

What Makes Local Elites Work for the Poor? A Case of a Community Forestry User Group in Nepal

Basundhara Bhattarai¹

Despite the growing popularity of community-based approaches to forest management, there are limited cases in which benefits and costs are shared equitably. One of the reasons for this situation is that decisions within community-based forest management (CBFM) regimes are dominated by local elites. This is especially true in the context of Nepal where society is stratified into different economic classes, ethnic groups, gender relations, and geographic differentiations. In this context, it is critical to understand the possibility of local elites becoming more sensitive to the needs of the marginalized groups, and establish factors that constrain or enable the process through which they change their attitude and behaviors. This paper analyzes this dynamic in the context of community forestry in Nepal. The factors and processes enabling local elites to undertake poverty-reduction initiatives by mobilizing community forestry resources are specifically analyzed.

The Sundari community forest user group (CFUG) located in the central Terai region of Nepal was used as a case study. How local elites developed innovative institutional arrangements and governance practices to provide a wide range of benefits and subsidies to the poor and marginalized members of the CFUG are analyzed. Such benefits and services include: providing financial subsidies for income generation such as through goat farming, house construction for the homeless, and a range of empowerment support services for the marginalized. The analysis suggests that there are key aspects that inspire community elites to work in favor of the poor: a) opportunities to critically self-reflect on their mindsets and behaviors in relation to the poor and marginalized groups, b) the presence of civil society facilitators with in-depth knowledge of social power relations and local-level dynamics of governance.

Introduction

Despite the growing popularity of community-based approaches to forest management, there are limited cases in which benefits and costs are shared equitably. Often the poor, women, and marginalized people have received disproportionately fewer benefits from the management of such resources (Paudel 1999; Agarwal 2001; Ojha et al. 2002; Bhattarai and Ojha 2001; Malla 2001). One of the reasons for this situation is that decisions within community-based forest management (CBFM) regimes are dominated by local elites. This is certainly true in the context of Nepal where society is stratified into different economic classes, ethnic groups, gender relations, and geographic differentiations.

In Nepal, a plethora of literature on community forestry report that local elites are one of the major obstacles for achieving equity in terms of sharing benefits and involving the poor in decision-making processes. In this context, the poor and marginalized have received limited or no access to resources.

The enforcement of the tenth five-year national plan (2002–2007) and the growing realization that the poor are not receiving equitable benefits have prompted communities and support

¹ Currently Gender Specialist, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD).
E-mail: bbhattarai@icimod.org

organizations to work for the poor. Persuading elites to work in favor of the poor might be a challenging task. Amidst growing concerns of inequity in community forestry, a recent national workshop on community forestry documented several pro-poor innovations throughout the country (Kanel et al. 2004). Although the extent to which the poor and marginalized are empowered and benefited may vary across different contexts, an important message that can be drawn is that at least the need for the emergence of the pro-poor approach is already in current policy discourses.

In this context, it is important to understand the possibility of local elites becoming more sensitive to the needs of the marginalized groups, and establish factors that constrain or enable the process through which they change their attitudes and behaviors. This paper analyzes the dynamic in the context of the Sundari community forest user group (CFUG) from the central Terai region of Nepal. The factors and processes enabling local elites to undertake poverty-reduction initiatives by mobilizing community forestry resources are specifically analyzed.

From the analysis of Sundari community forestry, four important messages can be drawn. The analysis focuses on the following key questions.

- 1) What makes elites critically self reflect on existing behaviors and practices?
- 2) Is there a role for external civil society action that leads to change?
- 3) Can the poor and elites negotiate for equitable rules? When and under what conditions?
- 4) What further challenges lie in achieving equity?

The paper is based on empirical data collected from the field during 2005 and is supplemented by the available literature and reports related to Nepal's community forestry. Semistructured interviews were conducted with key informants and with different categories of people including civil society activists, women members, poor members, and the CFUG leaders (elites).

The next section provides an overview of the case study site followed by analysis of mostly inequitable practices before the evolution of poverty-reduction initiatives. In the third section, the processes and outcomes of poverty-reduction initiatives carried out by the group through changing the mindsets of the elites followed by the conditions and the factors that contributed to generating pro-poor actions are discussed.

