Empowerment vis-à-vis marginalisation: A mix response from the decentralised institutions for sustainable resource management

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Abstract

Nepal has a policy of decentralisation and devolution in forestry sector, in which users themselves make decisions for the use and management of forest resources. The community forestry policy has been implemented for quite a significant time period. However, the impact of community forestry policy and programme in Nepal is debated around the potentials for empowerment or risk of marginalisation of the forest users. This article draws some indicators of potentials for empowerment and risk of marginalisation through a case study of forest user group. It builds an argument for the empowerment of the poor in a way that the forest user group is the only institution in village, which brings all people together and discusses the matter related to forest resource use and management. It provides a forum for all users including women, poor, and untouchables to be able to participate about the resource management. On the other hand, this article draws an argument that only coming together in a forum is not a real participation of the users. It seems only physical participation of the poor and marginalized and the elite groups of people legitimise their interests by the unconscious consent of the users in the forum. Moreover, the government is not committed to implement the policies and often issues orders and circulars that contravene the policy and legislation, in which the access to forest is restricted and that affects the poor most. This has resulted in further marginalisation of the weaker section of the society. This article concludes with a recommendation for democratising the forest user group at local level and government departments responsible at national level in a way that the poor and marginalized can articulate their interests and needs to the decision making process for the sustainable forest resource management.

Introduction

In Nepal, the community forestry policy has been in implementation for the last 20 years, mostly in the mid hills. However, the benefit (impact) of the community forestry policy and programme in Nepal is often debated in two opposite directions: empowerment or marginalisation of the disadvantage

users. Some practitioners and researchers see it as a strong and perfect medium for people empowerment, especially in a way that involves these sections of people from community to decide how to use and manage the common property forest resources (Gilmour and Fisher, 1997). Forest User Groups and networks are seen as perfect institutions that use their wisdom to manage their resources (Ambus et al., 2001).

There are views, on the other hand, that community forestry policy and programmes further marginalizes the weaker section of the society; the poor, women and the oppressed in a way that the policy and programme vest the rights and responsibilities only to a few key individuals in the community. All the benefits accrued from the community forestry go to the elites (Hobley, 1996; Malla 2001). After the intervention of community forestry, the access over the forests is restricted. This has affected the poor who mostly depend on the common property forest resources. The management and utilization decisions are vested on the local elite, which causes alienation of the poor from the resource as well as management process.

Thousands of Forest User Groups with unique socio-economic characteristics and the availability of the resource in each community forest also are varied. The issue of control and access depends to some extent on the construction of socioeconomic structure of the particular forest user group (Agarwal, 2001). If it is not too differentiated by class and caste compositions, it is more likely to be represented also by the women, the poor and the oppressed to some extent.

This paper draws on some characteristic examples of potential for empowerment as well as risk of marginalisation of the weaker section of the users in the process of community forestry policy and programme implementation. This paper is based largely on field visits, interviews, discussions and observations undertaken with the Forest User Groups in the mid hills of Nepal.

User Group Forestry: An institutional set up for common property forest resource management

Community forestry programme has been the main national policy of government of Nepal in the forestry sector development (HMG/N, 1989). Common property forest resource management involves social interaction and economic interrelationship among the users (Berks and Farvar, 1989;Chopra et al., 1990; Ostrom, 1995; Stevenson, 1991;). Accessible forest for local people is handed over to them for the use and management. An important thrust of the user group forestry is the development of user group formation process. According to guidelines of user group formation process, users are identified and informed about the legislative rights and responsibilities. Rules and regulations for protection and use are decided among the users following the formation of user group. Sanctions, punishment and approaches to monitoring

are established. However, it depends on the size and quality of forest, number of users, collection patterns and preferred forest products. Constitution as for self-governing institution and operational management plans are prepared and approved in assemblies. Forest Department staff (particularly rangers) helps prepare the constitution and operational plan. Later, District Forest Officer approves the management plan.

The Forest Act of 1993 and the forest regulation 1995 have given more autonomy to forest user groups as self-governing institutions with rights to acquire, transfer, and sell forest products (HMG/N, 1995). Forest user groups have full rights over the income from the forest resources. They can plan income generation activities. The income can be used for the development activities in the village under the discretion of Forest User Group.

It has been realised that the forest user group is an important institution in the village, which has an impact not only managing the forest resources, but also on the debate of social inclusion and exclusion of the users of the weaker section of the community. Following sections describe how it can be a potential means of empowering and equally a risk for marginalisation of the disadvantaged groups of the users.

