

## **Discourses on Poverty Reduction from Forestry in Nepal: A Shift from Community to Household Approach?<sup>1</sup>**

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*Policies, practices, and discourses on forest management in developing countries have largely concentrated on shifting property rights from the state to community regimes. The “state to community” approach has often been glorified as a panacea to poverty reduction in national and global development frameworks such as gross domestic product and contribution to Millennium Development Goals, which have essentially overlooked the issue of livelihood justice at the household level from the “relative poverty” perspective. These frameworks, which focus on average incomes at the country level irrespective of variance between rich and the poor households and gender injustice even at the intrahousehold level, have often been insensitive to understanding the significance of natural, human, social, physical, and emotional livelihood outcomes to poorer households and the intrahousehold level. In Nepal, some recent initiatives look at how the poorer households can claim and demand community-level spheres of decision making, and gain equitable access to resource bases, rights, and other benefits. Such initiatives are emerging under different community-based forest modalities, notably in leasehold forestry (LHF) and community forestry. LHF was initiated in the early 1990s targeting at least in principle the poor households as the beneficiaries, excluding nonpoor households. Community forestry, although originally based on the broader community as the beneficiaries regardless of well-being status, has also started, at least at a token scale, providing opportunities to poorer households. Major pro-poor innovations in community forestry include, but are not limited to: allocation of forest patches for the poorest households, their involvement in enterprises and microfinance activities, and development and enforcement of household–community agreement to include the poor in forest users’ executive committees.*

*This paper examines the inadequacy of the prevailing community approach to reducing poverty from forestry and highlights the shift to the household approach for equitable poverty-reduction outcomes. The paper discusses the roles of critical civil society agents, the learning-oriented practices of development projects, ongoing social inclusion movements, and weakening feudal production relations as the enabling factors of the initiatives. Despite being a noble concept, the household approach to pro-poor forestry innovations has not gained momentum in Nepal, and it is still unclear whether poorer households can continue to expand their claim to rights, resources, and benefits from communal resource governance. We conclude that high transaction costs, the recentralizing tendency of the Government, and inadequate policy–legal frameworks need to be analyzed to understand why the pro-poor initiative has not been expedited.*

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## **Introduction**

Policies, practices, and discourses on forest management in developing countries have largely concentrated on shifting property rights from the state to community regimes. Community forestry in various names and degrees of ownership, such as community forestry, joint forest management, participatory forestry, or collaborative forest management, has been the mainstream forestry program across the developing world (Gilmour et al. 2004; Petharem et al. 2002). This community approach to forestry is not confined to forest conservation or meeting the forest-based basic needs of people but is being recognized as an evolving alternative for the forest-dependent poor to escape from their poverty trap (e.g. Devlin and Grafton 1998; Mayers 2007a; McKean 2000). Recently, the “state to community” approach has often been glorified as a panacea to poverty reduction in national and global development frameworks such as gross domestic product (GDP) and contribution to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (NPC 2002, 2005, 2007; Kanel 2004; NPC and UNDP 2005).

However, there are growing criticisms that these frameworks have essentially overlooked the issues of livelihood justice at the household level. The frameworks basically focus on average desirable impacts on the community at large irrespective of variance between the rich and the poor in terms of various assets they own for their well-being. As a result, the Gini index measuring the poverty gap ratio between the rich and the poorest in Nepal for example has increased from 0.34 to 0.41 between 1996 and 2004 despite a fall of poverty level from 42% to 31% over the same period of time (NPC 2007). Interventions using the community approach to an inequitable society in terms of class, caste, gender, regional disparity, and age with varying degrees of livelihood needs and opportunities, even within the household level, have rather created inequitable outcomes than equity (NSCFP 2007c). As a result, the frameworks are often blamed for considering poor people below the absolute poverty line as a homogenous entity and not targeting the relatively poorest households. Some recent initiatives in the forestry sector in Nepal challenge the group approach of targeting the poorest and advocates for the household approach. The basic underlying hypothesis of the shift from the community approach to the household approach is targeting of the poorest households out of the community at large for their livelihood improvement through forest-and nonforest-based activities. The community approach has actually been run by “welfare supply” by the Government so far, while we argue that the effect is gradually transforming to “right-based demand” of the poor households within the communities.

## **Forestry’s Contribution to GDP and MDGs: Is it Evident?**

The contribution of the forestry sector to gross domestic product (GDP) and MDGs has been widely acknowledged particularly across the developing world. In Nepal, at least forestry's direct share in the local and national economy has been recognized (approximately 15% in the late 1980s) and is targeted to increase substantially by 2011 (MFSC 1988). Growth in the local and national economy through the development of forest-based enterprises and increased employment generation has been one of the ultimate objectives of the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector of Nepal of 1988. Forestry is one of the important output areas of the agriculture sector, which is a major contributor to the national economy, for sustainable farming and economic development (NPC 1995). Recently, the present and potential positive roles of nonwood forest products (NWFPs) in economic development have been highlighted considerably (GON 2004; NPC 2005). Despite the recognition and ambitious objectives, forestry's contribution to GDP has decreased substantially over time in Nepal due to growth in the non-agriculture sector and the absence of active forest management (Dangi et al. 2007). This indicates the inadequacy of the existing GDP approach to the forestry sector.

