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## The Joint Learning Mission: Overview

### Introduction

During the last three decades, the management of forests has been undergoing an intensive transformation process, based on the notion that local communities have a critical role to play in the management of forests and other natural resources. Currently, about 300 million hectares of forest land in Asia are under some form of community management. In Nepal, about a quarter of the forests are managed by 14,000 forest user groups, involving more than one million households. In India, about 14 million hectares of forest land are managed by different types of joint forest management communities in collaboration with the Forest Department, involving about 75 million people (Nurse and Malla 2006). In Bhutan, different approaches to community-based forest management are on trial, and more than 20 community forests are now being managed by the local people.

The papers presented here are the result of Joint Learning Mission by German Technical Cooperation (GTZ) and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), which took place in 2005. The Mission was undertaken in an effort to learn common lessons and draw key generalisations related to community forest management in general from the overall experiences in three GTZ supported projects in Bhutan, India, and Nepal.

One of the reasons why the study topic and the areas are so appropriate and rewarding for this type of exercise is that the development of community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) is more advanced in these Hindu Kush-Himalayan countries than in most other parts of the world. Nepal has over two decades of very successful experience in community forestry (CF); India has a similar number of years of experience in joint forest management (JFM); and Bhutan started social forestry (SF), which embraces community and private forestry, in the mid-nineties.

GTZ and ICIMOD have been active supporters of this movement and advocates for the adoption of participatory practices in natural resource management (NRM). GTZ has projects promoting participatory natural resource management (PNRM) in all three countries: the Bhutan-German Sustainable Renewable Natural Resources Development Project (BG-SRD) in Lobeysa, Bhutan; the Indo-German Changar Eco-Development Project (IGCEDP) in Himachal Pradesh, India; and the Churia Forest Development Project (ChFDP) in Lahan, Nepal. Some of these projects have been operational for more than ten years, spanning several project phases.

Common lessons can certainly be extracted from the experiences of the three projects, although not without reflecting certain aspects of the varying forestry institutional settings and sociopolitical scenarios in the three countries. These common lessons have influenced the project approaches and focus in each of the three project countries. They include lessons on forest quality and cover, population pressure and forest availability, and the policy and institutional framework, as well as levels of poverty and human development. The lessons learned in the three projects are manifold and can serve as a platform for promoting more informed forest/NRM policy making in the region. The experiences and lessons learned from these projects will be useful for governments, GTZ, ICIMOD, and other research and development agencies for scaling up at national and regional levels.

## **Purpose of Joint Learning Mission**

The Joint Learning Mission had the following aims:

1. To document the experience gained through the implementation of GTZ projects in Bhutan, India, and Nepal
2. To assess the overall social, economic, and environmental impacts of the projects such as their contribution to poverty alleviation, women's empowerment, and resource conservation, and their relevance to global and emerging issues
3. To identify the factors responsible for the success or failure of the projects and draw lessons from them in order to apply them in other projects and programmes in natural resource management in the region
4. To disseminate the joint learning experiences to relevant stakeholders

The study was not meant to be a detailed review of the projects. Rather, it aimed to learn common lessons from project experiences based on field visits and discussions with relevant stakeholders, including implementing agencies, target groups, and government officials.

## **Overview of the Projects**

### **Bhutan-German Sustainable Renewable Natural Resources Development Project (BG-SRDP) in Bhutan**

#### ***Project setting***

Over 70% of Bhutan is under forest and about 70% of the population derive their livelihood from rural areas (including forests). By law, rural communities are provided with timber for house construction and maintenance, as well as a yearly firewood allowance. The population density is low (about 650,000 people on approximately 47,000 square kilometres). Most rural communities in Bhutan live at least several hours (sometimes up to three days) away from a roadhead and have little opportunity for economic development. Generally, people depend heavily on forests for grazing, food products, and timber. Of the total forest area, about 35% is protected under national parks and biological corridors. Besides the management plans of national parks and forest management units, no formal management plans existed in Bhutan until a few years ago.

