6. A Comparative Perspective and Concluding Remarks

A Comparison of Government-sponsored Forestry with User Group Forestry

In this section we present a short comparison of the government-sponsored (DFO-approved) community forestry with the user group forestry discussed in the case studies above. Both Baitadi and Achham are within the purview of the Government's Community Forestry Development Programme (CFDP). However, most of the users under study in Baitadi know very little and are more skeptical of such a programme than the users in Achham[26]. More efforts to spread the philosophy of community forestry may be needed in Baitadi than in Achham.

It is evident from our cases that the indigenous systems are characterised by silvicultural conservativeness. The DFO-approved community forests (a process by which the forests are handed over to a user group under a written and approved operational plan), on the other hand, have their own drawbacks. In particular, under such systems, there is a restriction on *"the use of forest products until the Management Plan has been written and is being followed"* (Baral 1991:4). Besides, there seems to be an undue emphasis on user group committee formation in such systems (Fisher 1989, 1991; Gilmour and Fisher 1991) which are often *"nominated by the Forest Office in consultation with a limited number of elite individuals"* (Baral 1991:4).

Silvicultural conservativeness certainly is present in the indigenous systems of forest protection and management. This suggests that such systems lay greater emphasis on

[26] In a recent study by APROSC (1991), analysing the present status of the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS), it is reported that less than 30% of the rural communities and the forest user group committee members (the real target group of MPFS) are aware of the MPFS. Thus, the lack of awareness about the CFDP among most of the farmers in Baitadi district would appear to be quite normal.

protection. In all the cases under study, there is no practice of collecting green forest products in a systematic way (i.e., by pruning branches and thinning or removing of diseased and dying trees) as a management strategy. Studies in the central hills of Nepal have argued, on the basis of field experiences, that systematic and timely harvesting would provide forest products while encouraging natural regeneration. Felling mature trees, cutting branches, thinning, and singling to ensure an open canopy and healthy growth of the forest have been regarded as better silvicultural options to achieve a sustainable use of community forests (Gilmour and Fisher 1991:95). The indigenous systems in the FWDR of Nepal lack such management. The forest department personnel and other individuals with technical knowledge can take this as an entry point and help build management confidence among local people.

Concluding Remarks

The case studies presented here from two districts of the FWDR of Nepal suggest that there is a potential for user group forestry. The user groups and their characteristics, as discussed above, suggest some general patterns but not necessarily any universally applicable and exhaustive typology. However, the study reinforces the relevance of a research strategy aimed at revealing some common characteristics of user groups in different settings which eventually may allow us to talk of a general typology of user groups.

Suggestions

A pertinent question before us today is whether the traditional community approach to forestry is useful. On the basis of the case studies, we can say with certainty that the principle behind community forestry is certainly valid. However, the discussion of the cases has also revealed that often a wrong approach to the involvement of DFOs in the management of forests had undesirable results: the people lost interest in protection and management activities, or conflicts emerged in regard to user rights and ownership which resulted in depletion of the forest resources even though the interventions were meant to facilitate a sustainable use of forest resources. At times, such interventions also resulted in the breakdown of the indigenous systems of protection and management.

There are some other factors that are responsible for the failure of the traditional community forestry programmes. First, there is a very low level of communication between the DFO, rangers, and the local people. Attempts should be made to narrow such

communication gaps. Second, people tend to view the district forest officers as control agents rather than as extension workers and facilitators of community forestry. Perhaps the forest department's field personnel need to be reoriented through training to enable them to take the role of social extension workers and technical advisors to the local communities. Third, programmes for conservation seem to have been launched without keeping in mind the needs of the local people. Unless people have access to alternative sources of forest resources they have no choice except to steal products from the protected patch of forest. It should be noted that, in trying to protect the forest, if we also restrict the local population from using the forest products to meet their daily needs, there is a likelihood of conflict between the people and the Government or institutions involved in implementing such programmes.

Cernea (1989) emphasises that good intentions in experimentation and innovation ought to be backed by social knowledge which includes a better understanding of such factors as the existing land ownership system, the local power structure and authority system, the traditional attitudes and behaviour of the people regarding forestry, and so on (Cernea 1989:9-14). Implied in this kind of argument is the fact that any innovation or development project that happens to overlook the contextual and sociocultural factors runs the risk of failure and faces unanticipated consequences. This is exactly why the traditional community forestry approach has been very slow in handing the forests back to the people.

Spontaneous development of forest protection and management systems in many rural areas of Nepal seems to be a commonly acknowledged reality. User groups with formal and informal committees are to be found in some places, whereas in other places equally effective systems of protection and management of forest resources seem to be in practice without any formal UGC. Still, in other places, people seem to be moving towards formalising their user group committees and user group units and are approaching the DFO to grant them official recognition as user groups.