The contribution of the forestry sector to the MDGs is a recent subject. The direct and indirect contribution of a number of forestry practices to achieving all the eight MDGs has been acknowledged in the developing world (Kanel 2004; Mayers 2007b). Although MDGs are interlinked with a number of development agendas, their direct connection with the forestry sector in Goal 1 (eradicate poverty), Goal 2 (achieve universal primary education), Goal 3 (promote gender equality and empower women), and Goal 7 (ensure environmental sustainability) has been widely accredited in Nepal (Kanel 2004; NPC and UNDP 2005; Mayers 2007b). For MDG-related achievement, these goals are attributed mostly to community forestry, which is principally based on the group or community approach. We argue that in order to tackle poverty through forestry, the conventional modality of the community or group approach is insufficient, although appropriate to reach the poorest of the poor.

## **Nepal's Community-based Forestry Programs with Pro-poor Elements**

Nepal's Master Plan for the Forestry Sector of 1988 was the first major policy document to recognize the forestry sector's contribution to national income, employment generation, increased farm productivity, enterprise development, conservation of ecosystems, and sustainable soil management. The seventh Five Year Plan at that time also hypothesized to meet people's "basic needs" through various development activities, including agriculture, to which forestry was considered an important input (NPC 1988).

However, the seventh Five Year Plan was not smoothly implemented as the period suffered from civil unrest and political transition at the beginning of 1990. Even if the plan had been implemented as smoothly as it was postulated, the objective to meet people's basic needs would have been a distant hope, considering the failed trend of the periodic plans to produce significant desirable results due to a number of factors that included the undemocratic monarchy-led political system. Since the reintroduction of the multiparty system in 1990, the poverty-reduction agenda was reactivated with a more liberal political approach. The eighth periodic plan of 1992 adopted leasehold forestry (LHF) as the major program in the sector in terms of providing employment and income generation. The subsequent ninth and tenth periodic plans had poverty reduction as the major objective with forestry as one of the targeted programs to attain it. Although LHF was designed to be associated with poverty reduction from the forestry sector, almost all of the community-based forest management modalities have embraced the concept in one way or another (Table 1).

**Table 1: Poverty-reduction Initiatives in Various Community-based Forest Management Modalities in Nepal**

<b>Forestry Modality</b>	<b>Initiatives</b>	<b>Level of Targeted Beneficiaries</b>	<b>Foundation</b>
Pro-poor LHF	Targeting poor households with exclusive access to and use rights over forest resources in the communities in program areas for their poverty reduction through forest-based activities	Households in selected groups of the poor	Policy and project documents (Forest Regulation 1995; Leasehold Forestry Policy 2003; project documents)
Community Forestry	Targeting poor and socially marginalized households and allowing income-generation activities with their exclusive rights in community forests	Poor households in selected community forestry sites	Practices and insights after second generation issues (sustainability, livelihood, and governance) in community forestry

Conservation Area Management	Socio-economic development in local communities	Community	Modification of policy followed by practices
Buffer Zone Community Forest	Inclusion of indigenous and disadvantaged people in buffer zone user groups for pro-poor development activities	Basically community but poor households in selected cases	Practices to resolve park–people conflicts
Participatory Watershed Conservation	Access of the poor to resources	Community	Practices and project insights
Collaborative Forest Management	Allocation of limited revenues (25%) for local development	Comparatively larger community than any other modalities above	Bureaucratic interventions

All of these community-based forest management approaches have resulted in a positive impact at the landscape level and social capital formation at the group level. They have, to some extent, established the community-based approach as a viable model for rural development by recognizing the community groups as the vehicles of service delivery agencies at the grassroots (see Box 1).

### **Box 1: The Positive Impact of Community-based Forestry at Landscape and Group Levels**

#### **Increased the Forest Agriculture Interface**

- Increased biomass in community forests resulting in an increased off-take of litter and organic manure on their farmland, consequently many farmers have been able to cultivate more varieties of cash crops than before. The availability of more grass and fodder from community forests has encouraged stall feeding; thus children do not spend so much time herding cattle to the forests
- Enrolment of girls at local schools has also increased
- The number of water springs and the volume of groundwater discharge have increased.
- Incidence of landslides has been reduced
- Soil nutrition and moisture in agricultural land during the dry season has also increased

#### **Reversed the Trend of Forest Degradation**

- Less forest fire incidence in recent years. During the dry season before the transfer of community forests, forest fires used to be very common and there were incentives for the people to put the fires out
- Encroachment of forest land adjacent to the private farm land is very common in Government-controlled forest areas but not in community forest areas
- Encroachment of forest land along the forest boundary with private agricultural land has declined tremendously
- Illegal felling of trees and stealing of forest products has been mitigated
- The number of complaints and forest offences in Government-controlled forests is lower because local people have become self-disciplined and in many cases have been able to fine forest offenders via local rules

#### **Improved the Forest Condition**

- Denuded hills are covered with forests and greenery
- 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 forest patches, species diversity, wildlife and the total biomass

- The number of water springs with volume and duration of groundwater discharge has increased.

#### **Increased Inclusion and Participation**

- 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 the local level. These people later have been able to gain leadership positions in local governments
- There are many demands for more community forests to be handed over to local communities
- The number of women in FUG committees has increased
- Representation of women in chairpersons' positions has also increased
- Proportionate representation of marginalized castes and ethnic minorities in FUG committees has also increased
- Increased trained human resources at the village level. Many young men and women have become local facilitators, called social workers, and have been able to provide services to FUGs in conflict situations
- FUGs have delivered services to other FUGs. This demonstrates that farmer-to-farmer extension has been effective to provide services and disseminate learning in a cost effective way

Source: Pokharel and Paudel (2005).

