

Community Forestry for Rural Development in Nepal: Some Prospects and Problems

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1. INTRODUCTION

Achieving socio-economic change and development in a country like Nepal has been a formidable challenge and also one with an imperative of "reconciling development and conservation" (Ives, 1989). Nepal's status as one of the least developed countries in the world is often attributed to historical, physical, socio-cultural and economic factors and processes. For the past 40 years, various plans, projects and programs have attempted to improve the fate of the country and its people by setting one or more targets such as to increase the agricultural productivity, controlling population growth, conserving and improving the environment, poverty alleviation, rural development, meeting the basic needs of the people, and so on. While such goals have generally been laudable, the approaches and strategies adopted to achieve them have not always been appropriate. There are exceptions, and community forestry is one example of a viable approach to promote conservation or environmental protection as well as rural development in the Hills of Nepal. In a country where only about 10% of the total population lives in urban areas and where more than 90% of the country's economically active population is engaged in farming activities (CBS 1992), "rural development" and "meeting the basic needs of the people" are critical issues.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss some of the potentials and problems in the context of community forestry as a strategy for rural development in Nepal. Our discussion in this paper is based mainly on our field observations in Sindhu Palchok and Kabhre Palanchok; the prospect and problem of Community Forestry as a strategy for rural development may hold true for most parts of Nepal where these programs are being implemented.

2. BACKGROUND

The importance of forests and forest products for the rural people in Nepal cannot be overstated. Forests provide fuelwood, construction materials, fodder for livestock and other products needed by rural communities on a day-to-day basis. The linkages between farming, forestry, animal husbandry and human society and the importance of forests are sufficiently understood by the rural communities of the hills of Nepal (Chhetri, 1993, 1994, Chhetri, 1992, Mahat, 1987), but the fact that forests and forest products could generate income and employment in these rural communities and that community forestry could be a viable strategy for promoting sustainable rural development has yet to be fully appreciated by both villagers and professionals.

Today, progressive policies and legislative provisions of community forestry favourably promote rural development. For instance, one of the objectives of the Government's latest five year development plan (1992-1997) is to "increase income and employment opportunities from the forestry sector for small and marginal families" (HMG/NPC, 1992). The plan further adds that "forests will be raised on marginal lands in all the areas and emphasis will be placed on forestry-based occupations" (HMG/NPC, 1992). Policy statements like these and the priority given to community forestry in the overall forestry development program for Nepal have opened up opportunities for generating income and employment for the forest user groups from their community forests.



Figure 1. NACFP project area.

3. COMMUNITY FORESTRY: SOME CHANGES

In 1992, a seminar was organized by ICIMOD on Himalayan Community Forestry which brought together professionals and representatives from donor agencies, NGOs, INGOs and Government Organizations. At that seminar, it was noted that Nepal had taken a very liberal legislative approach to community forestry and that the "liberal approach of Nepal in turning 100 percent of forestry benefits to local communities amazed Indian participants" (ICIMOD, 1993a). Although the community forestry program in Nepal has had a history of ups and downs, HMG's commitment to the program is reflected in changes in focus that have occurred while implementing the program at the field level.

Ever since the introduction of the Community Forestry Program in Nepal in 1978, some noticeable changes have come about in the practices related to forestry development. For instance, there has been a change in emphasis from centralized management of forests by the Department of Forests (DoF) to decentralized management by communities. Community Forestry originally involved heavy emphasis on plantation activities, while today the focus is more on natural regeneration of forests and protection and management by user groups. The DoF field staff, whose role at one time was patrolling and protecting the forests, are now technical advisors to the communities, helping them to undertake forestry development. These days, DoF staff are not expected to control and punish the people, but rather, they are expected to act as facilitators. Since the forest user groups are now given authority to manage their community forests and sell and distribute forest products independently, villagers no longer have to wait for permits (purji) to obtain timber. All of these are encouraging signs of a progressive forestry development program being followed in Nepal today.

4. THE NACFP EXPERIENCE

The Nepal Australia Community Forestry Project (NACFP) has been assisting HMG in the implementation of community forestry in Sindhu Palchok and Kabhre Palanchok Districts in the Hills of Central Nepal since 1978 (Figure 1). Initially a high priority was given to establishing plantations during the second phase of the project since "the forest resource was so impoverished that little could be done to protect it until additions through new planting began to relieve the pressure" (Griffin 1988). Planting has continued to date, although at a slightly relaxed rate compared to the peak in the mid-1980s. To date more than 20,000 ha of plantations have been established in the NACFP area through the participation of the communities who will own the forest resources once the forests are handed over to them.

