Unintended outcomes of community forestry intervention in Nepal - some implications

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Abstract

This paper illustrates how community forestry intervention, despite good intention, may produce unintended outcomes. The reason is mainly attributed to the practice, which tend to consider intervention as a blueprint approach than a process. This is in contrast to the policy, which essentially considers intervention as a process for devising a 'fair' system, based on consensus derived from a number of informal dialogue and discussions. Arguments are put forward in favour of a process approach that do not necessarily limit itself to the problem of intra-community level but would go beyond and attempt to embrace wider issues pertaining to inter-community or the region. It is pointed out that unintended outcomes do not necessarily limit themselves to the community forestry sector but extend to the field of development intervention in general.

Community forestry intervention as a process

Nepal is renowned for its innovative community forestry policy (see for example, Mahapatra and Khanal 2000). The current policy considers community forestry intervention as a process which essentially involves handing over use rights of the government owned forests to the indigenous groups of people who customarily hold the de facto use rights of such forests (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). The Department of Forests staffs are expected to play facilitative role in the overall process. They would not only help the people in identifying who the use right holders are, but would also intimately be involved in sorting out potential inequity situations amongst the members of the recognised group in the management of forests and in subsequent benefit sharing. Operational Guidelines guide the field people about the required processes. This is in theory if not always in practice. Addressing inequity issue is considered as a matter of paramount importance. This is given that community lacks homogeneity in terms of interest and capacity which is in fact the reflection of socio-economic and cultural differences. Consensus building is the key to the

overall process which, in a simplified form, gets captured in the simple Operational Plans and the accompanying Constitution. The control would be officially shifted to the community of user groups, once those documents are approved from the concerned district forest officer. Community forestry has been accorded the highest priority sector in forestry (HMG, 1989) in which supports are being received from a number of donor agencies. As the situation stands today, over 848,000 hectares of forests have been handed over as community forests to nearly 11,000 user groups (approximately 1.2 million households), who are now managing these resources (FUG Database, March 2002). This situation is remarkable when looked at the fact that the government forests outside the community control have not got a chance to be put under any form of management and that the resources there are degenerating more than ever before. Equally remarkable is the fact that a number of user groups have been commissioning local development works from the money that gets generated out of the management of the handed over forests. Drinking water supply, irrigation improvement, trail construction, community house construction and provision of the furniture for the schools are some of the important areas covered by the funds (Baral 1999a).

Controversial views on 'intervention'

There are in fact different schools of thoughts, which see the value of intervention differently. One school of thought views that there is little point in considering community forestry as a process in a way the current community forestry policy has envisaged. It pleads for a move whereby the government takes its hands off, so that the legitimate groups of people will take control of the resource by default. The role of forest official in the handover process is considered to be unnecessary or even counterproductive. For example, Pandey (1990) proposes to 'denationalise' the resource, who assumes that people will resume a proper form of control on the event of such move. Ostrom (2000), and Ostrom and Varughese (2001) tend to see that people in certain situation tend to be 'self organized' while in others they fail to do so. They attribute the reason to the local environment where the system operates, thus implying that external intervention may have little role to play. Pokharel (2001), while questions the role of bureaucracy in facilitating the decentralised processes, sees that the more committed forest professionals may contribute positively in such processes. Gilmour and Fisher (1991) and Fisher et al (1989) see the role of intervention who argues that a failure to accept community forestry as a social process may create social inequity and the people will fail to comply at the same time. Baral (1999a) sees intervention as a social process but argues that even the best form of intervention may not be able to sort out the problem in an explicit way due to the fact that several problems are of generic nature, which may evolve over time. Varughese (2001) sees a need of working with villagers for identifying bonafied users which, he thinks, would help prevent 'free riding' and 'encroachment'. Adhikari (2001), based on literature review of the common property regime concludes that successful systems are

linked with equitability. Though he does not really talk about the value of intervention as a process, his conclusion does lead to that implication. Given the heterogeneity in the society in terms of wealth and power, the role of interventionists to accept community forestry as a process is clearly inevitable for insuring a reasonable degree of equity.

