

Community forestry in Nepal: 1978 to 2010

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Forest Policy

The forests are in mosaic with the farm lands throughout the Hills and the Terai (southern plain areas) of Nepal.

The human population and the natural resources remained balanced up to early 1950's. Although deforestation started since the 1700's, the process became accelerated from 1950's when the population boomed. Most of the forest lands of the hills were deforested continuously in patches without proper plan whereas official land distribution program was launched in large scale in the Terai and the inner Terai areas. Later on, this was followed by uncontrolled massive illegal encroachment. The forests became national property since 1957 but the users, more than 90 percent of the population continued process of using the resources as open access converted the lands into degraded barren lands, bushy lands or low value resources.

In some areas communities used to manage forest and pasture lands locally. However, most of the local indigenous practices are also disturbed by those pressures. The government did some planting in the barren and degraded hills. The government also prepared some management plans for the Terai forests. However, they are not effective because the users were not involved in the planning process.

Although the government realized the role of communities in Forest Act 1961, the Participatory By-Laws were enacted only in 1978 as Panchayat Forest and Panchayat Protected Forest Rules. At the beginning the legislation was more local leader and local political unit (Panchayat) oriented policy. Later, gradually with experiences, the By-Laws were refined and amended to present stage of empowering the real user groups to manage the resources. Table 5 gives a brief time line of Forest Policy evolution of Nepal. Many studies indicate that women are the main actor among the Forest Users and they are also effective managers. The Master Plan had given importance of women's participation. There are many examples where women are managing the forests on a more effective way. Women had shown more interest and playing a vital role. However, although it is improving, more emphasis has to be given to balance the gender issue in the CF program.

The latest policy objectives according to the Master Plan for Forestry Sector are:

* Hand over accessible forests to the users, empowering Forest User Groups to manage the forest resources. * Forest User Groups get all benefits from the handed over forests * Convert the entire forestry staff to work as extensionists

The main features of the legislation concerning the community forestry are:

- 1.) All accessible forests can be handed over to users (no area limit)
- 2.) The Forest User Groups (FUGs) have to manage the forests as per the approved constitution and operational plan (OP) of landed over CF
- 3.) Any National Forests suitable to be converted into community forest (CF) will not be given to other, such as leasehold forests.
- 4.) District Forest Officer (DFO) can hand over forest to FUG. (It used to be the responsibility of the Regional Director, the higher authority).
- 5.) FUGs can use surplus funds in any kind of community development works.
- 6.) The FUG is an autonomous and corporate body with perpetual succession.
- 7.) The FUG can fix the price of the forestry products irrespective of the government's royalty.
- 8.) The FUG can plant long term cash crops (e.g. medicinal herbs) without disturbing the main Forestry Crops
- 9.) The DFO can take the forest back from FUG if they operate against the operational plan (agreement). But the DFO must return as soon as possible once the problem is solved.
- 10.) FUG can transport any forest products simply by informing the DFO.
- 11.) FUG will not be disturbed by political boundary while handing over the forests.
- 12.) The FUG can establish forest based industries.
- 13.) FUG can amend the OP simply informing DFO.
- 14.) FUG can punish misusers (encroaches and thieves), who offend against the rules of the OP.
- 15.) Any agency can help users to manage CF.

Discussion

1. Potential Community Forestry

Community Forestry Program of Nepal is one of the most prioritized policy which is widely spread throughout the country. The advanced legislation and the attitudinal changes in the field staff made the program very dynamic. This is very popular and has gained high momentum. So nothing can slowdown the process any more.

A large number of forests have been handed over since 1978. However, the change in legislation completed the revision of the process to legitimize the status. Therefore, the process became faster only after 1990. A study indicated that about 61 percent of the existing forest area is potential CF. That means about 3.355 million hectare (5.5X0.61 m ha) of forest may be converted into CF in due course of time. By now about 362.552ha of forests which comes about 11 percent of the potential CF had been already handed over. If the rate of handing over remains that of 1994/95 it will take about 30 more years to convert all potential forests to CF. However, the rate of handing over is increasing rapidly. It will take not more than 20 years if everything goes well. Most of the easily accessible forests are already under Community Management. However demonstration effect of the program is so high that thousands of FUGs had applied for official process to hand over CF and similarly, thousands of FUGs started to manage CF unofficially but effectively (FIG 2).

