

I Introduction

Introduction

Participatory forest management has emerged as an alternative strategy for sustainable management of forest resources in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region. Small village-based community organisations have played an important role in asserting their rights to forest resources and in protecting and managing their local environment. People-centered resource management strategies have come to occupy a central position in different development sectors through accounts of their success.

Recognising the critical role community-based organisations play in natural resource management, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), in collaboration with the Nepal Chapter of FAO's Forests, Trees and People Programme (FTPP), organised the First Regional Community Forestry Users' Group Workshop. The key objective of the workshop was to mobilise resource persons in the forefront of community-based natural resource management in order to share experiences and devise strategies for the future.

The workshop, held from 22 to 27 May, 1995, at Budhanilkantha School, Kathmandu, Nepal, brought together members of forest user groups (FUGs) from Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Thailand, as well as community organisers from The Philippines and Bhutan. This was the first ever meeting in which forest user groups from different countries interacted on common concerns and achievements. It was also the first international meeting on community forestry in which community members were the main actors rather than the subjects of deliberations. The workshop provided a unique opportunity to design user-oriented strategies for sustainable natural resource management in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas.

Participants

A total of 77 participants from six countries attended the workshop. The participants consisted mainly of forest user group members, women's group members, some non-government organisations, and community organisers. Forty-three participants attended from Nepal, twenty-three from India, five from Pakistan, three from Thailand, two from The Philippines, and one from Bhutan.

More than one-third of the participants were women: sixteen from Nepal, eight from India, three from Pakistan, and one from The Philippines. Women's participation was affirmatively encouraged. Letters of open invitation to user groups and NGOs indicated that two out of three invitees had to be women. Child-care arrangements were also offered to facilitate the presence and participation of women delegates.

Workshop Process

An outline of the workshop schedule was prepared in advance, with a focus on making the workshop as participatory as possible. Four types of discussion were planned: cross-country working groups for sharing experiences, eliciting expectations, and arriving at overall recommendations for future action;

concurrent sessions on critical themes that emerged from discussions; country working groups for preparing country presentations and country action plans; and plenary sessions for presentations, questions, and group discussions.

Since participants came from diverse backgrounds, Nepali, Hindi, and English were used for the plenary and small group sessions. Translators and rapporteurs fluent in these languages facilitated all workshop discussions.

Apart from the first major plenary session of country representations, in which translations were carried out in two or three languages, the remaining presentations were made either in Hindi or Nepali, with translators located in the audience. This arrangement proved much more successful and was used in some of the small working groups as well.

Workshop Communication

A well-equipped secretariat was available to provide communication facilities to the workshop participants and to consolidate and share the outcomes of the group discussions. In order to provide a common medium for communication for the 80 participants to the workshop, arrangements were made to produce a daily wall newspaper for the duration of the workshop. Entitled *Chautari* and produced in Nepali, Hindi, and English, this wall newspaper became a popular place of interaction. *Chautari's* contents included workshop progress, news about unusual events, humour, and even complaints and suggestions.

File Documentation

In order to document the workshop process on film, a film crew was present throughout the seven days of the workshop. There are almost 800 minutes of footage on film, and these include documentation of the workshop and about 30 interviews with participants. The aim is to produce two films related to the issues discussed at the workshop.