However, critics have pointed out that despite the contribution of these community groups the latter in most cases have been captured by local power elites and their power in general has been reinforced; the outcomes of development have not had a trickle down effect to extremely poor households. This raised the issue of the limitation and the scope of the group approach to poverty reduction and highlighted the critical question of whether the community group approach is a viable model to address the issue of poverty reduction. This also provided an opportunity to understand poverty at the household and intrahousehold level and recognize the household within the group as a unit of intervention rather than a group itself.

### **What is the Household Approach?**

The household approach in this paper is a subset of the community approach for special attention to the livelihood improvement of individual poorer households within a user group of forest resources. It does not reject community-based forest management (CBFM) but is a refined way of tackling poverty under the aegis of CBFM. Therefore, it is not the privatization of Government or community forests. To better understand the household approach in this paper, it is neither private forestry as in Nepal, nor household forestry as in China (see Jiaqui et al. 2003). Private forestry in Nepal connotes the forestry practices in privately owned land; while household forestry in China refers to the participatory intervention of forestry projects taking households as unit actors on private and public lands on the mountainous regions for soil and water conservation through forestry. The major characteristics of the household approach in connection with this paper are listed hereunder:

- It applies to common or public forest lands handed over to a community (a common property regime as opposed to a private or state or open access regime)
- The overall property rights of forest resources lie in the community or user group
- It pays special attention to the livelihood needs of the individual households, especially the extremely poor within a community. The livelihood need in this case is associated with poor people's access to a combination of natural, physical, financial,

- social/political, and human assets and their related capabilities and activities pertaining to living at the household level
- It is strictly an approach to poverty reduction. The poorest of the poor households in well-being ranking get highest priority while it also targets benefits to the community for poverty reduction
  - It is associated with a group of all poor households as in LHF or poor households within a group as in community forestry. Even in a group of all poor households, the treatment is at the individual household level
  - It hypothesizes that equal treatment for poverty reduction in an unequal community in terms of well-being ranking will widen the gap between rich and the poor households, ultimately exacerbating poverty in relative terms in society
  - Fulfilling household level needs from common property is decided or endorsed by the group, such as CFUGs (Community Forestry User Groups) or LHFUGs (Leasehold Forestry User Groups)

Targeting the poor households for poverty reduction through forest-based activities was instigated in the mid-1990s in Nepal with the initiation of pro-poor LHF. At a time when community forestry was already in place with potential to fulfil forest-based needs and community development, pro-poor LHF was initiated to directly target poor households. An effort was made to organize poor households in groups to tackle their poverty with project-driven incentives and activities. The practice adopted by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)-funded Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project of the Department of Forests since 1993 was later institutionalized under the new Forest Regulation of 1995. The Regulation recognizes the provision to establish special projects for LHF to benefit people living below the poverty line. The major processes of LHF in the initial phase included:

- Identification of degraded forest land and people below the poverty line. The common feature of degraded forest referred to forest land with less than 20% crown cover. The threshold of poverty referred to a household with less than 0.5 hectare of private land or annual income of less than NRs2,500 (later increased to NRs6,100), commensurate with the poverty threshold criteria adopted by the National Planning Commission
- Formation of LHFUGs comprising approximately 10 households below the poverty line and their registration in the Small Farmer Development Programme under the local Agricultural Development Bank
- Delineation of patches of degraded forests equal to 10 hectares on average
- Notifying communities if they were willing to take the forest patch as community forest
- In case the forest patch was not claimed by the local people for community forest, the patch was handed over by the Regional Directorate of Forests to the LHFUG for 40 years in lease followed by a series of bureaucratic processes, often facilitated by project staff
- Post-formation support including microcredit, livestock as seed animals, sloping agriculture land technology, grass seedlings, and research and results' dissemination

Although the pro-poor leasehold forests are, by law, handed over to groups of communities, the requirement to identify the households below the poverty line to be organized into a group has in practice given rise to a household approach within a community-based regime. The fact that the group property of the leased land is divided into de facto parcels among the lessee households has strengthened the household approach in LHF in practice. The recent development in LHF, especially since the extension of the LHF project after 2005 under a new name—the Leasehold Forestry and Livestock Program (LFLP)—funded by IFAD had the following modifications:

- Use of the well-being ranking tool at the community level to disaggregate the well-being status of each household in order to identify the extremely poor or the poorest of the poor. In early LHF, all the households living below the poverty line were eligible for LHF without due consideration of relative poverty status among poor households. In the later version, the households at the bottom of the poverty pyramid got first priority
- Registration of the LHFUG at the District Forest Office to channel one-stop services to minimize transaction costs
- Delegation or deconcentration of authority to the District Forest Office to hand over leasehold forest

LHF in the existing policy framework has limited capacity to provide enough opportunities for poverty reduction through forestry for three major reasons:

- Out of 42% of land under the “forest” category by law, only about 10% has the potential to be brought under LHF due to the “degraded” forest criteria, while the people living under the poverty line exceed 30%, mostly in rural areas, and are often dependent on forest resources
- Some of the land in the 10% category has already been handed over as community forests or leasehold forests, resulting in the overall reduction of the potential. Even if all the remaining degraded forests were intended to be handed over as leasehold forest through intensive project interventions, it is likely that some of the land will still be handed over as community forests due to the legal priority of community forests over leasehold forests
- The provision to hand over only degraded forest as leasehold forest is a limiting factor to grasp resourceful outcomes for poverty reduction, if solely depending on LHF under the existing framework

