

Democratic functioning of community forest users group: a case of Shisawara Community Forest of Bardia District, Nepal

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This paper examines the democratic functioning, which is a pre-requisite of a sustainable community forestry programme in Nepal. The present study conducted in the Siswara community forest users group of Bardia district, a true representative of western Terai revealed that Siswara Community Forest Users Group (SCFUG) was different from other users groups in coordination, participation, management and organization in resource allocation and decision-making. The study necessitated further exploration on such functioning of community forest users groups in the Terai.

Key words: Community Forest, Users Group, Participation, Management

His Majesty's Government (HMG), the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MFSC) with technical assistance from CARE² Nepal has implemented the Forestry Partnership Project (FPP) in the Mid-Western Development Region of Nepal. The FPP forms a part of the broader Environment and Forestry Enterprise Activity (EFEA) project funded by USAID Nepal. The EFEA programme has been in operation since December 1996. It covers three districts in Terai – Banke, Bardia and Kailali, and five hill districts – Dang, Salyan, Pyuthan, Rukum and Rolpa (Chhetri and Sigdel, 1999).

The goal of the project is to increase rural household income through sustainable private sector agriculture and forestry enterprises. Increased democratic processes at the local level, and strengthen bottom-up planning and policy reform are its two major objectives (CARE Nepal, 1996).

Community forestry initiatives have been very successful in the hills of Nepal with thousand of Community Forest User Groups (CFUG) managing forests for the benefit of community. Similarly, community forestry has been gaining a steady momentum in the Terai (FPP, 1999). However, no group in the absence of democratic exercise can function effectively and smoothly. This mostly offsets the weaker section such as women, disadvantage

Group (DAG) and very poor thus depriving them of their share of benefits.

In 1997, the District Forest Office, Bardia had encouraged people in Bankatti village to register a plantation area nearby the village as community forest. This area was planted by the District Forest Office, Bardia some 15 years ago. Since then people of Bankatti have been managing the forest patch as community forest. The present study was conducted in this CFUG with a view to:

- identify the status of CFUG through democratic functioning,
- find out strength of the CFUG, and
- identify support needed by CFUG in democratic functioning.

Methodology

Siswara community plantation is situated in ward no. 6, Bankatti of Bagnaha VDC-eight kilometer north of Beluwachowk along the Gularia-Kothiyaghat road link of Bardia district. The boundaries of plantation forest are Babai River in the east, barren land in the north, and cultivated fields in the south and west. The SCFUG is one of the oldest groups in Bardia district. It comprises of 13 committee members. In total, 80 households and 400 people form the most

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² An international non-governmental organization working in Nepal since 1978. In this study, CARE Nepal is a Technical Assistance team working under EFFE as named FPP.

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The present study covers organization, management, participation, linkage and resource mobilization capacities of the CFUG by using spider web tool, group discussion and Semi Structured Interview (SSI).

Interview and semi-structured dialogue was organised in the study site with 28 CFUG members of the group including six executive committee members. Ward Chairmen and Ward members of the VDC were also interviewed. In addition, one structured questionnaire format was also filled up in support of executive committee members of CFUG.

Findings

Democratic Functioning in CFUG

To find out the status of CFUG on democratic functioning, the Spider Web tool was applied. From the tools the researcher observed five different aspects of the CFUG like organization, Management, Linkage, Resource Mobilization and Participation.

Organization

This CFUG is one of the oldest groups in Bardia district. In the community, everyone has participated in community meetings. From a single village, there were thirteen committee members representing in the committee; of them four each were women, and Disadvantaged Group, members.

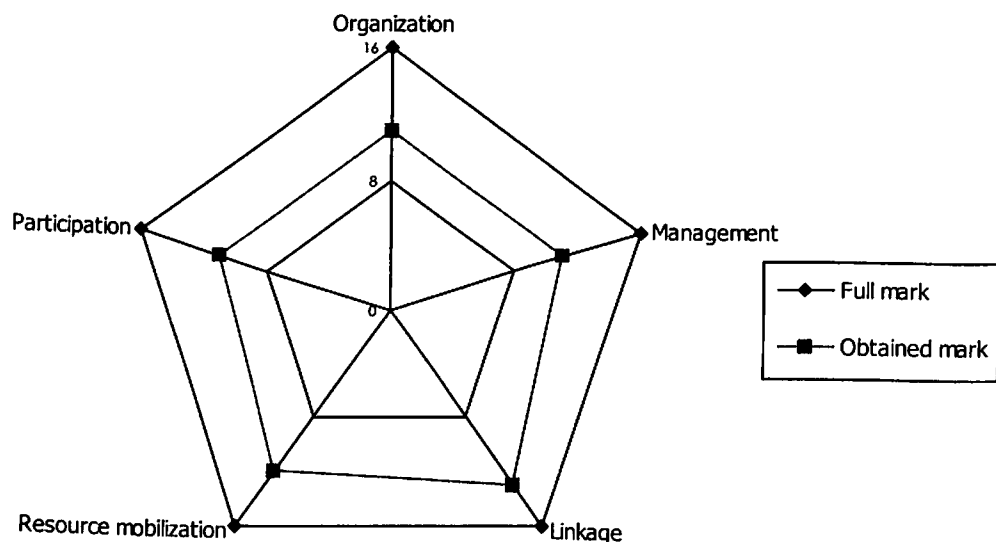
In the beginning, there were two categories of users those having the pooling rights, and others who have not. The executive committee brooked the category, and involved all secondary users as primary and provided pooling rights to them because of their commitment towards forest management and living around the forest.