The GTZ-supported Bhutan-German Sustainable Renewable Natural Resources Development Project (BG-SRDP) worked in two districts in Bhutan (Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang) covering an area of 5,000 square kilometres and a population of about 40,000. The project was jointly implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture, Royal Government of Bhutan, and GTZ. It started in 1994, had three implementation phases, and was phased out in December 2005. At this time, more than 20 community forests were being managed by local people in Bhutan, following a cautious approach to handover of responsibility and ownership to local users. The project worked through the District Natural Resources Sector with extension agents who, in turn, worked with farmers and the Territorial Forest Office and its rangers. The project was active in the three key sectors of renewable natural resource management – agriculture, livestock, and forestry – thus following an integrated approach.

Population growth and improved opportunities for economic development have brought about a growing pressure on natural resources in Bhutan in recent years. Rural communities in Bhutan can, in principle, use forests for timber for house construction and maintenance and for fuelwood. Also, extensive rights have been given to individuals for fodder collection and grazing. The goal of the BG-SRDP was to uplift the socioeconomic well-being of the people, while conserving the environment. Its purpose was for farm families (men and women) in the Punakha and Wangdue Phodrang dzongkhags to manage the renewable natural resources (RNR) in a profitable and sustainable way.



Karma Jigme Tempheh

Forest around villages in Bhutan can be transformed into community forest

## ***Key achievements***

The BG-SRDP's programmes and activities encompassed several key areas: 1) inter-sectoral planning and co-ordination, 2) RNR extension services, 3) management plans for community and private forests, 4) improved forest management plans for national forests, 5) support for the improvement of agriculture and livestock production, and 6) infrastructure to support the RNR concept. Programmes were implemented in collaboration with government line-agencies/departments, district forest offices (DFOs), and district extension services for agriculture, livestock, and forestry. By the end of the project, several policies had been developed and integrated in the field of forestry, farmers' groups had been formed, and local economic initiatives undertaken. The focus of the Joint Learning Mission was mainly on forestry within the wider watershed context.

Project interventions, especially in forestry, showed an increase in forest cover, but it is too early to conclude if the project has contributed to overall biodiversity conservation. In general, the project encouraged livestock/cattle farmers and forest managers to promote indigenous species. Traditional management practices still exist, but are not always functioning. The traditional boundaries, however, are still known and respected. Management rights for communities that build on these traditional use rights inspire a high level of commitment on behalf of local users to improve forest conditions.

## ***Refined approaches***

The project has contributed to holistic forest management in Bhutan. With the support of the project, all the forest areas in Bhutan have come under management plans. The project has contributed to the development of the concepts of community forestry, forest management units (FMUs), and forest areas outside FMUs (national parks were not covered by the project). As a consequence, Bhutan now has a management planning concept that will cover all of its forests in due time.

By starting local economic and improvement oriented initiatives, the project contributed to the development of the concepts of feasibility studies and marketing approaches, as well as the formation of farmers' groups. Through infrastructure support, the project contributed to the 'green road' construction concept.

The project's systematic capacity building approach has contributed to a general improvement in in-service training. The project has stimulated local officials and community leaders to work closely with other similar projects to increase efficiency, as well as to strengthen the green road concepts further. Capacity building has been done at all levels (with a focus on the extension level) to ensure a common understanding of new approaches.

## **Indo-German Changar Eco-Development Project (IGCEDP) in India**

### ***Project setting***

The Indo-German Changar Eco-Development Project (IGCEDP) is located in the Kangra district of the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. The project area (called 'Changar') is known for its remoteness, rugged terrain, and water scarcity. The area belongs to the lower Himalayas or Siwaliks and is characterised by a fragile landscape with climatic

vagaries, poor soils, and potentially erosion prone slopes. These features make the area similar to the Churia range in Nepal, which is part of the same geological formation. The area is degraded due to inappropriate use (e.g., open grazing, fires, and deforestation). The main objective of the project is to ensure that village users and their institutions self-manage their natural resources in a sustainable way.

The project focuses on the promotion of self-help groups, and the capacity building of government and non-government organisations. For implementation, the project has adopted a watershed approach. NRM-based micro-planning schemes and panchayats (local governance bodies) have been important in the implementation of this approach.