Despite a household approach under the community-based modality, the intervention in other modalities of forest management has been addressed seriously to tackle poverty but through the household approach. The effort has been mainly initiated in the community forestry modality. The major reasons the pro-poor effort could be more easily initiated in community forestry than other forms of forestry after leasehold are:

- Livelihood improvement of the poor households in forest user groups has strongly emerged as one of the major second generation issues of community forestry (Kanel 2004)
- The easy access of users to forest resources and their devolved authority to decide about community development under sustainable use of the resources has been institutionalized in community forests in comparison with other modalities having higher degree of control by the Government
- The forests handed over are normally dense and biodiverse with huge potential for livelihood improvement of the poor households. There is growing concern that resources in community forestry have been underutilized (e.g. Khanal 2001; NACRMLP 2005)
- Deliberations in CFUGs have been practical through general assemblies, meetings, informal discussions, self- and external monitoring, civil society engagements, and “right-based voices” emerging overall. Negotiation between the poor and

nonpoor/elite is possible in order to enhance the livelihoods of the poorest households with governance coaching and sensitization (Bhattarai et al. 2005; Hobley et al. 2007)

There are a number of pro-poor initiatives in community forests such as free or subsidized prices for the poor to collect forest products, free or reduced community forestry membership fees, inclusion of disadvantaged households in decision making and so forth. The NSCFP (2007a) uses the acronym, FREELIFE H2O to describe a strategy for livelihood improvement of the poor being practiced in community forestry. These provisions are written in group operational plans and to establish the right for a household to group property, a contractual agreement is made between the group and the individual households about these provisions (Box 2).

### **Box 2: Contribution of Community Forestry to the Livelihood Capital of the Households (FREELIFE H2O)**

**Group funds** are made available to the disadvantaged households as a grant or a loan against relatively low interest; usually well below the 40% that local moneylenders typically charge.

**Representation** of disadvantaged households (and of women in general) in group decision-making bodies is encouraged by reserving seats for them in the committees, and more specifically in leadership positions (chair, vice-chair, secretary, treasurer).

**Employment** opportunities are identified by groups in private or group activities where disadvantaged persons will receive priority for a position. If it is relevant, provision for training can also be offered.

**Education** of children, particularly girls, has been supported by group funds for scholarships, which is by far more pro-poor than the general contributions for school buildings and teachers' salaries which might be equal for all members but often of less benefit for the poor.

**Land** that is under the control of the forestry groups may be given to a disadvantaged household (or a group of households) for the exclusive harvesting of fodder, grasses, fuelwood or, if relevant, for the cultivation of NWFPs or food crops.

**Inclusion** refers to the efforts of groups to encourage disadvantaged households to ensure membership and to participate in meetings, workshops, excursions etc. (by reserving seats) for involvement in mainstream group dealings. Simultaneously the better-off in the groups are sensitized about their role and attitude towards the disadvantaged members and are persuaded to allow the disadvantaged to raise their voices and listen to their opinions.

**Forest products** from the groups' forest can be distributed on an equitable rather than an equal basis. The needs for forest products may be equal per household, but richer families can often rely on different sources (e.g. from private land) or can afford to buy forest products. A forestry group can privilege poor households by subsidizing or waiving royalties for forest products, by allowing a larger amount of products to be harvested or by prolonging the harvesting period.

**Enterprise** development is an option for groups to invest their funds and utilize resources for creating economic opportunities. A unique model can be practiced where the poorest households become shareholders of the enterprise—for this, groups have started using part of their funds to invest in shares for the poor.

**Health and Housing** support is typically provided in emergencies to help families that have suddenly become destitute—after a landslide, a fire, an accident, or otherwise; they need urgent support to avoid slipping further into the poverty trap.

Establishment of **linkage** between **households** and various **development organizations** is necessary for directing disadvantaged families to find support that is beyond the capacity or mandate of the groups. The groups' network must be activated for the benefit of the disadvantaged. These can be links with other projects, with Village Development Committees (VDCs), with line agencies etc. to demand access to their services.

Source: NSCFP (2007b).

In particular, the following notable innovations are commonly practiced in various organizations that have been supporting the CBFM approach, specifically focusing on households.

### **Community Forestry Land Allocation**

CFUGs with the help of forestry facilitators identify the poorest households in terms of the most disadvantaged in their group applying participatory well-being assessment or ranking. A patch of land within the concerned community forest is delineated and allocated to the poorest households of the CFUGs for a specified period, usually five to ten years (Kandel and Subedi 2004). The poorest households can cultivate the land for fodder production, NWFPs, and enterprise development for their exclusive use. Although the process is not explicit in the legal documents, the CFUGs legitimize it with amendments in community forestry operational plans followed by decisions in the general assembly and signing of a tripartite memorandum of understanding between CFUGs, the beneficiary households, and the District Forest Offices. In many cases, the general assembly identifies a number of poor households but they prioritize the land allocation for the poorest families. The concept to allocate land in lease to poor families in community forests has been acknowledged in the approach paper to the Three Year Interim Plan, 2007 (NPC 2007).

