical research to diagnose the problem, but they may remain disengaged with the particular communities or societies in which such studies are done. We embraced the Lewinian view that without an orientation to change and preparedness to capture the effects of interventions, we cannot fully understand the complexity of natural resource governance and practices in Nepal. Thus, to remain action-oriented means not only to accept obligations to contribute to the change society at large is in need of, and to remain open to be influenced by the agendas and expectations of the society while doing research, but also to grasp the difficulty and uncertainty involved in the process of change. This would also require one to transcend the disciplinary and institutional boundary so that one can frame the research to address the practical concerns of the people, which may not fit perfectly with the disciplinary frames of researchers. The action-orientation and interaction with communities in our approach make it clear right at the beginning that whatever we advocate should emerge from the concrete experience/experimentation in the real world. Through such a process, not just evidence but also the empowerment of human agents to carry forward the evidence in political articulation is important. At the time we founded FA, there was more noise than grounded voice on rights and empowerment. We found that many of the radical and critical explanations put forth against the dominant technocratic approach by advocacy groups and their allies were not making sense in the debates of change unless founded upon some action, evidence and reflection. This formed an immediate social context for the development of a critical action research approach in Nepal's forest sector.

- **The Approach is Research and Learning Oriented:** We emphasised creating new knowledge for change rather than doing standard development. At times we disappointed some communities with little intervention outcomes as we focused more on collating evidence and communicating it to the wider public sphere. Our belief is that some of the local problems people face are simply the manifestations of national level problems. The other aspect of learning was about discovering and questioning our own mental models. We always tried to remain inquisitive and were prepared to challenge our own assumptions. One of our conclusions is that policy and practices in forestry are guided by a lot of accepted beliefs and standard frameworks nurtured and inherited from the past, and there is a need to foster the organised production of counter knowledge. But our positionality of NGO at times provided flexibility in undertaking research in ways we liked, but also left the research with limited take up by the government, parliament and other decision makers. To enhance research uptake, we had to engage a diverse range of stakeholders in the process starting from the research design to policy communication. How FA's approach evolved in relation to these multiple challenges of Nepal's forestry sector is outlined in the next section. One of the key research innovations is that our research just does not end with producing some facts; we tried to build a system of communication of the research to the intended audience, not just policy makers but more importantly the actors in social movement.

While we emphasise CAR as the central theory of learning and change within FA, not all of the activities FA did or does are essentially part of a larger strategy of CAR. This is in part a reflection

of the freedom of actors within FA – as it comprises teams with varying degrees of inclination and attachment to the discursive, action and research aspects of CAR. And there is no branding mechanism of CAR to certify that the activity has met the standards of CAR. Yet, every action is subjected to some level of CAR-related reflection and analysis as part of regular sharing within the FA system. From the beginning, there is a regular system of reflection and sharing from the broader perspective of CAR, scrutinising the very elements that constitute CAR. Similarly, we have identified and engaged "change agents" from different organisations into a collaborative learning process in order to develop shared understanding on and ownership of action and research outcomes. This has helped incorporate outsiders' views and suggestions in different CAR cycles facilitated by FA.

CONTEXTUAL ROOTS FOR THE EMERGENCE OF CRITICAL ACTION RESEARCH IN FORESTRY SECTOR

Back in 2000, FA was founded on the belief that social exclusion and injustice are deeply rooted in the unequal access to and control over natural resources. The agrarian and pre-capitalist nature of Nepal's economy hinges primarily on natural resources, with tenure, governance, and market linkages as central issues. Following the democratic political change in the 1990s, FA was created to promote research and policy advocacy to catalyse critical thinking and democratic innovation in forest governance. In the post 1990 environment of multi-party liberal democracy, civil society activity grew profusely in Nepal, including in the forestry sector, proactively taking a significant role in the community forestry movement. Building on our prior experience and analysis of Nepal's political

economy, we strategically targeted the forest sector because of its local livelihoods significance, political importance, and wider environmental concerns. Our choice of forestry was also based in part on our prior experience in this particular sector.

At a time when we were conceiving the organisation of FA, there was a tension in the forest sector about whether to promote community based management or undertake scientific forest management by the government itself. Donor projects in the forestry have helped shape new forest legislation (1993, implemented since 1995) and this has empowered civil society leaders to demand the devolution of forest rights to local communities. But our observation was that despite formal and rhetorical processes of change in the legislative framework and the development of participatory and community based resource management innovations, the actual system of forest governance was historically entrenched within the techno-bureaucratic institutional system. Seeds of participatory innovations and the wider demand for scaling up community based forest management systems were obviously waiting for a national player that could link local practices with national policy debates in a more reflective, critical and social-scientific manner.

The process of devolution in forestry was not an easy process, and there was a clear gap for the role of a critical action research organisation. In the state-centric efforts to control and manage forests since the 1957 nationalisation of private forests, the national bureaucracies assumed the role of managers as well as technical experts, while local people were seen as the ones

destroying forests. The Department of Forest was created in 1925, and consistently expanded to take better control of forests against local communities. Since then, a series of legislations³ was enacted to enforce effective national control over forests by the expanding forest bureaucracy through excluding local people. While enacting the 1957 nationalisation act, it was assumed that taking forests from private groups and putting them under the control of the state would enhance people's access to resources. But in effect, the state created a strong techno-bureaucratic field and instituted stringent regulations to exclude people from the role of forest manager (Ojha, 2006). *Panchayat* era forest legislation even allowed forest officials to shoot people on sight if found collecting forest products.

