

## Chapter 8

# Summary and Conclusions

Nepal has gone a long way in terms of formulating a wide range of policies, plans, and regulatory instruments (Annex 3). In fact, many of these documents overlap. The inherent contradictions have often led to serious difficulties in their implementation. These have also provided a convenient excuse for the responsible agencies not to implement their provisions seriously. Hence it may be observed that many of the plans, policies and programmes appear only on paper, failing to produce the intended impacts. This is true across the broader macro-policy framework as well as in sectoral policies. The present study began by asking what specific impacts were generated by the policies adopted at different times in sectors and subsectors covered in the study. Yet, it was found that not many of the policies were actually implemented fully. In this concluding chapter, an attempt is made to synthesise in general terms the impact of different policies to the extent that these could be observed and deduced with some degree of reliability.

Land-related policies have their origin in various governmental development plans,

the National Conservation Strategy (HMGN/IUCN, 1988), NEPAP (EPC, 1993), and sectoral master plans and perspective plans. The effectiveness of implementation of these policies on the ground has, however, remained weak to non-existent.

Growth in agriculture, the largest sector of the economy, has remained virtually stagnant over a protracted period despite a number of plans and strategic approaches being followed in the past, often with donor encouragement. However, such plans have failed to give adequate attention to issues related to land ownership, tenurial arrangements, and potential impacts on soil fertility as intensive farming expands in hill and mountain areas. Agricultural research has failed to respond to the changing contexts of farming systems. Agricultural extension has similarly remained mostly incapable of assisting farmers. Women farmers are neglected in most programmes, and the cadre of women extensionists remains extremely meagre. Emphasis all along has been to treat all farmers (rich and poor, large and

small, men and women) equally. Agricultural development efforts are still target-oriented and based narrowly on increasing production, without attention to market potentials. A generalist approach is followed without regard to the diverse peculiarities of different agro-ecological regions and farmer categories.

All periodic plans, strategic documents, and action plans have invariably emphasised the need for giving high priority to soil fertility maintenance, particularly in the hills and mountains. However, continuously declining crop yields and the ever-worsening process of land degradation indicate that these policies have failed. Nepalese mountain and hill farmers face the critical problem of extensive land degradation. There is evidence to suggest that the amount of plant nutrients lost each year from the soil far exceeds the amount replenished through the application of organic manure and chemical fertilizer. As a result, crop yields have continually declined along with food security.

In terms of property rights and entitlements to productive assets and natural resources, the farmers of Nepal have limited access to such resources. Land and land-based resources have served as the principal source of economic surplus generated by the ruling classes. Concentration of land in the hands of a few elite classes and severe exploitation of the peasantry through the excessive expropriation of labour and land revenue have been the principal characteristics of rulers through much of the nation's history. Measures adopted at various times to alleviate the wretched condition of the peasantry became largely ineffective since the government was not serious about genuine reform. The overwhelming concern was to perpetuate the *status quo*, which was to safeguard the interests of the high-caste privileged classes. This is also true with regard to the

implementation of the Land Act of 1962. In Nepal, more than two-thirds of the total holdings are of less than one hectare of land, and are only 30 per cent of the total farm area. On the other hand 1.5 per cent of the holdings are in the more than five ha holding class and cover 14 per cent of the total farm area.

Landless and other chronically resource-poor households that are least affected directly by agricultural innovations and growth need special attention as employment opportunities expand on large farms and in non-farm sectors. Intervention to facilitate access to land is one of the options available to address the equity issue. Indeed, land redistribution and regulation of tenancy contracts are favoured both on equity and efficiency grounds.

Land fragmentation has emerged as another significant constraint. It is considered a structural problem inhibiting the modernisation of agriculture. Because of the scattered nature of farm parcels and, in many instances, owing to their economically non-viable size, farmers are hindered from adopting productivity-enhancing technologies that are otherwise readily available for their benefit.

In the forestry sector, the mechanism for implementing policies has been simply to launch projects that are often funded by the donor community, notably the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, FAO/UNDP, Japan, Germany, UK, Australia, the United States, Denmark, Finland, and Switzerland. As an example, Annex 4 provides a list of the major forestry sector projects implemented during the last 15 years. Many of them have been reported to have 'performed well' at the micro-level. The EDAW (1994) report, for instance, suggests that the NACFP has reversed the process of forest degradation that was occurring through the combined impact of

fires, overgrazing, and excessive harvesting of forest products. However, recent evidence from Sindhu Palchowk district shows that there are problems related to equity in community forestry. Forest user group committee members are predominantly from economically advantaged groups; they make most of the decisions and economically disadvantaged groups lose access to vital resources (Graner 1997). In many cases, community forestry has offered village elites legitimacy for their power and an opportunity to expand their political influence (Pokharel 1998).

