

Community Management/ User Groups (Group A)



"The Nepal group was very liberal while discussing the user group. A senior Nepalese forest officer said that even if the plan is not approved, he has been allowing the user's group to carry on with the management of the forest."

-- J. R. Gupta, Hattiban

It is evident from the experiences of India and Nepal that the concept and definition of "community" differs widely in the implementation of community forest management. The following list of some of the entities being supported in community/social forestry gives some idea of the diversity.

- Civil *Panchayats*, legally constituted constituents of the local government (differing in size and structure by States from a collection of villages to single village areas) (i.e., Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, U.P., and previously Nepal)
- *Van Panchayats*, legally constituted

forest *panchayats* (i.e., the U.P. hills)

- Forest Protection Committees, usually informally constituted by administrative fiat -- again differing widely in size, selection, and authority (i.e., Orissa, Gujarat, West Bengal, H.P. etc)
- User Groups, assemblage of local forest users; in Nepal legally constituted, elsewhere more informally established often under the name of forest committees
- Clubs and Associations, such as the *Mahila Mandals* (Women's groups), Youth Groups, Lion's Clubs, etc (i.e., H.P., West Bengal, etc)
- Cooperatives, legally registered forest workers' cooperatives or forest product cooperatives (i.e., Gujarat, H.P., etc)
- Societies, registered under the Societies Act (i.e., Haryana Hill Resources' Management Societies)
- Family lineages and clans, with or without some form of legal land registration over the forest area (i.e., H.P. and Nepal)

The debate over the most appropriate form of community institution for forest management includes advocates for each of the institutions listed above. Some argue the necessity for using established legal entities (such as the *panchayat*) to safeguard community interest, some argue the necessity of de-politicising community forests by avoiding political bodies such as the *panchayat*, some argue for exclusive management by a subgroup of the community such as the women, others argue that the most important criterion is inclusiveness of all residents. The current weight of social science research suggests that, other factors being equal, groups composed of all actual forest users (as opposed to members of an administratively-defined area or subgroup) have the greatest chance of success. However, since all other factors are never equal, institutional diversity will, and probably should, continue.

During the Seminar, most participants in the panel were most familiar with the User Group approach initiated in Nepal. This, then, was the context for this panel's discussion. The overall debate on local institutions was not engaged in directly -- but the characteristics of successful institutions were identified.

The basis for **defining group membership** was seen as critical to the success of community forest management. Nepal used to define memberships on the basis of administrative wards -- however, this was seen to include non-users while excluding small hamlets of users from other wards. Now, Nepal attempts to allow local communities to define the user groups on the basis of settlements and by whether they are primary or secondary users. However, households are not explicitly identified in the Operation Plans. While many places in India continue to define membership on the basis of administrative boundaries, most of the new JFM approaches require the registration of individual households, sometimes to the level of both male and female household heads.

Participants recognised that this registration of individual households would become increasingly important, even in Nepal, as forest products became more commercialised and cash revenue was involved. In addition, they recognised the value of identifying different classes of users, e.g., the 'primary' and 'secondary' distinction made in Nepal.

The importance of explicitly identifying women as full members along with their husbands or other male household members was also stressed. Government forests are public property to which women have legal access equal to that of men. Providing membership on a household basis, without explicitly identifying the women as well, is providing a new form of tenure whereby women's independent rights are further eroded and their potential participation in forest management further marginalised. A proactive approach to identifying women specifically provides them with their constitutional rights as well as introducing a mechanism for promoting their voice in culturally-constrained settings.

Gender and Powerlessness

I was impressed by the all-too-brief discussion on **gender issues**, but noted that the over-arching issues are **power relationships** under which gender issues fall. The larger category of relationships include the powerless at large, e.g. the landless, the women, the poor, the lower castes, isolated ethnic groups, etc.

-- D. Messerschmidt, Hattiban

Intra-group benefit-sharing is an issue which, currently, has led to the practice of widely different policies. For both India and Nepal, most benefits to date have been in the form of in-kind subsistence products (fuelwood, small poles, fodder, leaf litter, minor forest foods, and medicinal plants). Generally, groups practise equitable distribution by households; although in some parts of India there are attempts to skew distribution to disadvantaged groups (such as the poor or the tribals). Such attempts have met with limited success, and participants agreed that community solutions which encompassed all member households tended to be most sustainable **if they were transparent to the whole community and explicitly agreed upon.**

Only India has some experience with commercialised community forest products where cash revenue is involved (e.g., *bhabbar* grass contracts, harvesting of sal or eucalyptus poles for sale, sal seeds, *tendu* leaves for *bidis*, etc). In India revenues, from both product sales and labour payment, can be both in the name of

individual members as well as in the name of the group as a whole. It was recognised that the introduction of cash vastly increases the potential for intra-group conflict and inequitable arrangements. Participants from Nepal recognised that they need to foresee the need for mechanisms to deal with cash revenue (some groups already use petty contract systems) and build on the Indian experience in this area. Suggestions included the establishment of group bank accounts, monthly open meetings during which expenditures and balances were reported, and an effective (outside?) monitoring or auditing procedure established.