Despite some changes in attitude and behavior among forest officials towards working with people, largely as a result of the community forestry movement in the hills, the orthodox attitude of state centric scientific forest management continued. This formed an important context for our approach to emerge – such that we were compelled to reveal this hegemonic exercise of power and also offer forums for critical and deliberative engagement among citizens, officials and other actors. This left a crucial gap for a critical action research approach to fill in the Forest sector – especially efforts that reveal deeper power relations and hegemonic knowledge systems that lie on the road to greater justice and the empowerment of local people. The agenda of participatory governance emerged when there was a crisis in techno-bureaucratic confidence during the seventies, triggered by the news of Himalayan

³ Two laws are noteworthy here – Forest Act, 1961 and Forest Protection Special Act, 1967. The latter even authorised local forest guards to shoot people using forest illegally.

degradation⁴(Eckholm, 1976). Nepal's strategic geopolitical situation and fragile environmental condition attracted bilateral and multilateral donors, who took forestry and the environment as the key elements of integrated conservation and development projects. Donor insistence on explicit government commitment towards decentralisation was also growing, and was becoming a part of aid negotiation.⁵ But the donor led development in forestry was also meeting a point of saturation when we started FA, and this itself became a key area of FA's critical action research engagement (see later). In the post 1990 environment, the bilateral donor forestry projects that had their own implementing structures were facing demands for institutional change towards greater participation of local organisations, NGOs and communities. FA's emergence was also seen as a threat by those involved in conventional approaches to service delivery through donor created project units. Our strategy was to look out for international competitive resources rather than getting engaged with resource politics, in which we succeeded to a significant extent.

As community forestry proceeded with multiplying the number of registered community forestry user groups across the country, Nepal also moved through periods of conflict and political turmoil, especially after the Maoist declared the beginning of the 'People's War' in 1996. One of the claims on which Maoists based their war was that multi-party democracy and international development both were

responsible for social exclusion in Nepal. Community forestry programmes did not prove any different, although local communities remained resilient to civil war and continued to function without much interruption (Karna et al., 2010). The Maoist believed that the issue of exclusion was more systemic, historic and rooted in the larger political structure, all justifying the need for 'revolution'. This also created grounds for the need of CAR – to explore and catalyse inclusive and equitable governance of forest resources in the country, eventually addressing the very foundations of violent conflict. Clearly, we wanted to develop an approach to engage people and stakeholders to rethink existing institutions, policies and practices for fairer distributional outcomes and equity, going beyond the confrontational strategy adopted by rights activists and the apolitical and project-centered strategy adopted by INGOs in Nepal.

Still another contextual concern that inspired our CAR approach was the lack of opportunities for people to influence policy despite the rhetoric of democracy (Ojha et al., 2007). At policy level, political leaders continued to be guided more by the "administrative will" of the respective line ministries rather than by "public will" (as stressed in the ideal of deliberative democracy). This was partly because of the collusion of the private interests of the political leaders and bureaucrats, and partly because of the liberal democratic mindset (a belief in election without adequate deliberative links between citizens and leaders) in which representatives are considered entitled to make decisions on behalf of the larger mass of people. In such contexts, we have

⁴ In the decades of 60s and 70s, Nepal was projected as a site of Himalayan degradation, and this attracted tremendous international attention. During the early 1980s, Nepal's mountains were perceived as a site of environmental and livelihoods crisis – deforestation and soil erosion were affecting water flows and livelihood resources base locally and beyond (Eckholm, 1976; Cameron, 1998).

⁵ For elaborate discussion on how aid contributed to change and reproduction of forestry sector, please refer to another paper Ojha (forthcoming) in Book edited by Thompson and Gyawali.

always remained intellectually curious and practically engaged in the way radical and democratically elected leaders easily fall prey to the bureaucratic rationality once they come to the government. CAR thinking was thus animated by fundamental concerns over governance failure that needed more concrete learning and analysis and not just advocacy.

While we have sought to expand the public sphere of dialogues and participation, we have also remained critical of populist posturing and the weakening of the state. Despite the proliferation of NGOs, associations and federations, our understanding is that civil society actors have not yet been able to come to genuinely 'public' spheres, let alone the 'subaltern' public sphere, and are confined to the small-scale, instrumental domain of "projects" and resource networks. In the worst cases, leaders from the local community and larger civil society have engaged in collusion with corrupt groups within the government and illegal timber traders, thus creating challenges to decentralised governance. This means that natural resource governance is problematic not solely due to techno-bureaucratic dominance, unaccountable politics and donor-driven programmes, but also due to problems within civil society itself. Our work at FA has thus been equally motivated by the urge to understand, catalyse and transform how civil actors can engage in the process of governance reform, including demonstrating an innovative strategy of civic action.

In the existing landscape of actors in forest governance, our approach was critical as well as balancing. We also avoided making sweeping classifications of actors as progressive or regressive. Rather we believed in and actively pursued the difference within each institutional category. For instance, while we criticised the dominant tendency of a top-down techno-bureaucratic mindset within the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, we identified and built alliances with several progressive, critically engaged and change oriented forest officials, who had been fighting for change from within the system. Likewise, we did not seek to establish close relationships with any particular political party, but engaged equally with all major parties, though our engagement with political leaders has been mostly in association with community federations on forests, drinking water, irrigation and others, whom we have been supporting through critical action research based evidence and strategic advice.

HOW DOES CRITICAL ACTION RESEARCH HAPPEN?

Our work at FA, as outlined earlier, involves multiple actions and research from the local to the national level. The table below identifies how the CAR related interventions of FA have contributed to deepening policy deliberation around various forest governance issues in Nepal. It also shows various outcomes that could potentially result from such interventions.

CAR Interventions in Forest Policy: Examples			
Policy issues	Level	ForestAction Contribution	Achievement
Special forest policy for Terai (April 2000) and wider debates of Terai Forest Governance	Policy	Action researches Dissertation Book Journal articles Special issue of Journal on Terai forest	Reframe and decentralise Terai forest governance debate

CAR Interventions in Forest Policy: Examples			
Policy issues	Level	ForestAction Contribution	Achievement
Community Forestry guidelines	Guidelines	Actively participated in taskforce analysis and papers focusing pro-poor and inclusive provisions	Pro-poor CF guidelines
Forest Act amendment (different attempts including 2001, 2010)	Act	Field study Discussion paper policy roundtable	Government withdrew amendment bill
Gaurisankhar Conservation Area (2010 - 2011)	Regulations	Field study Policy roundtable	Ensured community rights in Gaurisankhar Conservation Area
CF inventory guidelines (September 2000)	Guidelines	Field study and report Review article in <i>Journal of Forest and Livelihood</i>	Simplified CF inventory guidelines

Source: (Sharma and Ojha, 2011)

A few examples can illustrate how we organised CAR in response to different issues of forest and natural resource management and governance.

