

The Forest Bureaucracy: Current Problems and Future Directions

Although JFM and Community Forestry have been accepted at one level, the forest departments of India and Nepal still have a long way to go before completely internalising these radical changes. In Nepal, the bureaucracy in charge of developing community forestry is currently in a state of extreme flux. Recent reshuffles and cuts in the bureaucracy have led to redistribution of power: in an unprecedented move, most of the senior forestry staff were forced to retire.

Since the Forestry Department now holds the main extension role for developing community forestry throughout Nepal, the institutional structure, as a whole, may have to accommodate these new functions. The Department, which has a hierarchical policing role, is now expected to carry out a facilitative and advisory function. This has led to many contradictions within the system, including difficulties in decentralisation of authority and decision-making to field staff. Budgets and other structures of control within the bureaucracy are also formed in a way that is inimical to the implementation of community forestry, which requires flexibility and response to local need rather than centrally-imposed targets. The Koshi Hills' Community Forestry Project, in particular, has been helping the DFO staff to restructure local budgetary and reporting systems in order to allow for greater responsiveness and flexibility.

In India, where new state-level integrated forestry projects focus more on JFM, questions arise about the value of continuing to have separate wings for Social Forestry, Territorial Forestry, and Soil Conservation. Effective implementation of the community forestry and JFM programmes, in the short- to medium-term, leads to increased workloads for field staff as well as demands that they spend a lot of time in difficult working conditions. The vast size of some territorial divisions is being questioned as work becomes more time-intensive. Some department officials are considering amalgamating field staff from different wings so that the Deputy Conservators of Forests, Rangers, Foresters, and Guards can handle the growing number of forest protection committees.

New operating procedures may be required to delegate authority to lower levels. Incentives, in terms of salary and promotion, are limited. The practice of frequent staff

transfers is also inimical to the development of stable local relationships, which are necessary for effective extension work.

In India, the NGOs are seen as critical components of the JFM programmes. However, the debate over whether they should function primarily as facilitators, researchers, or community organisers, or get involved in actual field-level implementation of afforestation, still continues.

The effective implementation of community forestry requires that the bureaucracy strategise, prioritise, and plan according to field-level realities. This necessitates the establishment and functioning of a monitoring system, within the bureaucracy, which allows for the analyses of the process as well as the physical achievement of community forestry. The experience with working groups in India may be valuable to Nepal. In a number of states, including West Bengal, Gujarat, and Haryana, working groups, consisting of forest department staff, NGOs, and academics, have been set up at the state and, in some cases, circle or division level. These working groups identify key issues for research and monitoring and review the progress in the implementation of JFM in the field experiences, and they have been able to build up a body of process documentation and research literature for the programme. At the national level, the National Support Group, within the Society for Promotion of Wastelands' Development, attempts to distil experience nationally and disseminate this information. A national JFM research network, which crosses state borders, is working on research activities to try and understand the ecological, economic, and institutional elements of JFM.