In the following section I present the unintended outcomes of intervention. It will be seen that the cause of unintended outcomes is primarily due to the fact that intervention failed to accept community forestry as a process. The role of intervention as a social process is thus justified.

Unintended outcomes of community forestry

Let us ponder at some field examples regarding the outcomes of community forestry intervention. While there are encouraging results of community forestry, a number of unintended outcomes (term credited to Gilmour and Fisher, 1991) are also apparent. It may be useful to site examples from some places and to try to figure out what might have contributed to such anomalous situation. This is hoped to help the policy and the field interventionists to pay attention to the matters thus helping to avoid or to minimise such undesirable situations.

In Siraha district, over 6,000 hectares of forestland have been handed over as community forests to 54 user groups. The concerned forest patches lie in the southern fringe of Churia range, the only remaining tract of forestland (28,000 ha) in the district. While the said handover has contributed to regeneration of the resource in the area and has also helped generating funds which has been used for commissioning local development works, it has a clear implication to the main tract of Churia that just adjoins those handed over patches. While restrictions are imposed in the community forests, the demand for forest products has continued both within the forest user groups and the settlements extending as far as the Indian border. These groups of people though resort to some alternative measures (for example, meeting parts of the need from private plantations etc), those are unlikely to meet their demands in a significant way. This would mean that all these people would find no options but to continue rely on Chure more than ever before. The restrictions in the community forests would mean that they resort to more extensive use in the inner part (mani-land) of Chure. This as a consequence causes massive destruction in the more extensive forest area in the hinterland (Warth 2000, DFO Siraha and FOBAS 2001).

Problem exists in the intra-group level as well. While money has been available for commissioning a number of development works, people of many user groups are skeptic about the transparent and appropriate use of such funds. One group, for example, built a temple which, cannot actually be visited by lower caste *Musahars* and *Chamars*. There are examples where assembly meetings

could not take place ever since the handover and that people at large do not know the financial status of the available funds. Decisions are taken in ad hoc basis by the people in the committee.

Baral and Subedi (2000 a,b), Baral and Subedee (1999) and Baral (1999 b) observe several anomalies in the Community forests in the Terai Region. In Kailai district of the far-west, for example, a group of households numbering around 1600 in Chhatiwan received as much as 4,000 hectares of prime Sissoo and Sal forest. This handover witnesses a number of problems with repercussions to both inside the group and outside. The ones to have received the resource are relatively new migrants from elsewhere in the hills. This handover had implications on the use rights of the indigenous ethnic Tharu communities settled in the adjoining district of Bardiya who until then had been using the forest for various purposes. They now have little alternatives available for forest products. Clear problems also lie within the group itself. The group members in general feel that the forest is more like a 'chairman forest' rather than a 'community forest'. They are least happy about the way the restrictions are made in terms of product collection, about the sale arrangements and about the use of the generated funds. The said accounts relate to the local problem. Problems of the regional nature (or national for that matter) are also apparent. It is an open question whether people living next to the rich resource deserve all these resources. Such questions can be raised when looked at the fact that the resource poor areas like Bajura, Humla and Dolpa are quite underdeveloped and the government has got moral responsibility to contribute to the development process of such areas by providing funds from the forestry sectors as well.

The term 'major five', is widely used in Jhapa district, which they say, make decisions about all community forestry matters. When they use the term they use it to denote people who hold key positions in the committee namely: chairman, vice-chairman, secretary, joint secretary and the treasure. People in general thus have least role in decision making. No wonder, the people in the executives from one of the user groups of the district tried to sell substantial quantity of timber outside the user group without due consultation with the group members. The unhappy people thus found no option but to report it to the district forest office. Apparently, this incidence eventually turned into a court case.

