



Seeing the Forest Through the Trees

Community forestry in Nepal

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Forests are critically important in Nepal because more than 70 percent of the country's population derives some part of its livelihood from them. Farmers depend on forests for green fodder to feed their livestock, particularly during the dry season when forests are often the only available source of fodder. They depend on forests for firewood, both as energy for cooking and heating, and as a source of income from sales to others. And they depend on forest products such as wild edibles and medicinal plants for both sustenance and income.

In Nepal, innovative approaches to policymaking, combined with novel methods for organizing community action, have played a critical role in improving and diversifying forest-dependent rural livelihoods during the past three decades. Community forestry programs have been so successful that today, one-third of Nepal's population participates in community forestry, directly managing more than 1 million hectares of natural forest, or one-fourth of Nepal's forest area.

Community forestry, at its most basic level, implies that the state cedes forest land under its control to rural communities. These communities become the primary caretakers and beneficiaries of the natural forests, with the state providing varying degrees of guidance and support through public policies and programs. The key to making these programs work is the active engagement of local communities in the day-to-day and long-term management of forests in a sustainable manner.

While community forestry programs in Nepal have directly contributed to improving

rural welfare by increasing household access to both food and income sources, it is the indirect impact of these programs that is the underlying success. Community forestry in Nepal illustrates the vital importance of “getting governance right” or providing the poor with the capacity to own and manage their natural resources. By elevating communities to the role of custodians, managers, and beneficiaries of the country's bountiful forests, and by supporting this effort with a strong legal and regulatory framework and robust civil-society networks, Nepal has strengthened the contribution of communities to both local development efforts and to the country's national development discourse.

The Emergence of Community Forestry in Nepal

For centuries, many rural communities in Nepal have relied on the country's forests for their livelihoods, using the forest's resources in ways that ensured continued availability for future generations. But by the 1970s, things had begun to change. Population growth, along with government mismanagement, was putting new pressures on the forests, and the global environmental movement was drawing attention to the plight of the world's dwindling forests. In Nepal, the forests were in the midst of a double crisis affecting both the sanctity of the Himalayas and the livelihoods of its inhabitants.



Community forestry improves access to raw materials, Nepal

In response to this crisis, technical and financial support began to pour in from international agencies to establish forest plantations as a quick fix to the problem of degradation in the Himalayas. But in 1978, the Government of Nepal introduced new regulations that provided local government bodies known as *panchayats* with limited rights to manage designated forest areas. Community forestry programs—initially driven by international agencies, but later taken over by local organizations—began to emerge rapidly in Nepal.

Community forestry gained momentum throughout the 1980s, and in 1993, Nepal introduced the Forestry Act, a radical piece of legislation that allowed forest-dependent communities to directly participate in and take control of forest management at the local level. Nepal's forest-management strategy soon evolved from a traditional protection-oriented, conservation-focused agenda to a much more broad-based strategy for forest use, enterprise development, rural governance, and livelihoods improvement.

At the heart of Nepal's system of community forestry were organizations known as “community forest user groups” (see Table 6.1). These user groups are officially recognized under the 1993 Forestry Act, and provide members with the right not

only to use the forest's resources for their own livelihoods, but also the responsibility to manage the use of the forest sustainably. Because they are legal entities, user groups can operate with a high degree of autonomy from arbitrary bureaucratic actions, and they can collaborate with any civil-society or private-sector organization of their choice, rather than relying solely on the government's forest department for services and support.

A user group may include all members of a village, a select subgroup of households, or people from another village or district. The main idea is that the group should be inclusive rather than exclusive of households in the village. In practice, all households of one or more villages become members of a user group, thus representing a range of people with different interests in using the forest's many resources—such as fodder, firewood, wild edibles, spices, medicinal plants, resins, irrigation water, and drinking water.

A user group is led by executive committees that are selected and supervised by annual assemblies of group members. With assistance from forest officials or nongovernmental organizations, user groups develop management plans that outline the goals, activities, and rules governing the use of forest products. Beyond these common structures and procedures, however, user groups have substantial flexibility in defining their own structures and roles. Some operate on the basis of *tole* or hamlet-based decisionmaking, while others are managed by subgroups with their own common interests. Given the diversity of rural Nepal, this flexibility means that each group can tailor itself to local needs, while also nurturing

Table 6.1—Community forestry impacts in Nepal, c. 2008

Indicator	Number	Share
Community forestry user groups	14,439	
Districts with community forestry operations	75	100 percent
Households engaged in community forestry programs	1.7 million	32 percent of total population
Area (hectares) of forest under management by community forestry user groups	1.2 million	25 percent of total forest area

Source: Nepal Department of Forests. 2009. Community forestry database. Kathmandu, Nepal.

cultures of democratic governance at the local level.