Potential for empowerment

Community forestry user group: A major institution at village
Forest user groups have been the major umbrella institution to decide the use and management of the forest resources at village level. In addition, it also plays an important role for other development activities at local level. At least one member from each household meets together once or twice a year and discusses the matter related to forest resource management and other development aspects of their village. There are no other organizations that give opportunities even to meet at a place to all concerned for specific issue. In this sense forest users group is a strong medium at local level that makes people to think and discuss about their resources themselves. It is also an institution within the village that accommodates diverse interests and needs of the users. It organizes various development activities as building or supporting schools, construction of irrigation channels, drinking water facilities, development of road facilities, etc. All users contribute for these activities voluntarily. In some cases, Forest User Groups seem effective even than local government institution (Village Development Committee) in this regard.

Forest users have an influence not only at local level; they also have a significant influence at national level through networking and federation building. Thousands of forest user groups have developed to manage the forest resources throughout the country. Federation of Community Forestry Users-Nepal (FECOFUN), as a national organization-representing user groups in

different parts of Nepal, has been in operation since 1996 (Shrestha and Britt, 1997).

Women in Community Forestry

Women participation has increased due to the changes in perception that women also have capacity to make decisions related to village and their family concerns. Community Forestry process in the case study villages is considered as catalytic agent that helped to grow other groups and co-operatives managed primarily by the women in the village. Before Community Forestry, women participation was very low in any programme related to common concerns in the village. Community forestry has an important role in bringing women out of house domain (personal communication with young women). The community forestry programme encourages women participants as real resource users to take part in community forestry activities. The Forest User Group's (FUG) constitution has also a compulsory provision that at least 50 percent of the total committee members should be the women. Of the total participants in Forest User Group assembly, more than 50 percent were women in this particular case.

Poor, Lower caste and community forestry process

"We go to meetings related to forest resource management. We also send our wives to attend the meeting. In assembly, things are discussed such as how to protect forest, how and when to distribute the forest products. We are getting benefits from forest. Though our needs are not satisfied with the present level of availability of forest products, the social process of community forestry is important for us that we are being included in common concerns of the resource management, including village development. With the initiation of community forestry, our access has increased even to political and social concerns in the village" - A group of oppressed caste.

Shoemakers (schedule caste) in-groups in their hamlet expressed the view above during discussion. Community Forest User Group organizes various programme, such as street drama, discussion about village activities to be done; the Sarki people (Shoemaker) take part and put their saying in the discussion forum. The lower caste people also have been included as members in the community forestry user group committee. The role of the committee is to maintain the constitutional provision of the forest user group and implementation of activities assigned by general assembly of the forest users. The poor and the oppressed also have been represented in the day-to-day decision-making body.

Discussion was held related to social exclusion and inclusion of lower castes. They explained that they are slowly being liberated from the exclusive and oppressive social system. Their relationships with upper caste have been changing as they were even not allowed to sit together with upper caste people, but now they can eat and drink together at least in village teashops.

They attend meetings inside the office building where all members sit together and discuss the issues related to forest management. According to them, community forestry is one of the main interventions that included them in socio-political process of the village including other factors as changing economy of the village, awareness raised through education, changing social composition and structure. Women of the lower caste also take part in the activities of forest user groups.

Risk of Marginalisation
Nepal's rural area is made up of a complex of social web. It consists of hierarchical social structure that includes different economic and social classes, oppressive caste systems and gender discrimination. The differences between the rich and the poor, upper caste and lower caste, man and woman etc., give rise to social conflict and discrimination that affects access and control over resources. In this context, there are arguments that the benefit of development intervention often goes to the elite and the powerful section of the society.

Though community forestry has a potential to empower the poor, women and the oppressed people, it is equally likely to be a means to further marginalise the poorer users of the community (Agarwal, 2001). Though the social relationship and interaction have been changed as compared in the past, access and control of poor, women and lower caste groups to the institution are still minimal. They used to attend meetings, assemblies and participate in activities. But, it seems to be mere physical presence rather than psychological in the process. It has been observed that some women have some say in assemblies, but those women are also in one or other way from well-off families in the village.

