

# Conflict in community forestry in Nepal: a review

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This paper analyses the conflicts concerning eight previous studies involving twenty Forest Users Groups (FUGs) in Nepal. Conflicts in community forestry in Nepal occur at three different levels: within FUGs; between FUGs, and with the Department of Forests. Six sources of conflict recorded are access to resources, change in resource quality and availability, authority over resources, differing perceptions of values, information transfer and availability and legal and policy issues. Conflicts related to access and the transmission of information among the interested parties were among the major ones. Measures of reducing the frequency of conflicts are discussed. Investigation of actors, stakeholders and resources to be conducted before or during the handing-over process of community forestry are discussed. Additional and competent field staff in the field of conflict resolution is needed to cope with the increasing number of FUGs. Training of the staff of Department of Forest is needed for their effective mediating role during conflict.

**Keywords:** Community forestry, conflict resolution, forest users group, Nepal.

The economical, social and cultural diversities of Nepal make this country a setting for diverse natural resource management practices and therefore, allied resource use conflicts. Conflict in community forestry of Nepal is one of them which is rooted in the communities themselves. Different castes, tribes, religions, ethnic groups and genders each have unique characteristics which vary in interaction with the local resource endowment.

Any intervention in community forestry changes the existing resource use pattern. This has different impacts on differently constituted groups. In the lack of commitment to change the pattern of power, a more powerful group can come into existence which is better able to protect and promote its own interests through intervention in community forest (Sarin, 1997).

## Concept of conflict

Conflict is an integral part of human condition which differs in its scope and scale from culture to culture (Pendzich, 1994). The term is derived from the Latin word "*conflictus*" meaning striking together with force. Stoner and Freeman (1989) have identified six types of conflict possible in any organisation.

On the basis of involvement of actors and according to sources, conflicts for natural resource use have recently been categorised into six types by FAO

(FAO 1997). The sources of conflicts in the Nepal's community forestry which are evaluated in the present study using FAO's approach are:

- **conflict over access:** this results as a consequence of a change in access, or from inequitable access, to resources - changes in the traditional pool of users, establishment of new protected areas that prevent traditional resource use are its examples.
- **conflict due to changes in resource quality and availability:** this is caused when there is a change in the 'amount' and/or quality of the resource available to the different parties. Growing populations, opening of new markets, increased land improvement (eg. with irrigation systems) for agriculture that replaces natural ecosystems. etc. all contribute as the sources of conflict.
- **conflict regarding authority over resources:** shift of decision making authority over resources can lead to conflicts. This is illustrated by government agencies claiming authority over forest lands, new local leaders coming to power and the emergence of NGO programmes.
- **conflicts that are value-based:** these result from differences in cultural, ethical or religious values and in the use and non-use of economic values associated with resources. Conservation *vs* production, religious forest *vs* forest for eco-tourism and differences in perception and

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attitude of the stakeholders regarding the resource use and management are the sources of value-based conflict.

- **conflict associated with unclear/or lack of communication:** this comprises lack of participation of all stakeholders, limited availability of information and lack of its clarity.
- **conflict resulting from legal/policy enactment:** these stem from different interests among institutions. Conflict in policy between subsidising agriculture and forest conservation and conflict between policies enforced by local institutes and national polices fall into this category.

### Conflict in community forestry: Nepal's perspective

The six principal general and specific causes of conflicts reported are depicted in Box.

General	Specific
Conflicts over access	Stakeholder exclusion, prohibition of traditional use rights, inequality in resource use and distribution
Conflicts due to change in resource quality and availability	Scarcity of resources, competition for limited resources
Conflicts regarding authority over resources	Boundary (forest boundary, political boundary e.g. FUG vs. VDC, encroachment in forest boundary), and land ownership
Conflicts that are value based	Socio-cultural (differing interest related to the rural/urban interface, elite domination, dualism in users, and leadership disputes)
Conflicts associated with information processing and availability	Lack of participation of all stakeholders during implementation of operational plan, lack of co-ordination from DFO officials
Conflicts resulting because of legal/policy reasons	Change from Panchayat Forest to FUG concept

Conflicts concerning forest resources which involve twenty FUGs have been reported for Nepal (Table 1). Table 2 shows that in most of the cases, access disputes contribute to conflict. However, conflicts regarding authority over resources and with information processing and availability are also important.

Downward migration of hill people towards the terai where the land is more rich and fertile, have better transport facilities and better quality forest resources, have become the reasons of conflicts. Site specific conflicts are analyzed and shown in Table 1 and 2.

### Impact of conflict

Conflicts have both positive and negative effects on existing forest resources. Those resolved swiftly properly have positive effects but if otherwise result in deterioration of resources. Malla (1995) in the case of Jalbire Women's Community Forest, and Tumbhahangphe (1995) in the case study of Buchhung forest, noted negative impacts of conflicts. The latter reported the breaking of a long-standing traditional local system of protecting forest and the introduction of disorder in the use of the forest resources which is still vulnerable.

Kharel (1995), however in the case study of Bokse Mahadevsthan Forest reported a positive effect whereby, conflicts regarding stakeholder inclusion and the boundary of the forest were solved through active participation and investigation of staff from the Department of Forest.

