

A framework for initiating forest certification in Nepal

Kumud Shrestha

For the past several years there is continuous increase in awareness has increased on sustainable use of forest throughout the world. Industries in Europe are demanding forest products from certified forests. With growing awareness on use of certified products, it is possible that forest certification could be mandatory for any countries to access international market. As using international experts for forest certification will be costly, Nepal could initiate its own forest certification system with participation of all stakeholders. Here, I have proposed- **np cert** to initiate Nepal's own certification system. This will enhance in-country capability and forest certification will be cheap and affordable to Nepalese proponents. At the same time this experience will give enough basis even if Nepal have to adopt international forest certification system. There may not be any benefit in accessing international market if forest certification become voluntary. But, this risk could be very expensive if we do not initiate national forest certification process as soon as possible. In additions, as np-cert is linked to sustainable forest management (SFM), which is socially, environmentally and technically better system, it will pay additional advantages to the country in the long run.

Key words: forest certification, sustainable forest management, certification standard

Sustainable forest management as defined by Ministerial Conference in Protection of Forest in Europe, 1993 *means the stewardship and use of forests and forest lands in a way, and at a rate, that maintains their biodiversity, productivity, regeneration capacity, vitality and their potential to fulfill, now and in future, relevant ecological, economical, and social functions at local, national and global levels, and that does not cause damage to other ecosystems*

People living in the world are worried of deforestation. Thus, need of sustainable forest management is the concerns of global population. Assuring international population that the products they are buying is coming from the forest managed in the sustainable way is the present day's challenge. The latter could be met only through forest certification.

Pan European Forest Certification (PEFC) has defined forest certification as an assessment from an independent, qualified and accredited expert who verifies in writing that the forest management practice comply with a series of collectively agreed performance standard for sustainability.

Similarly, chain of custody certification assures that the basic forest products or wood is coming from certified forests through the product flow accounting

system when forest products are transformed from one product to another. This has been made mandatory by the wood using big furniture companies in Europe such as IKEA, B and Q, many paper companies like Assi Domain who initiated liquid packaging papers known as tetrapack and others. International NGOs like Green Peace, Friends of the Earth, WWF are advocating to use products with logo of certified forests. Forest certification expedites easy access to market. Today goods are also produced from non-certified forests and sold, but they may not be far when majorities of companies in Europe buy only certified forest products, and none from non-certified ones.

One may argue easily that the price of a cubic meter of sal (*Shorea robusta*) timber in Nepal is about US\$ 373, which is comparatively much higher than international price of conifer timber (US \$ 100 per cubic meter). Besides, Nepal has not initiated large-scale scientific forest management. Thus one can question where to sell products. So, perhaps Nepal does not need forest certification only for timber sell. But, the country is also producing and selling wooden handicraft and medicinal plants in international market, worth more than US \$ 18 million per year (Kanel, unpublished). NTFPs provide livelihood for many people living in many

remote districts of Nepal. There are thousands of households engaged in wood carving in Patan, Bhaktapur and Bungmati. So, it is possible that we will not be able to sell those products in international market if we do not have forest certification.

Forest certification could also be related to the ethics of forest managers towards natural resource use and conservation. For them it would be a matter of pride as it also targets for enhancing productivity and minimizing waste in utilization. For example if a community forest user group manages certified forests, it reveals that they are responsible for forest management not only from economic perspective but also for conservation.

Process of forest certification

For forest certification, criteria and indicators are made to assure sustainable forest management from social, economic and environmental perspectives. For example rights of local people are honored in the process of forest management. This can be one criteria and there can be various indicators to make sure that this criteria is fulfilled such as level of participation of local people in forest management, amount of forest products distributed or sold locally, etc. Another criteria could be the conservation of biodiversity in the process of forest management. This can be assured by identification of endangered plants and animals that might existed in local forest management unit, which is going to be certified. There are many species declared as endangered by country itself and international conservation organizations like IUCN. The Nepal Forest Act 1993 has protected 19 plants species and the National Park and Wildlife Conservation Act 1973 has protected 27 species of mammals, 9 species of birds and 3 species of reptiles. Thus in forest certification conservation measures for those species must be prescribed if they existed in local forest management unit. There will be third party or independent certifying institution to assure that the whole process of forest management is done as per criteria and indicators of forest certification.

