

Participatory approach of forestry research in Nepal

K. P. Acharya¹, N. Stewart² and P. Branney³

There is a need to develop a new approach of forestry research which could involve local people to identify and prioritise research problems, interpret, evaluate and disseminate results. This is in connection with the increasing role of Forest Users Groups (FUGs) in managing Nepal's community forests. With this realisation, the Natural Forest Management Research Section (NFMRS) of the Forest Research Division initiated participatory action research (PAR) study with the two Forest Users Groups. Its aim was to explore the potential of PAR in community forestry. This article outlines the approach taken by such a research team in two community forests and suggests steps for conducting PAR in Nepal.

Keywords: community forestry, forest users group, participatory action research, Nepal

The importance of participatory action research (PAR) has increased recently because of the increasing trend of community based management of natural resources. Also, widening gap between the target users and researcher in communicating information has also made the latter to think of its importance (DFID, 1998).

Participatory action research in Nepal's forestry sector is about the testing and evaluating options in forest management. It is also a 'learning by doing' exercise. In Nepal's community forestry PAR is helpful to support the demand and supply of forest resources. The existing number of forest user groups (FUGs) which are also increasing rapidly and are increasingly recognised as the manager of Nepal's forests, the Natural Forest Management Research Section (NFMRS) decided in 1996, to explore the potential of PAR as a tool for conducting forestry research in Nepal that could help meet the needs of community forestry user groups. Identification of site specific problems and their solutions were the main agenda of PAR.

Approach of the study

Two Forest Users Groups were selected on the basis of their geographical location, origin of the forest, and history of forest management with a view to develop a methodology for conducting PAR. One FUG was supported by District Forest Office (DFO) and the other by Women Acting Together for Change (WATCH), a NGO during their formation. Case studies of the work carried out is

presented below highlighting what can be achieved with this kind of approach and also identifying the limitations and potential pitfalls that may be encountered.

Case study 1: Ale Chiring Forest Users Group :

District : Dhading
Households : 63
Main ethnic group : Magar
Forest area : 48.5 ha
Forest type : Pole stage sal (*Shorea robusta*), approximately 15 years old
Year of handover : 1992

This group has been protecting their forest for the last ten years. The forest is divided into blocks and some harvesting was done in the previous year. Upon the FUG's query about the 'acceptable' level of harvesting a joint visit was organised to the forest with the users and DFO staff. Discussions were held concerning the possibility of doing PAR in the forest block they had selected for the current year harvesting. Four 10 m x 10 m plots were laid out incorporating three thinning treatments and a control. No replication was done. The trial was established by the users and the products harvested were quantified in local units and then divided amongst the users. Efforts were made to keep the design simple and that the users fully understood the reasons for establishing such plots. However, the users referred the plots as belonging to the research team and felt that the team had driven the whole process.

1 Assistant Research Officer, Forest Research and Survey Centre, PO Box 3339 Kathmandu

2 APO, Forestry Research Project of the former Nepal-UK Forestry Research Project, Nepal

3 Consultant of the former Nepal-UK Forestry Research Project, Nepal

Case study 2: Panderah Darah Forest Users Group :

District: Lalitpur
 Households: 65
 Ethnic group: mainly Tamang
 Forest area: 2.12 ha
 Forest type: Pole stage pine (*Pinus roxburghii*) and a little utis (*Alnus nepalensis*)
 Year of handover: 1995

This group has been supported in the handover process by WATCH, a locally active NGO. The area of forest is very small with the species (predominantly pine). A group of women was running a small nursery with the intention of establishing trees in abandoned *bari* land. The thought on species selection were divided. The men preferring pine and the women trying to maintain multipurpose broadleaves which were in short supply.

Plots (10 m x 10 m) were established in this forest also as in the previous case. Seedlings of broad leaved species brought from the government nursery were planted in the bare area. Follow-up visits were made to the site to monitor seedling survival. If protected from grazing even such dry site was suitable for growing broadleaves found. In the monsoon season early morning before people leave to their fields was the best time to have a discussion with them.