The Himachal Pradesh Eco-Development Society (HPEDS) facilitated implementation of the IGCEDP project since 1994. The mandate of the Society is to facilitate the management of natural resources sustainably, thus contributing to mountain development. Operating in an area of 439 square kilometres (in 593 villages in 110 gram panchayats), the Society has progressively developed a unique approach using participatory planning, decentralised implementation, management through local communities, livelihoods based on local natural resources, and participatory impact monitoring. Under the project, 3,000 hectares of forest land are managed by communities in collaboration with the Forest Department. There are 71 village forest development societies, 16 of which have signed MoAs on joint management with the Forest Department. In essence, the experience is the outcome of intensive collaboration with grassroots communities, gram panchayats, and all major supporting implementing agencies (line departments, non-government organisations, and research and development institutions).



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Constructing a 'green road'

The project is based on the conviction that the catalyst for sustainable development is sustainable livelihood options designed by the multi-stakeholders themselves. Following the principles of watershed management, the major working areas are:

- capacity building of village groups/panchayats to enable them to plan and implement programmes for sustainable natural resource management;
- promotion of locally adapted natural resource management programmes;
- rehabilitation of degraded areas;
- improvement of existing farming systems;
- water resource development;
- improvement of local livelihoods based on eco-income generation;
- promotion of local technical and social expertise in the sustainable use of natural resources and their linkages with various stakeholders;
- development and improvement of the micro-planning process and panchayat micro-plans; and
- development of HPEDS as a knowledge centre.

### ***Key achievements***

Work in the above-mentioned thematic areas has resulted in two major innovations whose findings and experiences have been disseminated in the project areas. These works focus on

- the process and methodology required to facilitate a natural resource management oriented panchayat micro-plan with a clear focus on resource poor people, women, and local livelihoods; and
- the water resource development concept, which is based on planning, implementation, and management through water-user groups; the experience is not only based on the revival of local drinking water resources, but also promotes innovations in minor-irrigation techniques adapted to local conditions.

### ***Refined approaches***

The participatory methodology adopted by the projects is applicable not only to local user groups, but also to local governance units like the panchayat and their micro-planning process guidelines. The eco-income generation approach, which is oriented towards women and resource poor people, has a clear linkage to participatory planning processes and ensures inclusive growth at the local level.

The package, an integrated approach to watershed management which integrates all NRM components spatially and temporally, will ensure that project activities have the maximum impact in the mountain context.

## **Churia Forest Development Project (ChFDP) in Nepal**

### ***Project setting***

The goal of the Churia Forest Development Project (ChFDP) is to rehabilitate degraded forest and restore the ecological balance in the Churia hills for the benefit of the local population. The project aims to develop approaches and strategies for the protection and sustainable management of forest resources in this area. The project started in July 1992 and has recently completed its third implementation phase. It covers the Terai

(plains) and Churia (foothills) regions of Siraha, Saptari, and Udayapur districts in Nepal's Eastern Development Region, including 268 village development committees and many people of different castes and economic classes.

The forest resources in this region are under high population pressure and degrading rapidly. While the settlements are concentrated in the southern plains, the degraded forest resources are to the north (in the Churia hills and foothills). The total geographical area of the project is 461,900 hectares with 42% forest cover. The area is home to more than 1.4 million people who, for the most part, are very dependent on natural resources, including forests. Farming is the backbone of the local economy. More than 80% of the population are either farmers or agricultural wage labourers.

Communities in the project area are comprised of people from diverse caste and ethnic groups, cultures, and religions ranging from high caste groups to Dalits (low caste), from Hindu to Muslim, from mountain tribes and Terai indigenous people to in-migrants from other parts of Nepal and India. Siraha and Saptari are among the districts with the highest concentration of Dalits (about one-third of the population) and landless people in Nepal. The majority of the people in the project area are not only poor, but also illiterate. Caste, class, gender, and other social inequalities are strong, and as a result, Dalits and women have traditionally been only minimally involved in community forest management, although they depend heavily on forest resources for their livelihoods.

