

Chapter 7

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

General Remarks

The evaluation of user group forestry in Palpa district and the Phewa Watershed revealed that the majority of the 139 randomly-selected project beneficiaries interviewed believed that user group-managed community forestry has improved the quality and quantity of the forest biomass considerably and has yielded positive results in terms of livelihood and the agro-ecosystem. User group forestry was perceived as a much better approach than conventional community forestry, which, until recently, was better known as *Panchayat* Forestry. According to the old approach, the villagers were made to participate in the Government's programme, i.e., all the decisions pertaining to site selection, choice of species, and planting methods were taken by the rangers and a select group of villagers were made to participate as wage labourers and/or 'sponsored participants'.

The development of UGF in Palpa was the result of CF projects funded by the GTZ/SATA-aided Tinau Watershed Project and later by the Palpa Development Project for over the last 15 years. The community forestry component was the major focus of the Phewa Watershed Development Project which has been receiving external funds for the last 15 years.

Major Observations

This evaluation study was carried out to achieve several objectives. The most important objective was to gain a better understanding of the process of user group forestry so as to better equip planners and field professionals to accelerate the process of community management of forest resources. It was postulated

that the important lessons learned in the study area could improve forest policy at the national level, implement efficiency at the district level, and facilitate management decisions at the user level. The major secondary objectives were: a) to measure changes in the beneficiaries' socio-psychological attributes such as knowledge, awareness, perception, attitude, skill, and participation; and b) to examine both the qualitative and quantitative changes in biophysical resources as a result of the users' own management inputs.

It was revealed that the projects - community forestry in Palpa and watershed management in the Phewa Watershed - had been successful in creating awareness of the project activities among the target beneficiaries; had improved their knowledge and perception of the different aspects of forestry practices and rules; promoted favourable attitudes towards forest protection; and, above all, improved their skills and level of participation in most of the important forest management activities. In general, the beneficiaries in Pokhara had less favourable attitudes, poor knowledge and awareness, and a lower level of participation than their counterparts in Palpa. This was partly due to the greater emphasis given by the succeeding projects to physical rather than institutional development in Phewa. Perhaps, because of this factor, the biostock resource quality and resource potential were also found to be inferior in Phewa to those in Palpa. This is partly due to the plantation of exotic species (e.g., pine) in the former and induced regeneration of native species (e.g., *sal*) in the latter area. The following section presents the major observations and discussions on user group forestry activities in the study areas. The findings are based on analysis of the successes and failures in improving the knowledge, awareness, perception, attitude, skill, and participation (socio-psychological variables) of both the forest farmers and forestry staff.

Role of Technical Variables

User groups in Palpa were at a much advanced stage of social awareness and technical knowledge than those in the Phewa Watershed. The reasons identified were a higher literacy rate, especially among women; an initial self-reliant approach in project implementation; a higher degree of knowledge and participation; and positive attitudes and clear perceptions. For example, the female literacy rate was higher and the ethnic composition was

more homogeneous in Palpa than in Phewa. The user group members were also found to be more knowledgeable and skilful in Palpa. It was concluded that the initial approach adopted by the CF projects in Palpa induced the people to affirm their commitment and participate, thereby creating a 'self-reliance syndrome' whereas the projects in Phewa were highly subsidised and thereby created a 'dependency syndrome'.

Institutional Variables

The forest user group process in both the study areas was a well-established institution. User rights and responsibilities were generally clear to the members, thereby ensuring their participation in the preparation of their respective operational plans. This information was found to be useful for the decision-makers to expedite the 'handing over' process elsewhere in the country.

Socioeconomic Factors

Both Palpa and Phewa were found to have a history of strong, indigenous forest management systems. This was concluded to be one of the causes of successful user group forestry in both areas. Some of the plausible reasons for success or failure are given below.