Results and discussion

While supporting the development and implementation activities of sustainable forest management by FUGs, we - the researchers identified following issues:

- Diversity of user groups
- Inadequate forest management experience of Forest Department staff, especially those in fields
- A heavy workload on the field staff of the Forest Department (DOF). Budgetary constraints for field based activities is prevalent
- Lack of research manpower and resources to carry out research

We realised that readymade technical packages and forest management models could not be appropriate to address the diverse and immediate needs of FUGs. Solutions seem to lie within FUGs themselves if they are supported/facilitated in their own learning processes (Acharya 1998) from their practical experiences, or through sharing of experiences amongst similar groups. Such feedback helped prepare the following preliminary guidelines for

conducting PAR. These guidelines, however are targeted for researchers and forestry field staff, could be of use to any one working with FUGs.

Preliminary Guidelines for PAR

Step 1: Develop selection criteria for FUGs' active participation

This activity should produce an agreed list of criteria for identification and selection of participating FUGs. Important among them are established user group with an approved operational plan, no evidence of serious conflicts within the FUG or with other FUGs, evidence of interest/expressed need for AR to address an issue or issues.

Step 2: Select sites and FUGs for PAR

This activity should result in a FUG or several FUGs agreeing to work with the government field staff and researchers on some form of PAR. The agreement should be made at a general assembly of the users and the operational plan should be amended to include the PAR. All partners need to be actively involved at this stage.

Step 3: Design of action research

This stage should identify the site and plan of action for PAR. The design should be simple and the needs of different groups (eg. womens groups, medicinal plant collectors, etc.) within the FUG must be incorporated. A thorough analysis of the current state of the forest and the groups' management objectives is crucial.

Step 4: Implement research and collect information

While doing research and implimenting its techniques as many users as possible should be involved with their local techniques, tools and units of measurement. They should have the indigenous property right of any research findings.

Step 5: Monitor and evaluate research findings

This step should produce comprehensive findings which can be easily fed back into the forest management activities. Findings should be accessible for dissemination to other FUGs. Regular discussions should be held with the FUG members concerning the PAR and all stakeholders must be involved in the evaluation exercises.

Step 6: Dissemination

This step should involve knowledge sharing amongst the FUGs through various means such as site visits and exchanges between FUGs, leaflets and reports, media articles and via networks eg. Federation of Community Forest Users of Nepal (FECOFUN).

Conclusion and recommendations

This article outlines the attempts of a research team in Nepal to develop a more participatory approach to their forestry research. Previous attempts of research, especially for community forestry designed in an office table without any consultation with the forest users may not, once again, be able to meet their pressing needs. Our experiences that an alternate method such as PAR could be effective to address the need of users. However, the following aspects should be dealt with carefully:

- A genuine and full participation of all the stakeholders
- Promoting PAR within the 'research establishment' should also be given a priority so that to make it a valid methodology and not a diversion from 'proper' research.

When appropriately applied PAR can be a valuable tool in supporting the processes of change and development which FUGs, the Forest Department and forestry research are undergoing throughout Nepal. All the parties now involved are in learning process and in contrast to the technical 'fix-it'

solutions of research issues can be addressed in a more realistic and ultimately sustainable manner.

Based on the current situation of community forestry in Nepal, forestry research should do the following:

- Focus on the problems related to the local-level forest management
- Integrate socio-economic and cultural aspects with technical forestry issues
- Involve actively forest users in the identification and prioritisation of research topics; implementation of research activities; and the interpretation, evaluation and dissemination of findings.
- Emphasise the role of learning for all involved.
- Generate information which is of a type and form readily disseminated and easily utilised by forest users and by all levels of forest department staff
- Accept that many problems (and hence solutions) are site specific.

References

- Acharya, K.P. 1998. Collective Management of Common Forest Resource in the Hills of Nepal Through Community Forestry. *The Journal of Forestry*, Vol X (1).
- DFID. 1998. Action research for community forestry: Sharing experiences from Nepal. UK