

1. BACKGROUND

ICIMOD'S Participatory Natural Resources' Management Programme

ICIMOD's Participatory Natural Resources' Management Programme grew out of the realisation that declining availability of biomass to meet basic needs, such as fuel, fodder, and even food, is one manifestation of the increasing rural poverty in mountain areas. This is a consequence of the decline in area and productivity of those community resources often called common property resources. In addition, evidence of the ineffectiveness of state interventions in ensuring protection, development, and the regulated use of these resources is increasing. The failure of state-adopted measures to protect and manage natural resources has lent an urgency to the search for alternative development strategies. This has led to the emergence of 'people-centered participatory management of resources'.

Recently, successful initiatives involving participatory approaches to development, harnessing of natural resources through community forestry programmes, farmer-managed irrigation systems, user group-managed pasture development, and joint management of forests have been seen in Asia and other parts of the world. Their approaches and performance have been recorded by various field studies.

ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development) has been closely associated with such initiatives, particularly those related to community forestry in different countries of the Hindu Kush-Himalayan Region. Through this association and field-level observations, ICIMOD has identified the strengths and gaps of such initiatives. A key weakness is their ad hoc and sporadic nature. There is no mechanism to collect, synthesise, and exchange the varied experiences. Equally important is the general lack of a conceptual framework which can facilitate the integration of various issues, problems, and prospects of people-centered, participatory natural resources' management initiatives. Furthermore, despite flexibility and innovation, institutions supporting participatory natural resource management can only encourage and support dissemination of the experiences and are often unable to provide leadership to new and innovative participatory initiatives.

Recognition of this institutional lacuna in the region led to the emergence of ICIMOD's Participatory Natural Resources' Management Programme in 1993. ICIMOD has a comparative advantage in carrying out activities related to participatory natural resources' management. This advantage is based on ICIMOD's intercountry perspective and ability to study, observe, and work in any country of the Hindu Kush-Himalayas; its operational flexibility and autonomy that allows innovative and unconventional approaches to be tested; and its decentralised mode of operations. In addition, through its past work, ICIMOD has synthesised inter-country experiences and has undertaken action research, field demonstration, and policy and programme advocacy and replication. ICIMOD has also brainstormed on a number of issues and established contacts with regional governments and national institutions in its member countries.

Formation of the Nepal *Madhyasthata Samuha* (NMS)

The emergence of conflicts in community forestry and over other natural resources is an area of growing concern. There is growing consensus that the future will place increasing pressure on institutions to look for ways and means to resolve conflicts. Although institutions have experience of conflicts, examples of efforts to resolve them are rare. Introducing processes to

build institutional capacities to deal with conflicts is imperative. Although few empirical studies of the negative consequences of unresolved conflicts in social, economic, and environmental terms exist, experience indicates a possible correlation between unresolved conflicts and degradation of natural resources. The presence of conflicts also prevents the introduction of community-based forest management systems.

The Participatory Natural Resources' Management Programme introduced a collective process to focus attention on this issue and to build capacities for conflict resolution. The Nepal *Madhyasthata Samuha* (Nepal Mediators' Group) was established in August 1994 to stimulate collective discussions on the issue of natural resources' related conflicts and their resolution. In addition to sharing institutional needs and concerns, one of the main aims of the process was to discuss the idea of forming a Nepal Country Team to explore participation in a training programme on conflict resolution. This nine-day programme was held by the Regional Community Forestry Training Centre (RECOFTC) in Bangkok in December 1994. The initial members of the Nepal *Madhyasthata Samuha* were drawn from the Community and Private Forestry Division of the Department of Forests of HMG/Nepal, bilateral forestry projects, non-government organisations, research organisations, and professionals-including one lawyer.

Crucial decisions made at the first meeting included a consensus on the importance of conflict resolution and a commitment to participate in processes that would strengthen members' abilities to resolve conflicts. The concept of a Nepal Country Team participating in the RECOFTC programme was endorsed. To make the process more interactive, the group decided to document examples of conflicts and their resolution in their work and to contribute case studies which could be presented in Bangkok. A further decision was to run a one-day open seminar on conflict resolution, following the Bangkok workshop, to share experiences and discuss future action with other individuals and institutions in Nepal.

One concern expressed by members was that the experience gained at the RECOFTC workshop should not remain centralised in any one Kathmandu-based institution, but that mechanisms should be designed to ensure wider and accessible dissemination.

Training Programme on Conflict Resolution

A major milestone for the NMS was the participation of the Nepal Country Team in the RECOFTC's Bangkok workshop, where they presented five case studies. Four of the case studies were generated and prepared by NMS members. The fifth study was commissioned by the Asia Foundation. NMS members who participated in the workshop agreed that the course imparted new skills and methodologies for resolving and addressing conflicts in community forestry in Nepal and the South Asian region. Feedback from the resource persons at the workshop was extremely positive. The Nepal Country Team was the most focussed and effective and was articulate and constructive in the training programme. The case studies from Nepal were well-received and considered to be contributions to the growing literature on conflict resolution in community forestry. They were earmarked for use for other learning opportunities in different parts of the world.

Seminar on Conflict Resolution

Planning for the seminar began in January 1995. The main aim of the seminar was to introduce a process to sensitise policy-makers to conflicts and their implications. Because understanding

of the causes and impact of conflicts is inadequate, **an enlightened policy for natural resources management can only emerge out of better understanding and increased awareness.** The NMS wanted to initiate an ongoing process of awareness-building which, in the long run, could lead to enabling and sensitive policy formulation. An accompanying objective of the seminar was to share tools and techniques related to mediation and conflict resolution and to give participants an idea of the constructive options which could be used to resolve conflicts.

It was decided that the seminar would be designed around the five case studies generated by the *Samuha*. Community members from forest user groups from some of the case study sites, as well as representatives from the Department of Forests, were to be invited. Taking into account the presence of community members, it was agreed that the seminar design would not be paper-oriented but interactive dialogue-oriented, and Nepali was selected as the language to be used during the seminar. A list of potential participants was prepared by the members.

Planning Meeting for Seminar

The community members and forest staff from the case study sites were requested to arrive before the workshop officially started, and a half-day seminar-planning session was held with them on 24th April, 1995. Participants included NMS members and community forest user group members from Kabhre and Gorkha districts.

Manohar Lal Shrestha, from the Training Division of the Department of Forests, HMG/N, spoke briefly about the purpose of the meeting and the seminar. After the opening remarks from the user group members, participants broke up into three groups to discuss how to present the case studies from the Buchhung, Jalbire, and Bokse sites the next day.

Discussions were generated on the conflicts, issues arising from the conflicts, and suggested approaches to conflict resolution. The meeting concluded with each small group sharing the results of its discussion with the larger group. These reports were made by Sapana Malla (Jalbire), Sharada Kharel (Bokse), and Netra Tumbahangphe (Buchhung).