Towards the mid-1980s, the need for improving the management of existing natural forests and plantation resources saw a search for identifying appropriate organizations to undertake protection and management of these forests. For almost a decade, beginning in the late 1970s, forests were being handed over to Panchayats (now Village Development Committees) as community and protected forests. Although the intent of the government's policy to hand forests back to the people was commendable, the selection of the politico-administrative unit such as the Panchayats caused a lot of confusion and conflicts at the local level. By the mid-1980s, the forest user group (FUG) was identified and recognized as better suited for undertaking protection and management of forests in their proximity. The first handover of a community forest to a FUG was approved in 1988 in Kabhre Palanchok. By the end of 1990, the total number of FUGs in the project area was 60, while by the end of 1994, the total was 266. The formation of FUGs and the handover of community forests appears to be gaining momentum.

5. SOURCE AND NATURE OF INFORMATION

The observations and discussions in this paper have emerged as a result of dialogue between the authors and the local people in Sindhu Palchok and Kabhre Palanchok over a period of more than three years. Some case studies as well as anecdotal information have been used to support the emerging arguments in this paper. The results of some of the field-level discussions with the villagers using Participatory Rural Appraisal and Participatory Action Research methodologies have been presented as internal reports at NACFP. Table 1 below summarizes some of the data available in records kept at the districts and the project offices.

Table 1. Total user groups, community forest area and user households in Sindhu Palchok and Kabhre Palanchok (March 1995).

District	No. FUGs	Total CF Area ha	Total FUG HHs	Average CF Area/FUG	Average CF Area/HH	Beneficiary HH %	Average # FUG HH
Sindhu	156	6228.53	20026	39.9 ha	0.31 ha	38.95	128
Kabhre	125	2762.78	13522	22.1 ha	0.20 ha	23.38	108
Total	281	8891.31	33548	32.0 ha	0.27 ha	30.36	119

Source: Project Record, NACFP, HH=Household

Table 1 shows that the natural and plantation forest area handed over to 281 FUGs in Sindhu Palchok and Kabhre Palanchok covers 8891 ha. The average size of the forest handed over to FUGs comes to about 40 ha in Sindhu and 22 ha in Kabhre. A rough calculation, based on the average household size and the total

number of households in the two districts at the time of 1991 census (ICIMOD, 1993b), reveals that over 30 percent of the total population in the two districts have been exposed to the Community Forestry program. This is a substantial achievement given the fact that the first FUG-based CF handover was in 1988.

A note on the average CF area and the average number of FUG households is necessary to give a better picture of the field realities. While many CFs and FUGs may be closer to the averages shown in Table I, in reality there are wide-ranging variations. The largest FUG in the project area has 590 user households while the smallest has only 8 households. The size of the community forests handed to FUGs also varies. The largest CF in project districts is 250 ha while the smallest one is only 0.5 ha. Such wide variations in the size of FUGs and CFs along with other variables like the condition of the forest and species composition may raise questions regarding equity as well as self-reliance among the FUGs.

6. CASE STUDIES

6.1. Pine Plantations in Chaubas and Pipal Danda

Chaubas and Pipal Danda VDC are respectively located in Kabhre Palanchok and Sindhu Palchok Districts. Both sites have large areas of semi-mature plantation established on previously degraded sites. About 480 ha of plantation have been established in the Chaubas area and 439 ha in the Pipal Danda Area. In Table 2 some of the characteristic features of the two sites are presented. In both Chaubas and Pipal Danda, plantations were established in response to requests from local people. Many elderly people confess today that in the late 1970s and early 1980s (when the first plantations were established in the area), they were quite sceptical that forests would grow out of the tiny pine seedlings. These days, people in the areas are happy with the new developments in forestry because shortages of firewood, leaf litter and timber have been alleviated. However, at present, in both areas grass and grazing areas are in short supply (Table 2). These changes over time suggest that development efforts in regard to natural resources need to recognize dynamics.

Table 2. Some basic features of Chaubas and Pipal Danda.