An important innovation in this CFUG was the establishment of five sub-committees that look after particular activities:

- Ban Sanrakshya tatha Ban Bikas Upasamiti (Forest Protection and Development Sub Committee),
- Nursery Bikas Upasamiti (Nursery Development Sub Committee)
- Bikash Nirman Upasamiti (Construction Sub Committee)
- Jadibuti Bikas Upasamiti (NTFP Sub Committee), and
- Samanaya Upasamiti (Coordination Sub Committee)

Each sub-committee consists of required members selected among users by CFUG committee headed by an executive member. This CFUG has established an office run by the executive secretary as office secretary. Community forest regulations do not require land ownership or citizenship to begin or belong to a CFUG member. This group has, however, decided to provide membership to those who own land and distributed identity card to the members.

Democratic exercise of Shiswara CFUG



Sustainability of democratic functioning groups depend on familiarization with constitution among group members. In total 16 hh representatives said that they were familiar with the constitution, however, the rest were unknown.

The committee meets once a month where issues are solved according to the constitution. If undecided, or they fall outside the constitution, council (group) meeting is called upon to make decision by consensus and by majority vote whichever needed. In every six months there is a general assembly that everyone attends. At this time, the treasurer presents the accounts with details of income and expenses to the assembly. Similarly, the secretary presents the forthcoming annual plan and achievements of the previous year. It has been practicing by the committee to publicize about the discussions and decisions of the board through notice in public places of the village.

They have an election for the committee members every three years. The group always followed constitution during leadership changes.

Management

This community was depended on national forest for collection of fuel and timber wood before handing over the plantation area to them. Later, the community protected and utilized forest as per government policy.

Based on sample taken, only three household (hh) representatives were fully aware of forest operational plan (FOP) and 11 hh representatives had half, however majority hh representatives had no knowledge and awareness about FOP.

In 1999/2000, SCFUG has collected 18 thousand head-loads (about 900 tons) grass as against 15 thousand head-loads last year. But the amount of fuel wood extracted from forest was decreased by 66% than last year, which is 80 bull carts (about 80 tons). They have practiced to fetch bedding materials and dry twigs each year. They are following forest operation plan in leading of executive committee. In 1999 they have plantation, constructed fire-line, have conducted weeding, cleaning, singling, pruning and thinning activities. The forest is divided into four blocks, each year the community has been collecting from different single block for two days, in two days each hh can send people to cut firewood and grass in free of cost.

The CFUG has one forest watcher appointed for patrolling the forest paying Rs 1200.00 per month. The users also patrol the forest as required. The CFUG hired a nursery foreman to care and to maintain forest nursery paying Rs 1000.00 per month. The group members said that greenery and more regeneration coming up in the plantation areas after protection and management of the patch by the community.

The CFUG does not distribute forest products to the outsiders. However, surplus log is sold by auction. The CFUG has sold 149 standing sissoo trees and earned NRs.743, 000.00. At the time of distribution of forest product, committee calls the general members for decision-making. Usually, all members of the group participate in the meeting and involve in decision.

Specially, grass, fodder and dry branches are extracted from the forest regularly. Compared to other products, grasses are extracted in high amount. The CFUG distributes equally amount of products to the users free of cost. The CFUG has constructed one Kanji House to but stray animals.

If disagreements persist in the group, discussions held until they are resolved. The executive committee if loses credibility new election is held. These decentralized and open administrative and decision among system provides credibility to the community, which in turn supports and strengthens the system.

The committee regularly prepares annual action plan and then shares with general members during general assembly. The group has a strong sense of equity and is able to resolve disputes.

Timely audit report are submitted to the District Forest Office.

Participation

Frequency, of meetings and assemblies has increased considerably. Women and DAG participation in decision-making and dissemination of key decisions to the users have also increased. However, the executive committee selects (rather than elect) the participants in case of time constraint.

Seven users including four female have participated training, workshop and cross visit organized by the District Forest Office within two years. From training,

workshop and cross visits, the knowledge, confidence and awareness among participants have increased. They share learnings among community/users.

In the collection of forest product, women's involvement was found higher than men. In total, 724 man-days contributed by users in different forestry development activities like, fire-line construction, *Kanji* House construction, and road and channel rehabilitation, tending operation and temple construction.

Resource mobilization

The group fund has reached to Rs. 914,619.00 (USD 11,726) as of June 1998 and spent only Rs. 190,437.00 (USD 2,441). It was found that, most of the users are less aware on group fund.

CFUGs are using their group funds to expand their community forestry activities and to develop their communities. The CFUG is planning a large-scale plantation of rattan, which is a raw material for furniture. It has high market value. The CFUG has implemented various community development activities from the revenue such as school maintenance, channel and road maintenance etc. The CFUG has supported Rs 25,000.00 (USD 320) to school, constructed road and channel with Hume pipe, and allocated Rs 50,000.00 for forest development works. They have also thrust fund of Rs 100,000.00 (USD 1282).

Improvement needed

- **Insufficient resources:** The biggest problem of the CFUG is Babai River, which takes away more land each year. The CFUG is intending to build spur but do not have the resources to do so.
- **Lack of clear guidelines:** Now, the Terai District Forest Offices are hesitating to hand over

community forests to the local communities due to lack of clear guidelines of the government.

- **Technical Assistance:** This community forest area is high potential for Non Timber Forest Product (NTFP) like, Pipala, Rattan and lemon grass. Therefore, technical support to the CFUGs is needed.

Conclusion

The users of Siswara have good ownership feeling, because of the boundary conflict solved one year ago in their own initiation. They have more experiences on democratic decision making for example; brooked pooling rights between two categories of users and election of executive committee are some examples. However, CFUG should improve on financial transparency and all users should be aware in group constitution and FOP. The CFUG also should build monitoring system internally.

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