

From degradation to restoration: An assessment of the enabling conditions for community forestry in Nepal

B.K. Pokharel¹, Th. Stadtmüller² and J.-L. Pfund²

This paper provides an analysis of key factors and enabling conditions for community based forest resource management, which led to the emergence and consolidation of local institutions and organizations devoted to promoting community forestry in Nepal. A collective effort to establish good forest governance systems at local level was eventually able to combat forest degradation effectively, to improve forest conditions and forest agriculture interface successfully, leading to effective forest landscape restoration. It is shown that forest degradation in the past was essentially the outcome of non-consultative ways of policy making, inappropriate policies, wrong institutional arrangements and a controlling legislative framework instead of promoting active participation by local stakeholders. Learning from mistakes and continuous joint efforts of a wide range of actors have brought positive changes in the productive capacity of forests, availability of wood and non-wood forest products, improvement of agricultural productivity and supplementary income to local communities.

The paper examines the enabling conditions like interest, skills and capacities by local actors, as well as pluralistic forest governance system of community forestry in Nepal. The latter comprises community based organizations such as Community Forest User Groups (FUGs), user group federation, government, non government and external agencies with a clearly defined role within the corresponding legal framework which has been developed, adapted, refined and reformulated and adapted over the years.

A comparative overview of the past and present, together with the changing trend in terms of policy, process, practices, actors and outcomes is provided. On this basis lessons from 25 years of community forestry in Nepal are drawn. It is concluded that the trend of forest degradation can be reversed through the involvement of local communities, appropriate policy and legal frameworks with legitimate decentralized institutional arrangements developed over time through inclusive consultative processes and based on the learning from successes and failures of the past.

The two main messages are:

- In Nepal, community forestry proved to be an effective tool for forest landscape restoration. It is a process which requires the involvement and active participation of local actors, the development of local institutions, and a supporting legal framework, developed, adapted and refined along the process. Financial and methodological support by international donors might be crucial to start the process, to gain momentum and to overcome institutional and financial bottlenecks.
- Autonomous, independent, and decentralized community based institutions backed by appropriate policy and legal instruments and supported by enabling institutions can be effective local governance systems that have the capacity to reverse the trend of forest degradation, to restore forest conditions and to increase productivity and the supply of forest products in an equitable way. These institutions can protect, manage and utilize forest land and other resources (mainly financial, human, social and physical) for an increasing variety of goods and services for the improvement of livelihoods of rural communities.

¹ Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project, Intercooperation/SDC, Nepal

² Intercooperation, Swiss Foundation for Development and International Cooperation, Switzerland

1. Figures of Nepal's forest degradation in the past

Situated in the southern Himalayan flank, Nepal is roughly rectangular in shape with a total area of approx. 147,000 km², of which 29% is covered by forests, 22% is shrubland and pastureland, 20% area is cultivated land, and the remaining 29% land is non-cultivated mountain, settlements and river areas. Forest land data of the past show that forest area in Nepal has declined from 45% in 1964 to 29% in 1996 (see box 1). Currently, the annual deforestation rate in Nepal is estimated at 1.7%, excluding community forests, which is about one fourth of the total forest land of the country, (MFSC, 1999). Similarly, the total growing stock of forests has declined from 522 million m³, in the mid 1980 to 387.5 million m³, in 1999 (MOPE, 2001).

Box 1: Trend of forest degradation in Nepal

- Between 1964 and 1985, Nepal lost 570,000 ha (about 9%) of its natural forest
- The quality of forests declined as high forests converted into shrubland areas, which have doubled from 4.8% in the 80s to 10.6% in the 90s
- Forest depletion resulted in reducing soil nutrient, increasing erosion and affecting water supply in rural areas.

About 80% of the Nepal's total population depends on agriculture. It has been estimated that about 1 to 2.8 ha of forests is required to support one ha of agriculture land to keep the balance within farming systems (cultivated land, livestock, forests). Livestock suffers from inadequate and nutrient-poor fodder supply, resulting in low manure production, which leads to unsustainable agriculture development and additional pressure on forests. Nepal is considered to be a rich country in wild animals and plant biodiversity. About 4.5% (181 species) of the world mammals for example are reported in Nepal. Over 9% (844 species) of the reported species of birds at the global level are found in Nepal (MFSC, 2000). However, 11 species of birds and 3 species of mammals are believed extinct due to forest destruction and habitat alteration. Similarly, the agriculture sector has been facing severe problems from soil degradation, erosion, landslides, floods and sediment deposition (UNEP, 2001). Land tenure and distribution pattern is skewed. About 69% of the total population has less than one ha of agriculture land. Furthermore, about 63% of the total land is owned by only 16% of rich farmers. The per capita agriculture land has declined from 0.16 ha in 1980 to 0.13 ha in 1999 (MOPE, 2001).