Features	Chaubas area (Kabhre Palanchok)	Pipal Danda area (Sindhu Palchok)
Plantation	480 ha	439 ha
Management	Community Forest	Community Forest
Previous Condition	Grassland	Grass/shrubland
Previous Problem	Shortage of fuelwood/timber	Shortage of fuelwood/timber
Access	Remote: No motorable road.	Accessible: Motorable road.
Condition	Pine plantation	Mixed forest
Present situation	Plentiful forest products, excess timber and grass shortage	Plentiful forest products, excess timber and grass shortage
UG Aim	Utilize products for income and employment generation while maintaining the natural ecosystem values through sustainable forest management	Utilize products for income and employment generation while maintaining the natural ecosystem values through sustainable forest management

The plantations in both sites have been handed over to local user groups as community forests. The user groups have been undertaking silvicultural operations like pruning, singling and thinning to meet subsistence needs. However, because the users are only harvesting forest products for subsistence needs, the vast resources created in these areas are being under utilized. How to utilize forest product surpluses for subsistence needs, generate cash income and create employment are critical issues for CF. In both areas, users have been seriously considering establishing user group-managed sawmills to utilize the new resources.

Chaubas is a relatively remote site, the closest motorable road is more than four hours distant. Pipal Danda has a motorable road. The Pine plantations in Pipal Danda have approximately 50% stocking of regenerated broad-leaf trees. The people in Pipal Danda think that sometime in the future they can gradually change the structure of their forest from a pine plantation to a mixed natural forest. They plan to favour Chilaune (*Schima wallichii*), Kafal (*Myrica esculenta*) and other multi purpose broadleaf species by selectively removing pine. One old man in Pipal Danda claims that this will be achieved in the next 60-70 years.

6.2. Natural Forest Management in Nala and Tukucha Area

There are several forest user groups in Nala and Tukucha area of Kabhre Palanchok district today. Most of these user groups have been protecting and managing natural forest areas with some technical support and advice from the project and district forest office staff. Two such forests, Nala ko Thulo Ban and Tukucha ko Sano Ban and their user groups will be discussed briefly. Both of the forests have had their own history of indigenous management before formal handover took place. The user households of these forests come from several settlements or villages from five different Village Development Committees

Nala ko Thulo Ban (meaning Nala's big forest) is a single forest with a total area of more than 100 ha. Local people report that an indigenous system of protection and management was present here until it was designated as Panchayat Protected Forest in 1984. In 1989, the forest was handed over to three forest user groups under written Operational Plans in accordance with the new practice of User Group approach to community forestry.

Tukucha ko Sano Ban (meaning Tukucha's small forest) has an area of about 80 ha of natural forest and about 40 ha of pine plantation. This forest was also handed over to three user groups in 1988 and 1989.

Each of the forest user groups have divided their Community Forests into smaller blocks based on geographical features. Such blocks are not necessarily identical in size, but they fulfil the objective of ensuring product availability over a defined period while accommodating an annual harvesting program by the users. Regular harvesting of forest products has been taking place in these community forests by the respective user group members. The user groups have made income from the sale and distribution of forest products as well as from other sources. The funds thus collected have been used to undertake such local development works as improvements to the drinking water supply system for the users, electrification in the villages, construction of roads to connect the villages to the local market centres, fabrication of furniture for the local schools and restoration of a village shrine.

7. SOME PROSPECTS FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Today the supply of forest products from the CFs of many FUGs in the project districts far exceeds the local demand to meet the subsistence needs of the users. If such surplus is utilized properly, many FUGs can earn large incomes. A recent study has estimated that 130 ha of well managed 12 years old pine plantation could generate an annual net income of almost 1 million rupees to the concerned FUGs from the processing and sale

of surplus timber (Jackson, 1994). Another recent report estimated that 227 FUGs "accumulated net funds of about Rs 97,000 (about US\$ 19,400) during the year, after spending an equivalent amount on development and afforestation activities" (Jackson, 1994). Figures such as these suggest that farmers in the hills of Nepal cannot satisfy their own basic needs through participation in the Community Forestry program, but may also contribute to the national development and economy by undertaking small local development projects.

The potential for the FUGs to generate funds and use such funds to provide for their own local level development such as improving the drinking water supplies, constructing roads/trails, schools, etc., may have wider implications for the process of rural development in the country. Once FUGs start undertaking such local development projects, the government may shift expenditures to larger national level development projects. Instead of spreading the funds thinly over a large number of micro-projects, the funds at the centre could be spent in ways that would benefit a wider public.