The issue of **revenue-sharing with the Government or outside parties** was a constant theme throughout the workshop, given the differences in approach between Nepal's community forestry and India's JFM. In India, the arguments have tended to be whether to share revenues of major products (i.e., timber) with communities at all. In Nepal, the question posed by the seminar is whether the Government should share in some of the community forestry revenue at all. As almost all the participants were convinced of the right and necessity of communities sharing in the forest's revenue in order to meet community needs and to establish effective forest management, the primary discussion centered around whether the Government should retain **any** of the revenue (see boxes).

Relating to your starting point -- who really owns the forests? -- two cogent sets of arguments are available for and against revenue-sharing with the government. While NGOs, as representatives of the people tended to support community ownership, government foresters, as custodians of their nations' forests, mostly favoured revenue-sharing. However, both acknowledged the importance of both parties in improving community forestry management.

There was also a recognition that different policies on revenue-sharing can be called for in different circumstances. Scattered patches of inaccessible degraded forests being used for subsistence purposes, as is found in much of the hills of Nepal, may be most amenable to full community management and product ownership. Larger, more productive, and commercial forests, which produce important products for society at large, generate large cash revenues, and are

Arguments FOR Revenue-sharing with the Government

- The Needs of Society as a Whole. Government forests are a national asset which have to serve people not living next to the forests and have to provide products needed by the wider society.

- Financial and Legal Equity. In both India and Nepal, community forest lands continue to belong to the Government even though management authority and rights to products have been transferred to communities. The Government, as landlord and national custodian, retains rights and continues to bear expenses in relationship to these resources which need to be sustained.

- Technical Expertise. While local communities have the intimate knowledge of their forests which is essential for effective management, trained government foresters can provide technical expertise and access to research, and this is difficult for most communities to manage on their own.

- Enforcement and Conflict Resolution. While local communities are the most effective institution for forest protection and local conflict resolution, they frequently need the legal back-up and stronger enforcement capabilities of the Government in dealing with inter-community conflicts and difficult repeat offenders. Intra-group factions and conflicts can also require outside intervention.

- Staff Motivation. Once the Government's revenue share is removed, the motivation for forestry staff to establish, hand over, advise, assist, and monitor community forests diminishes. The low percentages of currently established community forests in Nepal and India are evidence of this fact. For joint community forestry to work, the government staff's incentive to participate in the process cannot be eliminated without an ensuing substantial decrease in their motivation. Without revenue-sharing the Government will never hand over the high quality productive forests (i.e., the *terai* of Nepal and Doars of India; the forests of Madhya Pradesh).

- Effective Management. Traditional systems of management are decreasingly effective in the face of the changing economic and social conditions where market forces, new political structures, and new livelihood strategies are fragmenting previously sustained community institutions. Government support is needed to assist communities in restructuring, re-establishing, and protecting their local institutions.

-- The Editors

difficult for village communities to protect and manage, are more suitable for joint management with revenue sharing. In this vein, the Chief of Community Forestry in Nepal suggested that Nepal's policy for the *terai* be modified to include government revenue from royalties and sales' tax. On the other side, some Indian participants called for a more liberal policy towards community revenue-sharing in the more productive forests of India.

Arguments AGAINST Revenue-sharing

"The radical principle of handing over management responsibility to user groups a 100 per cent is something that everyone wants to compromise on; some in the name of revenue-sharing, others in the name of technical intervention. Management responsibility is handed over, STOP. Beyond that, TOUGH! No incentives, no revenues. LEAVE THESE PEOPLE ALONE!"

-- Anonymous, *Hattiban*

- **Indigenous Rights.** Governments have mostly assumed ownership of these forests through nationalisation from local communities, *zamindars*, *rajas*, etc. Communities, not the wider nation State or society, have prior rights to these forests.