The problematic examples above relate to the Terai districts where there were relatively nominal efforts in terms of carrying out social processes required by community forestry policy. Apparently, the handover took place without much consideration as to who the indigenous use right holders were and whether there was a genuine form of consensus amongst the members regarding the forest management and the use of the funds. Terai, until recently, failed to get attention of the major donors. The required social processes particularly in the areas lacking donor involvement were generally reduced to official formalities

of writing the operational plan and the constitution, which in fact seem to have contributed to the problem in a major way.

This, however, is not to suggest that problems do not exist in the hills where more intensive homework is done during the handover process from supports available from the donor assisted projects. Lack of democratic decision making process has been reported in districts like Dhankuta and Parbat where there is extensive degree of support from the British funded project (Pandey 1995 and Shrestha and Shrestha 1997). Problems are found in Kabhre Palanchok and Sindhu Palchok districts (Chhetri and Nurse, 1992) where such supports are available from Australian government. In the same way, examples of misuse and manipulations of the resources are available from districts like Tanahu and Lalitpur where supports were available from Denmark aided community forestry project. Baral 1999 report such instances in Palpa district and Karki, Karki and Karki 1993 have similar observations in Kaski district of Western Nepal.

Implication and conclusion

Clearly, the community forestry intervention has not been free of problems. Inequity situations may lie in the intra or inter community level and sometimes even between the state and the communities in question. Similarly, there may be cases of 'pressure shift', which might ultimately lead degeneration of the resource not covered by the handover. In the context of the emerged problems, apprehensionists would assume that it might have been in fact erroneous to handover forests at all. When they say so, their thrust is in Terai where commercial value of forest is very high. However it has been very clear from the experiences so far that stopping handover does not stop the state of forest degeneration, for any one to bother about any thing else. We are aware that forests under the control of the government machinery have not performed any better (Baral and Subedee 1999). Given these situations, we are left with little choice than mobilising the people for the management of forests.

From the examples sited above one could infer that intervention could play a meaningful role provided that it is carried out in a careful way. This is testified by the fact that places with more careful intervention have much lesser degree of problem than the places where interventions were made in haste or done with a 'blue print approach' with little homework. The social processes are carried out in a relatively more rigorous way in the hills thus resulting into a less problematic situation. The acute problem particularly in the Terai is indicative of the fact that the process expected by community forestry principles has largely been ignored there. Intervention there happened to be more like a 'blueprint approach' where social processes were replaced by official formalities.

This thus implies that we need a better and more improved intervention if we have to meet the twin goal of sustainable forest management and social equity. Proper institution has worked reasonably well in the direction of conserving forest resource in many places. Apparently, institution is the key thing. A search for a proper form of local institution is the prerequisite for a more sustainable and more equitable forest management system and that intervention may be helpful in creating such institution. This, however, is not to suggest that careful intervention may bring about a flawless community forestry. Careful intervention, on the other hand, may be helpful in minimising the problems we face today and can be rectified over the years through experience.

We have seen that a very well intended endeavours may have unintended outcomes, particularly in situations where intervention failed to be considered as a process. Every one would agree that the intention of community forestry is not 'the lack of transparency', 'deprivation of indigenous use rights' and 'pressure shifts' as has been found at present. Emergence of unintended outcomes, however, should not mean that we need to forgo the attempt altogether. This should rather be used to find better insights about why the problem arose in the first place and to improve the future intervention.

My focus here has been on community forestry in Nepal. It may however be pointed out that unintended outcome is neither a unique case of Nepal nor that just of the forestry sector. The problem may be faced worldwide in the development field in general, and India may not be an exception which has embarked on a Joint Forest Management (JFM). Irrigation projects to the benefit of large landholders than the poor, agricultural projects to the benefit of those who can heavily invest on capital than those who employ menial labour, and the education projects to the benefit of the elite than the unprivileged class may be common problems likely to crop up during the intervention process, in the development field in general. Let us be watchful and try to learn from the mistakes we have made from the past intervention. Well-intended projects may yield unintended outcomes some times by default and some times due to problem in extension! Our best bet would be to acknowledge these realities and accept intervention as a process and learn from the mistakes that we tend to make.

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Notes to readers

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