Example 1. Problematising the universality of the science and opening up spaces for public debate around issues that were earlier closed as being scientific. Nepal's forestry sector historically was a bounded policy-making formation, with top-down and centralised decision-making. Although the elected parliament endorsed a progressive Forest Act (1993), recognising local communities as the managers and users of local forests, the legacy of the government departments considerably distorted the intention of the legal change. These distortions were effected through the formulation of new regulations or bylaws, directives, guidelines and official circulars that together undermined the participatory essence of the Act. One of them was the Forest Inventory Guidelines 2000, which imposed a complicated, 'scientific' method of forest measurement onto

local CFUGs as a pre-condition for signing and renewing forest management agreements. The Guideline was issued without the consultation of CFUGs and civil society groups. This created country-wide havoc as District Forest Officers began suspending agreements with local CFUGs invoking the lack of inventory/measurement data as required by the new Guidelines.

FA worked with the Federation of Community Forestry User Groups, Nepal (FECOFUN) and NGOs to understand the scale and complexity of the problem at ground level. We recognised that it was necessary to further probe the issue and to propose alternative ideas on how science and local knowledge can be combined to inform forest management decision making, and how that can be reflected in national policies. FA produced a policy discussion note entitled "science and politics of forest inventory in Nepal" in 2002 (Ojha, 2002) and shared it with policy makers, donors, researchers and activists

nationally and with international networks. A survey of the problems facing CFUGs across Nepal was done and a report produced (Dhital et al., 2002). FA researchers made field visits to understand community perspectives on the Guidelines and held interactive meetings with forest officials at different levels. Articles and opinions from diverse stakeholders, including the research conducted by FA, were collected and disseminated through various Issues of the Nepali language journal of FA – *Hamro Ban Sampada*. The Inventory issue was also identified as a case study in another research on Knowledge Systems of FA (Paudel and Ojha, 2008) and was further analysed and published (Hull et al., 2010). These analyses generated options for reconciling scientific forestry with local knowledge.

Our analytical insights and evidence stimulated new thinking and realisation on the part of policy makers, and stronger community voices demanding user-friendly Guidelines. The evidence we generated was compelling, and it was recognised that the Guidelines had become overbearing for local people and was contrary to overall policy. Eventually, in 2004, the Director General of the Forestry Department initiated the process of revising the Guidelines, this time forming a multi-stakeholder task force, to conduct a series of consultation meetings with stakeholders. FA contributed directly to the discussions, analysed the processes of policy negotiation, and provided critical suggestions on how scientific and local knowledge can be combined into a framework of democratic forest governance.

Example 2. Critical action research to transform patron client relations between forest bureaucracy and local communities. During

2004-2006, a team of FA researchers worked with *Chautari* CFUG in Morang district, as part of their multilevel action research initiative. The case of *Chautari* CFUG in Morang demonstrates how critical action researchers were able to empower the CFUG members to have deliberative engagement with the forest officials on better utilisation of forest products. Although the community forest was formally handed over to the CFUG, the actual decisions on forest management were still controlled by the District Forest Office. And surprisingly, such an everyday issue as forest access has not yet become a priority on the agenda of the national level FECOFUN that was articulating other policy agendas at national and international levels. A team of FA researchers visited the site as part of their CAR intervention. They spent several months – questioning and challenging the villagers, making them more conscious about inquiring, probing, reflecting and discussing issues at hamlet and village levels, as well as with other stakeholders. The deliberative processes helped to improve the confidence of users as legitimate managers of forest to make sense of the legal documents, to better understand the technical calculations and terms used in the forest management plan document (through which forest officials were manipulating harvesting practices) (Ojha et al., 2010). This also allowed the FA researchers to collect and organise evidence in relation to the problems of local institutions, and thus enabled them to challenge the techno-bureaucratic domination in the language of science itself.

Likewise, during the same period, the team worked with another CFUG in Dhankuta district – *Handikharka* CFUG. Here, researchers were able to encourage critical self-reflexivity among the CFUG elites who were ill-advised by the

forest officials – in adopting a protectionist approach to forest management that excluded disadvantaged groups. In this case, CAR interventions focused on providing equitable access to forest products by promoting firewood production against the conventional timber forestry and the protectionist wisdom characteristic of techno-bureaucratic control. Similar work earlier in Kavre emphasised deliberative empowerment (Banjade and Ojha, 2005).

Example 3. Questioning non-deliberative and strategically framed policy and programme initiatives and then expanding public debate. A key area of hegemony we encountered in Nepal's forestry sector concerns the way donor money is channeled for the benefit of local communities. As mentioned earlier, various donors generously funded forestry development in Nepal, including setting up of the community forestry system. Over the years, the project structures themselves began to emerge as durable organisations in the institutional vacuum between donors and government. At the end of 2009, as the two bilateral projects were coming to end, the project staff were trying to find ways

to create and manage projects to be funded by donors. They engaged Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MFSC) officials to undertake an evaluation of community forestry impact focusing on their project sites. Though it was packaged as an independent evaluation of the CF system, we were aware that the study was meant to establish the legitimacy of continued funding of the projects. They recognised our strength as researchers as well as having political leverage when it comes to communicating the findings, and asked us to apply for the evaluation consultancy. We discussed the issue within the whole staff meeting and decided that, rather than applying for the evaluation consultancy, we should go for publicly questioning such a narrowly conceived study, and suggest to the government to make it more transparent and participatory. FA drafted a letter outlining key concerns and also providing suggestions, and this was submitted to the Secretary of the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (see Box 1 below). The concerns raised were about who defined the agenda, and the scope of the study, and also the methodological assumptions that mask the strategic interests of those framing the study.

Box 1. FA Concerns and Suggestions on the Community Forestry Impact Evaluation Study

Excerpts of a letter sent by the head of FA Nepal to the Secretary, Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation on December 24, 2009.

Concern 1. Who defined the evaluation agenda?

It appears that although the call has been formally announced (December 11, 2009) by the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MFSC), there is a "core group of stakeholders" which seems to be initiating the study process. It is not clear who these core group of stakeholders are. There is a suspicion among forestry sector civil society organisations that that this process excludes several key players of CF in Nepal. FA as a key research player in Nepal's community forestry is not aware of any processes that led to this call.

Also, the Call further stipulates that MFSC announces the Call on behalf of "task force", but it is not clear what kind of task force this is, who constituted it, and how. Since we do not know who is within the Task Force, we fear that this has exacerbated the sense of exclusion among many important players of CF in Nepal. We are really curious to know why an apex level government body like MFSC is working "on behalf of the task force" that is not transparent to wider society.