- Ethnic Homogeneity. In Palpa, the overwhelming majority of the UG committee members were upper caste Brahmin families. In one case, Magar families were predominant but the group was homogeneous. A UG forest, therefore, had a better chance of success under communal ownership.
- High Literacy Rate. The literacy rate in the user group community was around 47 per cent, which is much higher than the national average. One of the UG Village Development Committees also had several schools and one college and this feature was associated with successful UGFs.
- Successful Agriculture. Due to favourable locations (altitude-wise, the area falls in the subtropical/tropical zone) and good quality farmlands, the villages had been consistently increasing agricultural production, and this is helping them to decrease pressure on the forests.
- Availability of Alternative Forests. The members of the majority of the FUGs are simultaneously members of at

least two other forest user groups in the locality. In addition, they also maintain their own private forests. This has indeed helped them to protect the user group forests successfully.

- Development of Alternate Energy Sources. The progressive nature of the villagers has led to gradual diversification of their fodder and energy sources. For example, the villagers have installed biogas plants in their houses, using both animal and human waste. This has relieved the pressure on the forests, resulting in a sustainable system of resource utilisation.
- Small Size. Smaller FUGs were found to be more successful. One such FUG - Mulgaira - started with only 50 members in 1985, and this has now grown to 79. Compared to Bharkesh Telgha FUG (an example of an unsuccessful FUG) whose membership is 331, it is one-fourth in size. It can, therefore, be concluded that smaller FUGs (less than 100 members) have a higher chance of success than large-sized FUGs.

Equity Issues

Exclusion of a section of the population, especially those from the lower castes, disadvantaged groups, and occupational classes, from forest user groups, was found to create an equity problem for both the Government and the society. This problem was more pronounced in Phewa than in Palpa. Inter-village disputes in defining user rights were reported in one place each in Palpa and Phewa. The urban and suburban population, who either earn their living by selling forest products or are dependent on fuelwood for domestic energy, were increasingly found to be attempting to enter formal groups. This is one of the ethical as well as equity issues which should be addressed to ensure the overall sustainability of UGF. This challenge opens up new opportunities and entails new responsibilities for the DFOs. Conceivably, the solution lies in making the surplus forest areas and/or products available to these people without usufruct rights.

Institutional Development

Clearly-defined rules and regulations and well-organised local groups and committees are essential for successful implementation of community forest management. Although the

structure of the committee may vary, strong and cohesive organisation is essential for effective discharge of functions (Messerschmidt *et al.* 1993). In short, the following areas need special emphasis.

Government's Role

The DFOs' unplanned and high-handed interventions usually disrupt indigenous systems. Introduction of forest guards, establishment of a range office, patronising selected politicians, and unilateral issue of permits are the different forms of intervention which affect the degree of user participation.

The Department of Forests is not yet well organised and strong enough to cope with the increasing demand for handing over the mid-hill forests to the respective users. There is a danger of using a few successful UGFs while deciding to hasten the pace of handing over the forests to the respective communities. In Palpa, the number of forests handed over during the fiscal year 1992/93 was 28, which was more than double the combined figures of the previous three years. The process should be unimpeded, but it must be accomplished with the improved understanding and participation of the community.

Effect of Population Pressure

The increasing population growth is exerting additional pressure on the forest resources. However, the responses of the people differed in Palpa and Phewa. The close proximity to Pokhara, a major tourist destination, has enabled absorption of a portion of the labour force from Phewa in the tourism sector. In Palpa, the tradition of male members' seeking employment in the police and military services (including the Indian and British armies) is continuing. Nevertheless, the increasing food demand is resulting in the gradual conversion of forest lands into agroforestry use, thus reducing the common property resources.

Types of UGF Function

Forest protection and enforcement of use regulations are two of the most important functions of the UGs. Religious fencing, sociocultural sanctions, monetary penalties, and legal action are some of the methods used to carry out their functions. Arriving at

an agreement to restrict access to the forest by the majority of UG members is the first step towards converting open access resources to common property resources.

Alternative Sources

The existence of alternative sources of fuelwood, fodder, and grazing resources is believed to help in the protection of forest resources in a more sustainable manner. In all the seven UGs studied, on an average each member had access to two other forests. Depending upon the size, quality, and stage of the forests, the amount of products harvested varied greatly.

In order to deduce UGF principles, the following general indicators may be useful.