An analysis of the structure of forest user group revels that only rich and medium wealth ranked people have been represented in the forest user group committee. The forest user group committee is a body of forest user group to implement activities approved by assemblies. Despite the fact that the poor class constitutes a majority of the total users, they have no representation in the committee. The political economic reasons of non-representation of the poor are: economically the poor have to be active all day, day in and day out, to sustain themselves and their families. Being committee members there are no immediate returns to fulfill their basic needs. Hence, for the poor it is a waste of their productive time. The political reasons are: they do not and cannot control the institutional power over others even if they are selected as committee members; they cannot acquire higher social status in the existing social structure. I interviewed some the poorest members of the forest user group and they all expressed their view as not being interested to be a member of the forest user group committee: "We don't have time to go the meeting and take part in discussion, and we also don't know what is to be discussed and how to discuss it. In the past, when we were free we attended assemblies, but did

not properly understand the decision taken. We were not consulted about the rules and regulation of the forest use and management" (A group of poor users).

Moreover, the organizational process that leads to equity and justice depends primarily on existing socio-economic structure and the power relation among and within the users (Barraclough, 1995). In a social process, no institution is autonomous; it is always constrained and conditioned by social forces (Pathak, 1994). It is another risk that if the existing exploitative power structure in the community is not taken into consideration; there is more likely to be further marginalization of the poor and the oppressed. The following example shows how the poor are getting worse off, though the intention of the community forestry is to uplift them.

Use of the forest user group's fund

A woman with abandoned husband had taken out a loan from the forest user group. Her land ownership certificate was kept with the forest user group committee as mortgage for the loan. Since there was no income source, she could not pay the loan in time and the interest of the loan was raised in increasing rate. After that she was recruited as forest watcher so that she could pay the loan by her monthly wages. After a few months time, she fell ill and could not keep the job. One of her neighbors was landlord and he wanted the piece of land from her and started to cause many troubles to her. Finally, she had to sell the land and move somewhere else for her livelihood. But she could not sell the land as her land certificate was still with the FUG committee. She could not get back without paying the loan in full. She had to take out another loan from elsewhere to pay the previous loan to get the mortgage back.

As I observed the motivation of the village leader to community forestry is to protect the forests by restricting access over it, the process which further marginalizes the poorer users. These protection-oriented attitudes are often supported by government's orders and circulars issued about community forestry are also one of the constraints to overcome by the poor and marginalized users. The degraded lands were handed over to community and communal protection and management has revived the greenery with the community and the poorer users of forest user groups making the major contributions. However, they are deprived of the use rights and these are the people who need the forest products most. Why and how to manage the forests, who should manage and how and when to distribute the forest products are controlled by the village elite with the alliance of the forestry staff.

The policy documents mention the rights and responsibilities of forest users in managing their resource themselves aiming to empower them and to fulfill

their needs. However, Forest Department officials often manipulate the policies and act in a way that benefits them. In another words, they keep their hands up whereby people's rights over the local resources have often been ignored. If the process moves towards implementation, people's rights are curtailed in each step through directives, circulars and orders (Britt, 2001), which signify the limit to devolve power to the community (Agrawal and Ostrom, 2001), which in turn affects mostly the poor and marginalized.

Conclusion

It is true that user group concept in community forestry has been the major institution at village level to manage the forest resources in Nepal. Community forestry policy and programme emphasise the participation of poor, women and lower caste people by bringing together in a forum to discuss their needs and priorities. But, it is difficult to conclude that the disadvantaged groups have benefited from the policy and programme of community forestry in Nepal in a way that present approaches of community forestry put into place. Though the social relationships and interactions have changed as compared with the past, access and control of poor, women and lower caste groups to the institution are still minimal. They used to attend meetings, assemblies and participate in activities. But, they could not articulate their needs and priorities.

There are many constraints to be accommodative for the poor users to be included in the process and to get benefit. Though people come together in discussion forum, very few individuals manipulate the agenda to be discussed and divert the decisions that favour their interest. Often the government attempts to control access to the forest resources by issuing various orders and circulars, which excludes the people from the use of the forest resources and it serves the interests of elite class. The elite supersede the interest and needs of the poor and marginalized section of the community. Participation of people is just as physical one and the poor user are deprived of emotional and psychological attachment to the use and management of forest resources.

In conclusion, current challenge in community forestry process is to democratise the forest user groups at local level and governments department responsible for forest resource management at national level in a way that the poor and marginalized can assert their rights over the resource and can articulate their interests and needs for the resources. Still there is lots of work remaining to be done.

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Notes to readers

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