Suggestion:

The history of CF development in Nepal is uniquely participatory compared to other sectors. So we suggest we retain this historical strength of CF when it comes to CF evaluation as well. This approach will ensure wider uptake of evaluation findings, and trigger constructive engagement among diverse stakeholders of CF in Nepal, thus leading to change we all anticipate. We suggest the following actions for the MFSC in this regard:

- Revive the Forestry Sector Coordination Committee (FSCC) with inclusive civil society representation, and convene FSCC meeting to discuss the need for impact evaluation as part of the forest sector reform agenda. The FSCC meeting may constitute a task force for various key tasks to be undertaken, including the impact study.
- Entrust a key focal point role to the Community Forestry Division (CFD) within the Department of Forests instead of the donor programme. CFD should act as the secretariat of the impact evaluation steering committee or task force formed by FSCC. This is because the Division is the central government unit to coordinate community forestry activities, manage CF database and provide feedback to policy.

Concern 2. Scope and objectives of the impact study.

The impact study mainly seeks "to assess the extent to which community forestry has contributed or not to livelihood benefits". Our view is that we should not commission evaluation research simply to find a "yes or no" answer to this question, as it would simply tell us whether we should continue the programme or not. Instead, our enquiry should be aimed at identifying useful lessons for enhancing the performance of CF in order to address multiple economic, social and environmental challenges. In particular, we need to understand which intervention modalities have generated what kinds of outcomes in different contexts. If we want to use the study findings to design future programmes, we need to focus on modalities, inputs and strategies of various CF support programmes as the key variables of analysis. More importantly, we need to recognise that communities have invested at least four times more than the donor or government in forest management. It will be unfair if we see community forestry primarily as a donor funded activity, and undervalue the millions of dollar equivalent cash and in-kind investments made by over 10 million people affiliated with community forestry in Nepal. The idea of evaluation should be to understand how public spending can further enhance the existing struggles and initiatives of local communities, local citizen groups, women and disadvantaged groups, rather than justify or reject a particular donor or government programme modality.

This means that we need to review not only DFID and SDC supported activities, but also include samples of other CF projects and support activities implemented by INGOs, NGOs, CBOs and community networks, in a comparative framework so that we can arrive at most effective intervention modalities.

Suggestions:

- Reframe evaluation objectives to examine the impact of various modalities of CF (actors, strategies, processes) and the linkages/conflicts/synergy between CF and other modalities of community based forest management – particularly leasehold forestry and collaborative forest management.
- Design the study to evaluate the comparative effectiveness of public spending (government budget, donor funds) in support of creating sustained livelihood opportunities, economic innovations and transforming governance.
- Focus on understanding the endogenous, local and citizen-led processes and initiatives for change and transformation rather than the processes driven by donors, central government and other national institutions.

Concern 3. Methodology

The methodology of the impact evaluation is the most important part, and should be clearly linked to the evaluation objectives (for which we provided suggestions in the previous section). Since we need to reframe the objectives, we need to revisit the methodology accordingly. Currently, the design is silent on the issue of attribution. While qualitative case studies can provide deeper insights, we should focus more on quantitative analyses. There are already plenty of case studies which can be reviewed, and any need for fresh case studies should be determined only through careful review of what already exists.

Suggestions:

- Expand the scope of survey beyond assessing "what livelihood impacts have occurred" to include what intervention modalities have created this, under what contexts, and with what dynamics of innovation generation processes.
- Since in-depth qualitative case studies are likely to be strategically manipulated, focus should be on quantitative analysis. Variables for quantitative analyses should be carefully devised from the objectives and key questions for evaluation.
- A team of experts should be asked to advise on the sampling frame which need to be agreed by the multi-stakeholder group or task force formed by FSCC. The review should be linked to the learning questions and challenges experienced by FSCC, and should contribute to the ongoing learning among forest stakeholders.

Source: ForestAction Nepal.

This eroded the legitimacy and enthusiasm of the study process, but could not entirely have the study withdrawn. Our strategy in this case was limited to questioning and not so much empowering the affected groups to actively oppose the process. This almost paralysed the study, resulting in several credible researchers dropping the assignment.

Example 4. Creating multi-stakeholder dialogues and policy forums. Since 2009, FA has started a regular policy forum in which it has collaborated with the association of foresters and federations of community forest groups. Unlike conventional policy forums, the *Ban Chautari* model invariably involves a sequential combination of: diagnostic analysis of emerging policy issues by researchers, empowerment of disadvantaged groups concerned with the policy issues, holding multi-stakeholder policy dialogues, and wider dissemination of the research outcomes and deliberative processes to the public.

In 2011, they conducted nine *Ban Chautaris* on the issues covering forest act amendment, sustainable forest management, timber management, forest based enterprise, protected areas and green economy. The Executive Coordinator⁶ of FA Nepal claims that: "The process has had some good achievements. First, the initiative has institutionalised '*Ban Chautari*' —a unique process of policy dialogue that combines diagnostic analysis with structured policy dialogue. Second, it has provided a welcoming environment for dialogue where people can share their views without any fear, and this has also helped develop trust among the stakeholders. Third, it has been able to narrow down the gaps in stakeholders' understanding of some major contentious policy agendas such as sustainable forest and timber management and protected area governance".

Table 1. Summary of policy contribution of *Ban Chautaris*

Topic	Policy issue	Contribution from <i>Ban Chautari</i>
Revisiting PA buffer zones: Exploring legal and institutional reforms in buffer zone management	After 15 years of implementation of buffer zone programme, new challenges have emerged and stakeholders are demanding substantial change in its legal and institutional framework	Stakeholders agreed that programme needs revision including its foundation law protected area act 1973. BZ council's lead role and government's facilitating role suggested.
Restructuring Protected Areas: Exploring democratic governance framework of conservation areas in Nepal	Continued expansion of protected area is increasingly contested, deliberative and inclusive process is demanded	Role of conservation areas in managing larger landscapes is appreciated. They also recognised the shortcomings with existing models and saw opportunities for more democratic and participatory management models.

