

New Developments between Village-level Institutions

User groups and forest protection committees gain their authority through legal control over resources and the sanction of the forest department. This authority can be used or misused. In Nepal, there have been several instances in which local elites have gained control over the user group and, hence, over the forest. In India, some indigenous forest management groups seem to be dominated by Youth Clubs or certain village elders. Also, if informal management systems are replaced with formal structures, users who are traditionally excluded from public discourse, such as women, tribals, low caste groups, etc, may be marginalised. However, there are many cases in which users, who were previously virtually disenfranchised from the decision-making process, have greater access and, indeed, control, over decisions concerning the forests they use.

In order to develop the strength and the bargaining power of user groups, conscious attempts have been made in Nepal, and to a limited extent in India, to bring user groups together to form informal networks so that they can exchange ideas and experiences. This has been formalised in some areas of Nepal, where user groups meet on a regular basis at the range level to plan activities for the following year. There is a range-level budget to support these activities. In other instances, some user groups have registered as NGOs in order to gain greater access to the services offered by other agencies and organisations. In Gujarat a group of Tree Growers' Cooperative Societies, the *Lok Van Kalyan Parishad*, meets on the third of every month and now has its own newsletter, which is edited by VIKSAT, a facilitating NGO. In Orissa, there are a number of associations or fora of indigenous forest management groups. A large

Federation, coordinated by a coalition of grass roots' NGOs, includes 325 self-initiated community forest protection groups. For these groups, the fora provide an important platform for sorting out conflicts between different community groups.

The power of user group networks in Nepal was demonstrated recently by the national workshop. At this work workshop, representatives from user groups throughout the country exchanged experiences and made recommendations for operational changes. These recommendations were then presented at the Second National Community Forestry Workshop. This was the first time that users were able to express their views at a national forum where policy-makers were present.