- **Effective Management.** In many cases, local communities used to manage their community forests most effectively without government intervention through traditional management systems. Increased government intervention has been the cause of their deterioration, government withdrawal is the condition for their resurrection. Unless the community fully owns the forest, they will not be fully motivated to manage it.

- **Rural Development.** So far, governments have only designated poorly stocked, relatively unproductive, and degraded forests for community management. Revenue-sharing with the Government would only reduce the inadequate return local communities already receive from these forests. The community needs all of the benefits to have a reasonable chance at effective rural development.

- **Bureaucracy.** Despite the best intentions and guidelines, government intervention inevitably entangles communities in bureaucratic processes which undermine good management, speedy revenue-sharing, flexible management, and effective enforcement.

- **Cultural Considerations.** Governments frequently overlook the social and cultural considerations that local communities wish to honour -- whether they consist of ritual obligations, sacred sites and species, tribal hunting rituals, or the local power structure.

-- The Editors

Community Forestry as a Process

Harihar Acharya sees community forestry as a **process**, without end products, that should allow user groups to evolve unconstrained by the imposition of models. He pointed out that arduous efforts to gain the consensus of all users by forest extension staff may not be necessary if leader farmers can represent their communities and carry out their own extension. Although forestry initiatives must be integrated with other sectors, they can start out from single sector approaches and expand. Harihar recommends building on indigenous systems without necessarily formalising them -- which often breaks their strength.

-- Harihar Acharya, *Hattiban*

Ian Napier recommends what he terms 'process projects', which maintain a set of goals, but allow for flexibility in the mechanisms used to achieve those objectives. The most important resources are **time** -- he cautions against moving ahead too fast -- and **persons who themselves have changed their attitudes**. Money, he emphasised, is no panacea.

-- Ian Napier, *Hattiban*

Within the group input and cost-sharing appear to be characteristic of successful community forest management. Traditional indigenous systems rely on equitable sharing of protection costs through equal contribution of foodgrains to watchers or through rotational guarding. People invest in their forests. The wider the participation in cost-sharing, the more stake participants have in the outcome. While communities eagerly (usually too eagerly) accept outside inputs, these frequently endanger financial self-reliance. However, without such inputs the number of communities willing to bear the cost of forest management and protection has not proven to be very high.

Community cost-sharing with the Government or project promoters has generally been low, confined mostly to some role in protection. Labour charges tend to be paid from outside as a means of employment generation and as an incentive for forest protection. This was challenged by some participants: "Communities don't need money" said Nalini Subba of CARE/Nepal, "rather forest activities should be linked to other development activities". Participants noted that, although most programmes tried to plan in gradual phase-out of project support, the financial and managerial burden was currently too high to be sustained without greater self-reliance.

How can outside assistance be channelled to promote widespread community forestry without undermining the very self-reliance and sustainability they are seeking? This fundamental dilemma was not solved; however, the participants did identify some successful strategies. These included explicit yearly agreements on cost-sharing arrangements and a plan to phase-out support as forestry income increases. Also, financial resources could be devoted more to awareness building to facilitate local community organisation through NGOs.

Some participants were also attracted to the model of Gujarat, in which community forests are divided between self-financed and joint-financed arrangements. If a community chooses the self-financed model, they could be eligible for 100 per cent of the benefits. If the community chooses joint-financing, revenue is also shared with the outside financing agency. **The amount of investment becomes the basis for calculating returns to different investing parties** along the lines of a share-holding corporation.

The role of donors as cost-sharers also came in for limited scrutiny. Donor-driven agendas were seen as all too frequently driving national priorities and dividing up the countries into competing systems and approaches. While some advantages were identified in different States and regions experimenting with different approaches, the difficulties in coordination and reporting were also exasperating. It was felt that donors far too often looked for the cream to scoop off the top and left the government holding the bag with the more difficult and less glamorous areas and programmes. Better modalities are needed to ensure the continued exploration of innovative pilot programmes within more consistent overall frameworks in which the State and nation remained in the driver's seat -- just as communities needed to remain in the driver's seat in relationship to their governments.

Donors

An important issue arising from the seminar is the future role of donors in an environment where all responsibility is phased out to user groups. To use the jargon of the seminar, should we define donors as something that works, something that does not work, or something that should be tried?

-- Anonymous, Hattiban

There was recognition that **inter-group relationships are increasingly important and that conflicts between groups** are likely to increase as communities are awarded management authority over individual forest areas and the benefits (including revenues) from these forests increase. The distribution of forests are not equitable between village communities and user groups. Some groups will have large and productive forests and others small or unproductive forests. This inequity, combined with the differing degrees of investment each group makes in protecting and managing its forests, has already generated conflicts over access and benefits between communities with and without adequate forest areas of their own.