Overview of Sundari Community Forest User Group

Humans settled in this area about 40 years ago. Around 1960 and again in 1980 the Punarbas Company (a Government resettlement organization) cleared forest land for distribution to landless people. By that time, the rate of deforestation was high and most of the forest lands were converted into agricultural land. Due to the massive influx of hill migrants into the area, tremendous pressure was put on the forest in the forms of encroachment, timber smuggling, and forest fires. Some of the local settlers and new migrants to the area established businesses to sell forest-based products (Koirala 2003). Deforestation continued until the establishment of the CFUG. People could find trees only on steep slopes, where the felling and transportation of wood was difficult. Because of the massive deforestation in the area, the local people suffered from disease and environmental hazards (ibid). One of the local residents recalled that the landscape was virtually naked, barren land; there were hardly any small and scattered shrubs; wildfire occurred annually—the formerly forested area was land where people could do whatever they wanted.

After the restoration of democracy in 1990, new policies were created in the forestry sector. The Forest Act (1993) and Forest Regulation (1995) are considered important policy benchmarks in securing the rights of forest users throughout the country. As a result of this progressive policy framework, CFUGs were formed throughout the country. In subsequent years, the Sundari CFUG was also formed and the forest was officially handed over to the group in 1996. However the community had been protecting the forest informally for many years and the informal protection committee had also been formed by that time. This committee, on behalf of the village, was active in stopping the smuggling of timber from the forest. Using its de facto use right, the committee also distributed memberships to the users—the membership fee was NRs100 (US\$1.50) for every household (as an entry fee). Later, the same households became members of the CFUG.

The group consists of 1,251 user households (Sundari 2002). The user households are spread throughout all nine wards of Amarapuri Village Development Committee (VDC) and the community forest also lies within the same VDC boundary. For day-to-day regulatory purposes, the CFUG has elected an executive committee consisting of 13 members and has hired an additional office secretary and a forest watcher. In addition to the executive committee, the FUG has formed a number of subcommittees that include the internal auditing subcommittee, the monitoring subcommittee, goat-rearing subcommittee, house construction subcommittee, nonwood forest product (NWFP) management subcommittee, bee-keeping subcommittee, disabled rehabilitation subcommittee, fodder tree program subcommittee, and the picnic–sport feasibility study subcommittee (Sundari 2002).

The members of the CFUG claim that after the establishment of the CFUG, there have been tremendous improvements in the forest condition. A great deal of regeneration has been seen and forest encroachment and wildfires have completely stopped. The natural forest is dominated by sal (*Shorea robusta*), a valuable timber species in the area. They further claim that in 2005 forest fire destroyed many of the forests of the neighboring VDCs. “We saved our forest because of our intensive and organized efforts” said one of the users (personal communication, 2005). According to the CFUG record, more than 100 NWFPs are found in the forest, which can be used for different purposes ranging from traditional medicines to industrial raw materials.

The main forest products extracted from the forest are timber, fuelwood, fodder, and NWFPs. Regarding the collection of timber, the demand is assessed in advance and trees are felled accordingly. For timber, NRs250 (US\$4) per cubic foot is charged from the users. Every household can purchase 50 to 100 cubic feet if the demand is genuine and the household can pay the charge for the demanded quantity. *Bakal* (the portion of the wood outside the heartwood, including the cambium of the wood) is another wood category that is also used but is inferior to the normal quality. As such, prices for this wood are lower. It is used by all of the users, irrespective of economic class. The difference here is that the poor households use *bakal* for house construction, whereas less poor households use it for other purposes.

The equal pricing mechanisms for the uneven paying capacity of the users seem to be more beneficial to the less poor. The members of the executive committee have claimed that the existing rate of timber is already subsidized but the poor found that the rate was beyond their paying capacity. This is what Chhetry et al. (2005) have called “hidden subsidy.”