User groups may also raise money from the forests that they manage. Their revenues may come from a variety of sources, including fees collected from members or outsiders in exchange for permission to collect forest products. Under the 1993 Forest Act, while user groups can retain 100 percent of the revenues generated collectively from their forests, they must designate 25 percent of this income for community-development activities. Revenues vary among user groups depending on the size and quality of their forests, and range from US\$50 per year in the high hills to \$1,200 in the Terai region.¹

The area of forest managed by any given user group varies substantially, ranging from less than 1 hectare to more than 4,000 hectares, with an average size of 79 hectares.² Similarly, the size of each user group can range from less than a dozen to more than 10,000 households, with the average user group having 111 households.³

Local Impact, Local Empowerment

Today, though the state retains ownership of forests in Nepal, its role has shifted from policing forest use to assisting community forest groups in the management of their precious natural resources. The handoff of forestry management in 1993 to communities helped rural households expand and diversify their livelihood options.

While poor households had little to gain from using the forests as a source of commercial timber because of the high upfront costs associated with this business, they had much to gain from other uses of the forests. Poor households benefit from the consumption and sale of fodder, firewood, wild edibles, and medicinals, as well as from the income generated through relatively new activities like nursery management, spice cultivation, and resin tapping.⁴ Several studies have found that members of user groups in Nepal have gained substantially from forest-based incomes, while other studies have demonstrated that these groups have yet to harness the full revenue potential of their community forests, although more in-depth analysis of these impacts is required.⁵ Importantly, forests have also proven to be an important safety net for many of the poorest households, especially those without access to land for agricultural cultivation.

The benefits of community forestry are not limited simply to what individuals and households can consume or sell. Revenues generated by user groups have also been used for community investments. This includes investments in improving irrigation canals, expanding water-distribution systems, supplementing teachers' salaries, providing small loans for community members, and building schools or other public buildings.⁶

There are also several less tangible benefits of community forestry in Nepal. While user groups play an important role in managing forests, they have also been central to promoting social inclusion and grassroots democracy throughout Nepal.⁷ These aspects were given a boost in the 1990s with the formation of a network of user groups established to represent local interests at the national level. Known as the Federation of Community Forestry Users (FECOFUN), this nationwide network emerged as a key player in forest-sector policy debates and brought civil-society perspectives into the policymaking process that were previously overlooked and unheard. This effort was no small feat given the prolonged insurgency and political upheavals that have plagued Nepal in recent decades.

Challenges and Remedies

Ensuring that marginalized groups are benefiting equally from community forestry has proven to be a challenge. In some communities, traditionally disadvantaged groups—the poorest households, women and female-headed households, lower caste and *Dalit* (outcast) households, and certain ethnic minorities—have not benefited equally nor enjoyed the same level of participation that would be expected in a community-managed effort. Often, wealthier households and male leadership not only control forest management decisions, but also impede poor households' access to forest products or infringe on the forest areas allocated to them.⁸

Efforts have been made to introduce explicit provisions to protect and support marginalized groups in the community, and to designate forest resources and community revenues to the marginalized. Among women, despite the enduring social norms that discourage women's political participation, greater participation has been observed in recent years, while women-only user groups, though few in number, have been operating successfully. But it is likely that these equality

issues, many of which are being articulated on the national policy agenda, will take time to resolve.

A Good Prognosis for Sustainability

Three decades of innovation in community forestry indicate that the intervention is a highly sustainable one. Politically, community forestry is supported by a strong legal and regulatory framework and has won the confidence of many national policymakers, civil-society organizations, and the international development community. The continuing popularity of community forestry can be seen in the increased number of user groups that have formed over time (for example, from 10,969 user groups in 2002 to 14,439 in 2009), the area of forest handed over for community management, and the number of households and families involved.⁹ And while support from a variety of stakeholders is needed to sustain community forestry, ultimately its long-term success depends most importantly on the strong interests of local communities in forest governance, their capacity to do the job, and their adoption of a sustainable approach to forest management. So far, communities appear to be up to the task, and user groups have become durable institutions supported by an active and vibrant network of user-group federations, all contributing to the sustainability of community forestry in Nepal.