### **Pro-poor Enterprise and Microfinance**

A number of community forest-based enterprises are emerging across the country (Pandit 2005). Practices to benefit the poor from the enterprises have also been initiated. Priority to the poorest families for wage employment, share holding in microenterprises, and involvement in community forest-based cooperatives and networks are some common characteristics of the pro-poor enterprises in community forestry (Kandel and Subedi 2004; NSCFP 2007). The seed money for the poor to invest in share holding in enterprises is provided from CFUG funds or in some cases by projects, such as in the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP) with a condition to pay back. Hobley et al. (2007) identified three major models of pro-poor forest-based enterprises in the NSCFP area:

1. CFUG–private partnership with disadvantaged households as shareholders, e.g. Nepali paper, fruit juice, essential oils and dairy products
2. CFUG network-based, e.g. resin harvesting
3. Enterprises at the household level, e.g. mask-carving, bamboo furniture etc.

Pandit (2005) estimated that 21 out of 28 enterprises surveyed provided direct and indirect employment opportunities for the poorest of the poor and women.

The microfinance activities basically refer to savings–credit schemes at the community level. In many CFUGs, separate savings and credit subcommittees are formed to mobilize the microfinance. Involvement of poor households has been made compulsory wherever the subcommittees have been formed. A fraction of the CFUG fund is allocated as seed money for the fund and each member household deposits a fixed amount per month in the fund. The money is provided to households involved in the subcommittee on a rotation basis for income-generation activities. Priority is given to the poorest households when providing credit.

## **Household–Community Partnership**

Negotiation between a CFUG and its poor households is being practiced for a number of pro-poor activities in community forestry. A notable example is the development of both CFUGs and household level plans with specified rights, duties, responsibilities, and roles of both the CFUG and the households (Hobley et al. 2007). There is a contractual agreement between the CFUGs per se and the poor households for a number of activities including the representation of disadvantaged members on the executive committee, land allocation, and other income-generating activities for the poor (see for example details in NSCFP [2007b] and NSCFP [2007c]).

## **Enabling Factors for the Pro-poor Household Approach**

A number of internal and external factors can be explained for the transformation of the community or group approach to poverty alleviation using the household approach in the forestry sector. The most notable are listed hereunder.

### **Role of Critical Civil Societies**

The role of various nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and critical civil societies has been one of the contributing factors to renovate group efforts towards poverty reduction for more targeted households. In this regard, the contribution of the Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN) has been substantial to catalyze many CFUGs to segregate the poorer households from the nonpoor in the group for special livelihood treatment (Bhattarai and Khatiwada 2006; LI-BIRD 2006). FECOFUN's role in lobbying for institutionalizing the LHF concept under the aegis of community forests in the upcoming three-year Interim Development Plan (2007–2010) is one of the examples for the household approach within already transferred community forests. ForestAction Nepal has been able to facilitate in Nawalparasi to identify landless families in the group and provide group funds to build houses for them. Civil society organizations have also been able to convince some user groups to waive membership fees and other financial responsibilities of the poorer households in the groups. A number of other civil society organizations, such as the Community Forestry Support Network (COFSUN), Himalayan Rural Women Natural Resources Group (HIMAWANTI Nepal), and the National Federation of Natural Resources User Groups (NEFUG) have been constantly advocating for making forestry sector programs pro-poor with substantial focus on poor households within the groups.

### **Development Projects**

The learning-oriented monitoring practices of many donor-funded projects have been remarkable for targeting individual households of the extremely poor in the community at large for their livelihood improvement. The IFAD-funded LHF project became the forerunner of the household approach in LHF albeit the project had adopted a group approach during the inception phase. Later with five years' experience in LHF using the group approach, the project initiated division of the land resource among individual households of the group although it was not acknowledged in the operational plans. Despite a noble idea for the household approach, LHF is still principally recognized as a communal effort. Recently, a number of other donor-funded forestry projects have been initiated targeting individual households with disadvantaged backgrounds in groups in order to enhance their livelihood opportunities. In this respect, the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC)-funded NSCFP has supported CFUGs to categorize their members into well-being ranking in user groups and played a catalyst role in sensitizing CFUGs to individualize their livelihood approach to meet the specific needs and demands of the deprived families at the household level to escape from

their poverty trap (NSCFP 2007b). Use of the well-being ranking tool with locally identified criteria, identification of extreme poverty at the individual level, and sensitization of the right-based approach for the poor to development as opposed to the customary welfare-based approach are some basic ways the NSCFP deals with livelihood improvement through the household approach (Hobley et al. 2007).

The Department for International Development (DFID)-funded Livelihood and Forestry Programme (LFP) has also initiated supporting the livelihood improvement of poor households in forest user groups. The project which was initially called the Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project changed its name to the LFP with a major focus on the transformation of natural, physical, financial, human, and social capital associated with the livelihood improvement of the forest-dependent poor. One of the popular pro-poor programs the LFP has been facilitating is “Land Allocation for the Poor” in community forests (LFP 2004a) as discussed earlier. The compulsory inclusion of disadvantaged households in the executive committee of CFUGs has also been initiated in order to institutionalize their voices in decision making (LFP 2004b). Another activity the LFP has recently included in its programs is its support for pro-poor LHF in its project districts. Previously, LHF was confined to the IFAD-funded project areas. The learning-oriented monitoring and feedback of the project have created avenues to develop the household approach.