Today, there are many certification system in the world such as Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), Pan-European Forest Certification System (PEFC), Indonesian Eco-Labeling (LIE), etc. So far FSC certified forests are over 39 million hectares (FSC website, March 2004) and PEFC certified forests are 46.66 million hectares (Kotwar and Havo, 2003).

These systems use a label or trademark to show that goods are produced from sustainably managed forests. In Nepal, we have trademark of Nepalese Standard (NS).



FSC logo



PEFC logo

Those trademarks make buyers know that the product is coming from certified or sustainably managed forests. As mentioned before today there are large areas of certified forest in the world, unfortunately none in Nepal. Therefore, if international communities demand certified product in future, Nepal will not be able to sell any products.

Thus forest certification is only a voluntary scheme. Those who wants to get the certificate of responsible forest management either for selling forest product or for their ethical pride have to go for forest certification. It is not compulsory for those forest owners who feel that forest certification is burden to them. Therefore, forest certification does not make additional works to them who feel it is unnecessary.

People often express need of changing legislation if forest certification system is initiated. In fact forest certification standards are build in the country's laws, therefore forest certification system does not demand any change in the legislation of the country.

Initiating forest certification in Nepal

A practical and cheap way to solve this problem is by initiating our own forest certification system in Nepal. Here I have proposed *np cert*, a short form for Nepalese certification system (*np* stands for Nepal and *cert* for certification system). Therefore, *np cert* is the process to initiate forest certification system and operationalizing it with support from all stakeholders. This will be independent third party certification on forest management system. Once the national standards are developed and local certifiers are established, certification will be cheap and affordable to forest managers.

The following major steps have been proposed for its operationalising in Nepal:

Establish National Working Group to initiate national forest certification process:

It is very essential to discuss on forest certification need and issues in the beginning. Several awareness-raising materials are necessary to educate the various stakeholders in FC. National working group must represent institutions concerned with production of forest products such as community forest user group, private forest owners, forest-based industries, forest based raw material using industries such as wooden handi-craft, furniture, NTFP traders, dispensaries and local healers etc. One of the main aspects of FC is environmental conservation, thus national working group must also include conservation organization like WWF, IUCN, etc. There are many bilateral and multilateral agencies, like UNDP, Danida, DFID, USAID, etc. which are interested in socially acceptable and environmentally feasible sustainable forest management. These agencies should be included in the national working group. Since social issues related with forest management are also very important, social institutions related to forest management should also be involved along with government institutions, such as MFSC, Department of Forests, Department of Plant Resources, etc. But, in any country forest certification is the responsibility of non-governmental institutions, because international forest certification systems like FSC or PEFC are NGOs and independent from government bureaucracy. Working group also need representation from government side to incorporate concerns of and support from government.

In the working group all stakeholders must put forward their concerns clearly and negotiate for finalizing criteria. Otherwise, fulfillment of those criteria could add cost of production, which will make the product less competitive in international market. To implement day to day activity of the national working group and coordination in national and international level, a group coordinator is necessary.

Formulation of national standards:

After establishing national working group, formulation of national standard begins. National standard is setting out broad criteria to fulfill SFM principles and identification of indicators to make sure that these criteria of SFM are fulfilled. The

criteria have to contribute to principles, where as indicators make sure that criterion are achieved. For example given in the box are 10 FSC principles dealing with sustainable forest management.