2. Strategy Changes

The Cfs are functioning very well. In general, there are no problems so far. (However, Problems may arise if the strategy is not changed). The main causes of the success are:

- Practical legislation and amendment as per need
- Intensive district and regional level training
- Support of the field staff - Capability and willingness of the users/and
- External inputs

Communities are very conservative, cautious, good manager and development oriented. Most of the forests are either not capable of generating high income or the communities as reluctant to exploit the products. However, two or three FUGs broke the rules and tried to make benefit against the agreed operational plans. It indicated the possibility of attitudinal changes the FUG may bring in the future. Although the problem is only in 0.00056 percent of CF. It compelled the government to think. To solve this problem the government needs to look at:

- Strengthening the process of organizing FUG and Hand-over of CF.
- More intensive training
- More clear field implementing guidelines
- Add more field staff in the organization
- Improve legislation if necessary

The process of organizing FUG is quite satisfactory. Intensive training to FUG, field staff and many others, such as teachers, women, leaders etc., are going very well. Similarly clear operational guidelines are prepared. However, wide discussions with communities, more training on technical and social aspects

and minor positive changes in the legislation may be necessary. Further more, the government have to think seriously to add more qualified field staffs, which were unfortunately reduced in 1993 when the organization was re-designed. The program need to concentrate more on post user group formation where the FUG need more moral, technical and personal supports. The existing staff can not do these jobs as the FUGs are added and field operations are expanded.

3. Supporting groups

When the CF policy was formulated it was assumed that the communities will be fully supported by the forestry field staff. Because there was no NGO or any other agencies, even now, virtually no NGOs are available to support the CF program except some new grassroots level local NGOs and INGOs in the form of donors.

The Institute of Forestry is the only organization who is producing mid-level technicians. Even the curriculum still remains traditional except some minor changes and do not exactly fit for community forestry implementation. The in-service training program in the project level is the only cause to bring attitudinal change among all actors involved in the program.. The new legislation, however, is designed to get support by any agencies in the program including other government agencies, such as Department of Soil Conservation and international INGOs or NGOs.

There was a big change in CF program in the last fifteen years. Decentralization Act (1982) gives all development authorities to District and Village Development Committees (DDC & VDC). The 1978 CF program also gives authority to VDCs. However, 1987 amendment of CF Rules bypass VDC and goes down to FUG. There may be 10-15 FUGs in each VDC chairman can not be chairman of each CF where intensive monitoring and contribution is needed. The elected leaders also become member of chairman of one of the FUGs. There is a balanced and strong support of the leaders despite being against the decentralization system.

4. Impact of CF on Development

Forest resources in Nepal have high potentiality to support development of the nation. The FUG managed Forests are growing and improving value of the resources. The FUG do not need money for Forestry Development activities because the protection and silvicultural operations are carried out voluntarily by the users. The forests need operations which can produce income from the very beginning of the management. Some CF had generated huge income. The surplus fund can be used for other community development activities. However, the CF program is going very slow in the Terai where a large source of revenue is lying without any management. All Terai Forests can not be managed by FUG because the forests are in bigger block and all are not

manageable distance to be empowered. The DFOs will progress only when CF and National Forests are managed together by preparing participatory plans. In an average about 10-15 percent of the forests are potential CF in the Terai.

However, in the hills some districts have 100 percent potential CF areas. All income goes to FUG and the fund is used widely for other community development works such as school drinking water, irrigation, health, roads, fishery, industry, and individual loans, etc.

The CF program brought a big impact, not only in environment conservation, meeting basic needs and economic development, but also in other sectors. The concept had been used in soil and water conservation, wildlife conservation (Joshi 1996), vegetable and livestock farming, drinking water, irrigation, roads and so on. There are indigenous practices in irrigation system, however, FUG concept helped to be popular and strengthened.

To support the activities many donors are involved in the program. About half of the external input of the Forestry Sector is in the CF program. Donors of other sectors, such as roads, education, rural development, health, water, etc., also support CF program because the CF program can support and sustain those activities easily. A Forestry Sector Coordination Committee (FSCC) in the center level brings every actor together for coordination and cooperation. Similarly, for better coordination the government had supported to establish FUG network in District and Center Level called FECOFUN (Federation of Community Forestry Users of Nepal).

5. Year 2010

Although the forests handed over is only about 11 percent, thousands of FUGs are unofficially managing and many had applied to DFO to be handed over after preparing constitution and operational plans. Due to lack of sufficient field staff, the DFOs had kept the applications on the queue. However, the FUGs are managing them even without official handing over.

The CF program of Nepal is very progressive and moving on the right track. It simply needs positive support of the government and other agencies. It is heading towards success. The Master Plan will remain as a guiding policy.

By year 2010 (2068 BS) most of the potential CF will be managed by the users. Most of the communities will be organized. Most of the cities will be full of timber produced by FUG. Many FUGs will be running forest based industries and enterprises. This will develop not only economic and living standards of rural communities, but also support the government by generating huge financial support to the treasury. The market may become a problem but not the raw material. To support all these progress, the government will continue to bring positive changes in concerning legislation. The training programs and network

programs should be strengthened regularly. As the result, the CF program will be leading to develop the economy of the country together with management of National Forests of the Terai for government revenue. I believe that presently a specific strategy can not be developed because the process is very dynamic. Necessary changes in community forestry will prove positive and productive support for community forestry and Nepal will be able to share important ideas in community forestry with the rest of the world. It is necessary to increase trained field staff to support the continuously increasing FUGs before the FUGs deviate from the basic concept and problems of bigger dimension may arise.

Notes to readers

This paper is a case study prepared for the Mountain Forum discussions on Mountain Policy and Laws. 1997