The Netherlands-funded Biodiversity Sector Programme for the Siwaliks and Terai (BISEP-ST) Project has also started support for pro-poor LHF—it did not have the program in its inception phase and early project documents. Although the major thrust of the program has been collaborative management of Government forests and conservation of the Siwalik Hills using the community or group approach, its recent change to adopt LHF as one of its support areas indicates it has learned to embrace the household approach for livelihood improvement of the forest-dependent poor.

The important roles of development projects and forestry-related civil societies in making community forestry pro-poor using the household approach is also being institutionalized in the forthcoming revised *Community Forestry Development Guidelines* of the Department of Forests (DOF 2007).

## **Ongoing Social Inclusion Movements**

The overall social inclusion movements in Nepal have direct influence in most of the development sectors including forestry. The poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) of Nepal has acknowledged broad-based economic growth, social/human development, targeted interventions, and decentralization with social mobilization as the four major pillars of poverty reduction (NPC 2002). These four pillars accept social inclusion as the major process in development that requires the compulsory inclusion of women, ethnic groups, *dalits* (socially stigmatized and disadvantaged castes), and other deprived communities in State-driven opportunities. A number of ongoing movements and agitations led by various organizations such as the Federation of Ethnic and Indigenous Nationals, Nepal; Madheshi Jana Adhikar Forum (Terai inhabitants rights’ forum); the Forum for Land Rights Concern; the Association of Landless People Nepal, and the Association of Freed Bonded-labour in Nepal are some noteworthy examples in catalyzing social inclusion and thereby adopting the household approach in the forestry sector. The Interim Constitution of Nepal, 2007 has also institutionalized social inclusion as the “fundamental right” to embrace social inclusion as an integral feature of all governmental and public activities.

## **Dwindling Feudal Production Relations**

Poverty and disproportionate distribution of assets among people have been largely explained as the product of semifeudal production prevailing in society. The decade-long armed conflict led by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) philosophically targeted abolishing “semifeudal” and “semicolonial” production. The anti-feudal movement has also gained momentum from other socio-political forces, especially since the popular movement at the beginning of 2006. The voices for equitable distribution of benefits from natural resources such as land, water, and forests among the citizens have been remarkable in the gradual breaking down of (semi-) feudal production. The abolition of dual ownership on private land, enforcement of a land ceiling, and the initiation of land distribution to freed bonded-labor and other landless people are some major achievements in land reform against feudalism. The “illegitimate” capture of landlords' land by landless people led by the Maoists in many parts of the country during and after the conflicts (generally termed the People's War by the Maoists) has also accelerated to weaken feudal production relations. A similar effect is gradually spreading to the forestry sector, especially in community forestry, against elite-capture of the major benefits of community forests (Iverson et al. 2005; Bampton and Cammaert 2007).

## **Challenges to the Household Approach to Pro-poor Forestry**

Despite being a noble concept, the household approach to pro-poor forestry innovations has not gained momentum in Nepal, and it is still unclear whether poorer households can continue to expand their claim to rights, resources, and benefits from communal resource governance. The excessive project-driven innovations create a question mark for the enhancement or continuation of these innovations or initiatives. The following challenges have to be analyzed as to why the pro-poor initiatives are not gaining momentum.

### **High Transaction Costs**

Pro-poor innovations require added transaction costs for extra activities, such as in-depth well-being ranking at the household level, governance coaching of the poor to raise their voices for their rights against their poverty and of the elite to be sensitive to understanding the livelihood rights of the poor, and added costs to hire extra service providers. As such the transaction cost of community forestry to the poor has been empirically found to be higher than the nonpoor (Adhikari and Lovett 2006); the transaction cost to bring them out of the poverty trap would be even higher. NSCFP (2007b) learned that human capital is the most crucial out of various livelihood assets for households to be able to escape from the poverty trap with their continued capacity to understand rights, responsibilities, and roles to identify the routes out of poverty. It requires that literacy, education, and awareness be raised for the poor vis-à-vis advancement in resource governance, which automatically increases the transaction costs to achieve forest-based poverty reduction.

### **The Recentralizing Tendency of the Government**

Although the Government has made a commitment to decentralized governance in the development sector, including forestry, the recentralizing tendency has been evidenced by a number of activities. Various Ministerial and Departmental decisions have been made to curtail the rights of forest user groups, often contrary to the prevailing policy frameworks (Ojha et al. 2007). The ad hoc decisions on the imposition of taxes on tree species and products, a technically unjustified ban on felling green trees, restriction on community forestry in the Terai forests, amendment of the Forest Act, 1993 to curb CFUGs, Departmental control over the utilization of CFUG funds, the special policy for the Terai forests to be managed under the State property regime, and the declaration to convert

community and LHF to a buffer zone for strengthening protected areas are some examples of the Government's willingness to keep control over centralized power and recapture decentralized authorities (Pokharel et al. 2007). Ribot et al. (2006) argue that limiting the commercial use of community forestry in the hills and keeping control over valuable forest resources in the Terai (the plains region) under its own regime is the recentralizing tendency of the Government in Nepal. Such governmental recentralizing curtails the rights of the users to decide upon pro-poor arrangements in their community-based forest resources.

