

Participatory Forest Management in South Asia

A Comparative Analysis of
Policies, Institutions and Approaches



Golam Rasul
Madhav Karki

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Preface

Forests and related natural resources provide multiple benefits to society and are crucial to the livelihoods of millions of people in South Asia, particularly those living in rural mountain and hill areas. In India alone, about 300 million people in rural areas depend directly or indirectly on forests for food, fodder, small timber, and cash income. Forest and rangelands are also the predominant land uses in hills and mountains in other HKH countries. In addition to their diverse economic utility, forests provide many other ecosystem services including watershed protection, carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation, climate regulation, and ecosystem balance, and support agriculture by enriching soil fertility. However, forests have been degraded extensively in many countries due to overly bureaucratic, timber-oriented, and centralised systems and frameworks of administration and management.

Realising the importance of local communities in forest management, several participatory management models such as social forestry, community forestry, joint forest management, leasehold forestry, and collaborative forest management have evolved in different countries in the region. Community forestry occupies a central place in forest management in Nepal. In India, joint forest management has emerged as an effective tool to conserve, manage, and regenerate forest alongside traditional systems such as van panchayat arrangements and shifting cultivation-based agroforestry. Other models have been developed in Bhutan and Bangladesh. These different approaches have different features, characteristics, and degrees of participation by local forest users, and thus different implications for the management of forest resources and the livelihoods of forest-dependent people.

In order to promote a truly participatory forest management model, it is important to understand the scope, limitations, and requirements of the different models now in use, and their relative strengths and weaknesses. This paper attempts to trace the evolution of participatory forest management in South Asia, with particular reference to the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region and specifically from a mountain perspective. Using secondary information and the authors' own experiences, four different participatory forestry models are examined and their relative strengths and weaknesses identified. The models are compared and contrasted using specific criteria such as level of institutionalisation, tenurial security, degree and quality of local participation, decision-making authority, rights and obligations of stakeholders, benefit sharing arrangements, and actual practices, considering the variation in types and quality of forest, population size and resources, and socioeconomic needs, all of which impact on the implementation of a particular model. Measures to overcome weaknesses and to promote participatory forest management are suggested.

I believe that this is the first attempt to examine the evolution of participatory forestry from a specifically mountain perspective at a regional level. Participatory forest management is a topic that is critical to improve the lives of poor rural people, as well as to the sustainable conservation of forest resources. I hope that the information and analysis contained in this book will help to enhance our understanding, stimulate further study, research and dialogue, and provide valuable insights into promotion of participatory forest management in the Hindu Kush-Himalayan region.

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Executive Summary

In an effort to develop an effective institutional framework and mechanisms for the management of forest resources, several participatory forest management approaches (PFM), such as community forestry (CF), joint forest management (JFM), and social forestry (SF), have emerged in different countries in South Asia. These approaches vary considerably in many respects, including level and quality of institutionalisation, tenurial arrangement, degree of participation, decision-making authority, rights and obligations, and benefit sharing. Although there is an expressed desire to promote participatory forest management across the region, little effort has been made to understand the nature of the different approaches, their strengths and weaknesses, and their implications for resource governance and livelihoods. This paper makes an attempt to analyse the four institutional approaches of PFM adopted in Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal on the basis of primary and secondary information.

The analysis reveals that, although all four countries are gradually moving from centralised to participatory forest management, the magnitude and pace of the movement varies significantly. While in Nepal and India participatory forest management has become a major thrust in forest management, in Bangladesh and Bhutan it has been progressing cautiously. Except for JFM, all PFM mechanisms are supported by state legislation; the degree of institutionalisation varies considerably, however. While forest user groups (FUGs) in Nepal have full decision-making authority, CFMGs (community forest management groups) in Bhutan and joint forest management committees (JFMCs) in India have limited authority. Considerable variation also exists in the degree of participation of local people in PFM units. While in Nepal local participation is very high, in Bangladesh it is very low; and Bhutan and India fall in between. Despite the emphasis on participatory management, the inclination and practice is still towards regulated participation. However, it is fair to say that the outcomes of PFM activities depend on a number of factors including the size of the population, quality and quantity of resources, and the quality of leadership available in local organisations. The implications of different approaches have been analysed in terms of their policy and legal framework, institutional arrangements, level of decentralisation and devolution, and degree of participation. Policy recommendations for the promotion of participatory forest management have been put forward.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

CF	community forestry
CFMG	community forest management group
DFO	District Forest Office
DoF	Department of Forest(s)
FD	Forest Department
FECOFUN	Federation of Community Forestry Users of Nepal
FUG	forest user group
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
JFM	joint forest management
JFMC	joint forest management committee
NGO	non-government organisation
NTFPs	non-timber forest product
PFM	participatory forest management
SF	social forestry
SFMC	social forestry management committee
VFI	village forest institution
VFPC	village forest protection committee