Likewise, different categories of users use different types of fuelwood. The office secretary of the group stated that almost half of the users in the higher economic rank use good quality fuelwood, i.e. fuelwood from tree trunks that are not useful for timber (*golia daura*); the other half uses small twigs of dry fallen branches or extracted from silvicultural operations. The price for good quality fuelwood is NRs1.25 per kilogram. Dry twigs are collected in a specified period each year and the labor cost for the silvicultural operation needs to be paid; in turn the users get the resulting fuelwood.

The types of fuelwood used are one of the indicators to identify the wealth class of households. In the yards of wealthier households, *golia daura* can be found, whereas in poor farmers' yards, one can see piles of small twigs (*jhinja daura*). "*Golia daura garible kinna sakdainan, yo ta dhanile matra kinna sakchhan*" said one of the poor users, meaning "only the rich people can pay for the fuelwood from round wood but the poor can't afford it."

The CFUG has generated much income, especially from the sale of forest products. On average the annual income of the CFUG is NRs1.2 million (~US\$18,450). Analysis of the total income of 2003 revealed that 73% comes from the sale of timber, 10% from the sale of *golia daura*, and the remaining amount from miscellaneous sources.

Analyzing the CFUG's annual expenditure, the largest amount of money is spent on forest development (see Table 1 for the breakdown of the expenditure for 2003). Forest development activities include the cost incurred for forest product harvesting—for felling, sawing/grading, and transportation to the CFUG office. The next largest share is spent on community infrastructure, including support for the construction of a school building and salaries for the teachers; construction of an irrigation canal; the CFUG office building; subsidies to establish a biogas plant for cooking; partial support for the construction of drinking water tanks and taps; and construction of village trails and resting places for the public. One fifth of the total expenditure is spent on institutional development and about 4% is for capacity development of the members. Another 8% of the CFUG expenditure is spent on poverty-reduction activities.

Table 1: Annual Expenditure of Sundari CFUG

Expenditure Items	Amount in NRs	Percentage of the Total Expenditure
Forest Development	500,000	40
Institutional Development	252,000	20
Capacity Building	55,000	4
Community Infrastructure	333,611	27
Direct Support to the Poor	95,000	8
Miscellaneous	15,765	1
Total	1,251,376	100

Source: Sundari (2003).

The CFUG considers support for local schools and for the construction of irrigation canals important for developing community infrastructure, although the results are not accessible by poor households. The argument is that often the poor are landless or have no irrigated land. As such, they cannot benefit from investments in irrigation channels. Often the poor are unable to send their children to school, hence improved schooling is also beyond their reach. Even the money spent on water tank construction does not result in equitable distribution among households. Upper class households have a fixed tap but for the poor and marginalized, one common tap is fixed for many households, which is inadequate for collecting water for household consumption.

The allocation of funds mainly for community infrastructure is attributable to people who have more access to decision making with respect to the utilization of group money. Normally the more affluent users are those who dominate the decision-making forums, hence their perspectives become the rules for the whole group. In most cases, the poor are not present at these forums. Even when they are present they do not speak, and even if they speak, they are not heard and have no strategy on how to deal with their better-off counterparts.

Improvement in Benefit Sharing and Equity

Genesis of Poverty-reduction Initiatives

From the very beginning of the implementation of community forestry policy, attention to addressing equity issues within community forestry was being overshadowed by the rapid handing over process of Government forest to local communities. During this time, although respective laws were already in place, most efforts were poured into the institutional transformation of forest management from the State to local communities, considered to be one of the most radical shifts in the history of forest management in the country. As the numbers of groups increased, the issue of product utilization came to the fore. In many of the groups, complete closure of forest for some years or limited collection after taking over forest management was common. Many poor people suffered from such closure as they had no other option to replace their forest products needs; they were entirely dependent on communal resources for daily energy sources, food, and other requirements. Some members of the occupational castes like blacksmiths (iron makers, especially of agricultural tools) had to completely change their occupation as the CFUG did not allow charcoal-making from community forest wood. Many of the women had to spend more time in collecting fuelwood and fodder from remote national forests, which restricted their time for child care and other communal work.

This subject was raised among CFUGs at the local level and support organizations at the national level. A debate also started within Sundari CFUG as well and led to rethinking of the group's governance system. Continuous discussion with pro-poor civil society activists and interface with outsiders encouraged the CFUG leaders to develop pro-poor activities within their program, according to one of the civil activists.