⁶ Personal communication, Dr Naya Sharma Paudel, January 31, 2012, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Topic	Policy issue	Contribution from <i>Ban Chautari</i>
Poverty reduction through forestry: Exploring strategies to realise economic benefits of timber management in Nepal	Timber has been kept in low profile in policy debate and discourse despite it has been hot spot in practice. This has undermined the potential benefit that could be fetched from the timber.	Realising the huge potential of timber to contribute in national economy and employment, stakeholders called for attention to bring the timber policy and associate issues in public debate and policy priority.
Forest Enterprise: Opportunities and Challenges in the context of Nepal	There are huge policy gaps and practical hurdles in promoting community-based forest enterprises	Key policy gaps and practical hurdles for community-based forest enterprises were identified and attention of government has been drawn for revising the policies and correcting in practice
Scientific Forest Management Opportunities, Challenges and Reality	Irrespective of management regime, Nepalese forest lack scientific and productive forest management	Key factors hindering to the scientific forest management have been identified and stakeholders called for immediate action for piloting productive forest management in different management regimes
Nepal's forests: Green economy or black money	Despite huge potential to promote green economy, Nepal's forests are being playground for black money	Four key issues require consideration to move towards green economy. The conceptual clarity, services and technologies, policy and legal barriers on forest based trade and enterprise and tenure security, community rights.
Challenges of Churia conservation and role of local communities	Despite huge efforts from government and other development agencies, Churia region across the country is degrading and President Churia Conservation programme initiated by GoN has been highly contested	Stakeholders unanimously agreed that Churia need immediate attention due to ecological, socio-economic and political significance. It requires technological and institutional innovation to deal the current conservation challenges. With this realisation, the stakeholders agreed to sit on further debate and discussion for improvising the Present Churia Conservation Programme and seeking other options.

Source: (Khatrri et al., 2012, p.12)

In a recent review meeting of the *Ban Chautari* series of dialogues, the participants' responses were largely positive. Participants highly appreciated the initiative and recognised that such process would contribute to informed policy making in the forest sector (ForestAction, 2012).

- Mr. Keshav Bhattarai, Secretary of MFSC, appreciated *Ban Chautari* and opined that the government could have provided funding and other support for this process. He assured that the senior officials would participate in the future events provided they are informed in time.
- Dr. Uday Raj Sharma, Ex- Secretary of MFSC suggested that the government should own and support the process as this would add legitimacy to the process. He urged senior officials to manage time to participate in the Chautaris. He also suggested working closely with government authorities to enhance the policy uptake.
- Mr. Ram Prasad Lamsal opined that contrary to everyday CSO led meetings organised to invite and humiliate policy makers, *Ban Chautari* had established a culture of mutual respect and genuine exchange of ideas.
- Mr. Bajra Kishor Yadav, Director General of the Department of Forests (DoF) appreciated the process and opined that the DoF would benefit from such dialogues.
- Mr. Kapil Adhikari, chairperson of timber traders of Nepal stated that the private sector had been involved in forest policy issue for the first time through *Ban Chautaris*.

Some participants warned against the potential pitfalls of externally funded initiatives. They suggested that *Ban Chautari* should take nationally relevant policy agendas, maintain the transparency of policy issues and management aspects, share outcomes with all relevant actors, and constructively support government

in its policy process. The FA team and their collaborators welcomed these suggestions and pledged to continue organising such forums for policy dialogues.

Example 5. Strategic and advisory support to community federations on forest and natural resources. A significant part of the time and energy of FA staff has gone towards providing assistance, advice, and organising resources to strengthen the activities of federations of community based resource management groups. FA is invited by these federations regularly to their strategic meetings and internal reviews. FA staff provide a broader analysis of issues confronted by these federations. Engagement with such rights holder groups has enabled FA to directly share its research findings with the public and concerned citizen community, as well as to update itself on the expectations and concerns of the people. FA staff have maintained a critical balance in their relationships with advocacy groups, avoiding any direct role in the campaigns organised by community associations. This strategy has helped FA to retain its critical action research focus, while trying to reach out and actively engage with the ultimate beneficiaries of its work. FA's close ties with several community federations and the offering of critical knowledge, has not been welcomed by the more conservative officials of the MFSC, but maintaining intellectual integrity in relationships with diverse stakeholders has enabled FA to retain its capacity to work even with rival factions.

CRITICAL ACTION RESEARCH AND THE FRONTIERS OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Having outlined the CAR approach and how it can catalyse and stimulate the democratisation of governance at different levels, I now turn to

discuss how this approach was organised by FA over the past 10 years. While organising CAR oriented activities at FA, we engaged in at least the following seven domains:

Creating and transforming the institution

Ten years down the road, FA has a lot to share about how it experimented with different organisational modalities, not because they are ready-to-use success stories, but because there is a rich insight coming from multiple experiments. In the first year, we operated as a programme initiative within an existing NGO as we hesitated to set up new NGO in the already crowded field of development NGOs in the country. At least at the beginning, this was also a pragmatic strategy for us, enabling us to minimise the operating costs by sharing the office space and utilities of a well-functioning NGO. But as we speeded up our activities, we recognised that it would make more sense to register FA as an independent NGO. We had a governing board of seven people but this represented only those of us working in the organisation or their close allies, as we wanted to keep the management and administration more organic and less costly in terms of coordination and governance. This means that we did not have an independent governing board. As our presence became more pronounced in Nepal's forest sector, after three years, we invited a University professor to chair the board and this marked the beginning of a more formal, externally visible NGO board. We increased the membership from an initial 7 to over 40 now, in order to expand the constituency of the organisation.

A key strategy we employed to make the organisation less hierarchical is to have a rotating leadership. This was expected to ensure

that no single person would emerge as a dominant figure as is common in NGOs in Nepal. For the first few years, we put excessive emphasis on the team – by creating collective decision forums within the organisation, but we realised that this proved too difficult and time-consuming for coordination. So we started to have more coordinating roles at the centre of management. We also invented a management team mechanism sharing power with the coordinator and actively supporting him or her in providing leadership to the organisation. The organisation functions primarily through the highly independent activity or project leaders who are often the specialists in their area of expertise. Through such an arrangement, the organisation has been able to host at least 5 PhD holders and senior researchers who enjoy a significant degree of freedom to design and undertake research and actions. Yet they all engage in collective learning and visioning through reflective meetings, sharing and deliberative practices.

