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Policy Recommendations

This collaborative study provided useful insights and lessons that form the basis for certain broad policy recommendations that may help in designing future programmes and projects for promoting participatory forest management in the Himalayan region. The key recommendations are as follow.

Devolve power to local communities – The experience gained through these micro level case studies indicates that although decentralisation in forest management is progressing in all three countries, devolution of power and authority is not being given equal consideration. While the very nature of ‘participatory forestry’ calls for community involvement in the process of planning, implementation, and decision making, experiences gained through the projects show that real devolution of power to local people has yet to happen. It is, therefore, imperative for promoting participatory forest management that power and authority be devolved to local forest user communities.

Develop and strengthen effective community-based institutions – In promoting sustainable and participatory forest management practices, there is a need to develop and strengthen effective community-level institutions, clear rules and regulations, and strong linkages between national, district and community institutions in order to develop appropriate mechanisms for benefit sharing, conflict resolution, and financial incentives. An effective user group federation, such as FECOFUN in Nepal, can play an important role in promoting participatory forest management. It is therefore recommended to develop and strengthen community-based institutions for promoting participatory forest management.

Take positive action for disadvantaged groups – The needs of poor people, women, and disadvantaged groups are not automatically reflected in the management and operational decisions of user groups, as these people have little voice and capacity to negotiate with the elite class. Clear policy guidelines need to be developed and put in place towards the inclusion of disadvantaged sections of society in participatory forest management. Policies for positive discrimination, e.g., allocation of a certain percentage of forest area to poor and disadvantaged groups, are therefore recommended to create more opportunities for disadvantaged groups.

Promote a move from protection to active management, and subsistence to commercial production – Although participatory forest management provides support to livelihoods, its role in improving the quality of life of participants remains limited as the focus so far has remained on subsistence production. Experience from this study suggests that in order to improve the quality of life of rural people, mere forest protection

is not enough. It is necessary to enhance productivity and facilitate the move from subsistence to commercial production of timber and non-timber forest products as well as ecological services. It is necessary to improve silvicultural and resource management practices to increase productivity; for which the technological capacities of user groups must also be improved. Necessary policy and institutional support needs to be put in place, including training, credit, marketing services, and business development services, to facilitate a gradual shift from subsistence to commercial production.

Provide policy and institutional support – Field experience shows that decentralisation and giving responsibility to local people to manage forests is not enough. Local people continuously need new knowledge, improved and technical skills, latest information, and enabling support to manage forest and related natural resources more efficiently. The supporting role of NGOs or government agencies is crucial, particularly at the formative stage. Poor people, women, and other marginalised groups face many constraints to effectively exercising their rights to access the forest. Attention also needs to be paid to policy and legal support and an institutional framework with post project backstopping mechanisms in place. Many good initiatives for forest management and rural enterprise development become frustrated due to lack of enabling policies and institutional environments. Therefore, appropriate policies and institutional support need to be put in place.

Create new economic opportunities and market linkages – Forestry is a livelihood related activity for the mountain poor. In order to sustain participation in forestry related activities, new economic opportunities need to be identified and market linkages harnessed and developed to facilitate the move from subsistence-based activities to commercial enterprise. New and promising areas of activity based on local resources need to be identified and developed. Certification of organic products can also be pursued. The potential for carbon finance as an incentive and instrument for reducing poverty also needs to be explored.

Develop an integrated approach – The pursuit of forest management is consistent with sustainable development as it requires pursuing economic activities to improve the quality of life of the people concerned without affecting the regenerative capacity of the natural resources. Therefore, responsibility for forest management needs to go beyond forest departments. It is necessary to involve the concerned line agencies such as agriculture, livestock, soil, local government, and rural development for promoting sustainable forest management. An integrated approach needs to be taken to promote holistic forest management.

Provide continued international support – In the Himalayan countries, participatory forestry is not only a means of better resource management and regeneration of degraded forest, it is also an end in development activities as people's participation and empowerment are the main development goal of all the countries in the region. This is a daunting task. It is, therefore, imperative that international organisations, development agencies, and donor communities come together and continue their support to produce a more synergistic effect on participatory forest management and strengthen the process.

Empower local forest user communities – In order to manage forest effectively, special consideration needs to be given to empower poor and vulnerable people and socially excluded groups with new knowledge, information, skills, and technologies. It is imperative that the capacity of local organisations, government organisations, CBOs, NGOs, and service providers be built.