As stated by the chairperson of Sundari CFUG, discussion with a District Forest Office (DFO) staff member during the study tour inspired the CFUG leadership to evolve poverty-reduction activities. Box 1 shows how an external agent can influence local CFUG dynamics.

Box 1: Reflections on the Poverty-reduction Initiative in Sundari FUG

These reflections come from FUG members who participated in the study tour, mostly the executive committee members.

Tour participants: "We have initiated community development work in the village. For instance, we have invested a large amount of CFUG funds for the development of community infrastructures."

The DFO: "You have invested the group money in the infrastructures but have you thought who have benefited most and who have not from such investments? For example, you have invested several thousand rupees in the construction of irrigation canal from which landlords have benefited but not the landless and the poor. Likewise, from the money invested for school development, only the households who can afford to send their children to the school have benefited but what about the poor who cannot send their children to the school?"

Tour participants: "We were speechless when we heard his remarks about the mobilization of our group fund. It made us to realize that we hadn't thought about the equitable distribution of group funds to each of the group members that the DFO has rightly pointed out. The dialogue with the DFO prompted us to re think our fund mobilization schemes towards poverty-reduction actions."

When they returned to their village with the commitment to initiate poverty-reduction activities, the major challenge was to make fellow members of the CFUG aware and ready to

institutionalize a poverty-reduction program. It was a challenging task for them to orient the local elites on this matter. Later, the CFUG leadership organized a workshop for local elites, which included school teachers, heads of local institutions (nongovernment organizations/government organizations), VDC representatives, and heads of local cooperatives to discuss poverty-reduction matters; this eventually served as an important strategic milestone for the program. Mr. “Sharma” (not his real name) as an external civil society activist was requested to facilitate this workshop for the CFUG. At this workshop, reflection and discussion were directed in such a way that all of the participants expressed their commitment to include the issues related to the poor and marginalized. For instance, a representative of the milk cooperative made a commitment to buy cattle milk from the so-called “untouchable” caste, as households from this caste were not allowed to sell milk to a local dairy for social reasons. Similarly, the representative from the drinking water cooperative expressed his commitment to fix additional taps near poor and marginalized people’s settlements as the existing taps were insufficient to provide enough drinking water for collection whereas almost all of the wealthy had taps in their own house compounds.

The workshop conducted social wealth ranking to identify poor users; this list was ratified by the executive members of the respective wards. Finally 25 households were selected as the poorest members of the 106 poorest households of the group; 156 households were identified as “poor” households (see Table 2) using local criteria (see the Annex for different class criteria developed by the group). The 25 poorest households were to be targeted first for poverty-reduction initiatives.

Table 2: Number of Households According to Wealth-ranking Criteria in Sundari FUG

	Wealth Categories					
	Poorest	Poor	Lower Medium	Medium	Rich	Very Rich
Number of households	106	156	377	414	152	46

Source: Sundari FUG minutes (2005).

After conducting this exercise with the key leaders of the group and local support organizations, elites and the facilitator agreed to run a Participatory Action and Learning (PAL) process to sensitize remaining elites and the poor members of the group. The PAL process had seven major steps:

1. A formal meeting with the executive committee
2. Training for volunteer facilitators
3. *Tole* (small hamlet) meetings and reflection
4. Workshops for hamlet representatives at ward and CFUG levels
5. A workshop with hamlet representatives and the executive committee
6. Planning workshop
7. General Assembly

In step 1, the CFUG leaders and the facilitator were informed about discussion at the earlier workshop and the decision to proceed with implementing PAL.

Once the executive committee agreed to conduct PAL, CFUG volunteers were selected and trained to facilitate the process. Subsequently, the volunteers facilitated hamlet-level meetings and asked thought-provoking questions, keeping in mind the key aspects of PAL. The main features of the PAL process were:

- Critical inquiry for reflection
- Collective planning for future courses of action
- Sensitization for empowerment
- Coaching for capacity building
- Adoption of inclusive participatory processes
- Social analysis of the issues
- Dynamic facilitation
- Appreciation of differences in capacity, interest, and perspectives
- Institutionalization of the process

Once the hamlet-level meetings were over, the issues raised in all the hamlets were introduced at the workshops. The workshops were carried out in two steps: the first step was the ward-level workshop including the hamlets that lay in the particular ward; the second step was the CFUG-level workshop at which representatives from all the hamlets were present to analyze the issues raised at the hamlet-level meetings. A workshop was then carried out with the executive committee of the CFUG followed by a planning workshop for organizing the General Assembly.