So how does such a decentralised system adopt a common value and approach such as CAR? We emphasised discursive coordination rather than management control. This means holding meetings on specific agendas and issues, sharing critical insights and innovations and enhancing social learning among the staff and professionals of FA.

In terms of financial management, we also experimented with challenging strategies. FA does not normally provide a monthly salary to senior staff – it ascertains a rate or overhead charge on the personnel fee. This way the institution does not take the burden of employing the staff, while the latter also feels that he or she has the autonomy to pursue research and action. This applies even to the head of the organisation – who is paid for 7-10

days of general administration and leadership work, and is free to work on the project of his or her interest. In 2007, we experimented with a full time coordinator for the organisation but this did not work – as this arrangement contradicted the usual ambition of the leader to act in actual agendas and projects, rather than remain a full time manager of the organisation.

But in effect, the remuneration is generally on a par with the higher scales in the national NGO category. Unlike some well-known NGOs, we have not thought of extracting a surplus but spent money for the project and staff. This does not mean every important job a staff member does at FA is paid – about 25% of the work of senior staff is voluntary and is related to unfunded strategic work on creating counter knowledge and critical policy engagement. In Nepal, while some people differentiate their consulting or paid jobs from their volunteer social engagements, FA staff have taken the strategy of encouraging and capitalising on the self-motivated strategic engagement of its senior professionals so as to raise the profile of the organisation and enhance the potential to influence the dominant system.

Despite all efforts to become inclusive, the majority of staff was male, non-*Dalit*, and non-*janajatis* (belonging to an indigenous group). This was in part a criterion of staff efficiency that always remained critical to the competitive survival of the organisation. This issue was pointed out by an external reviewer of the organisation in 2010 (Lama, 2011).

Nurturing a new breed of critically engaged action researchers

A major challenge we faced right from the beginning, and to some extent to date, is to find professionals who have the capacity to think

against the current. We expanded the team by building on our own networks of people whom we knew well and had some level of confidence. We located potential members in different Universities in the UK and other countries, and I personally happened to meet some of them and talk about the possibility of working with FA on different occasions in the early years of FA. We clearly explained to everyone joining the organisation at the senior level that we do not offer a monthly salary – we only provide buffering opportunity of certain days of work, usually 50-150, with rates commensurate with experience and qualifications, and then encouraged individuals to develop their own project and raise funds. This proved to be quite difficult. We realised that not all are equally positioned to develop and sell new programmes, so we began to have some form of role division among different groups of staff – new programme development, field implementation, research etc. There is now an emerging division of roles in project development and implementation depending on strengths and networking.

We always emphasise theoretically informed research and local action. This has required constant engagement with texts as well as people. We always have some members engaged in more conceptual research while others act on the ground on specific issues. Such a combination of people can together pool theoretical and empirical, political and technical, local and global knowledge on specific issues and then develops a robust knowledge to share with local stakeholders. In the process, we tried to make researchers activists, and activists researchers. We also launched some structured reading sessions but this depended on the enthusiasm of particular leaders. The sessions that proved particularly useful were those on social learning, organisational learning and action science. Different people read different strands and used these in research, writing, training, and informal sharing.

Holding reflective meetings out of the office premises proved quite fruitful, as it opened up more informal, open and reflective moments for discussion and sharing. Another aspect of collective learning is writing research and experiential reflection in various forms. Having a strong writing culture was part of training the new researchers but not everyone took it seriously. I particularly emphasised joint authorship and we did not calculate much in terms of who did what and who gained what, but adopted the generous strategy of sharing the ownership, so as to establish new members in the forestry sector. This created some tensions at different points especially when new and more individually oriented researchers joined in. Through such processes, we were able to retrain even the technical foresters to see themselves as critically engaged social researchers (Banjade, 2012).

Counteracting techno-bureaucratic power in forestry

Creating a civil society organisation was itself a political act in the forestry context. In the beginning, it was very hard for us to get the organisation recognised by government organisations and the wider professional community. Given the long history of traditional reductionist and extractive scientific approaches in the field of natural resource management, deeply rooted in the institutions of the state itself, finding a civil society space to undertake critical action research was not easy. In some worst cases forest officials even wanted to evict our staff from the field as they asked the staff not to enter their territories (villages, CFUGs) without their permission.

A major part of FA work was to confront techno-bureaucratic power in forest governance. This was undertaken through multiple strategies –

engaging open-minded bureaucrats in joint action learning and reflection processes, generating analyses and ideas that empower community rights groups and federations, undertaking issue based diagnostic analyses, facilitating dialogues between local community leaders and government officials, hosting scholarly exchanges and deliberations, and creating multi-actor dialogues. Sometimes working through friends and colleagues opened up a path into the broader institutions of government. As we grew organisationally, along with the scientific ground, attitudes changed, and government staff began to see that FA is serious in its agenda and work, as well as maintains high levels of professional integrity. The expansion of our symbolic capital through networking with the international community also made a difference in the eyes of government people. When we strengthened our ties with the Federation of Forest Users, considering them as the audience of our research, this also helped to countervail techno-bureaucratic power.

After the government began to recognise FA research and professional strengths from around 2007, they invited FA in all meetings, task forces and working groups. The issue now is not about getting space but about making participation effective. The challenge for FA is to have quality ideas to contribute and not so much demand space for contribution. The ball is now with the FA itself to become even more proactive.

Managing the knowledge products and communication

Documenting knowledge products has remained a key part of CAR. FA has produced a wide range of knowledge products – from the Journal of Forest and Livelihoods to policy briefs. They were meant to engage and inform a wide audience. By the end of 2011, FA had published 13 issues of

the Journal of Forest and Livelihoods, 15 issues of *Hamro Ban Sampada*, 16 policy discussion papers, 10 booklets and 31 policy briefs (Gurung, 2011). Without working on such products, I think it would have been difficult for FA to have a strong presence in the world of policy and knowledge. This has both epistemic and symbolic effects. Apart from such practitioner-oriented products, our research has also found its way into more academic and wider social science community. In doing so, we have emphasised the analysis of forest governance in Nepal through diverse social science angles.

At times, we were able to generate funds for such products, but on several occasions, we pooled our own volunteer efforts to produce the journal and scientific outputs. Most of the discussion papers and policy briefs I wrote, and journal issues I edited were purely my voluntary efforts over and above the level of funding that was available for the field research portions of the work. This trend continues and several of the FA professionals put extra personal effort to get critical knowledge products delivered to the wider public.

