

The Development of Community Forestry

The 1970s and 1980s saw large amounts of donor funds being funnelled into community forestry, as different parts of the country were carved into projects. Initially, community forestry was seen to be the solution to the deforestation crisis: local people would plant more trees to meet their fuelwood needs. However, as projects gained experience, there was a more general questioning of the assumptions underlying the 'crisis' (see Thompson and Warburton 1985). Finally, project staff began to see forests and not just trees: local people had throughout this period of national and international sponsored reforestation continued to use and protect existing forests and trees on their own farmland to supply their needs. Hence, in the mid 1980s, several projects reappraised their interpretation of community forestry and began to examine the communities and their existing forest practices. This led to a major reorientation; projects together with DOF staff began to support local-level management of existing government-owned forests. This was a fundamental shift, from *panchayat* or village-owned land to DOF-owned land, which effectively refocussed attention on the management practices of natural forest areas. This called into question the abilities of villagers and DOF staff to effectively manage these resources.

The Government of Nepal's forestry sector policy was first declared in the Sixth Five Year Plan (1981-1985), which emphasised community participation in the management, conservation, and use of forest resources. This policy was further promoted with the passing of the Decentralisation Act (1982) and the 1984 Rules for its implementation. The Act and Rules aimed at handing over responsibility for planning to the *panchayat* and district levels. The act formalised the duties and responsibilities of village *panchayat*(s) and ward committees and empowered them to form:

People's consumer committees to use any specific forest area for the purpose of forest conservation and, through it, conduct such tasks as afforestation, and forest conservation and management on a sustained basis (Regmi 1982:403).

The Decentralisation Act and Rules went beyond the original *Panchayat* Forest Rules, which designated the village *panchayat* as the local institution for forest management. A 1988 amendment to the *Panchayat* Forest and *Panchayat* Protected Forest Rules of 1978 adopted the concept of the user group by referring to the Decentralisation Act.

In a more recent strategy paper for the Eighth Five Year Plan, emphasis was placed on the need for decentralising the planning and implementation of development programmes to the village and district levels (1992a:9). Underlying all the aspects of the strategy to promote rural development is the stated commitment to users organising their own services with government and other organisations acting in support of users. This was further developed by the new Decentralisation Act (1992) which strengthens the role of user groups as local-level development organisations.

Nineteen eighty-seven was a watershed in community forestry: at the end of this year, policy-makers, DOF field staff, and project staff came together in the first National Community Forestry Workshop held in Kathmandu. Recommendations from this workshop included the 'user group' concept which was later incorporated into the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (1988).

In 1988, the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, inspired by an international initiative to bring forestry throughout the world under a uniform strategic framework, was completed, using foreign and national expertise. It provides a policy and planning strategy for forestry into the twenty-first century, the first priority of which is to meet the basic forest product-related needs of local people through community forestry and private planting. Several actions are described below that will enable the implementation of this strategy.

- Phased handing-over of all accessible hill forests to the communities, to the extent that they are willing and able to manage them
- The need for an extension approach, aimed at gaining the confidence of the woodcutters and others, particularly women, who actually make the daily decisions
- Retraining the entire staff of the Ministry, for their new roles as advisers and extensionists (HMG/N, 1991a:14)

Community forestry is the priority programme of the forestry sector and has two major components:

- management of natural forests and enrichment planting of degraded forests, as community forests (previously known as *Panchayat Protected Forests*) and
- establishment and management of community plantations (previously known as *Panchayat Forests*) in open and degraded areas (HMG/N, 1991b:15).