In all stages of the PAL process, there was active support from Mr. Sharma. The continued dialogue and deliberation with local elites and the poor was critical for initiating pro-poor interventions.

Outcomes of the Pro-poor Innovations in Sundari CFUG

This section presents the pro-poor action that emerged from the PAL. During the process, the users learned about the existing practices of CFUG governance, future expectations, and the priorities of the users, especially the poor and marginalized. To start pro-poor interventions, the CFUG initially targeted the 25 poorest households for whom both humanitarian and other support was given. In this context, the CFUG fund was mobilized and the support of other development actors was also sought. The following six support services were arranged for the poor: house construction for the homeless, goat rearing for income generation, rehabilitation of disabled people, free CFUG membership, prioritization for local employment, and subsidizing the cost of forest products to the poor. Box 2 provides the narrative of a poor woman who benefited from the poverty-reduction activities of the group.

House Construction

Until the first quarter of 2005 three houses had already been constructed from CFUG funds and one more was underway. The houses were built for users who were homeless, destitute, unable to build a new house on their own, or had no property and survived by their own labor. Of the three newly constructed houses, one was headed by a low-caste widow, one was for a leprosy sufferer, and one was for a family in the poorest category. All of the beneficiaries had lived previously on an encroached forest area, the land bordering the actual community forest and agricultural land. As the CFUG's plan is to support many users who are unable to maintain their houses, the debate is ongoing whether to provide full support or to only provide assistance for finding labor on their own.

Goat Raising

For the last three years, an annual budget of approximately NRs30,000 has been allocated to distribute goats to the poorest households and about 60 female goats have already been distributed, one for each household. In the first year, first priority was given to the 25 poorest households. The rule states that such households have to return the first goat kid to the CFUG and the animal is again distributed to another household; the system is known locally as rotational goat rearing (*ghumti bakhra palan*). Only after the first kid is returned, is full ownership of the goat awarded to the respective households.

All of the poorest members are not taking the goat as they lack space to keep it at night. “I always suffer from the rainfall as the roof of my house is not strong enough to protect from the rain and hail. In the day time the goat can be kept in an open place but during night it needs a secure place to keep it safe from wild animals and theft. In such a situation, to arrange a place for the goat is beyond my capacity” one handicapped CFUG person told the author. In contrast to the poorest households, other categories of users—the poor and medium classes—are reported to be benefiting from the goat-rearing scheme. The reasons are: they already own some cattle including goats and own some private land with some trees to provide fodder. The addition of one goat has increased their capital with the same existing management system and more or less similar cost structure without additional management burdens. These households have demanded more than one goat if the CFUG wants to see the real impacts from the goat-rearing scheme (discussion with committee members).

Rehabilitation of Disabled People

Disabled people are entitled to support using the CFUG fund. Goat rearing is sponsored from the CFUG fund but other support like medical treatment and house construction for people suffering from leprosy is provided in collaboration with other supporting institutions. The CFUG is also providing school uniforms and stationery for the children of leprosy-afflicted people in the village. Currently one sufferer is under treatment in a leprosy hospital with support from the group.

One sufferer stated that “my son is studying in class five, the VDC has provided a scholarship (under the scheme to support the disadvantaged and disabled) and the CFUG has provided school dress and stationeries and the other two are also getting dress and stationeries. That’s why I could also send my children to the school.”

Free Membership

Provision of free membership was a new initiative of the CFUG under the poverty-reduction initiative. Altogether 150 poor households have received free CFUG membership. Before becoming a member of the group, they had no access to the resources and services from the community forestry program. CFUG rules stipulate an entry fee, but these households could not become members as the entry fee was too high for them.

