

Equity and Poverty Linkages in the Management of Commons in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas

Suman Rai

CEGG, ICIMOD, Kathmandu, Nepal

Abstract

This paper provides an overview of equity issues in the management of common property resources in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas. It gives pointers on how the management of common property resources can better support the livelihoods of poorer and marginalised people in mountain communities. Current mechanisms for access and control over commons, often through community management as in community forestry, in many cases do not produce equitable outcomes for poorer and marginalised communities. The paper concludes that areas needing urgent attention are 1) to take more of a livelihood focus in commons policies, 2) to end the assumption of homogeneity in community management, and 3) to build on existing customary rights.

Background

The Hindu Kush-Himalayan (HKH) region extends 3500 km from Afghanistan in the west to Myanmar in the east. It sustains approximately 150 million people and affects the lives of more than three times as many people in the plains and river basins below. This region is the world's highest mountain region and the most populous and fragile mountain area. It has an area of over 354 million hectares of which 11% is cropland; 17% forest; 41% pasture and rangeland, and 11% in protected areas. The last three categories of land use are the common property resources. Even after disregarding the parts of these areas that are inaccessible to mountain communities, common property resources constitute a major source of livelihood for local communities.

Common Property Resource Management in the HKH

The common property resources of water, timber and fodder are finite and their depletion leads to the degradation of remaining resources. These resources need to be systematically managed.

In the HKH, common property resources are in most instances managed within more than one type of institutional framework. Protected areas, such as national parks, increased from covering only 2.5% of the area in the early 1990s to 11% by 2002. The last decade has also seen increased commitment by the state to the community management of common property resources. The participatory management of commons through community forestry and joint forest management were introduced in the 1980s and 1990s. Also, forests and rangelands have been given on long term lease to households to use. Examples include the Household Responsibility System in China and the Leasehold Forestry Programme in Nepal.

Traditional institutions for managing these resources are found across the HKH. In India constitutional decrees recognise such institutions in Northeast India. In Uttaranchal, northwest India, the community management of village forests by elected forest councils (*ban panchayats*), has existed for more than 70 years. There are more than 6000 unofficial community managed forestlands that predate the formally constituted ones (Sarin 2001).

Some major problems encountered in the management of common property resources are related to the enforcement of rules. The inability of right-holders to enforce rules sometimes leads to them losing control over these resources. Many traditional common property resource institutions are declining because of external processes such as the inroads made by marketisation, or the introduction of new institutions that coopt community rights.

Poverty and Common Property Resources

Poverty means not having enough food, income and other inputs to maintain an adequate standard of living. A household's standard of living is also related to its access to natural, physical, financial, human, and social assets. It is usually the lack of an appropriate mix of assets that constrains people from generating and sustaining adequate livelihoods. Livelihoods are the capabilities, assets and activities needed for a means of living, and are sustainable when they can cope with stresses and shocks and maintain or enhance their capabilities.

A number of factors account for the widespread poverty amongst the people of the HKH. This area is largely outside the mainstream development process. It lacks sufficient infrastructure and development policies are biased to developing plains areas. As a result mountain areas experience high rates of out-migration. The HKH only offers limited alternatives to relying on local natural resources for supporting livelihoods.

Common property resources are a vital asset for HKH communities and it is particularly poor people who rely on them for their livelihoods. Loss of access to and control over them undermines people's livelihoods and exacerbates poverty. This leads to the loss of local and indigenous knowledge and in the long term degenerates the institutions that have traditionally maintained the commons. It is therefore crucial for the most vulnerable and needy groups to be assured access to and control over common property resources.

Equity in the Management of HKH Common Property Resources

The inequitable management of common property resources is a major impediment to alleviating poverty. Poor and socially marginalised people are often unable to influence life around them and the socio-political system means they have little say on decisions to do with access to common property resources. Also, their lack of land, livestock, and other assets limits their opportunities to exploit available resources.

The main issues related to equity in the management of common property resources in the HKH are social and gender concerns, the exclusion of distant resource users, the asset poverty of poorer groups, and the rights of recent settlers.

Social and gender issues

Local social structures and power relations have a strong influence on shaping, supporting, and sometimes thwarting the sustainable management of common property resources. In Nepal, influential forest user group members are often mostly from economically advantaged

groups and disadvantaged groups are often excluded (Graner 1997). Existing power structures, like patron-client relationships among users of common property resources, are characterised by a complex web of interdependent contracts which often restrict the inclusion of socially marginalised groups. Especially concerning decision making, the relative strength of some members often prevails over others. There is little evidence to suggest that more powerful interest groups want to facilitate equitable access for less powerful groups. This pertains to gender issues where traditional norms, social barriers, and the attitudes of fellow members often prevent women's involvement in making decisions.