2. Forest policy history and lesson learnt

In Nepal forest policy has developed and persisted, each designed and modified in response to negative impact. Conversion of forest into private agricultural land was practiced up until 1950s. Forest nationalization was practiced in the period from 1950 to 1970 and decentralization and community based forestry together with state and private regimes have been attempted after 1980. (See Box 2 for a brief account of Nepal's 150 years of forest policy history.) Hobley (1996) has analyzed Nepal's forest history at length, categorizing forestry in Nepal into three main periods, namely privatization (1768-1951); nationalization (1951-1987) and populism (1987 onward).

Before the creation of the modern centralized political nation state in 1769, Nepal was divided into many autonomous petty states or kingdoms. Levying of revenues for these states to maintain their power encouraged forest clearance and harvesting of certain products from which tax would be generated. The process of unification of Nepal and its protection needed against the expansionary interests of British-India from the south and incursions from Tibet in the north, resulted in substantial clearance of forests and expansion of agriculture through the promotion of immigration and the forced levying of tax from agricultural production. Much of the forest and range land were cleared and still owned by land lords and families connected to Ranas.

Box 2 Nepal’s forest history: Testing of private, state and community regimes

<u>Before 195: Forests was administered as private property</u>	
Up to 1846	Era of Forest conversion to agriculture land
1846 – 1950	Privatization of forest by autocratic regime
1950 – 1956	Period of transition to convert forest as private property to state property
<u>1957 - 1990: Forests was controlled as state property</u>	
1957 – 1960	Nationalization of private forest – Forests declared as state property
1961 – 1975	State’s control and command approach remained dominant
1976 – 1986	Emergence of the concept of community forestry – partnership state / community
1987 – 1990	Formalization of the current forest policy
<u>1991 – 2005: Forests has been managed as common property (in partnership with the state)</u>	
1991 – 2000	Translation of community forestry principles and policies into practice
2000 onward	Recognition of community forestry as an effective approach of resource management

In 1950, the Rana regime was overthrown and new interim people's government was formed. In 1957, all private forests were nationalized and forest bureaucracy was made strong. To the bureaucratic power that already existed with the forest service, technical and fiscal power were added. During the period from 1950 to 1980 about half a million ha of forests were destroyed. Forest degradation, however, was considered an environmental and technical problem – and not a policy related problem. Therefore technical solutions such as plantation and fencing were pursued. This approach of bureaucratic control to protect forests lasted for almost two decades. Nepal lost almost 9 % of its forests and suffered from the degradation of forest quality. Policy making process at that time was non-consultative and top down. The outcomes of which at national, district and local level were negative impact to forests and people dependent on it are shown in table 1.

It was only in 1978 that the concept of community based forestry and decentralization of forest management was emerging. However it took a decade to decide to formulate people centered policies. The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector was prepared only in 1988. People's movement in 1990 backed up the concept and forest legislation was enacted in 1993. It took another two years after the enactment of the forest legislation to formulate workable Forest Rules and Community Forestry Operational Guidelines. Altogether it took almost 17 years after the endorsement of the concept of community forestry in 1978 to prepare an enabling policy, legal and operational framework, which were completed only in 1995. Now Nepal's community forestry is much more matured, complex and often perceived as the most advanced approach in the world in providing the enabling political, strategic, legal and operational framework for participatory and community based forest development (Mahapatra, 2000; Smith, 2004).