At the same time, community forestry groups have much to gain from potential cooperation. It was noted that study tours among groups are perhaps the most valuable form of learning, engendering greater group confidence and providing new management ideas. It was suggested that an inter-group federation could provide groups with invaluable means for increasing their bargaining power with the market and the Government. Such a federation could also provide a forum for conflict resolution and problem solving.

User Group Federations

As community-based groups are formed to manage their local natural resources, certain inter-group issues may arise. Linkages and coordination among groups is desirable to:

- (1) facilitate conflict resolution;
- (2) enable groups to share capital (e.g., tractors, machinery) or take advantages of the economies of scale enabled through collective activities (e.g., buyer's cooperatives); and
- (3) ensure that social and environmental issues, occurring on scales larger than the user group can handle, are addressed. (e.g., ensuring watershed protection, timber supplies for generating foreign exchange)

-- Lini Wollenberg, Hattiban

In order to **cope with increasing revenues**, community forestry groups will need to develop increased **internal skills** in silviculture, management, accounting, and marketing. Many community forestry groups in India and Nepal are already attempting to market

their products in the commercial and industrial sector. Attempts to capture value-added benefits from in-house processing of such products as sal leaves, essential oils, fibre ropes, bark paper, broom-making, industrial oils, etc are beginning to appear and will be increasingly important. Internal skills could be developed by communities appointing a villager to serve as their 'village forester', on either an honorary or paid basis. This forester could receive training from forest departments and NGOs to enhance his/her skills in forest management, product processing, and marketing.

Communities will also need to develop **mechanisms for making more effective use of outside skills in the government and private sector.** More liberal and competitive government policies in forest product harvesting, transit, and marketing, combined with greater community knowledge, should allow communities to make more effective use of the much maligned, but frequently essential, private sector for marketing. Groups with sufficient revenue could begin to hire foresters as consultants to increase their productivity and advise them on forest management. Both government forest departments and NGOs will have to play a critical role in expanding their knowledge, training, and extension services in the field, e.g., management, accounting, and forest product processing and marketing. Job descriptions for forest rangers need to be rewritten to encompass these new tasks.

While subsistence products will play a big role in community forestry for some time to come, the ability to capture the benefits of commercial marketing will increasingly be the gauge for community forestry sustainability. This prognostication calls for reassessments of current legal constraints on the planting of cash inter-crops in forest areas -- or are only those species which are naturally regenerated to be allowed? It also calls for the development of credit and insurance schemes that treat community forests as the investments they are. Economic cost/benefit analyses of alternative forest investment options are desperately needed to guide communities in making wise investment choices.

To effectively promote such self-sustaining community forests, **current budgeting procedures** need rethinking. While promising

The Private Sector

The relationship between the private sector and local communities is often seen as one in which private, commercial interests employ or 'exploit' communities' labour and natural resources. However, as communities gain control over resources and build community savings' funds, there may come a day when communities employ the private sector for labour and technical consultation services.

-- Lini Wollenberg, Hattiban

new approaches are being slowly worked out through the mechanism of community forest management plans (also called microplans, operational plans, etc), both countries continue to be dominated by top-down budgeting procedures which severely constrain both outside inputs and the communities' use of their own inputs. Hectarage targets, per hectarage budget limits, planting targets, and seedling production targets all serve to pre-ordain budgets and community discretion. Within the budgets available, more flexibility and devolution of decision-making to communities are needed to facilitate adaptive and productive management, tailored to individual community forest needs and opportunities. This, in turn, will require the development of a better menu of technical options from which communities can choose (see later technical section).

Hypothesis No. 8

If natural forest becomes locked up, some alternative source(s) must be made available to local forest users. Protection of one forest usually leads to over-exploitation of neighbouring forest(s) and grazing land(s). (R.J. Fisher 1991, and field observation).

Hypothesis No. 11

Successful forest management is enhanced if there is good communication linkage between the committee and the community of users, about rules and regulations (formal and customary), meeting times, etc.

Hypothesis No. 13

Forest user groups are more highly motivated to manage the resource to the degree that they feel accountable for or that if they feel 'ownership' over - i.e., that it is their own ('hamro ban ho').

From: Messerschmidt et al Forest User Groups in Nepal Perspectives on What Works and Why, 1992.