## **Inadequate Policy–Legal Frameworks**

The existing forestry-related policy or legal frameworks provide an encouraging environment for neither providing biodiverse forests as pro-poor leasehold forests nor introducing innovative pro-poor concepts such as “leasehold within community forestry.” The confinement of LHF to the “degraded forests” has a serious impact on returns to poor households. The other restraining factors for LHF include a compulsory report of financial feasibility, provision of Initial Environmental Examination, priority of community forestry over LHF, and lack of strict rules for the service providers to reach the poorest of the poor. In community forestry, on the other hand, the household approach is being overlooked or obstructed by Government forest offices. There is a general lack of policy or legal statements that community forestry should be pro-poor. The policy-backing of community forestry is mainly from the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector of 1988, which limits community forestry to the fulfilment of forest-based needs of the local people. The Forest Act of 1993, which is the legal foundation of community forestry, directs it for the “Collective Welfare” of the community. As long as the policies and legal frameworks are amended to include equitable sharing of benefits for the poor and disadvantaged households, the dilemma seems to continue.

## **Conceptual Issues**

A number of conceptual issues exist related to poverty and forestry's contribution to it. Poverty is a multifaceted process; it is caused by a number of factors and it can be eradicated through a number of measures by a number of agencies and more importantly by the respective household itself. So an impact study of any project or program on poverty reduction is always incomplete. For any poverty assessment exercise, a comprehensive impact study is needed to examine the impact of any sector or subsector on poverty at the household level. An assessment of the project or program should therefore be more concerned with whether it has been able to develop and build sustainable institutional arrangements and tools, and not so much on impact.

A critical issue relating to the community forestry and poverty nexus is the extent to which community forestry can be expected to achieve pro-poor outcomes. The national community forestry program and its enabling framework of policies, laws, institutions, and processes was not originally designed or expected to achieve outcomes targeted specifically at disadvantaged households. These are expectations that were later added to the objectives of many community forestry programs without the enabling framework being adapted.

Whilst we consider that there are certain aspects of community forestry that contribute to its significant potential as a pro-poor program (its widespread reach in remote areas; its extensive membership of all types of household; the autonomy and capacity of its local groups; and its track record of responsiveness to external changes and influence) we also recognize that to directly reach and have impact on households, especially the poorest, other more specific approaches may also be desirable. Certainly, our experiences of community forestry have indicated that this approach does offer an opportunity to have impacts on all types of livelihood capital, including social capital, which would perhaps not be the case otherwise.

Community forestry brings households of different types together at a group assembly, where various caste, class, gender, ethnicity, and well-being categories discuss, debate, negotiate, renegotiate, and agree from within a group umbrella.

Although it is not yet possible to reach firm conclusions, the questions that are currently being asked within community forestry include:

- How much is expected from community-based forestry to contribute to meeting the environmental and social objectives, particularly poverty reduction? Can community-based forestry offer the expectation? What categories of disadvantaged households can be expected to benefit from community forestry through delivery of interventions by groups and what categories of disadvantaged households are unlikely to benefit?
- Are there different approaches that need to be implemented by groups in their interventions so that different types of disadvantaged households may benefit? In particular, what should be their strategy—should they concentrate on those households that are likely to gain the greatest incremental benefit (not necessarily the most disadvantaged [destitute] households), or should their approach be to share resources across all poor households regardless of their ability to respond? Or should they target the destitute with a more humanitarian package realizing that this will barely or not contribute to raising living standards and chances in life?

## **Methodological Issues**

A number of issues have arisen from the methodology used to measure livelihood impact at the household level. Some illustrate the difficulties in getting a clear understanding on the perspective of livelihoods as perceived by disadvantaged households. Others point more to methodological difficulties in the sampling and information gathering process. This is being discussed and documented well in various literature (see for example, NSCFP 2007c).

Communication with identified poor households has proved to be more difficult than expected. Lack of human capital and an inability to conceptualize or see far beyond their day-to-day survival requirements has made it difficult to capture their views on the impacts of interventions they have received from groups.

In assessing changes in poverty, it is clear that poverty is not static, but a dynamic and complex multidimensional phenomenon that is difficult to capture in all its nuances. The DFID livelihoods framework provides an opportunity to explore and conceptualize the wider aspects of poverty, but since there may be both positive and negative changes in different assets, overall conclusions are difficult to draw. In particular, emotional, psychosocial, and attitudinal aspects of social and human assets are found to be the most difficult to assess and understand.

There are also issues that concern the inevitable delay between certain group interventions and the likelihood of household-level impacts. Over what kind of timescale can we expect to see impacts? This is particularly important because of the apparent critical asset of human capital. If this is to be influenced by training (for example by scholarships for girls) then the impact is likely to be over a generation. Other types of intervention may produce more immediate effects.

The selection of number and the location and the type of households in various well-being categories for assessment is another challenge. The unwillingness of destitute households to reveal their true condition, or even the lack of data of all the households of various categories and mainly of truly destitute households and the well-off households and the study of poverty

dynamics is another major challenge. The general tendency is to see only the destitute or “intervened” households, not the whole quantum. Equity issues are poorly captured and difficult to assess by looking only at the poorest of the poor. The study can tell us nothing about changes between the richest and poorest households. To do this the household sample would need to be much wider in a way that it would also incorporate interviewing nonpoor households about the changes in their perceptions of the poverty situation in the group and the way the group is dealing with it.

Groups may have different criteria for assessing households in their well-being ranking. In many cases a classical criteria of financial or landholding status may predominate whilst we would define a category of households that might be considered as disadvantaged in many ways. How then is it possible to categorize in a meaningful way a *dalit* household suffering from social exclusion or a widow being accused of being a witch and a household consisting of aged individuals who lack physical capacity to cultivate land and utilize the resources they may have?