Table 1: Major elements of 50 years of Nepal's forest policy (1955-2005)

Level	1955-1985	1986-2000	2000-2005
National level (Major policies, legislation and guidelines)	<p>Policy making process remained non-consultative and top-down</p> <p>Contents of legislation were made in the principle of control and command</p> <p>The main policy outcomes of the period include -</p> <p>Private Forest</p> <p>Nationalisation Act (1957)</p> <p>Panchayat Forest Act (1978)</p>	<p>Policy and legislation were made through multi-stakeholder consultations</p> <p>Contents of legislation were made in the principle of devolution of authority to local communities</p> <p>The main policy outcomes of the period include -</p> <p>Forest Sector Master Plan (1987) and revised in 1991 and 2000</p> <p>Forest Act (1993)</p> <p>Forest Regulations (1995)</p> <p>Community Forestry Operational Guidelines (1995) and revised in 2001.</p>	<p>Policy and operational guidelines have been made and revised through multi-stakeholder forums such as Forestry Sector Coordination Committee</p> <p>The main policy outcomes of the period include -</p> <p>Community Forest Inventory guidelines (2001)</p> <p>Forest management guidelines (2002)</p> <p>Fund mobilization and pro-poor guidelines (2005)</p> <p>10th five year plan, 2002-2007 (poverty focus)</p>
District level	<p>People were seen as destroyer of the forest</p> <p>Role of government staff therefore focused on policing and law enforcement</p> <p>Rights and demand of communities not fulfilled</p> <p>Divisional Forest Offices were given judicial as well as custodian power</p>	<p>Policing role of government staff changed into advisory and facilitative</p> <p>Forestry planning processes became more participatory</p> <p>Multi-partnership approach initiated</p>	<p>DFO's facilitation role became institutionalized</p> <p>Bottom up planning process institutionalised</p> <p>Multi-stakeholders roles defined and developed, and DFOs' role focused more in field based technical training</p> <p>Gender, equity and livelihood related support service provision by NGO sectors to poor users initiated</p>
Community level	<p>Dominant role of the state killed local forest management systems</p> <p>State led plantation initiated but without success</p> <p>The main implementing agencies for forest development were government staff</p> <p>Cases of forest offences at the DFO increased</p> <p>Antagonistic relationship between DFOs and communities was observed</p> <p>Rate of forest degradation became high</p>	<p>1 million households and 100 million ha forests handed over to nearly 12,000 forest user groups (nearly 800,000 member households) all over the countries</p> <p>Emphasis on community initiated active forest protection system</p> <p>Evidences of improved forest condition and people's ownership on forests</p>	<p>Sensitivity raised on equitable decision-making and benefit sharing</p> <p>Trend increased to focus on gender, equity and pro-poor provision in groups plans and decision making processes</p> <p>Groups' and DFOs' increased emphasis to address poverty, forest productivity and wise use of forest resources</p> <p>Groups' constitution and forest Operational Plans revised and rewritten to benefit poor from community forestry and beyond</p>

3. Progressive elements of the current Nepal's forestry legislation: an enabling condition for community forestry

The Forest Act of 1993, along with its by-laws, outline a number of provisions which guarantee the independent and autonomous identity of local groups called Community Forest User Groups (FUGs) which govern by groups constitution and forest Operational Plan prepared by the communities in support of service providers and approved officially by local District Forest Officers. The main features of the Forest Act 1993 and the Forest by-laws 1995 are:

- Legislation recognizes Forest User Groups (FUGs) as legal entity, autonomous and corporate body to be governed by their constitution, and Forest Operation Plan prepared by FUGs and approved by Forestry Officials.
- FUGs can have a fund of their own and all income from sales go to that fund.
- FUGs can utilize the fund for any purpose to be decided by their the general assemblies.
- FUGs can freely fix price and market the forest produce.
- FUGs can amend or revise their constitution and Forest Operational Plan, informing Forest Officials.
- FUGs assembly can elect or change executive committee anytime.
- FUGs can punish its members who break the rules established FUGs themselves.
- Forest official can take back community forests who fail to implement the plan but should re-hand over within 30 days.
- FUGs membership and forest boundary will not be restricted within political boundary
- There is no limit of forest area to be handed over to communities. Local people's capacities, willingness and customary rights will determine the area and location of forest to be handed over as community forests
- FUGs can optimize the productivity of forest land by growing cash crop together with forest crop.
- Standing Forest Products of community forests can be mortgaged in financial institutions to obtain loan.
- FUGs can establish industries and make profit.
- FUGs can seek support from any organization and raise funds.