Traditional technologies, and approaches to and institutions of forest management, are virtually insignificant in the project area. To a large extent, this is due to the pressure and dominance of the recent in-migrants. Prior to the project, local people used to consider the forest resources as belonging not to them, but to the Government of Nepal. As a result, they did not practise forest management and were overexploiting forest resources. The forest shrunk rapidly towards the more remote Churia hills.

### ***Key achievements***

The ChFDP's programmes and activities encompass several key areas, namely afforestation and the regeneration of forest land, sustainable forest management (with a community forestry focus), alternative fuel sources, poverty reduction and economic promotion, soil erosion control, integrated planning, and strengthening of local institutions.

Project activities have been implemented in collaboration with government departments, such as district forest offices (DFOs) and district soil conservation offices (DSCOs),



**Income generation from NTFPs**

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without being embedded in them. In addition, new partners have been non-government organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs), and user groups.

ChFDP has tackled three main challenges:

1. **To bring all forests under protection and (later) management** – More than 60,000 hectares of forest area are now under protection and management by about 400 community forest user groups (CFUGs). The target is to bring the maximum area of remaining forests under active management by local users in the near future.
2. **To shift from a protection oriented management system to an active forest management** – This will help to increase the production capacity of the forest and thus meet the increasing demand for forest products. It will also provide some intermediate forest products to local users.
3. **To contribute to local development** – The management of the forests is to be organised so that it effectively contributes to the economic and social development of the community.

The project has provided benefits to more than 60,000 households, who are members of the 346 CFUGs formed (and handed over) already and involved in the use and management of about 60,000 hectares of forest land. Ultimately, 70,168 hectares (36% of the total forest area in the project districts) will be in the hands of local communities as



Hans Beukeboom

Handing over management of a community forest to the local community

a result of the technical, financial, and institutional inputs and facilitation provided by the project.

### ***Refined approaches***

The ChFDP highlights three of its approaches as refined.

1. **Community Forestry Management Demonstration Programme (CFMDP)**  
– The CFMDP works with 10 selected user groups to facilitate active forest management by promoting governance and capacity building, eventually increasing livelihood support activities. The programme is a process-oriented action research, which addresses the second generation issues of community forestry, such as decentralisation, social inclusion, and the institutionalisation of community participation.
2. **Integrated natural resources management (INRM)** – The INRM concept of the ChFDP addresses upland-lowland inter-dependence and mutual flows of resources. It produces the integrated and holistic action plans needed for the sustainable management of resources by facilitating dialogue among stakeholders extending beyond the limits of districts and village boundaries. The first INRM pilot area in Rampur Toksila covers three village development committee areas, and another pilot area in the Sartre Khola (stream) watershed covers all stakeholders in the catchment area, including the eight VDCs that are direct users of Sartre Khola.
3. **Distant user group approach** – The distant user group approach addresses the issue of spatial distance between users (in the south) and forest resources (in the north), which are roughly divided by the East-West Highway. Community forests were handed over to eight user groups comprised of traditional users of national forests residing at a distance of four to nine kilometres away from the forests. Some distant users have also benefited from joining the existing user groups as secondary users.

As people's participation in forest management has become more institutionalised, and therefore, stronger, forest conditions have improved with natural regeneration occurring. Eventually, this will contribute to increased biodiversity, as proven by participatory assessment and biodiversity monitoring and evaluation.

The ChFDP employed a decentralisation approach and had a 'rights-based' and 'people-centred' management policy. This means that capacity building can be seen at three different levels: the grassroots level, the district level, and the regional level. First and foremost is to build the capacity of local people at the grassroots level. Therefore, a lot of attention has been given to building the managerial and technical capacities of CFUGs and CBOs. Participatory and democratic practices have been applied at the grassroots level including awareness raising, training, exposure visits, and action research. At the district level, capacity building of line agencies such as the district forest offices and district soil conservation offices, NGOs, the district development committee, and the Federation of CFUGs has been given priority.

## **Joint Learning Process: Learning-by-experiencing**

The Joint Learning Mission team was made up of professionals from the three participating projects and ICIMOD. This multi-disciplinary team (including foresters, sociologists, economists, and community development specialists) adopted a unique and innovative approach to participatory learning, ‘learning-by-experiencing’, to find the relevant lessons for policy making from field visits and project materials. This approach, rather than following a rigid blueprint for information collection, allowed for flexibility and in-depth understanding. The best way to move forward was devised as the team went along with the mission approach. The main steps taken by the team and the key questions encountered are depicted and described in Figure 1.