It is our contention that people in general are already aware of the idea of protecting forests. Any attempts at preaching the importance of forest protection to the rural people could be a waste of time, energy, and resources. In fact, they have been living in close proximity as well as in constant interaction with the forests as parts of a local ecosystem. Thus, it is a mistake to assume that people in the villages lack motivation to protect forest resources. Perceived advantages and the importance of the forests (and other resources) for the households, the village, and the local ecosystem have always been known to the farmers in the villages of Nepal. It is, therefore, erroneous "..... *to believe that the traditional peasant has a lack of common sense and intelligence when he is felling trees and*

cutting firewood that causes landslides and erosion in the Himalaya" (Seeland 1986:194)[27].

It may be true that, in many places, attempts at forest protection have either not been made or not been successful. What the local people in such cases may be lacking is a clear management plan that lays down the rules and regulations in very specific terms with regard to protection, utilisation, and distribution of forest resources (e.g., Koti *Gaun*). This perhaps is one area where the forest department and other external agencies can help the user groups of forest resources.

From our discussion above, it is implied that people's participation is the best way to achieve the objective of effective protection and management of forest resources to ensure sustainable use and thereby avert an ecological crisis. In order to ensure popular participation in forestry, we suggest that the following conditions should be given due attention. First, recognition should be accorded to the existing local practices, institutions, and organisational structures. This includes cultural norms and values as well as any other institution. Second, the local user groups should be recognised as the owners as well as the protectors and managers. Third, people should be convinced that they are not only the protectors of the resources but the immediate beneficiaries as well. If such a situation already exists in some places, attempts should be made to formalise it. Fourth, the establishment of institutions and organisations that have broad-based participation, rather than imposed from above or one based on the dominance of traditional leaders, should be facilitated. Fifth, the role of the DFO and related institutions should be redefined so as to facilitate the persistence of local management systems.

A common feature of the user groups and the forest protection and management systems under study is that they all have a perceived demand for various forest products. People have also developed strategies for ensuring a sustainable supply of such products. In most cases, the user groups have determined how to distribute (harvest) products among the primary user members as well as how to share the products with neighbours. It is also notable that user groups have formed a set of rules and regulations to check abuses of the resources by members as well as non-members. Hence the agencies interested in getting involved in community forestry in the hills of Nepal must be ready to function together

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27 Seeland concludes that "*... ecological preservation cannot be a survival strategy for a Himalayan peasant, because it is: 1. a transgression of dharma, 2. not a traditional pattern of reaction to changing conditions of living, and 3. exceeds the normal working capacity of a peasant*" (1986:196).

with the existing system and strive to strengthen the local practices of forest protection and management, wherever they exist. The emphasis on user group forestry is undoubtedly important. Through such an approach, the local user groups could be encouraged to be self-sufficient and self-reliant if they are given the authority to manage and utilise the forest resources according to their requirements.

Implications

The existence of indigenous systems of forest protection and management in the hills of Nepal is an indicator of the ability and willingness of the village people to take the responsibility of sustainable management of forests. User group forestry could be formalised and strengthened under the philosophy of community forestry.

The rules and regulations prevalent in the indigenous systems for protection and management, including the provisions for user group membership, are the results of long-term practices and traditions. There are, therefore, certain advantages in using existing user groups of forests to advance the community forestry works (Baral and Lamsal 1991). First, there is the advantage of saving time and energy in identifying genuine user groups of a forest. Second, such users are already exposed to the idea of protection and management. They are used to such obligations as paying for a guard and abiding by the rules and regulations. Third, such systems provide opportunities to learn how forest protection and management can run on its own without any investment or involvement from outside. Given the fact that the major emphasis of the government's community forestry policy is to hand over all accessible hill forests to the local people, the knowledge of indigenous systems in promoting locally sustainable protection and management practices is extremely important. Fourth, the handover of user-managed forests may help to demonstrate the advantages of community forestry. The forests under indigenous protection are generally ready for some harvesting (pruning, singling of multiple stems, and thinning) of products (e.g., in Binashaun, Seli, and Bhatwada). If such a forest is handed over formally to local user groups and a harvesting operation is carried out with technical advice from the DFO, the results can be positive. The local people will not only obtain forest products to meet their requirements but will also learn that forests can be protected along with utilisation of their resources (and become silviculturally progressive).

Finally, the concept of *hamro ban* (our forest) seems to be crucial for effective protection and management of a forest. It is, therefore, essential that the ownership of the user groups' forests should not be brought into question as a result of intervention from outside agencies including the District Forest Offices.