Sources: HMG (1993); DoF (2002); HMG (1995); Talbott and Khadka (1994)

4. The positive impacts of Nepal's Forest Act 1993

Nepal's Forest Act 1993 is considered to be one of the most progressive legislations of the contemporary world in terms of local people's rights on forest resources. The positive impact of the legislation are found at two levels namely, at forest landscape level and at institutional level.

4.1. Impact at forest landscape level: trend of forest degradation reversed

Policy impact at forest landscape level can be observed in forest agriculture interface, forest restoration and forest quality.

Forest agriculture interface improved:

Evidences from 60 case studies from Dolakha, Ramechhap and Okhaldhunga, NSCFP supported districts, suggest that majority of respondents farmers who are members of FUGs feel that forest agriculture interface has improved following the establishment of community forests in their villages (NSCFP, 2003; DFO, 2004). They report that there is an increased biomass in community forests resulting in increased off-take of litter and organic manure on their farmland. Therefore many farmers have been able to cultivate more varieties of cash crops than before. Availability of more quantity of grass and fodder from community forests have encouraged the practice of stall feeding which have reduced grazing pressure and saved the time of children to herd cattle to the forests. Enrollment of girls children at local school have also increased (Singh et al, 1996; Robinson, 1997; SDC/N, 2000;). In addition, it is reported that the number of water springs and water volumes have increased, and soil nutrition and moisture conditions in their agricultural land during dry season have improved.

Trend of forest degradation reversed

Forest users have reported that there are less forest fire in recent years. Before the handing over of community forests, forest fires used to be very common and there were incentives for the people to put the fire off. DFO staff neither had capacity nor the resources to take preventive and protective measures of forest fires. Encroachment of forest land adjacent to the private farm land is very common in government controlled forest area. In addition, government reports have estimated that more than 100,000 ha of government land is encroached. Nevertheless in community forests the picture is different. The trend of encroachment of forest land along the forest boundary with private agriculture land has tremendously decreased. This has been possible due to the fact that local villagers themselves are involved in boundary survey of community forest land. Since villagers are actively involved in making rules on how to protect, manage and utilize forest land and products, illegal felling of trees and stealing of forest products have decreased. Evidences show that the number of complaints and forests offences have reduced because local people have become self-disciplined and in many cases have been able to fine forest offenders by local rules.

Forest conditions improved

Various studies show that formerly denuded hills are covered with forests and greenery again (NSCFP, 1999; NSCFP, 2003; Nurse et al., 2004). The overall forest condition has improved mainly in terms of regeneration, number of stems per unit area, basal area, growing stock, the rate of annual increment, density of a number of forest patches, species diversity, wildlife and the total biomass. Villagers have perceived that number of water springs as well as the volume and duration of water discharge have increased.

4.2. Impact at the institutional level

Establishment of an inclusive pluralistic community forestry governance

There are at least seven types of stakeholders at different layers of governance. Government organizations, non-government organizations, local government, user group federation, professional organizations and private sectors have emerged and begun to become institutionalized at community, village, sub-district, district, region, national and even at the international level. All have contributed for the promotion of community forestry. In addition, donor communities have also played an instrumental role to formulate policies, plans, projects and to innovate methodologies and strategies to further strengthen community forestry in Nepal (see table 2 for details).

Table 2: An inclusive pluralistic community forestry governance at various levels

	Government	Local government	Non government	Federation	Professional organisation	Private sector	Donors
National	NPC MOFSC DOF	DDC Federa- tion	NGO federa- tion	FECOFUN NEFUG HIWANTI	RAN NFA	FNCCI	Country Office
Region	RFDO						RPO
District	DFOs	DDC	NGOs	FECOFUN HIWANTI	RAN	FNCCI	Project units
Sub district	Range Post			FECOFUN			
Village		VDC Ward	FUG Networks				
Communities	FUGs UGs	FUGs Ugs	FUGs UGs	FUGs UGs	FUGs UGs	FUGs UGs	FUGs UGs
Households	Men and women user members	Men and women user members	Men and women user members	Men and women user members	Men and women user members	Men and women users	Men and women users