Exclusion of distant resource users

In the participatory management of common property resources, such as community forestry and joint forest management, distant resource users such as seasonal grazers, have often been excluded from equitable access. The British government has supported many forestry projects in South Asia. Case studies of a number of these projects in India and Nepal (ODA 1996) found that certain groups such as seasonal graziers and pastoralists were excluded from benefiting from these initiatives. This is despite of the fact that participatory management regimes, like for example community forestry in Nepal, are meant to include all traditional users. Moreover, movement across countries in high altitudes which previously used to be effectively open, have become more restricted and pastoral groups have lost access to traditional grazing grounds. As a result these groups are restructuring their livelihood strategies often by out-migrating.

Poorer groups and resource endowments

Access and the 'harvesting' of resources from commons is often based on standard rules applicable to all members. This gives well-off groups, who have more assets such as land and livestock, a better opportunity to exploit resources. Within institutional rules each appropriator of common property resources will want to maximise their payoffs in terms of their differing needs for quantity and types of resources. So, more than often, the demands of economically poorer households are much less. Resource management in such a case will only be equitable if the poorer households increase their assets or identify other means through which they can benefit. The latter strategy has been little considered whilst formulating policies for managing common property resources.

Recent settlers and the management of commons

Customary laws are now being considered as a positive factor in the search for appropriate property regimes for the better use of common property resources. However, these laws are in some ways problematic. Traditionally unequal power relationships greatly affect how resources are distributed and managed. In many local societies gender relations are systematically skewed against equal rights to common property resources. Besides this, recent settlers in more permanent communities often have to abide by different rules that limit their access to common property resources. Customary laws are often far from democratic or equitable. In some cases, recent regimes for participatory management of common property resources reinforce customary inequities and sometimes introduce new inequities.

The Way Forward

Equity issues should be analysed and addressed from the global and national levels down to the inter- and intra-community and household levels. Each level has complex power relations that result in dominant groups getting disproportionate benefits. Social constructs of gender

and patriarchy apply at the household level while caste issues arise within communities. Ethnic and tribal identities apply between communities levels while the interests of nation states influence control over resources and the distribution of benefits at the global level.

Current mechanisms for access and control over commons, be they through global processes or national policies, often do not produce equitable outcomes for poorer and marginalised communities. Some of the areas that need urgent attention are the need for a livelihood focus in commons policies, an end to the assumption of homogeneity in community management, and the need to build on existing customary rights.

More livelihood focus in commons' policies

Current policies for managing commons in the HKH tend to give more importance to conserving the environment than strengthening livelihoods. Policies have been formulated mainly as a response to resource degradation. These responses include social forestry, the leasing out of degraded areas for regeneration, decentralising resource management, stricter penalties for illegal use, and bans on certain uses such as grazing and the felling of green trees. In the HKH there is a need for a shift towards promoting local livelihoods to increase the participation of poorer people in managing the commons.

The assumption of homogeneity in community management

A fundamental premise for the success of community management is the assumption of distinct communities that are relatively homogenous. However, in many ways this is not true as within the HKH the many caste, class, gender, and economic differences make communities heterogeneous. This diversity leads to varying power relations that allow differential command over resources. Policies for managing common property resources urgently need to acknowledge this diversity to facilitate the implementation of more equitable outcomes.

Existing customary rights

New developments should recognise the importance of customary rights. This will help to ensure that developments contribute to societies' quality of life, are in harmony with the environment, and do not undermine and destroy mountain peoples' livelihoods. Also, policies need to ensure the rights of mountain communities over their biological resources by giving traditional knowledge and technologies priority over individual or corporate use. It also needs to promote improved governance of these resources by mountain communities.

Local knowledge

The International Convention on Biological Diversity 1992, requires signatories to protect and promote the rights of communities, farmers and indigenous peoples to the customary use of biological resources and knowledge systems (Articles 8j and 10); and requires the equitable sharing of benefits arising from the commercial use of communities' biological resources and local knowledge (Article 15.7). While there is a broad consensus that benefit-sharing should include benefits for local communities, most of the debate on this issue focuses on benefit sharing at the national level. There is a great need to build up the capacity of poor and marginalised communities to press for the equitable sharing of benefits and to assert their control over resources and knowledge systems.

Conclusions

There are insufficient policies in the HKH that mainstream equity and poverty in the management of common property resources. Reasons for this include the lack of voice of marginalised peoples, policy-makers' tendency to ignore the needs of those who do not raise their voices, the lack of advocacy by civil society, and the neglect of the needs of poor and marginalised people.

Inequitable access to benefits from common property resources jeopardises their sustainable management because it causes conflicts and does not allow the participation of marginalised users. There is an urgent need for HKH countries to mainstream equity and poverty issues in policies and practice for the improved management of common property resources.

References

- Sarin, Madhu (2001) *From Rights Holders to 'Beneficiaries'? Community Forest Management, Van Panchayat and Village Forest Joint Management in Uttarakhand*. Bogor, Indonesia: Centre for International Forestry Research
- Graner, Elvira (1997) 'Kami (Blacksmiths) Today: Forests and Livelihood Security.' *Contributions to Nepalese Studies*, 24(2): 217-231, July 1997
- Mary Hobley (1996) *Participatory Forestry: The Process of Change in India and Nepal. Rural Development Forestry Study Guide 3*. London: Overseas Development Institute