### **Information collection**

Information was collected in field visits, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, discussions with project implementing authorities, and by studying available secondary information including project documents. The project visits lasted two to four days and were organised by the project country teams who pre-selected the sites for the field visits. The information and feedback from participating communities reflected each project’s most significant activities and achievements, and other developments in the area. While mornings were used to visit relevant field sites, afternoons were devoted to project presentations, meetings with key stakeholders other than users in the field, and discussions about the observations of the day.

The team members collected all remarks and observations in the form of bullet points. In the first step (Step 1 in Figure 1) the main framework was outlined for documenting the lessons learned. The lessons were clustered under the headings: social, environmental, institutional, economic, technical, and political. These bullet points summed up impressions (good or bad), lessons learned, new findings, best practices, and also glorious failures, information gaps, emerging issues, and any unfinished business.

In the second step, some group members prepared a list of focus topics (Step 2) for which more in depth and focused information was required. To prepare the actual analysis, the raw bullet points were provided with contextual observations and additional background information. They were further explained, prioritised, and clubbed together where possible for later use (Step 3). In Step 4, representatives of the projects were again asked to provide additional information and explanations of the reason or motivation for the project to deal with a given issue, and the regional context, the environment, culture, politics, surrounding or related policies, and any underlying assumptions.

### **Wrap-up workshop and lessons for influencing policy**

In Step 5 it was decided to prepare briefing papers on selected key topics with experiences from the select projects as concrete outputs from the joint learning exercise. The thematic topics were selected during the wrap-up workshop by comparing the bullet points from each of the three country visits. Another round of discussions (Step 6) led to the development of a tentative list of five topics. Later it became clear that the information would be more valuable if presented together in a single book. The outcome is the present publication.

