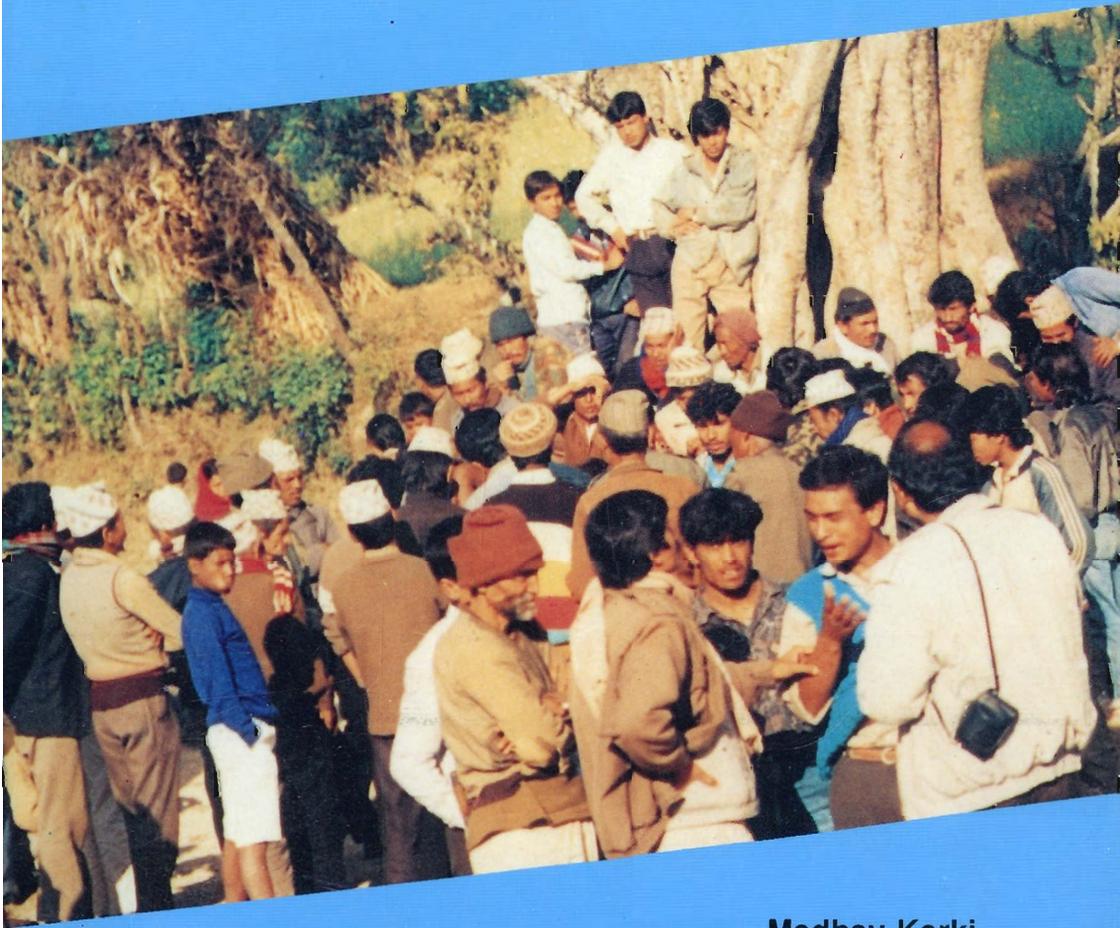




**SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF COMMON
FOREST RESOURCES: AN EVALUATION OF
SELECTED FOREST USER GROUPS IN
WESTERN NEPAL**



**Madhav Karki
Jay B.S. Karki
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SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF COMMON FOREST RESOURCES: AN EVALUATION OF SELECTED FOREST USER GROUPS IN WESTERN NEPAL

Foreword

(Case Studies of Palpa District and The Phewa Watershed)

Madhav Karki
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Foreword

This study is one in a series commissioned by ICIMOD to provide insights into community-managed forests. Continued access to forest resources is crucial for people living in mountainous regions, particularly those who have limited access to non-farm employment and markets.

The over-exploitation of limited resources and the sustainability or unsustainability of carrying capacities are matters of continual concern for all these who work for the betterment of living conditions in the Hindu Kush-Himalayas.

