

Participatory Management Planning

The operational plan is a legal document approved by the DFO which empowers the group to take control of the forest area. Legally, before a forest can be handed over to a user group, an operational plan has to be submitted and approved by the DFO. The plan is prepared by the users of the forest and not by professional foresters or natural resource planners. Sufficient time must be allowed for all members of the user group, weak and strong, to reach a consensus on the management options for their forest. This process can take from two weeks to three months or more. However, by the end of this period, users regard the plan they have derived as the 'rules for our forest'. The plan specifies, for example, access to the forest and forest products as well as to protection and decision-making mechanisms. The plan is sanctioned by the DFO and, until the recent political change, by the local *pradhan pancha*. An executive forest user group committee is then elected by the user group members to oversee the implementation

of their plan (Gronow and Shrestha 1991). Although, in most cases, an executive committee is elected, there are cases where the user group, as a whole, takes responsibility for implementation.

While experiences vary from state to state in India, emphasis is generally placed on establishing protection, formalising the community-level institution, and on developing some type of action plan or micro-plan. Most state JFM programmes have not moved substantially beyond the protection stage. West Bengal is the only major exception in this regard, although Gujarat and Rajasthan have begun to develop action plans. These micro-plans usually focus on identifying community needs and are not limited to forest management planning. They include a variety of additional development support activities, such as alternative energy technology; energy-saving stoves; enterprise development; and construction of wells, roads, school buildings, and so on. These exercises can help communities to develop a more integrated view of their overall resource and development needs. However, there is a limit to the rural development activities which the forest department can implement. What is required then is effective coordination between various other departments, which is not always an easy task. Field foresters are concerned that these plans often raise false expectations, and local community groups begin to view the forest department as the implementation arm for all rural development activities. In West Bengal, because of problems with fund flow, many micro-plans have not been implemented. On the other hand, some researchers are concerned that the micro-planning is not sufficiently participatory and are working with forest department staff to improve upon this process. From the technical point of view, the input of the community into different forest management strategies and options for meeting their objectives is the least participatory part of the process. Needs are identified and inputs sought from the community on the scheduling of pre-determined silvicultural operations. However, in both India and Nepal, much more could be done to involve communities and foresters in the development of more innovative management options.