Despite nurturing a new breed of researchers, we have consistently faced the capacity challenge to do this. This is a critical part of CAR. This is partly because we have not been able to retain the most competent people who are offered more competitive salaries and benefits by international organisations working in Nepal.

Until recently, we did not care much about the media, which required quite a different set of communication skills than research and scientific writing. But now we have at least two media persons working with FA on a part time basis, guiding the entire team on how research products can and should be communicated in a way people can understand and from which they can benefit.

Questioning the funding environment while getting the work funded

Most cases of CAR practice by FA researchers were or are operating within internationally funded development projects. Situated within the field of development means that such initiatives have to face the legacies of post-World War II development – of western control over power, knowledge and financing (Escobar, 1995). This has posed particular challenges for CAR actors, who have to confront not only the existing donor assumptions of linear planning and management but also the heightened material expectations of local stakeholders.

Heavy reliance on external sponsorship means that there is still limited recognition of endogenous thinking and innovation, such as our critical action research approach. There is usually a mismatch between funding cycles and temporal pathways of innovation. Creating innovations in resource management and also facilitating critical pathways to innovation require societal investment and support, in order to have an impact. Yet, Nepal government has not earmarked funding for such ‘soft development’, given their emphasis on creating tangible development outcomes. In such situations, foreign aid continues to be a key source of financing our work.

In the context of forestry, aid priorities are still governed by the colonial legacies of state-centric management, primarily through bilateral forestry programmes creating parallel structures. What is missing is a broad view of innovations in which research can be one function closely embedded within the process of development and change itself. Following the environmental turn of the development debate and, more recently, the climate change crisis

penetrating resource management approaches, the level of public funding (including international aid) has increased for environmental activities, but not necessarily to support critical action research. The priorities focus on either delivery of services or technology transfer and are still guided by a positivist scientific ideology. Much international aid is handled and administered by international organisations (government, non-government, and bilateral and multi lateral projects) – which are structured to filter critical voices and counter knowledge, but are conditioned to reproduce the existing order through the calculated path of ‘service delivery’, ‘policy support’, and ‘reaching the poor directly’ without engaging local agents of change. In such a situation, FA has to live in a paradox – to question aid and also negotiate aid to fund its activities.

While funding access is largely limited for generating counter knowledge, there is another challenge FA faced in relation to accessible resources. Donors look for concrete and verifiable developmental outcomes even when they are prepared to support critical action research. The problem is not that CAR-like initiatives do not yield a return on investment, but that their gestation period is longer, and we need to conceive evaluation methodologies to ascertain aid-induced change that differ from the conventional evaluation approaches. In several instances, funders have frustrated FA staff through their conventional quantitative cost-benefit approach to evaluation, focusing on what quantitative tools can measure, but ignoring more fundamental social, cultural and institutional outcomes of the initiatives (Giri et al., 2011). Contestations around the meaning, scope and epistemology of evaluation therefore represent a key bottleneck in securing sponsorship for CAR approaches to natural resource management.

All this suggests that CAR oriented researchers and activists will have to work further to find ways to persuade development donors to recognise the social, cultural and institutional outcomes as part of development. They will also face an uphill struggle to influence public spending policies in developing countries to support CAR and address questions of inclusion and democratisation.

The struggle to be done by critical action researchers is tough. I have myself encountered situations in which aid projects have approached me and asked me to respond to a particular development issue as a paid consultant (and work within the given Terms of Reference), in a clear attempt to co-opt my civic standpoint. A colleague of mine who recently worked as a consultant to a bilateral development project later shared with me that he was asked to write what they wanted, and not what he found from the investigations. Another colleague also shared that his impact evaluation report was too critical to the project management, and hence the management did not want to publicise it. In many instances, FA has had to compromise its stance to secure funding, but it still has a good record of rejected consultancies that clearly would have undermined the critical stance of FA on issues of public concern.

Balancing research, advocacy and development service delivery

Organising time and effort to balance research and action is particularly challenging, as the two functions often require diverse and competing sets of competencies, skills and efforts, as well as institutional mechanisms.

The research part of CAR is sometimes seen as extractive and not relevant for the local stakeholders and even policy makers. Likewise, the methodological frameworks of research still

tend to carry the legacies of the positivist paradigm, with little thinking on how experiential insights can be tapped and interpreted. Likewise, another critical challenge is when FA staff are seen as advocates of particular standpoints in specific governance debates, and not as independent researchers doing 'neutral research'. There is indeed a basic dilemma here – how can CAR researchers make a legitimate choice for their role in the spectrum between research and advocacy?

A key goal of FA CAR activities has been to improve the wellbeing of the people living in and around natural resources by engaging and empowering the local communities in the learning process. In view of this, while working at multiple levels has remained a key aspiration, direct collaboration with local communities has usually remained a priority. Unlike the experiences of service delivery projects (which offer some tangible services immediately) or traditional research projects (which do not engage people apart from collecting information), a number of unique challenges have emerged pertaining to the CAR projects. First, there is a perception gap between the CAR facilitators and local communities. FA staff as CAR facilitators tend to see the problem of resource management and human wellbeing as a cross-scale phenomenon, and hence the need to analyse issues and generate evidence for meso level and national policy deliberations. On the contrary, members of local communities tend to prioritise immediate fulfillment of needs and solutions to the problems they are facing. Complex trajectories of change involving learning and collaboration are not an immediate priority of local communities who have pressing livelihood needs. For these reasons, developing relationships of trust with local actors was not always easy.

These communities' ways of learning are largely tacit, and there is always some level of resistance to a research process that exposes unreflected assumptions. A senior staff colleague at FA, Banjade (2012) recalls his experience with some local communities in Nepal:

"Local people saw the researchers as NGO employees, among thousands of others, who they considered as having lucrative jobs and being interested only for 'dollar *pachaune*' (literally, 'digesting dollars coming from foreign sources'), rather than being committed to enhancing community wellbeing. Therefore, the researchers became victims of the dominant image of NGOs in Nepal, which are commonly blamed for (mis)using foreign support in the name of people".