From the project or program perspective, issues of attribution are important. Any identified changes in household livelihood status are a result of many different factors including political movement such as the Maoist movement in Nepal, the effect of other development projects, NGOs, emergence of political parties and their agendas, the media, market opportunities, and other externalities and so forth (not just the project’s intervention). Project impacts are therefore difficult to capture (although this may be of no relevance to the households themselves who may not necessarily make such distinctions between groups and non-groups).

Attitudes to authority and institutional structures are deeply engrained in the minds of both poor households and groups. Naturally, both may wish to present a favorable and pleasing impression in order to satisfy their “patron.” We have found this attitude difficult to overcome even in the mindset of qualified consultants carrying out this study, where the desire to show success was difficult to counteract. Also consultants and even personnel working for donor-supported projects are driven by a desire to please the donors or employer with predominantly positive pictures rather than being analytical, which would explain if and how the intended objectives were achieved or could not be achieved. In contrast, amongst academics a tendency of cynicism exists to look too negatively at the achievements and the learning from donor-supported projects. In both ways, learning is limited.

## **Key Learning**

We recognize that the underlying causes of poverty are very different for each household. Therefore an agency devoted to poverty reduction has to individualize the livelihood approach (moving from the group approach to the household approach) to accommodate the specific needs and demands of a single household to increase its chances of escaping from the poverty trap.

We found that a single focus on the economic position of a household is not assumed to sustainably contribute to improved livelihoods; for this, intervention at several (and preferably all) livelihood capital is needed. The nature of the groups’ legal mandates enables them to take multiple initiatives to address this capital. A necessary intervention is to sensitize the groups of their social responsibility towards the poor household members, and for them to realize the scope of possibilities that lie in their own hands.

External agencies such as governments and projects can be catalysts and provide initial investments for family-based initiatives, but the main thrust to address poverty issues has to come from the group itself. As poverty usually has multiple, deep-rooted causes, a solution

cannot be found in a one-time financial intervention. It is the role for the community at large, and in particular the respective group to give identified disadvantaged households long-term and multifaceted support, i.e. in as many spheres of livelihood as possible by linking with many agencies.

The development potential for extremely poor households may need the most intensive follow up for climbing up a rank. For the most deprived, it is almost impossible to make them benefit from development interventions, and humanitarian support with a welfare approach is in fact the only way to provide for their living. External agencies can motivate the groups to provide humanitarian support for the destitute—but still based on the notion that this is not always charity but that it is also a human right of the destitute to be taken care of.

## **Conclusion**

The household approach to forest-based poverty reduction is an emerging practice with both opportunities and challenges for the forest-dependent poor to escape from their poverty trap. The household approach in this context is not against the “common property” approach to community forestry, but involves the targeting of individual households of the extremely poor for livelihood improvement within the common property regime. Although the household approach begins with the conventional welfare attitude of the Government as in pro-poor LHF, it is creating avenues for community forestry users, especially the disadvantaged to adopt and strengthen the “right-based” approach to claim their rights, resources, and benefits from common property forest governance. The approach has the potential to produce equitable impacts from community forestry or LHF to minimize the gap between the rich and the poor as it works at sensitization of the poor to seek their rights to not be poor and of the elite to be sensitive enough to respect the livelihoods rights of disadvantaged people.

Adopting the household approach in practice, LHF has been creating opportunities for the poorest of the poor to explore livelihood support from “degraded” forests supplemented by project incentives, while community forestry is also gradually transforming to a poor-focused form from its “forest product supplies and community development” modality. Critical civil societies, development partners, social inclusion movements, and weathering feudal production relations have been conducive to adopting the pro-poor household approach in forestry. However, the approach is still vulnerable in terms of its continuity, long-term effectiveness, and equitable impact on poverty reduction. High transaction costs, the Government's inclination to recentralize forestry, and the inadequacy of enabling policy–legal frameworks for right-based pro-poor forestry are some challenges to be analyzed and tackled to continue the household approach to forest-based poverty reduction.

We recognize that study related to poverty is always inadequate in terms of obtaining an accurate and comprehensive assessment of the livelihood impact on poor households. Many further studies are undoubtedly needed to demonstrate the linkage between forestry and poverty and the contribution of community groups to household poverty reduction, taking both conceptual and methodological issues into consideration.

There is no single conclusion. Three scenarios exist in Nepal in terms of the contribution of community-based organizations to household-level poverty reduction.

**Scenario 1.** Positive impact is noticed only at landscape and institution levels. No positive impact at the poorest household level has been noticed at all. In this case, the forest resource is protected and the groups are functioning as protection groups. With regard to addressing poverty issues, both groups and households are insensitive and passive.

**Scenario 2.** Some impacts on poverty at the household level are seen but sustainability is questionable. Although some groups are active in delivery of interventions for poor households, the households themselves are not sufficiently empowered to demand services and their rights and do not yet recognize their responsibilities. In other cases in this scenario, some households are demanding services, but not getting an adequate response from group leadership. In either case supply and demand are not matched.

**Scenario 3.** There are cases that the positive impacts on poverty reduction are taking place, and appear to be sustainable. Both the groups and the households are active. Attitudes and the commitment of community leaders towards poor households are changing in a positive direction. The households themselves know their rights (not to be poor) and are sufficiently empowered to articulate them to the groups followed by the response from the group leadership. The households are undertaking various livelihood opportunities and are empowered emotionally as well.

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