

Who Are the Users?

The basis for community forestry development lies in the participation of all identified users in the management of local forests. The authority and responsibility for managing these forests is vested to the user group. Therefore, 'users' are the primary unit for consultation and decision-making. Users are now described as:

people who traditionally use a forest area for collection of forest products, grazing, cultural activities, etc. They include individuals with open access to the forest, 'illegal' users who are not recognised by other users, primary users, and, in some cases, secondary users. Primary users are those who regularly use the forest area and have locally recognised rights to obtain all forest products. Secondary users are those who occasionally use the forest area for a specific purpose or to obtain a specific product and are not given full rights by the primary users to obtain all forest products. (Operational Guidelines of the Community Forestry Programme, HMG/N 1992b).

The Community Forestry Guidelines also recognise two other important aspects which have a bearing on community forest management. The first is the interest group, people within the Forest User Group with a particular need or concern related to forest management. Examples are: livestock growing groups, wood sellers' groups, women's forest groups, and blacksmiths' groups. The second is the "Indigenous Management System; a system of social and technical arrangements which has been initiated by the local community for the management of a local forest or other community resource."

The focus on users led to a disaggregation of 'community' and 'village' to their constituent parts - individuals, men, women, rich, and poor. This, in turn, led to a questioning of social relationships and conditions governing access to forests and decision-making and to a realisation that the narrow technocratic boundaries of the forestry profession did not permit the development of appropriate social skills to facilitate equitable management of forest resources.

As experience and understanding grew, a framework for practice emerged, which defined the stages necessary for allowing the full participation of all users in forest management practices. The following section outlines the user group formation process. It draws on the approach described in the Operational Guidelines (HMG/ 1992b) but expands it to include a pre-identification stage which is necessary for the full participation of all users:

- Pre-Identification Phase:** This is a necessary preliminary stage so that the user group formation process can begin. This stage includes an initial identification of all forest users in the area under consideration, including primary and secondary users, as well as an assessment of their use needs and the management options which would accommodate these needs.
- Investigation Phase:** This stage includes establishing a good rapport with villagers and gathering social and technical information about the use of the forest as well as identifying the users and the community forestry area.
- Negotiation Phase:** This stage includes the formation of the forest user group, discussion and resolution of forest management issues within the forest user group, and reaching a consensus on approaches to management as well as the preparation and approval of an Operational Plan and the handing over of management responsibility for the community forest to the forest user group.
- Implementation Phase:** This stage includes carrying out approved forest management activities by the forest user group with the field staff monitoring these activities and providing requested advice.
- Review Phase:** This stage includes appraisal, revision, and renegotiation of an operational plan with the forest user group, either at the request of the users or upon expiry of the plan.

There is no reason to assume that there is a natural sense of 'community' upon which to found community forestry initiatives. Consensus over collective management of natural resources must be gained by accommodating the diverse private and sectional interests of the various groups which use the local resources; and this consensus must be carefully maintained if the resource is to be sustainably managed.

Whether CF or JFM is undertaken at the User Group level or the Village level, some interface with the locally-elected body, the *Panchayat* in India or the Village Development Council in Nepal, is necessary. West Bengal, in India, has resolved this issue by placing nominal control over forest protection committees at the second tier of the *Panchayat* government, the *Ban-o-Bhumi-Sanskar Sthayee Samithi* (forest and land committee). This committee recommends hamlet or village groups to the forest department for recognition as FPCs and has a representative on the executive committee of the village group. This prevents direct control by the village or first tier-level *Panchayat*, but retains the link between the village committee and the *Panchayat*.

In addition, there is a complex set of legal use rights, called *nistar* in Madhya Pradesh and Orissa, which determines who has access to particular forests and products. JFM rights and use agreements must take these into consideration.