This was largely animated by people's frustrations over the failure of the development industry during the previous 50 years in Nepal, and the fact that it only served to strength social inequality (Metz, 1995). Besides, efforts to generate research and address issues that are beyond the immediate concerns of local communities are particularly likely to meet with local resistance.

In several situations, forming task groups and engaging locally based facilitators has become a key strategy. Working with a select group of local 'change agents' or one or two group representatives from within the communities was found useful, but ended up with a limited institutionalisation of learning processes. Nonetheless, as the planning and learning processes intensify through CAR based interventions, it is not straightforward to define, negotiate and agree on who is going to participate in the actual action process – even when the process is taking place at local level.

Working across scales

Two conceptions of cross-scale links are dominant in the resource governance literature – as an institution and as an adaptive system – both of which are problematic, as they downplay the chaotic interaction processes, as well as how agency interacts with systems and structures in the process of change or reproduction.

The experience reveals that the linking process has at least four axes and is not as structured an institution as some find it. We conceive cross-scale linking processes as ‘transactional flows’ in terms of a) information flow, b) legitimating processes, c) value chain linkages, and d) exercise of power and counter-power. FA made attempts to address multiple combinations of these diverse transactions but practitioners reported that success was much more limited than what they were able to achieve internally at local community levels.

All these processes are linked to whether or not the management of natural resources takes a system-wide view and provide an enabling environment for local innovations. A key gap in FA work is that it still failed to question and counteract the mentality of ‘invent and diffuse across scales’, rather than continuous innovations, which requires taking a learning based approach at all stages, and at all scales, from the community to the national level and beyond, affecting the practice of natural resource management. The ‘meso sphere,’ more like ‘forums’, rather than well-formed institutions between local and macro, has been found to be an important layer in the linking process. Our work in most cases started at the community level, and then ended up with a greater realisation of the need to work at the meso level, and then link to the national level. This remained through the subsequent phases

of the project. At times, FA has also been able to share its research-policy links by creating South Asia level forums of policy researchers (Paudel and Dhungana, 2009).

CONCLUSION

This reflective story on the critically engaged action research experience of FA Nepal over the past 10 years demonstrate that the CAR approach to civic engagement can contribute to and unravel possibilities for change. This also demonstrates a possible way forward for many NGOs that are now currently losing their sight, caught between advocacy, service delivery and research roles as they strive to secure funding. The article makes the case that civil society activism should not be equated with the pure advocacy of particular interests in a social segment; there is equally a role for critical action researchers who are capable of unravelling all kinds of hegemonic exercises of power and even challenge the unquestioned acceptance of the order by marginalised communities. Such an approach can become a flagship programme of action for those seeking to contribute to change in a more engaged way than traditional academic researchers do, in a more intellectually reflective way than conventional rights activists do, and in a more critical way than the technical researchers approach governance issues.

Like many organised civic actions, ForestAction Nepal is situated in the dominant neoliberal and developmentalist power and mindset that tend to limit organised civic actions to contractual service delivery. In such a situation, with varying degrees of success and failure, the attempts of FA have generated valuable evidence in relation to the prospect of civic organisations to act as

producers of counter-knowledge rather than reproducers and disseminators of current hegemonic knowledge systems that sustain exclusion, domination and inequities. This is important as many of NGO actions are being colonised by external resources and knowledge that ignores or negates the perspective of change from below. The decade long experiment of FA, based on the continued and determined practice of critical social science and production of counter knowledge, also shows that it is possible for the dominant state and donor actors to become more interactive and collaborative in planning and governance processes. This has been particularly fruitful when CAR researchers have collaborated with federations/associations of communities claiming rights over natural resources. The organisational aspect of CAR as practiced within FA reveals that the leadership has to take an adaptive approach to organisation building, so as to sense and tap emerging political and intervention opportunities, and make critical action research interventions relevant to the society.

The story, however, also cautions about the formidable challenges one has to face while trying to organise critical and engaged action research – from building up a competent team to confronting institutional powers and raising funds to sustain the activity. Sustaining a critical project is particularly challenging in the face of market fundamentalism, neo-positivism, unaccountable politics, and the degeneration of civic engagement culture. It is possible to think and act critically with impact. But new ways of understanding and measuring impact are necessary to enable CAR based innovations.

Multiple forms of power distort deliberative processes in governance – bureaucratic,

technocratic, western developmentalist, market fundamentalist, feudal-political, neo-elites emerging from social movements. Participation and radical politics is not enough, not because it is wrong but because these are hijacked by neo-elites, and also because it leaves the underlying hegemony remains unquestioned. Civic engagement through CAR can target these powers to deepen democratic governance.

How can critical action researchers emerge and proliferate in Nepal? We need a new breed of critically engaged researchers empowering disadvantaged actors and expanding deliberative spaces. They need to challenge the ‘false consciousness’ of the disadvantaged and unravel hidden power through carefully chosen facts and epistemological articulations. Fundamental rethinking is required concerning the ways in which international development and environmental conservation businesses view civil society participation – as the instrumental mobilisation of citizens. We should not transplant modernity from the west, but rather create critical, deliberative and reflective space for citizens to make informed choices.

While in part this is a question related to available political opportunity and economic incentives, I argue that it has more to do with the production of critical consciousness among civic actors themselves. And the development of such consciousness is not just a pedagogic process aided by some great trainers, it is also a process of change involving crisis into deep cultural systems. In Bourdieu’s language, crisis emerges through mismatches between schemes of perceptions and thoughts of the socially embedded agency, and the regularities of the social field in which social agents become habituated (Bourdieu, 1998).

While the CAR story of FA Nepal presented in this article is not an absolute success story without challenges, what is clearly established is that civil society actors have to think and act differently to understand what kind of change they want to bring, and how. Looking at the enormous challenge we faced when seeking to help policy development in community based forestry systems in Nepal, serious doubts can be cast on the claims of change and transformation made by government and international organisations (including INGOs, multilateral and bilateral programmes in the country). Inclusive

development cannot occur through upscaling service delivery within the current structure and systems (as emphasised by many donor and government programmes), nor through pure interests based advocacy and campaigns alone (as emphasised by rights activists and associations). The future of development and environmental sustainability in Nepal reside in the degree to which critical, learning oriented civic actors emerge and engage with different stakeholders in different domains of governance. The public policy system should recognise and encourage such actions.

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