Increased participation, representation, interest and skill of rural people³

One of the positive impacts of the current forest policy is enhanced social and human capital of local people in particular inclusion and representation in leadership positions of marginalized communities such as poor women, social excluded groups and people from remote areas in community forestry governance at local level. These people later have been able to gain leadership positions in local governments (Gronow et al, 2003). In addition, there is a high number of demands for more community forests to be handed over to local communities. Under a difficult socio-political situation - mainly Maoist insurgency - local communities are found very interested to takeover responsibility of managing national forests as community forests (Pokharel and Paudel, 2005). For example it is reported that in the three districts supported by NSCFP alone the number of FUGs increased from 162 in 1995 to 812 in 2004. As a result, the area of forest area under community control has increased by six folds in 9 years (from 13300 ha to 77100 ha). The coverage of household membership of the total district population has now increased from 18% in 1995 to 76% in 2004. Women in FUG committees increased from 21% in 1995 to 35% in 2004 in the NSCFP project area. It is reported that representation of women in chairperson's positions have also increased. Similarly

³ This section is drawn from Pokharel et al (2005)

Dalit's proportionate representation with district population in FUG committees is also found to be increased from 3% in 1995 to 11% in 2004. Likewise, representation of ethnic minorities in FUG committees also increased (NSCFP 2000a, NSCFP 2000b; NSCFP 2004a, NSCFP 2004b). It is encouraging to note that due to community forestry programmes a significant increase of trained human resources at the village has taken place. Many young men and women have become local facilitators called social workers and have been able to provide services to FUGs in conflict situation. For example, a total of 190 social workers, who are also the members of FUGs, of which 93 are women, are working in the villages to provide services to FUGs. Emergence of FUGs as CBO Service Providers is another achievement in the project districts. Out of 44 service providers involved in 2004 to implement community forestry programmes, 5 service providers are FUGs which have delivered services to other FUGs. This demonstrates that farmer to farmer extension has been effective, providing services and disseminating learnings in cost effective ways.

5. Major challenges

Despite its success in terms of forest restoration and institutional development, reaching to the poorest of the poor through community forestry alone (as often over expected) is still a big challenge – but also an opportunity – of community forestry. Major challenges include:

- Issue of exclusion of the poorest in power and positions
- Inclusion of the poorest in capacity building
- Issue of access to infrastructure and services generated from community forestry
- Issue of access to groups' fund: who get how much?
- Issue of access to forest land and forest products- how much to the poorest?

It is not within the scope of this paper to analyse the challenges of community forestry in Nepal. This is being discussed at length in various publications (e.g. Malla 2000; Pokharel et al. 2005). These challenges nevertheless are also beginning to be addressed by communities by themselves if they are allowed and given autonomy to do so (see Poudyal and Thapa, 2004; Rai, 2005; Pokharel et al, 2005).

6. Conclusions

Forest history and experiences in Nepal show that inappropriate and top down policies have led to forest degradation. Control and command approaches failed to bring positive outcomes in forest landscapes. Both private property regimes and state property regimes failed to restore forest area and conditions. In Nepal Community Forestry has proved to be an effective tool for landscape restoration, which requires an active participation of local actors, a supportive legal framework, a dynamic process of policy change, and financial as well as methodological support from donor agencies.

Autonomous independent and decentralized community based institutions can be the vehicle for positive change in forest landscapes. They can be effective local governance systems that have the capacity to reverse the trend of forest degradation, to restore forest conditions and to increase productivity and the supply of forest products in an equitable way. They are able to form capital assets, provide goods and services for the improvement of rural livelihoods which go beyond forestry.

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Acronyms

CBO	Community Based Organisations
CFUGs	Community Forestry User Group
DDC	District Development Committee
DFOs	District Forest Office
DOF	Department of Forest
FECOFUN	Federation of Community Forestry User Groups in Nepal
FNCCI	Federation of Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industries
FUGs	Forest User Group
HMG	His Majesty's the Government of Nepal
HIMWANTI	Himalayan Grassroots Women's Natural Resource Management Assoc.
MFSC	Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation
MOPE	Ministry of Population and Environment
NEFUG	National Federation of Forest User
NFA	Nepal Forester's Association
NGO Federation	Non Governmental Organisation Federation
NGO	Non Government Organisation
NPC	National Planning Commission
NSCFP	Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project
NSCFPD	Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project Dolakha
NSCFPR	Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project Ramechhap
RAN	Rangers' Association Nepal
RFDO	Region Forestry Directorate Office
RPO	Regional Project Officer
VDC	Village Development Committee