- a. In almost all the cases studied, the basis of the emergence of successful UGF was the existence of indigenous knowledge and traditional methods of forest protection and management. The knowledge may have been gained either by watching the water sources decrease or dry up; occurrence of landslides or soil erosion; and increasing difficulty in fuelwood and fodder collection as well as an increase in the time taken for collection. Management skills were mastered through practice and mutual learning.
- b. The spontaneous emergence of social worker(s) or leader(s), who either had the ability to convince the masses or had taken the risk of challenging the forest authority, also indicated successful UG-based management. The local leadership may have functioned within the framework of various socially-sanctioned positions such as chairperson of the School Management Committee, priest of a temple, *talukdar*, senior citizen, informal village head, or the community leader. Although such leadership roles were largely taken up by male members belonging to the upper castes, given the opportunity, females and members from the lower castes are also found to have shown equal leadership qualities. Leaders occasionally may have abused their authority, either by making political gains or by reaping a few privileges. In such instances, the UGF has not survived

well. The example of Bharkesh is a case in point. Here the committee members are either enjoying privileges or are not sincerely discharging their duties. The result has been a complete breakdown of the management structure.

c. The type of structure in the community is another factor making or breaking the UGF. In general, small, homogeneous, communally evolved, relatively educated, and disciplined communities appear to be managing their resources in a more sustainable manner than big, impoverished, and ethnically-mixed communities. In the first category of communities, the rules are more thorough, members are sensitive and aware of their rights, and forest management goals are clearly understood.

d. The fourth indicator is the issue of property rights or, more specifically, tree and land tenure security. The forest policies pursued by successive governments, right from the time of King Prithvi Narayan Shah (the first king of a unified Nepal), have been so unstable and their implementation so destructive to both forests and indigenous systems that people are thoroughly suspicious of the Government's motives. Nothing less than a written certificate of tree and land ownership rights seems to convince them that the forests they have been using for generations will finally be theirs. Only after the formal handing over of the forest by the DFO, through a written and stamped certificate and through the actual exercise of use rights by the villagers, does there appear to be an increase in the affinity of the community to the forest, and it results in subsequent protection and management. Therefore, it is prudent to differentiate community/traditional forestry from UG forestry in that the latter is community, traditional, and indigenous all at the same time and the former is only community in name but open and freely useable in practice.

e. The excessive cost of forest management also seems to be leading towards UGF. In the larger community-based forestry, all the new and potential users simply by virtue of living within the *panchayat* boundaries had power to create costs for the management. This weakened the power of the actual users (in reality the owners) since they

had to bear the huge costs of the people who did not invest anything in development of the resources.

- f. The existence of locally-evolved institutions and the degree to which they are well designed also seem to work in favour of the UGF. Institutions here refer to both the organisations and norms, rules and regulations governing them. The operational plan developed by the Ranger of the Tinau Watershed Project is so general and vague that it is more or less a useless document for the users.

- g. Lastly, the conservation of the forest and the quality of its management depend on the level of scarcity suffered by the community concerned. Only disastrous suffering and unforgettable hardship appear to be leading to the spontaneous emergence of group/community-based forest protection drives. However, this last factor is not crucial now since the stories and case studies of neighbouring villages/communities/districts, or even regions, if spread properly through well-designed extension programmes to communities in other parts of the country, will ensure that others will not need to go through a period of scarcity and hardship before they take over a user group forest for themselves. This is where the role of government and non-government agencies will be found to be lacking.

What This Case Study Explains?

Based on the study findings and the aforementioned observations, this study adds the following new dimensions towards improving user group forestry policies and practices in Nepal.

1. On the question of the adequacy of legal provisions to promote the accelerated handing-over of community forests to the FUGs, the Forest Act (1993) provisions do meet the current needs. The only precaution suggested here is that the clauses pertaining to the final authority of the DFO should be used only in exceptional cases. The clauses contained under Chapter 13, Miscellaneous, are especially referred to here. In the name of priority projects, HMG has retained the right to use any forest in the country, and this can still be used by unscrupulous officials to disrupt

the infrastructure of the UGF. In addition, the Bill is not yet effective and lacks bye-laws.