FSC Principles defining responsible forest management

- Principle 1 Compliance with laws and FSC principles
- Principle 2 Tenure and use rights and responsibilities
- Principle 3 Indigenous people's right
- Principle 4 Community relations and workers rights
- Principle 5 Benefits from the forests
- Principle 6 Environmental impact
- Principle 7 Management plan
- Principle 8 Monitoring and assessment
- Principle 9 Maintenance of high conservation value forests
- Principle 10 Plantations

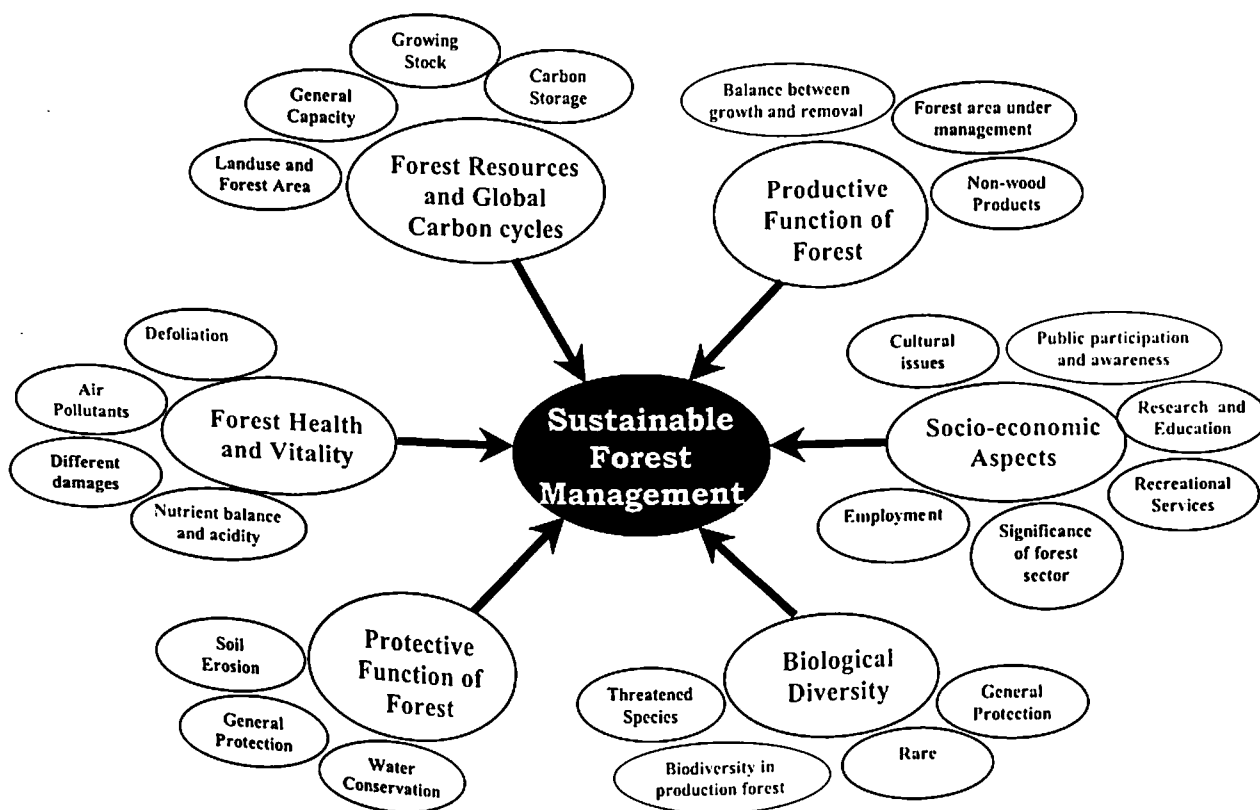
The figure on the next page shows how criteria will contribute to the principles of sustainable forest management.