Similarly, reports of environmental impacts of various forestry projects at the national level are pessimistic. Based on the latest national forest inventories developed from air-photo interpretation and satellite image analysis, the Forest Resource Information System Project has found that forest lands have been reduced by about nine per cent in 17 years (between the period 1979–96), and the rate of degradation of the existing forest is yet to be reversed (Table 8.1).

Such contradictory sets of data on the extent of environmental degradation in Nepal indicate that it is difficult to measure the extent and the causes of degradation in the country, and the reasons are much more complex than often believed. As Blaikie (1990) has concluded, seeking confirmation of land degradation can be a daunting task. The emphasis of government publications, received wisdom, and academic research at a particular point in time can so condition the perceptions of policy-makers that it is

difficult for any counter-intuitive results of research to gain credibility.

Whatever its factual basis, the environmental 'crisis' or the achievements made in this area have been used by both the Nepalese government and the donor community in different ways, in line with their own interests, approaches, and political convictions. In either context, the Nepalese government has been able to convince the donor community to produce aid flows. In fact, the majority of the donor agencies, who send their personnel directly or indirectly into government departments, end up merely doing the routine work of inefficient state services.

The views in this document may seem pessimistic and somewhat cynical in comparison with the rhetoric of official policy, legislation, and progress reports. However, even without rigorous evidence, the general state of the nation's policy environment, and its role in influencing land management and degradation, appears unsatisfactory. These findings come from the perceived reality of institutional incapability of government apparatus and non-sustainability of donor-funded projects and their environmental impact on the natural resource base and local population.

Any general problem of unsustainable resource use and biodiversity degradation, in Nepal as elsewhere, lies in the inability of the state. Any recommendation must therefore address this general issue first. While a good policy and legislation are necessary prerequisites, even when in place

**Table 8.1: Percentage Change in Forest and Shrubland Area in Nepal, 1979-1996**

Data sources	Forest area	Shrubland	Total
NFI (1990-96)	29.0	10.6	39.6
Master Plan (85-86)	37.4	4.8	42.2
LRMP (78-79)	38.0	4.7	42.7
Source: FRISP (1998)			

they are far from being effective instruments unless there are adequate mechanisms and commitment to execute seriously. There has to be the political will and institutional capability to manage resources in a sustainable way; but pervasive failures in governance have prevented this from taking place. It is only the weaker sections of society that are brought under the purview of the law, and powerful individuals involved in violations of law often escape through their influence.

Therefore, the implication of this type of study dealing with the socio-environmental impacts of official policies is that the currently growing dominance of populist rhetorics in the NGO sector, neo-liberal influences in the public sector, and historically inherited classical approach in the mindset of bureaucrats and technical professionals, should not be allowed to prevent critical reflection. Nor should the rhetoric of official policy blind one to innovate and search for radical alternatives that challenge the *status quo*. Evidence suggests that the poor have become victims of the negative impacts of government land policies that have contributed largely to environmental degradation.

Finally, with regard to decentralization, the *Panchayat* system, which was virtually a centralized monocratic system, empowered the elite (specialising in power games) rather than the people. Reports of most of the

committees/commissions formed by the government for suggesting better implementation of decentralization were never fully implemented. The bureaucracy as well as the national leaders and state institutions did not have faith in the people. Various policies related to decentralization were not implemented with sincerity because of the lack of a strong political commitment. The political change of 1990 has not altered the feudal structure of the Nepalese society. A few people still own most of the resources and the government is represented mostly by the power elite. State-owned natural resources are also siphoned off, mostly for the benefit of the elite class, while the majority of the poor have been pushed further into poverty and deprivation. Decentralization in the past never emphasised proper management of natural resources and sustainable development. The centre was never sincere in real deconcentration, decentralization, and devolution of power to local entities. Broader issues such as environmental conservation, land degradation, and sustainable development were never the subjects of discussion within the broader framework of decentralization. The latest Local Autonomy Act (1998) attempts to safeguard the interests of local entities by entrusting people to manage their own affairs. However, strong political commitment and bureaucratic support are needed to make this act operational and meaningful. Nepal's past experience does not lead to such optimistic expectations.