Employment Priority for the Poor

Every year, the CFUG needs labor for forest product harvesting, especially at the time of timber harvesting. The CFUG has ruled that it will employ the poor if they are skilled in sawing timber. Previously, such work was done by outsiders. Unfortunately, only some of the poor tap this opportunity because they lack the necessary skills.

Subsidy for Forest Products

Equal-pricing mechanisms ignore the paying capacity of users for products like timber and good quality fuelwood; purchase is restricted to households that can afford the set price. For the 25 poorest households, the group decided to waive the charge for timber. For the other poor households, the users demanded halving of the timber price for at least 150 households but unfortunately this was not approved as the wealthier households resisted the proposed revision. “The user assembly was unable to approve this demand as there was resistance from some of the wealthier user households against the poorly organized group of poor people for collective bargaining. Representatives from each hamlet brought the agenda to the assembly for its discussion and approval, but only a few of the poor households were present in the assembly and they were not even organized within themselves, waiting for others to negotiate on their behalf. Although most of the executive committee members were in favor of this demand, due to the very weak presence of the poor households in conjunction with the resistance from the rich, the executive committee could not make the decision in their favor” one of the committee members told the author.

Box 2: The Impact of the Poverty-reduction Initiative on the Poor

Some 15 years ago Mrs. Maya (not her real name) and her family migrated to this village to settle permanently from Silong, India. They did not have their own private land or other property. They had to survive through daily labor. Three years after their arrival, her husband died in an accident when he was working as a laborer in a local irrigation canal. At that time she was 32 and she already had four daughters, the youngest one being only nine months. After the death of her husband, she endured a very hard life obtaining food and other household needs for her family.

She used to own a small thatched hut but it did not protect them from rain and the wind. During bad weather she could not cook food in the hut. Mrs. Maya used to seek labor and her small daughters had to cook the food for all of them; if cooking was not possible in their own hut, they had to request their neighbors to use their kitchens, which was hard but they had to survive. Usually the food was only half-cooked. When it rained, they had to ask their neighbors for somewhere to sleep.

One year since she received CFUG assistance, Mrs. Maya stated: “I am staying in a nice house built by the CFUG. I am very much indebted to the CFUG who understood my greatest problem of shelter and responded since I could never have built the house by myself.”

She added, “In addition to the newly constructed house, I have got one goat from the CFUG. I have to give back the first baby to the CFUG and then all other forthcoming babies and the mother goat will be my own property. The CFUG has provided free membership to me as I was not a member of the nearby community forest.”

In the last assembly meeting, the CFUG requested her to act as the chief guest, a role normally reserved for district-level government officers. She placed *tikkas* on the foreheads of the so-called *thulo manche* (high profile people) of the CFUG who were rewarded by the CFUG for performing special tasks for the group. According to Mrs. Maya, most of the members accepted this rite but some members declined because she came from a low-caste family. “Although this event had pros and cons, this has brought change in my social life, it has increased my social prestige, and my social status has been changed which I never could have imagined possible in my life” said Mrs. Maya. A CFUG committee member corroborated this, indicating that there has been a significant difference in the social status of Mrs. Maya before and after the intervention of the poverty-reduction activities.

Discussion

The preceding section has indicated that change in the livelihoods of the poor is possible with alteration of the relationship between the wealthier and the poor. It is important to understand what conditions and factors have contributed to the elites addressing the concerns of the poor and similarly what conditions and factors have allowed the poor to claim equitable benefits and challenge inequitable practices.

The case study showed that the elites have the potential to transform social relations in terms of benefiting the poor and marginalized. Once the elites exchanged knowledge outside of their own community this provided space to critically reflect upon their own practices and think about possibilities of improving existing CFUG governance practices. The case study further showed that knowledge exchange with the involvement of outsiders became more effective because of the symbolic power associated with it. Moreover, using an experienced external agent (the facilitator) with some level of “symbolic power” (power that gives force to what one says or does) was an important factor that worked for the poor.