People in some rural areas of the hills may prefer pine plantations on degraded broad leaf sites if they can generate income from marketing pine timber. The FUGs in Chaubas and Pipal Danda are examples of this. What is more interesting is to see that some farmers in the project area have also planted pine in their private lands since these trees grow faster and provide quick returns.

Farmers have a strong interest in the management, sustainability and use of the forest resources in their proximity because they depend on such resources for their survival. Thus, when forest resources are depleted, it is the hill farmers who suffer the most. They understand this very well. During a recent visit to Jajarkot, the senior author had an opportunity to attend the opening day of a Community Forestry workshop for village women. When a ranger began to talk about the importance of conservation, forest and natural resources for the farming community, an elderly lady in the audience stood up, interrupted the ranger and said: "We already know all this. Could you please tell us something new?".

The new potential for the rural farmers could be in linking opportunities for income and employment generation with protection and management of natural resources. Employment opportunities created at the village level may have implications on the social and demographic process, too. It could mean a reduced rural to urban movement of people. This, in turn, will not only retain able-bodied human resources in the villages (retain more farm labour) but will also reduce the pressure on urban areas where socio-economic problems associated with overcrowding are becoming more acute every day.

One of the best things to happen is that local level development decisions are made at the local level since FUGs or villagers themselves fund them. Such decisions are likely to be more appropriate and the resultant development process will probably be effective and efficient ensuring people's participation and sustainability.

In some parts of Sindhu Palchok and Kabhre Palanchok, FUGs have chosen to use their funds as a rotating credit fund from which user group members can obtain short-term loans at interest rates they themselves have fixed (Chhetri, 1995). People see this type of fund management as useful since loans can be obtained easily to meet household expenses of any kind. Furthermore, when FUGs are located far away from banks, the rotating credit fund as a way to manage income appears to be suitable.

Also, a potential exists for FUGs to undertake income generating activities by utilizing non-wood forest products like medicinal plants, fruits, Sal (*Shorea robusta*) leaves, lokta, etc. Some of these products are collected by individuals and/or contractors and supplied to the market. Perhaps FUGs could be provided with the necessary support to collect, process and market locally available non-wood forest products. If marketing activities are

done by FUGs as a group, the resultant benefits will go to everyone in the group rather than to some individuals only.

As noted above, the FUGs have the potential to reduce the cost of rural development to HMG. This is happening in many ways. One good example is a reduction of the cost of protection of the plantations and natural forests. Forest user groups have been growing seedlings in their own nurseries, undertaking plantation activities and protecting the forests by adopting protection methods that are suited to their local conditions.

8. EXISTING AND EMERGING PROBLEMS IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY

As discussed above, the potential benefits from Community Forestry for rural development are many. However, some problems or bottlenecks are still there while others are likely to emerge in the future. One of the main problems is that some CFs might be overutilized, and that local elites and unscrupulous people may try to capture the benefits. Overutilization could result in the degradation of forest resources. Equity problems will also occur if care is not given to the way funds are shared or used, particularly if benefits are captured by the elites among the FUG members. The elites from urban areas and district headquarters and high-ranking government officials (other than those from the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation) tend to disregard or overlook the tenureship rights of FUGs in their respective CFs. There have been some isolated cases of this nature. This needs to be controlled.

More recently, DoF field staff are finding it difficult to handover forests that run across more than one district or in cases where forest users come from two or more districts. Field staff may need to do a careful investigation in order to identify CFs that are spread across district boundaries.

Other obstacles to a smooth implementation of CF in the hills of Nepal are the target orientation of the DoF, inadequate levels of support available to FUGs (because of the shortage of field staff), frequent transfers of the field staff and inadequate records keeping systems at the field level.

9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The following conclusions emerge from the above discussion:

1. The developments in Chaubas and Pipal Danda clearly suggest that solving one set of problems today may give rise to another set of problems and issues tomorrow. An observational/evolutionary process towards development is better than the one that looks at development as an end product.
2. The real empowerment of the FUGs is to make them self-reliant which is also contingent upon a better co-ordination between various organizations within HMG.
3. A potential exists for Community Forestry and User Groups to contribute to rural development in Nepal. What can be a more sustainable approach to rural development than letting the rural people themselves carry out local development works on their own by mobilizing local resources?
4. Through participation in community forest protection and management, FUGs have reduced the cost of forest protection (i.e. no cost to hire watchers) for HMG.
5. Community Forestry can generate funds that can be spent on local development, reducing the burden on the government to undertake local development works.

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