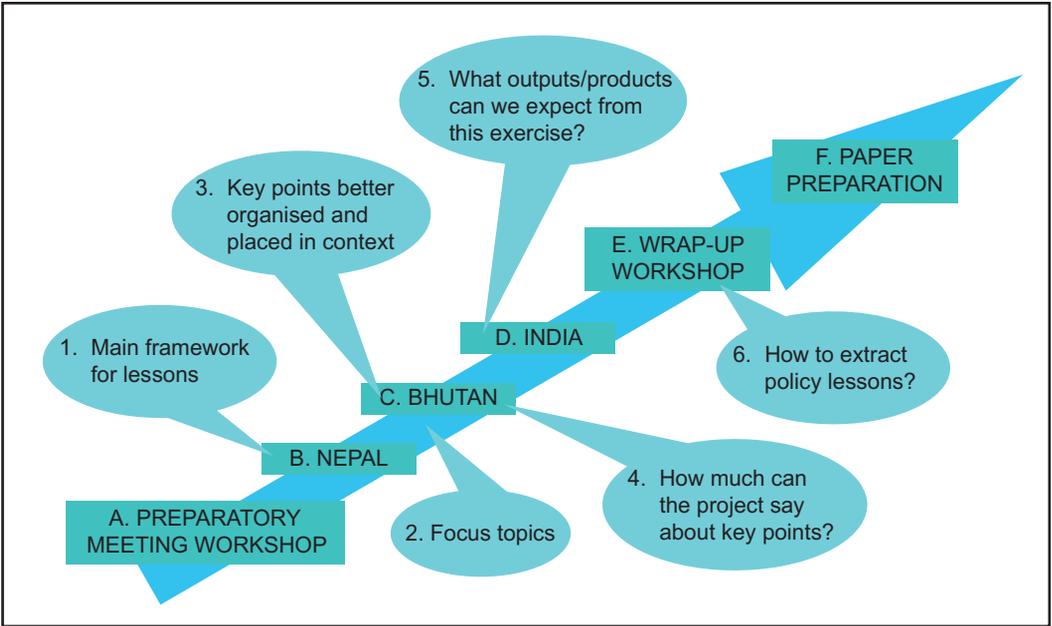
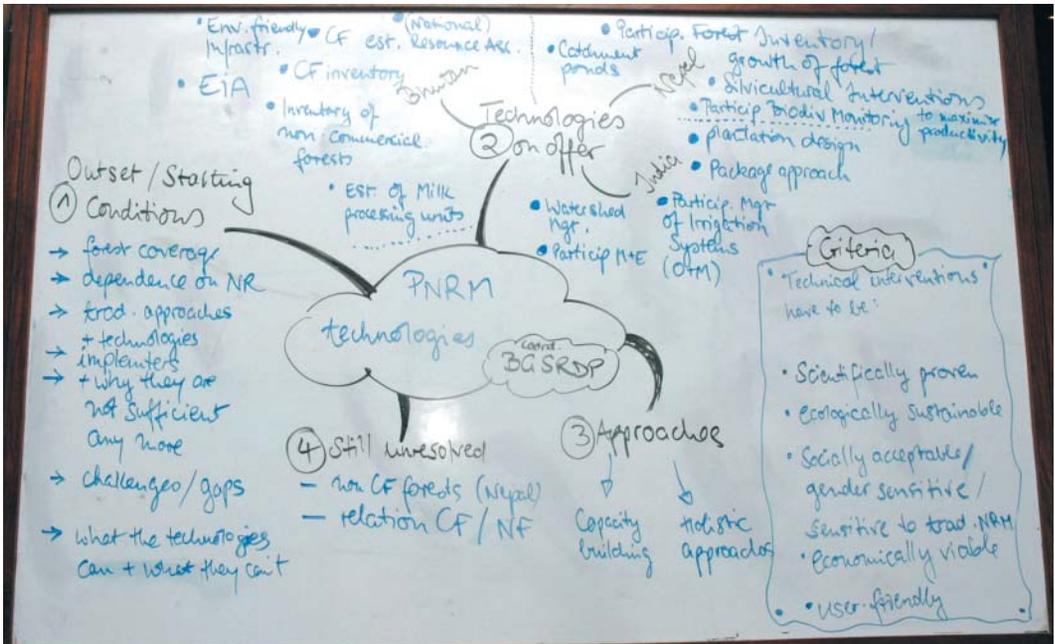


Figure 1: Steps and questions shaping the joint learning process



Joint learning process developed in the workshop

Narendra Bajracharya

## Reflection on the process

For a fruitful learning process to take place, certain basic arrangements should be in place with provision for good facilitation:

- **Facilitation by a knowledgeable outsider** – A facilitator is needed to provide guidance on the learning-process. He/she can ask the right questions at the right time, and guide the participants through the process. The facilitator helps the group to define commonly agreed expectations. There has to be one contact person in each of the participating projects and institutions.
- **Make it targeted** – The aim of the learning process should be well defined from the start, matching means, expertise, methodology, and expected outputs. The path from field observations to papers that are useful to the potential target group should be clearly mapped out. The expertise required includes an in-depth knowledge of the projects visited, experience with other similar projects, and expertise in the existing policy environment and currently relevant issues.
- **Choose a leader** – Identify one person who will lead and coordinate the process throughout, including the final documentation.

## Conclusion and Reflections

The GTZ/ICIMOD Joint Learning Mission took a unique approach by not evaluating the projects critically from the outside, but instead adopting an appreciative and empathetic attitude towards the projects to document best practices and the most valuable lessons learned. For this approach, the views of outsiders who take an inside view are critical and valuable.

The mission opened the eyes of the participants to the relevance of the activities of the projects (their own and others) in the regional and global context. The members were able to immediately use these new insights in their day-to-day activities and in organising the phasing out of their own projects. For this reason, such events should be initiated at least 20 months before the actual end of a project, so that the recommendations of the review teams can be accommodated during the implementation phase.

To make maximum use of the approach's potential, good leadership and a good facilitator are required, that is a resource person guiding the process throughout, serving as a reference point, and motivating people to solicit contributions from the participants, and also to help in the documentation of knowledge and information, thus making the learning accessible to a wider audience.



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Joint learning with community members



Narendra Bajracharya

Exchange among joint learning team