It will be necessary to go to forest and talk with a lot of people during the preparation of standards. It is very necessary that practical problems be incorporated during the formulation of standards. Because Nepal has various ecological diversities, it is necessary that experiences are gathered from all ecological zones like high Himal, Middle hills, the Terai, etc. Thus establishment of pilot forest area are necessary for SFM and setting standards. These local standards made in different places should be merged to make national standards. During the process of preparing national standard, it is necessary that all representatives express clear interests of their constituent institutions. National standard should be easy to implement while not destroying the meaning of SFM. It should be clearly feasible and acceptable to all stakeholders.

Developing national certification bodies:

Once national certification standards are endorsed, we need an independent institution to operationalize forest certification in Nepal as per the endorsed standard. Thus *np cert* will be a national system establishing and operationalizing forest certification in Nepal. In order to operationalize forest certification, certification bodies are necessary. Certification bodies are institutions, which will ensure that particular forest management unit is complying

Figure: Criteria and example indicators for sustainable forest management



with national standards during the operation of forest management activities and during the process of production. Nepal needs at least one certification body to make *np cert* operational. This institution must be an independent third party meaning it should not have interest of neither producers nor consumers. This institution must have pool of very honest inter-disciplinary experts coming from social interests, conservation interests and technical interests. Any kind of unprofessional alienation of experts working in certification body with producers, consumers, industry or business community could ethically destroy the concept of forest certification and hence the mechanisms should also be worked out to eliminate the mischief.

The main job of this institution is to certify forest management operations as per the national standard and then issuing certificate of responsible forest management. The second job is monitor local forest management units, which are already certified; third is to monitor the process of product transformation. It is very essential that capability of this institution

be developed to meet the international standard. If some specific problems persist then experts have to be invited from foreign countries only for that purpose, such assistance must be sought in grant from bilateral institutions. Otherwise forest certification will be very expensive for Nepal and ultimately making certification impractical proposition.

Certification and monitoring of certified forest management unit:

For forest certification, interested local forest management should apply at the certification body. Inter-disciplinary team coming from certification body with expertise in social field, conservation field and technical forestry will make field visits in local FMU and discuss with local people. First visit is known as scoping visits where experts will examine the possibility of forest being certified and identify gaps from social, conservation and forestry perspective for further improvements. In the final visit the team may recommend to issue certificate with conditions, if necessary.

Benefits

There could be various benefits in initiating national certification system such as:

- It will generate enough awareness on sustainable forest management resulting socially acceptable practices, continuing local people's socio-cultural relations with forest, performing environmentally sound activities, conserving biodiversity as well as adapting technically better practices increasing productivity and maintaining forest health.
- It will ascertain that the products are from sustainably managed forest, which considers social, ecological and economic criteria. This helps to access international market for interim arrangement until Nepal reach to the standard of international certification system. If any international certification system becomes mandatory to sell forest based products such as handi-craft or medicinal plants in international market then there will be enough bases to fulfill requirements of international certification system.
- During the process of establishing and operating this system, the involvement of local people will build national capacity in forest certification.
- Once national capacity is developed, forest certification becomes affordable to community forests and a private entrepreneur. Because the certification has to incur only additional costs of a group of Nepalese experts involved in the process of operating certification system. If the Nepalese experts are involved additional cost of certification becomes insignificant to communities and private forest owners.

A multi-stakeholder platform to initiate forest certification

Nepal Foresters' Association (NFA) is initiating a process to increase awareness in forest certification. In the past NFA has organized many interaction programme in forest certification which are well accepted by all stakeholders. NFA has almost one thousand members working in different type of institutions like NGOs, bilateral projects, private forest organizations, forest based industries, government services, etc; and similarly forest certification must be common agenda of all these institutions. Thematically, members of NFA are also working from different perspective of SFM, which include social, environmental and technical or economic perspective. Therefore, NFA is a common platform of people, who could be involved in the process of forest certification.

Therefore, NFA will continue this process in initiating forest certification system. It has initiated first round discussion with potential partners. Thus NFA can be a appropriate multi stakeholders platform to initiate forest certification in Nepal.

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