

Five

Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Participatory forest management (PFM) in South Asia is undergoing an evolutionary process, yet knowledge on how to design PFM and implement it more effectively is still limited. PFM experiences gained from Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, and Nepal provide some useful lessons and insights. Despite some commonalities (e.g., state owns forest lands, forest department approves forest management plans, and local people protect and maintain forests), the analysis revealed that the four country models of PFM differ considerably from each other and are at different stages of participatory management. The examination of various aspects of the four PFM models revealed three different categories: limited participatory model, joint management model, and community control model. These can be depicted as a continuum from state-controlled to community-controlled forest management regimes. Social forestry (SF) in Bangladesh and community forestry (CF) in Nepal, as currently practised, are at the two opposite ends of the spectrum, with joint forest management (JFM) in India and community forestry (CF) in Bhutan somewhere inbetween.

It is interesting to consider why the CF model in Nepal is relatively more advanced in facilitating PFM than the other models. The authority and autonomy given to local FUGs by the respective policies and acts (Forest Act, 1993 and Forest Regulations, 1995) to design and implement their own rules, regulations, plans, and programmes, and the power to revise them based on learning and experience, made CF in Nepal relatively more participatory and successful. The communities (FUGs) devise and revise their own rules through collective choice, as needed. Unlike SF in Bangladesh and JFM in India, the forests handed over to the FUGs in Nepal are not confined to degraded lands, nor do FUGs have to share benefits with the state, except in the Terai region. FUGs in Nepal also have the right to impose sanctions on those breaking community rules.

Despite the emphasis on participatory management, which requires the involvement of people in decision making, overall the inclination has been towards controlled participation. Participatory management is not simply about forming committees. Genuine participatory management entails the formulation of appropriate management and development strategies based on the analysis made by local people with the assistance of forest experts capable of providing technical advice. In some instances, for example in SF in Bangladesh, the role of the local community has been grossly neglected. As a result, SF is moving slowly and is mostly found along roadsides and riverbanks and in sal forests. SF in Bangladesh is top-down and tree centred, and fails to muster the true participation of local people in planning and management. It is similar to the early social and community forestry approaches in Nepal and plantation forestry in India. Similarly, JFM in India is also mostly confined to degraded forests.

Rights and responsibilities are not distributed in a balanced manner in SF in Bangladesh or JFM in India. Local people have more responsibility, whereas the FD has more authority. Hence, there is a lack of mutual accountability. Communities are more accountable to the FD than the FD is to them. In particular, the FD's right to dissolve the executive committee of forest user groups makes it an unequal partner. On the other hand, the community does not have the right or power in any of the PFM models to take action if it thinks that the FD is not fulfilling its responsibilities satisfactorily.

In CF in Bhutan, the law creates appropriate legal opportunities for community participation, but there are limited opportunities for communities to sell forest products. Moreover, local people can obtain sufficient timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) from state forests as per government rules. Therefore, there is little incentive for them to be involved in community-based forest management. Given the low interest and low ability of local people to exercise their power and authority, the FD is trying to promote the community-based approach by providing large amounts of support. However, the way in which the FD is providing this support is as an extension of the Forest Office to the community rather than by supporting the community to manage the forests themselves. Instead of creating a market for community forest products, the FD is developing rules and regulations for better silvicultural management. In many situations, the village forest committees established under CF in Bhutan have become an arm of the FD, rather than being developed as independent organisations that could challenge the authority of the FD.

Policy Recommendations

1. **Recognition of forest user groups as legal entities:** As in Nepal, forest user groups should be recognised as legal entities, particularly in Bangladesh and India. As the PFM model is a reversal of the traditional top-down forest management model, it faces many institutional and structural problems, thus requiring strong political support from the government.
2. **Involvement of forest user groups in decision making:** The involvement of forest user groups is a pre-requisite for the promotion of PFM. It is, therefore, important to design effective institutional mechanisms to ensure their active involvement in planning, implementation, and decision-making processes. User groups should be given more authority and autonomy to design and implement forest management plans, benefit sharing mechanisms, and other rules and regulations for the effective conservation and management of forest resources.
3. **Balanced distribution of power and authority:** As opportunities to manage and control forest resources are influenced by the distribution of power and authority between the forest user groups and the FDs, it is necessary to rationalise the distribution of power and authority between the two parties. It is also important to develop mechanisms to ensure the accountability of FDs. At present, under all the four management models, forest management groups are made accountable to FDs but FDs have only limited accountability to forest management groups.

4. **Provision of new knowledge, skills, information, and support:** As PFM is a new venture, local people need new knowledge (technology, market information, silvicultural options, and others), skills, information, and support to manage forests more effectively. Marginalised groups, especially the women and the poor, often fail to exercise their rights due to inadequate knowledge and information, and resource constraints. To promote PFM, governments should provide the necessary support to local forest user groups and build their management capacities in resolving conflict related to forest management and in dealing effectively with outside partners, including FDs and other regulatory and supporting agencies.
5. **Enhance capacities and coordination of public sector agencies:** The pursuit of forest management is consistent with sustainable development as it requires pursuing economic activities for the improvement of the quality of life of people, without inflicting damage upon natural resources. Forest management cannot be made the exclusive responsibility of the FD; it is necessary to involve concerned line agencies such as agencies involved in agriculture, livestock, soil, local government, and rural development, to promote sustainable forest management. Towards this end, the capacities and coordination of public sector agencies involved in forest management and rural development should be enhanced.
6. **Promotion of economic opportunities:** Efforts to promote PFM cannot succeed if people cannot sell their forest products and gain economic benefit. Formal and informal barriers to selling community forestry products need to be removed. Where markets for products are not available, for example in Bhutan, such markets need to be created and developed to enable the marketing of community forestry products, including timber and non-timber forest products.
7. **Promotion of federations and networks:** Given the tendency of the regulatory authorities to circumvent rules and regulations, it is necessary to establish effective mechanisms to ensure that the commitments made to communities are implemented properly. Federations of forest user groups, like FECOFUN in Nepal, may be established in order to improve the bargaining power of user groups. A regional network of groups practising PFM could be formed to share experiences and information, particularly on markets, technology, and management options.
8. **Creating awareness at appropriate government levels:** Special attention should be paid to re-orientate state forest bureaucracies away from traditional models that emphasise trees and production, towards PFM with a focus on local forest dependent people, their livelihoods, and the overall socioeconomic development of the rural communities living in and around forest areas.