In economic terms, the prospects are promising, although more needs to be done. Since community forestry began about 30 years ago, the level of donors and government contributions has decreased while the involvement of nongovernmental organizations and user group networks has expanded. User groups currently absorb a little more than 70 percent of their own operating costs (primarily in terms of labor costs and small financial outlays), with donors and the government each contributing the remaining 15 percent.¹⁰

From an environmental and ecological standpoint, there is strong evidence indicating that community-forestry practices have improved forest conditions. Forest coverage has increased in some areas under community management according to measures drawn from satellite imagery and aerial photography.¹¹ Forest conditions, as measured by such indicators as sapling densities and diameters, also have improved.¹² To further promote sustainable forestry manage-

ment, the government and other stakeholders are exploring the possibilities of forest carbon marketing from community forestry.

Keys to Success: An Enabling Political Environment and Strong Civil Society

Three decades of operational innovations, legislative developments, and evolving practice have clearly demonstrated success in terms of enhancing access to forest products, improving livelihoods opportunities for forest-dependent people, and strengthening local organizational capacity. Community forestry appears to have stood the test of time, contributing to the improvement of livelihoods, civic strengthening, and the engagement of Nepal's large rural population. The experience offers several lessons.

- **Learning through experience is the key to success.** Community forestry has evolved into a complex institutional network that requires actors to work collectively in a learning mode. Even when there is an absence of political consensus or a well-defined legal framework, collaborative learning has allowed for continuous improvements in Nepal's model of community forestry.
- **A strong civil-society network is a critical part of community forestry success.** Civil-society networks have played a central role in influencing the development of community forestry, especially in terms of safeguarding community rights and ensuring the autonomy of community action from regressive government actions and intrusive private interests.
- **Diverse practice should be allowed to emerge through flexible regulatory arrangements.** Although conceived as a unified program of community forestry, diverse modalities have emerged in practice. User groups vary from a dozen households to several thousand, and the group structure varies from informal sharing and coordination mechanisms to highly formalized organizations. These are important adaptive responses to the diversity of contexts in Nepal.

Community Forestry: A Global Perspective

During the past decade, more than 22 countries in Africa, Asia, and South America reformed their national forest policies to expand community forestry rights.^a In fact, by 2008, an estimated 27 percent of the total forested area in developing countries was designated for administration or ownership by communities, and this trend continues to grow.^b

Most of these policy reforms aim to improve livelihoods for forest-dependent people and achieve more sustainable forest management. They typically provide communities with harvesting rights over forest products, and management responsibilities such as forest monitoring. Governments and communities typically share forest-related revenues based on a predetermined profit-sharing metric.

Nepal stands out as a notable success in being able to move beyond several of the early implementation hurdles that stymie many other countries. For instance, Nepal successfully developed a strong policy and institutional framework, and provided relative autonomy for communities to harvest forest products and undertake a wide range of forest management and enterprise-based activities. Other countries with notable community forestry programs include Cameroon (1.1 million hectares or 5.7 percent of total forest area), Mexico (38.7 million hectares or 59 percent of total forest area), and Tanzania (2.35 million hectares or 6.5 percent of total forest area), where there has also been substantive transfers of forest-resource tenure rights over to communities.^c India is another country that stands out because of its sheer quantity of forest under collaborative management between communities and government—17 million hectares or 25 percent of the country's forest area.

In spite of its increasing popularity, community forestry has been slow to get off the ground in many other countries. Critiques often focus on a perceived reluctance by governments to cede control to communities, as well as the limited scope for communities to benefit in this system of forestry governance. With continued research on the public policies and grassroots action necessary to make community forestry succeed on a large scale, including research on its impact on a range of indicators at the household and community levels, this intervention is likely to play an increasingly important role throughout the developing world. It may be particularly important in the context of growing global concerns over climate change, where a new emphasis on linking community forestry and carbon markets potentially offers a valuable means of mitigating carbon emissions while generating revenues for poor rural communities.

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- **Open and responsive attitudes of government officials are key to a collaborative learning processes.** The development of community forestry was in part triggered by the open and responsive attitude of government officials, and was followed by the gradual development and institutionalization of a multistakeholder process of collaboration. Community forestry

is no longer a government program alone or a foreign aid-driven activity, but a complex governance regime for forest-dependent communities. ■

NOTES

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