It is already becoming clear that the successes of user group forestry vary, and that much depends upon the clear-cut identity of the groups, clearly specified user rights, and the bases on which these are determined. Conflict resolution would appear to be another important issue that needs serious consideration.

At what point any given user group becomes or became, institutionalised is another important perspective. Some groups have existed, whether formally or informally, for quite long periods of time and have survived all manner of reform to emerge in the latter day as Forestry User Groups. User groups exist with varying degrees of success.

All this should indicate to us the overwhelming importance of the forests and their products to village dwellers throughout the mountainous regions.

What is becoming clearer as these studies emerge is that the indicators for successful management of a forest by a user group are not constant. Hence, ICIMOD's interest in looking for both the commonalities and the differences in User Group management.

ICIMOD organised these case studies on User Groups with a specific framework in mind; i.e., to identify key internal variables (those within the community); and to identify key external variables (those outside the community). It is hoped that eventually ICIMOD will be able to record the different typologies and their practical implications for planning and management of natural resource use at different spatial levels. At this time I am already confident that this document will serve as an important tool in sensitising and educating students of the Institute of Forestry, Pokhara, as well as many others about the importance of local level national resources' management. The authors of this particular book on User Groups have put in a lot of effort to complete it. They have acknowledged those who have helped them in doing so, but I would here like to reiterate those thanks in acknowledging the patience and enthusiasm of the forest users who helped with this study. I would like to thank the Ford Foundation (New Delhi) and more specifically Dr Jeffrey Campbell for the financial support provided to undertake this study and its publication. I should also like to thank Dr Mahesh Banskota, Director of Programmes, ICIMOD, for organising these studies and for the special attention he has given them.

Egbert Pelinck
Director General

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This work would not have been possible without the overwhelming response and cooperation shown by the forest users of Palpa district and the Phewa Watershed. We specially thank the User Group Committee officials as well as the Group members who shared their ingenuity, knowledge, and ideas with us. We sincerely acknowledge their intellectual contribution, of which this report forms a part.

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Madhav Karki

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Executive Summary

The evaluation study of User Group Forestry in Palpa district and the Phewa Tal Watershed near Pokhara revealed that both areas are gradually progressing towards full transfer of management authority and tree tenure rights to the users. Seven out of twenty-five Forest User Groups (FUGs) in Palpa and two out of four FUGs in Phewa were studied in terms of their structure, function, and performance. The major highlights of the findings are as follows.

1. FUGs in Palpa were in a more advanced stage of managerial skill, technical know-how, and group cohesion than those in the Phewa area. Although the groups in the Phewa area have been in existence for a much longer period than those in Palpa, due to inadequate addressal of long-term sustainability factors at the initial stages in the former, the users were found to lack the clear perception, forceful drive, and adequate group cohesion that were evident in Palpa. The research team concluded that, in general, Palpa FUGs were more successful, effective, and efficient than those in the Phewa Watershed.
2. Both external and internal forces were found to affect FUG effectiveness and functioning. The chief external factors were type and amount of subsidies, attitude of the District Forest Office (DFO) staff, extent of the market for forest products, nature of other development project activities, and approach of the donor agencies concerned. The major internal factors were ethnic composition; leadership quality; extent of fuelwood, water, and fodder scarcity; level of (especially female) literacy; availability of and/or potential of alternate energy sources; size of land/livestock holdings; and level of poverty. There was close interfacing between the internal and external forces and, depending upon the specific factor linkages, the association either multiplied the favourable effects leading to an improvement in the forest quality or altogether they combined with negative forces leading to degradation.

3. There was strong correlation between the quality and quantity of biological (biomass) resources and FUG effectiveness. Both in Palpa and Phewa, users were simultaneously using at least three different forest patches, both legally and illegally. The per capita forest area in Palpa was higher (0.28ha) than in Phewa (0.20ha). However, there were significant differences in the stocking rates of forests within each area. Under the current pattern of forest use, which is based on the harvesting and utilisation of 'lops, tops, and drops', a higher per capita forest acreage could lead to greater effectiveness of UGF (User Group Forestry) forest management.
4. The socio-psychological variables (knowledge, awareness, perception, attitude, skill, and participation) were highly important indicators of User Group (UG) functioning, effectiveness, and sustainability. These variables needed to be favourable (both in the case of the majority of the user members as well as the concerned government staff) for achieving improvement in community forestry outputs. Education, training, observations, visits, demonstrations, and participation were found to improve their indicative socioeconomic characteristics.
5. Tree and land tenure, although an important variable, was not found to be of great concern to the sampled users, perhaps due to the well publicised policy of User Group Forestry. The handing over of forests, through an officially approved operational plan, was found to adequately assure the users about their full ownership rights over trees. Land ownership, of course, rested with the Government but the users either did not think that it was an important issue or simply did not seem to care about it, at least for now.
6. Women's participation and attitude were crucial variables for an effective, well-functioning, and potentially sustainable FUG. The women, who were participating out of self-interest and self motivation, were educated, and had full family and community support, tended to contribute considerably in shaping and enforcing the FUG rules, resolving conflicts, and planning and implementing new technical programmes. However, the women, who had been nominated by the leaders and/or government officials, belonged to the backward castes, were poorly educated, and did not have full family/social backing, tended to

