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## Social Equity through Participatory Forest Management

### Introduction

Participatory forest management (PFM) has contributed significantly to improving the forest condition in Bhutan, India, and Nepal, and has increased forest stock. However, its contribution towards alleviating poverty, reducing inequalities, and bringing about gender equality has remained limited in most cases (Pokharel and Nurse 2004; Nurse and Malla 2006). Growing evidence suggests that the benefits of PFM are largely captured by the rich and elite groups, while families from lower caste groups and the poor are not benefiting equally, even though they have to rely more on forest resources for livelihood than the rich. While women do most of the forestry work (collecting fuelwood and fodder), they are under-represented in the decision-making process, and as a result their needs and priorities are not reflected in management decisions. To achieve the broad objectives of PFM, special attention needs to be given to disadvantaged groups to ensure their active participation in decision-making processes.

This section discusses the experiences of the three GTZ participatory forest management projects in Bhutan, India, and Nepal in relation to social equity, which refers to fairness and justice (Fisher and Malla 1987). Although opinions about what is fair and just vary according to culture and societal value systems, “ideally everyone should have a fair opportunity to participate in decision-making processes and thus access resources with their full potential” (Whitehead 2000). But the challenge is how to ensure that everyone has a fair opportunity. The following questions summarise a few of the key challenges faced by policy makers and development practitioners:

- How can we design and implement policies and strategies to reduce poverty and inequalities in participatory forest management such as joint forest management and community forestry?
- How can we enhance the involvement of women, members of lower castes, and the poorest of the poor in decision-making, and improve their capacity to organise themselves and manage resources for their own and for the national benefit?

The lessons learned from these projects’ experiences in social equity are very valuable in the design of appropriate strategies and policies. This section presents several processes and mechanisms through which social equity is addressed by the three GTZ projects and analyses these mechanisms to extract lessons for future project implementation and for policy development. Finally, policy implications are highlighted and recommendations outlined to address equity issues in participatory natural resources management.

# **Social Equity in Participatory Forest Management in Bhutan, India and Nepal**

## **Experience from BG-SRDP in Bhutan**

By tradition, and according to the forest rules, access to forest resources is equal for all households in Bhutan. However, in practice, resource rich households use forest resources more than resource poor households. The resource rich have access to more labour, more cattle, and more cash to buy permits and, as a result, their use of forest resources tends to be greater than that of poorer households. Villagers feared that under village or community management of forests, the wealthier households would deplete forest resources leaving little for the less wealthy households. The project, in collaboration with others, ensured that equity issues were addressed in the Community Forestry Manual and that realities in the field were monitored.

So far, the equity aspect is not a major issue in Bhutan as, in general, all households in a community are members of the relevant community forestry group. Resources are shared equally (with a few examples where poorer households receive more forest products). The equity issue is also a concern for the Forest Department and is being closely studied. The representation of woman in community forest management groups is still very weak. Although many women are members of community forestry groups; women are still under-represented at the decision-making level. This issue is also being studied, awareness is being raised, and some improvements have been made.

## **Experience from IGCEDP in India**

In comparison with the community forestry areas of Churia and in Bhutan, the project area of Changar is fairly accessible and economically well off. Despite this, baseline data showed that a substantial number of households are below the Indian poverty line and an overwhelming majority of these are landless and belong to lower caste groups. To address their specific needs, the IGCEDP primarily focuses on resource poor and lower caste groups, and women. A process-approach was adopted to ensure the active involvement of disadvantaged groups. This participatory process resulted in three distinct outputs:

- The development of a natural resource based village/panchayat micro-plan with a clear focus on enhancing livelihood opportunities for the resource poor and women
- Micro-plans that follow the watershed approach, comprised of technical packages of practice, community participation, and participatory monitoring converging at the bottom level, and dealing with the treatment of degraded land for the benefit of the resource poor
- A methodology for the revival and promotion of livelihood avenues based on value addition of local natural resources and human skills – this was evolved on the basis of ‘eco-income generation’ done more or less exclusively with women and the resource poor

