

Sharing and the Shift in Control

The transfer of ownership and control of forest resources to the local communities are carried out differently in India and Nepal. In India, JFM involves a partnership between local communities and the government. This partnership is an unequal one in terms of the level of control over the resources, for, although the community takes on new responsibilities, has authority over protection, has increased inputs into management, and a share of the benefits, the forest department has the final control. This is reflected in the share of forest produce given to local communities involved in JFM. Most state orders specify that communities have rights to fodder grasses and non-timber forest products; these involve from 20 to 80 per cent of the final harvest. The percentage varies from state to state but is usually less than the share retained by the forest department. In Nepal, at least in the hill forests, the community user group is given control of the forest and is granted 100 per cent of the forest benefits. Furthermore, this 'turnover' is carried out after an operational plan is put forward by the user group, with the forest department playing a technical advisory and extension role. Thereafter, management, harvesting, and distribution on sale are carried out by the user group, with technical inputs from the department.

This bold move may be an important lesson for many of India's state forest departments, which are hesitant about increasing the level of benefit-sharing or community control of forests. On the other hand, it has been argued that removing the forest department share may reduce the incentive for forestry officials and field staff to contribute to the management of these forests. In the case of the hill forests, it must be remembered that the departments have no prior revenue. In Nepal's *Tera*i region the department has still not handed over the valuable sal forests completely to communities. They are considering either joint forest management, such as that in India, or leasehold forestry, in which private industries or even cooperatives may be given forests for management. Finally, in cases where communities have *de facto* control over forests, they may be reluctant to enter into any sharing arrangements with the department.

Unfortunately, many within the bureaucracy in Nepal believe that 'handing-over' forests to local people reduces the workload of the forest Department staff. The short-sighted reaction to this has been to reduce the number of staff. This reduction, both at the Centre and the District, has adversely affected field operations and has led to a loss of confidence and uncertainty about future policy and actions. This prevailing view of community forestry has subjected a very complex field situation to over simple interpretation and planning, which may lead to poor implementation. Success, in such cases, is only seen in terms of the numbers of groups formed and not in terms of more complex indicators, such as the increased productivity of forests or increased equitableness in access to resources and decision-making.

In Nepal and India, community forestry was based on the premise that communities should be given access to and manage forests only for subsistence needs. In Nepal, there is growing awareness of the fact that foresters can assist communities to manage forests for a range of income-generating products, including timber. The JFM

programme in India realised that harvests must also be shared. In West Bengal, where the benefits from sal pole harvests, under a coppice management system, are expected to begin flowing soon, the department has realised that the sharing formulas and systems for equitable distribution of cash income require a great deal of forethought. In both countries, it is now becoming evident that the real challenges lie beyond protection; they lie in community-based management of the forests themselves and in resolving the procedural, technical, and economic issues that accompany such a shift.

Once the control of and benefits accruing from the forests are handed over to a community/user group, the question that needs to be answered is who controls and who benefits within the group. The issues of gender equity and participation in decision-making by women and marginalised groups need to be constantly monitored. Neither the Nepal CF experience nor the Indian JFM experiment have succeeded in addressing these issues. In individual cases, however, policy changes and specific processes have helped bring women more effectively into the foreground. Both countries have found that separate forums for women, to meet and discuss forest management issues, were useful as a means of confidence or consensus building prior to their participation in larger fora/meetings. Other approaches have included raising gender issues continually in larger groups in which a quorum requires a minimum attendance by women. Where income and cash benefits are to flow from the forest, separate or joint accounts may be preferable to household accounts in the male's name. Much more study is needed to understand the most effective means of ensuring equity.