contribute less and behave as passive participants in the management of FUG affairs. The women's voice, if presented collectively, was found to win the support of the male majority to their cause.

7. The professional staff members in the study areas were poorly motivated, weakly organised, and inadequately trained. Their functioning tended to be highly dependent upon the style, philosophy, and temperament of the DFO or the Project Chief. While natural resource problems in the areas clearly demanded multi-disciplinary solutions, the approaches forwarded by the forestry staff were single-pronged and territorial in nature. During the evaluation period, both the Palpa and Phewa offices had good leadership and our evaluation of their work is favourable. Their understanding of, commitment to, and attitude towards the User Group community forestry approach was highly favourable. They were found to be largely successful in rallying their junior staff to support their own thinking and practices. However, the research team's concern was that there is no mechanism to guarantee that this tempo will be maintained in the future. Apart from the frequent transfers and absence of professional staff, the attitude, directive, and philosophy of regional and central level officials were also found to affect the working pattern of the district level staff.
8. Although UGF in both the study areas had the potential of leading to sustainable forestry, the Government's own material and technical commitments should not be diminishing at least at a time when this new community forestry approach has just taken root. So far the trend is to request hand over of the natural forests only. There is a profound need to encourage and support user group participation and investment in developing plantation forests as well. The recent trend of cutting down the budget allocated for travel, afforestation, and plant materials as well as reduction of staff strength should be stopped, if not reversed. Alternatively, more cost-effective afforestation techniques, such as the one attempted by the Palpa DFO, should be adopted.
9. The procedure for transferring forest ownership from the DFO to the FUGs has not yet been standardised. It needs further refinement based on the lessons learned from different parts of the country. The practice of rangers

writing the operational plans and getting them formalised from the 'users' does not seem to work well, as seen in Bharkesh FUG in Palpa. The committee should be formed after the draft operational plan has been formulated through all the users' involvement and approved by the general body meeting of the group. The rangers' involvement in organising meetings should be reduced to the final appraisal of the plan and monitoring of implementation only. The membership issue should not be finalised in haste and it should be resolved so as to minimise intra-group and inter-group conflicts.

10. Some of the successful FUGs should be developed as technology and information transfer centres. It was found that Mulgaira and Hungi FUGs in Palpa and Turung in Phewa had created 'chain effects' among the neighbouring communities and had successfully induced them to organise the users into similar groups. The DFOs should use such resources for extension purposes. While the picture of user group forestry in Palpa may appear rosy, there are still institutional, technical, and socioeconomic issues that need to be monitored continuously and resolved to truly sustainable forest management.
11. The sustainability of the FUG was concluded to be generally indicated by the increasing productivity of resources, a dynamic balance between the demand and supply of basic forestry products, a satisfactorily (as perceived by the users) functioning FUG committee, and continuous innovativeness in the institutional development approach.
12. With the rapid expansion of FUGs in each district, a well-organised monitoring and evaluation unit (M&EU) needs to be set up at the district and at the regional levels. Perhaps a monitoring unit at district level and an evaluation unit at regional level could be an ideal set-up. A member of the district-level FUG association, a network of all the FUGs in a district, could be one of the members of the monitoring unit. This unit will monitor the FUG activities, help transfer technology, address equity issues, and resolve inter-group conflicts.
13. User Group Forestry may not be the panacea for all the ills found in "conventional community forestry" but due to the lack of better alternatives at present, this approach is

indeed one of the best of all the available approaches. Further refinement of this approach may lead to sustainable community forestry. At least, this is all one can hope for now.