Moreover, to include disadvantaged user groups in the overall planning and implementation, the project relied on general consensus in the village/panchayat. This helped to sensitise more advantaged people to the need to identify marginal groups and

their needs, which facilitated participation of these groups in the subsequent stages of the project. This strategy provided space for disadvantaged groups in planning, and their articulated demands were included in the resource management plans. At the same time, specific provisions were made to ensure the participation of women and members of lower caste groups in village institutions. For example, 50% of the village development executive committee members should be women, and representatives from lower caste groups must be included as well. This was supported by programmes such as the promotion of mahila mandals (local women's clubs) and capacity building for women leaders.

## Experiences from ChFDP in Nepal

Realising the importance of involving lower caste groups and women in community forest management, the ChFDP adopted several strategies, including poor-focused initiatives. Most important of these are the Community Forestry Management Demonstration Programme (CFMDP) and the Forest Rights Programme. Under these programmes Dalits (so-called lower caste people) and women were trained to raise awareness about their rights, to develop their knowledge and skills, and to boost their morale and courage to participate in development work. As a result, the involvement of Dalits and women in community forestry, and their participation in CFUGs and decision-making increased considerably (Boxes 4 and 5).

The geography of the area is such that all the forests are in the hills to the north, while the most populated areas are towards the south. This leaves a large proportion of the population without immediate access to the forest resources they need, as only people in the vicinity of the community forest tend to be included in forest user groups. Box 6 describes how the ChFDP project has included distant users (who live too far away to be directly involved in forest management and protection) in user groups, giving them equitable access.



Woman use forests and must participate in planning

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#### **Box 4: Addressing the specific needs of Dalits**

First, an effort was made to provide intensive support to a small number of CFUGs through the ChFDP. Under this programme, Dalits within CFUGs were empowered to form their own sub-group to bring their specific needs, concerns, and priorities before the committee. The second approach employed by the project was the launching of a Forest Rights Programme through a partner NGO. This programme raised awareness of the importance of the active involvement of Dalits in CFUGs through campaigns in Dalit villages. Third, to address the needs of Dalits living far away from the forest, communal plantations were supported in several areas, particularly in Dalit majority areas, to involve them in CFUGs and to enable them to fulfil their subsistence requirements.

#### **Box 5: Involving women in forestry decision-making**

In order to improve the participation of women in decision-making, the project concentrated on raising awareness and capacity building of women through the CFMDP and the Forest Rights Programme. This produced significant successes, including the formation of women-only CFUGs, one of which has also won a national prize for community forest management. Households are registered in CFUGs in the names of both male and female members, against prevailing social norms.

#### **Box 6: Providing equitable access to distant forest users**

To ensure that distant users benefit, distant forest user groups were created, 14 since 2001 involving about 2,000 households. These groups were allocated forest areas that had not previously been handed over. An integrated planning process, including a series of workshops and consultations with all relevant stakeholders, was followed to reach agreement on the forest management plan. However, the scarcity of public land needed for plantations and their scattered location has limited the progress of this initiative. Many of the areas have remained without intervention due to disputes over tenure between local authorities, one or more wealthy landowners, and the local communities.

## **Lessons Learned**

Several lessons have emerged from the three participatory forest management projects in Bhutan, India, and Nepal:

1. The participatory forest management process has increased awareness within and outside the community about social equity issues, particularly the inclusion of women, lower caste groups, and other marginalised groups in forest management in project areas and beyond. As a result, participatory forest management has developed a process of holistic social development in the communities.
2. The participation of women, lower caste groups, and other disadvantaged groups has increased in all three projects in Bhutan, India, and Nepal. Their involvement in decision making has also increased considerably.
3. The participatory forest management process has increased the exchange of information within the communities through continuous interaction. This has

increased social cohesion and enhanced social capital in the weaker sections of society. As a result, power and positions are being negotiated and redefined.