The role of civil society action was crucial in the studied group to spark reflection in the elitist mind,. The involvement of the external facilitator who had ample knowledge of the local situation regarding social power relations, livelihood strategies, and the overall environment for generating support for poverty reduction was remarkably important for guiding the elites’ work on poor people’s agendas. The frequent interactions of the external facilitator in terms of advocating the rights of the users, empowering the poor and marginalized, questioning and challenging the day-to-day practice of the elites, and facilitating self-reflection among the elite on the effects of their practices on the livelihoods of the poor were crucial components in sensitizing the elites on the concerns of the poor and marginalized. Moreover, in-depth knowledge on social power relations and the local-level dynamics of governance with a high level of commitment and motivation were important attributes of the facilitators.

The discussions and meetings carried out with the group members have provided ample space for deliberation. Such interactions were conducted in each hamlet, seeking the participation of all the users irrespective of social class, gender, ethnic groups, and remotely located settlements. The interfaces with different sets of people have the potential to create opportunities for the poor to understand the dominating behavior of the elites and develop resistance strategies in their day-to-day lives. The interaction made CFUG members realize that many households have no formal access to group membership. After discussion with different levels of people, they realized that the excluded households are in desperate need of forest products but they cannot afford CFUG membership. As a result of the interaction, the poor have obtained several services and benefits from the mobilization of CFUG resources.

However, as Malla (2001) noted, there is a continuous challenge emerging from patron–client relations in empowering and benefiting the poor and marginalized. This was evidenced by the exclusion of the poor at the assembly meeting, in the hope that somebody (possibly the elite) would defend on their behalf (Bhattarai 2005). One of the leaders stated that the user assembly did not pass the agenda of halving the timber price, which was demanded by the poor during the hamlet-level meetings, because there was no representation of the poor at the assembly (personal communication with the author).

Concluding Remarks

This paper analyzed a CBFM case from the west–central Terai of Nepal where community forestry groups represent highly stratified and hierarchical societies. The paper shows that social realities between the poor and elites can be changed thus altering the rules of benefit sharing in favor of the poor. The paper shows clear evidence in support of this but it is too early to generalize the lessons. These lessons point to a need for reshaping current discourse on equity in CBFM.

At least four factors and conditions have been identified. First, elite groups are not only the problem; they might become the vehicle for the social change if they are given adequate opportunities for self-reflection and interfacing about the weaknesses of their practices. Second, it is very important that ample space for deliberation among the elites and the marginalized be given with the assistance of an external civil society facilitator. This increases the chance of the elite being sensitized on the concerns of the poor. Third, civil society intervention is an important dimension in terms of advocating users' rights, empowering the poor and marginalized, questioning and challenging the day-to-day practices of the elites, and facilitating elites' reflection on the effect of their practices on the livelihoods of the poor. Moreover, external but in-depth knowledge on social power relations and local-level dynamics of governance with a high level of commitment and motivation are important attributes for facilitators. However, there is a continuous challenge emerging from patron–client relations in empowering and benefiting the poor and marginalized.

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Annex 1: Wealth-ranking Criteria in the Sundari Community Forest User Group

Rank	Criteria
Poorest (106 HHs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Twelve months a year have to depend on wage labor • Unable to work/disabled • Included as users when free membership was granted • No private land of their own
Poor (156 HHs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Houses (huts) with thatched roof and without windows • Produce enough food for three months only • Landholding size is less than 0.2 hectare • Houses are slightly better than those of the poorest • Wage labor only source of income • Some have free CFUG membership
Lower-medium (377 HHs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can survive for about six months from their own production • Landholding size is around 0.3 hectare • Houses with timber and thatched roof • Junior-level job holder • Own one to two goats from their own source
Medium (414 HHs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can produce food for a whole year but not enough to sell • Landholding size is between 0.3 to 0.7 hectare • Houses with brick or cinder block walls and roofed with zinc sheets • Keep four to five cattle, goats, and chickens • Medium-level job holders inside the country and abroad, especially in Middle Eastern countries; engaged in small businesses
Rich (152 HHs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Households who produce enough food for all of the year and sell the surplus; use the money for other household activities • Landholding size is between 1 to 2 hectares • Households having cement houses • Animal husbandry and established business are the major income sources • Permanent job holders who are employed in foreign countries other than the Middle East
High class (46 HHs)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Household status is better than rich households

HH = household.