2. Regarding the tremendous increase in the demand for handing over forests and District Forest offices, as the limited staff and resources are not able to cope with the increased work load; innovative and efficient methods, such as the ones successfully implemented by the DFO, Palpa, can be replicated elsewhere in Nepal. The practice used hitherto of requiring each and every FUG meeting to have a Ranger/Asst. Ranger present should be discontinued. Instead these officials can be asked to be present only in the final meeting when the FUG structure and OP contents are to be finalised. Yet another approach (forwarded by the then DFO, Palpa, Mr. Baral) is to do away with the requirement for a fully-fledged operational plan prior to handing over the forest. Instead, a provisional certificate of ownership could be issued to immediately initiate forest conservation measures. After all, the bulk of the country's mid-hill forests are not in a state for immediate harvesting/thinning/pruning operations but are in greater need of protection, and this is not happening currently due to lack of tenurial guarantee to the actual users. The provisional certificate has the potential to provide this guarantee.
3. Regarding the issue of lack of interest on the part of the community in afforestation work, thereby resulting in a failure to meet the forest development needs of the country, once again the approach implemented by the DFO, Palpa, is worth trying elsewhere in the country. In this particular approach, the DFO first of all asked the potential communities to indicate their interest in establishing new plantations on common land. Once the interest and initiatives arose in a community, the DFO staff formed UGs and UG committees and issued certificates assuring tree and land ownership to the users. The species' preferences were collected by the UGC. Supplies of necessary seedlings were assured by the DFO. However, a condition was proposed, i.e., all the expenses, apart from the seedling transportation, were to be borne by the FUGs themselves. The community, in most instances, agreed, and the DFO informed them of the

arrival of seedlings to the district office or nearest road point from where the concerned users had to transport them themselves to the planting site. After carrying out plantation under the supervision of the DFO staff, each community was personally visited either by the DFO or his senior staff, and transportation costs were paid to members of the UGC. Through this process, the DFO claimed he carried out plantation in 47 locations (covering an area of about 160ha) at 10 per cent of normal cost. The Research Team Leader visited several of these plantation sites and found that the quality of plantation was good and that the survival rate was more than 80 per cent. This new approach to forest resource development is cost-effective and sustainable and, therefore, is recommended in other districts as well.

4. Regarding the sustainability of the user group forestry approach itself, the author feels that in Nepal's forestry sector the most important requirement for sustainability is the immediate institution of cost-effective and efficient methods of forest resource conservation. Our studies in Palpa and Pokhara have concluded that nothing institutionalises sustainable conservation more than granting full recognition of locally-evolved socioeconomic institutions and organisations. The FUG concept meets this end by changing the whole attitude of the users, from that of exploiters to that of resource managers, simply by granting a certificate which says that the forest that was the "government's" yesterday is "theirs" today. It seems that these users change their practices quite rapidly from those of liberal consumers to these of conservative savers. This change of attitude augurs well for the sustainable balance of the country's precarious forest resource use equation.

5. Finally, regarding the aspects of equity, justice, and efficiency, the FUG concepts and practices have created issues that may create problems for local and national governments in the near future. The first and foremost concern is that, after all the accessible forests have been handed over to the recognisable and *de facto* users/owners, a section of the society will be excluded from vital and sensitive resources. The State has a responsibility to meet

their basic needs as well. To solve this problem, the Department of Forests should review the current Master Plan critically so that a significant number of forests can be managed as national forests to meet the basic needs of those excluded. In this context, the *terai* forest should not be handed over to users in the same way as in the mid-hills.

6. As far as the system's efficiency is concerned, predictably the FUGs will not implement operational plans based on economic criteria alone, thus compromising the profit motive. However, the social and economic benefits of more conservative management will, in the long run be greater than the short-term financial losses incurred by not capturing market opportunities.

Policy Lessons

1. The Government still lacks clear policies regarding appropriate allocation of land resources for different forest uses (e.g., protection forestry, conservation forestry, production forestry, and community forestry). This has resulted in poor implementation of the forest development programmes, misallocation of scarce resources, and unsustainable management of forests at the national level. According to this study, despite the overall successful functioning of UGFs, the users are dictating the pace and nature of forest management and not the Government. The concerned agencies must formulate a long-term policy and be consulted to it.
2. The DOF staff generally still have the 'foresters know best' attitude and 'dictate' to rather than 'consult' with the users. Some of the prescriptions and rules included in the operational plans by the rangers were found to be based on what they perceived as good for the members rather than on shared ideas and opportunities for equal partnerships in collaborative forest management.