4. The needs of the poor, women, and lower caste groups are not automatically reflected in management and operational decisions, as they have little voice and capacity to negotiate with the elite class.
5. The involvement of disadvantaged groups in the planning process has several inherent constraints. Members of disadvantaged groups are generally busy with daily-wage work and, therefore, need to receive immediate benefit from their investment of time in community activities such as tree planting. Enhancing social equity, therefore, is a non-linear process and requires long-term commitment to support the process of maturation.
6. The experiences gained through the projects suggest that equity in PFM does not come for granted. To bring about social equality and enhance social inclusion, pro-poor targeted initiatives are required to empower disadvantaged groups and to channel increased benefits to them. For example, Dalits could not have participated actively in CFUGs in the Churia hills in Nepal without the active support given by the ChFDP. Likewise, women and Dalits could not have been involved in forest-based enterprises for income generation without the support of the IGCEDP. This exemplifies the fact that external support and facilitation can empower forest-dependent disadvantaged groups to have a voice in community decisions by providing training, raising awareness, developing options, and supporting advocacy.

## Policy Implications and Recommendations

The lessons that emerged from the three projects have many (policy) implications in relation to addressing the critical issue of social equity. The experiences gained by the projects suggest that well-planned and well-focused programmes that provide a package of diverse support can ensure the active participation of women, poorer people, and lower caste groups in the management of forest resources. With proper support, disadvantaged groups can become active managers of forest resources instead of just passive beneficiaries. The process of participation can also reduce inequalities by affecting the existing social power structure through enhancing skills, knowledge, and social capital. However, given the social inequalities, skewed distribution of resources, and unequal power structure, where poor and lower caste groups and women have a limited voice in decision-making, strong commitment and bold actions are required to bring about changes in social, cultural, economic, political, legal, and institutional structures in favour of marginalised and disadvantaged groups. The following recommendations may be useful in developing a strategy to bring about such changes:

- **Introducing a policy for positive discrimination** – Clear policy guidelines need to be developed through a consultative process with vertical and lateral linkages and put in place to ensure the inclusion of disadvantaged sections of society in PFM. Policies for positive discrimination, e.g., the allocation of a certain percentage of forest area to poor and disadvantaged groups, may also be designed to create more opportunities for disadvantaged groups.



- **Developing and implementing an equitable benefit sharing mechanism** – To support poverty reduction through participatory natural resource management, due attention must be given to benefit distribution between different stakeholders, especially poor and disadvantaged groups, to meet their varying demands. Appropriate mechanisms may be developed and institutionalised to ensure the equitable distribution of benefits from forest management.
- **Creating an enabling environment for proper representation** – There is a need to create an enabling environment to ensure the participation of disadvantaged groups, their proper representation on committees, and reflection of their issues in the agenda and in management and operational decisions. For example, the provision of equal rights for women (at least 50% representation) and the proportional representation of lower caste groups in management committees must be made obligatory. In India representation of disadvantaged groups has already been enshrined in some programmes and regulations. The representation of disadvantaged groups in federations such as FECOFUN should also be ensured.
- **Building capacity** – Building the capacity of the poor, women, lower caste groups, and other disadvantaged groups through training, skills development, exchange visits, and other formal and informal approaches is essential to raise their awareness and confidence to demand their rights.
- **Developing inter-sectoral linkages and strategic alliances** – It is important to develop inter-sectoral linkages for PFM to make a significant contribution to poverty reduction and in order to maximise the potential benefits. Strategic alliances are also required between the government, projects and NGOs, and the private sector to build synergies and strengthen support.

**Scaling up** – Appropriate policies, programmes, and institutions need to be developed to scale up the best practices and experiences gained in the pilot projects, as pro-poor activities in these projects are currently only on a limited scale. The participatory techniques applied in the three projects, such as micro-plans, can be leveraged by local administrations and organisations such as panchayats, geogs, and CFUGs to create livelihood opportunities for the resource poor.