

Four Discussion

Forest management in South Asia is undergoing gradual but pronounced change. Various forms of participatory forest management have changed the landscape in many parts of the region. In certain cases, local people have successfully designed and implemented rules and regulations and are managing forests in sustainable ways. Large areas of once degraded land are now regenerating under participatory forest management and different joint-management frameworks. Participatory forest management has also created more space for social mobilisation. In Nepal, for example, the empowerment of local resource users has encouraged them to challenge the traditional forms of authority and to address the problems of unequal access to resources.

There are considerable differences among the four approaches in terms of their policy and legal support, institutional arrangements, level of decentralisation, rights and responsibilities, quality of management outputs and outcomes, decision-making authority, and degree of participation (see Table 1). Although there are similarities among the four systems, they represent differing types of management regime and are at different stages – or levels of transfer of rights and responsibilities – in participatory management.

In SF in Bangladesh, PFM still remains at a basic level. SF is essentially an externally sponsored forest management system, where all physical and financial inputs are supplied by the FD, and the main authority and control remain with the FD (see Table 1). The FD follows a top-down, custodial approach to decision making, and the participation of local people is only sought to achieve the objective of meeting afforestation and tree plantation targets in return for a share of returns. The participants are given very limited authority and control. The FD makes all major decisions and local people's participation in decision making is very low. This model of forest management can be characterised as a limited participatory model.

Joint forest management in India and community forestry in Bhutan are fairly similar and at the same level of development. Local people join with the FD in developing forest management plans, which draw on the knowledge and experience of both local people and the FD (see Table 1). Authority and responsibility are shared, although local people are given only limited (inadequate) authority and power to design and implement forest management and development plans independently. However, the local people in Bhutan and India are gradually taking on greater responsibility. This forest management model can be characterised as a joint management or co-management model.

In community forestry in Nepal, the community (i.e., the forest user group) is primarily responsible for forest management. Local people prepare forest management plans (with technical support from the DoF, make major decisions regarding forest management, and design rules and regulations regarding access to and control of forest resources and in relation to benefit sharing. CF has also contributed to community-building processes (i.e., processes that contribute to the development of community-based forestry) by enhancing the position of collective actors in property, governance, and access relations; improving the nature of collective decision-making; and legitimising customary sources of authority. FUGs have also become important local development institutions at the village level (see Table 1). They provide a forum for villagers to meet and discuss different development issues. In addition to forest management, FUGs carry out various development activities such as supporting schools; constructing local roads, irrigation canals, and drinking water facilities; and other development activities (Timsina 2002). This model of forest management can be characterised as a community control model. However, CF in Nepal is limited to hill forest areas. It is proposed to manage almost one-third of the high forest in the Terai under a different system of PFM called collaborative forest management.

Although many hectares of once degraded land in South Asia are now regenerating under various forms of participatory forest management, the analysis revealed that reforms in forest management are still incomplete in many ways (see Table 1). In Bangladesh SF goes back more than 20 years, but it is moving slowly and mostly still confined to roadsides, riverbanks, and degraded sal forest. SF is highly top-down and tree centred and lacks true participation of the local people in planning and management. It is similar to the early social and community forestry approaches in Nepal and plantation forestry in India. JFM in India is mostly confined to degraded forest (although a recent Government of India circulation has opened protected forests with canopies of less than 40 percent to management under the JFM programme, except in West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh) (Sundar 2000, p.267). Moreover, most of the advances have been project driven and have not been institutionalised as government programmes. Therefore, after withdrawal or termination of project support, there is a risk of unsustainability.