In the Alchhi Danda FUG stopage of the yearly intermediate operation became the reason of conflict, and in the case of the Thuloban FUG intermediate operation guidelines were not followed (DOF, 1996). Illegal cutting of trees has been attributed to continuing boundary disputes between Chhitre Pani FUG and Chhurekad FUG.

### Strategies for conflict management/resolution

Most conflicts within a community are managed by local leaders and social elites through indigenous dispute management techniques (DOF 1996). However, Kaplan (1995) reported that while traditional patterns of conflict settlement tend to prevail in more remote mountain and hill areas, and as people become more 'urban exposed' they may bypass or ignore traditional patterns. He predicted that traditional systems for conflict resolution will become increasingly weak and more cases of conflict

Table 1: Sources of conflict in different case studies/forest users groups.

Case studies /forest user groups	Conflict over access	Conflicts due to change in resource quality and availability	Conflicts regarding authority over resources	Conflicts that are value based	Conflicts associated with information processing and availability	Conflict resulting because of legal/policy reasons
1. DOF (1996) Rani Ban	stakeholder exclusion, traditional use rights			differing interest related to the rural-urban interface	consultation concern	
Chitre Pani Alchhi Danda	inequality in resource distribution	scarcity of resources	forest boundary		consultation concern	changing from Panchayat Forest to FUG concept
Thulo Ban					lack of participation of all stakeholders, deviation from OP	
Ghaiya Bari 2. Buchhung forest	traditional use rights	competition for limited resources	political boundary		consultation concern	
3. Mahadevsthan forest	stakeholder exclusion, resource use		forest boundary			
4. Ram bazaar forest			forest boundary, land ownership boundary		lack of participation of all stakeholders	unclear forest rules
5. Community vs. leasehold forestry	stakeholder exclusion, resource use	competition for limited resources			deviation from OP, consultation concern	
6. Jalbire women's forest						
7. Lipebatese forest 8. Other CFs Suspa	stakeholder exclusion		political boundary			
Khorthali	stakeholder exclusion			elite domination		
Vitteri	inequality in resource distribution				lack of participation of all stakeholders	
Ramche	stakeholder exclusion					
Nigure	inequality in resource distribution		land ownership	elite domination	lack of participation of all stakeholders	
Bhortle Pakha Khagudanda Purkha Ghyangle patal Bhuhikoria	resource use			elite domination elite domination leadership elite domination		
	resource use					

will be taken to levels higher than the village which will put weaker parties at a real disadvantage as they lack the means to contend strongly at those higher levels. Indeed, there are very few previous studies on community forestry conflict in Nepal which really describe the resolution methods. Conflicts in the Bokse Mahadevsthan forest (Kharel, 1995) and within the Suspa FUG (Karna, 1997) which were over access towards resources, and entitlements of FUG membership, were resolved through intense mediation organised by the officials of DFO and Federation of Community Forestry User Group in Nepal (FECOFUN) (in case of Suspa FUG), and others. However, in the case of Buchhung FUG (Tumbahanphe, 1995), the conflict persisted, as government agencies, instead of facilitating and mediating between two parties, imposed decisions. On this occasion, the method followed by officials was not process resolution, but handled more like a court case.

Table 2 : Number and sources of conflict as found in twenty forest user groups

Sources of conflict	No
Conflicts over access	12
Conflicts due to change in resource quality and availability	3
Conflicts regarding authority over resources	8
Conflicts that are value based	6
Conflicts associated with information processing and availability	8
Conflicts resulting because of legal/policy reasons	2

Within FUG, conflict could be resolved through the community's customary system. Conflict at this level is mostly about stakeholder exclusion, traditional use rights, elite domination, unequal benefit sharing, deviation from forest operational plan and lack of participation during its implementation. Solving conflicts of these kinds, timely support from the DOF field staff, particularly ranger is desirable. The ranger who has a good contact with the parties involved can act as a mediator and facilitator to resolve conflicts. Most conflicts between FUGs are about forest boundaries, dualism in users, and unclear forest policy (ie. fragmentation of the existing Panchayat Forest to be handed over to various FUG). Conflict arising from such fragmentation could have been eased by rangers and DOF through direct negotiations between the

FUGs. Boundaries between forest area accessible to two different FUGs should be well-defined. Disputes in dualism of membership should be solved by restriction of membership within a single FUG. Dualism in users discourages loyalty to a particular FUG and makes it difficult to develop the FUG as a sustainable institution in the future (Dahal, 1994).

Conflicts over access, over authority for resources and arising from poor communication of information are frequent. There is need for a broad conflict avoidance/resolution strategy with social and politically focused components. Provision should be made for preparing people to undertake constructive roles in such situations. Proper investigation of actors, stakeholders and resources related to community forestry prior to or during, the handing-over process is the central social issue. Every interested group should be included in discussions. Series of negotiation will often be essential to cope with the requirements of diverse interest groups. It is important for the future that women and poor should be empowered and fully involved in community forestry programme and be allotted appropriate use rights. They should be encouraged at every stage of the FUG formation process including decision making.

Although the government has a declared policy of handing over forest to FUGs irrespective of political boundaries and the opinion of political personnel, this has not been consistently implemented in practice by field staff. Proper co-ordination between Village Development Committees (VDCs) and FUGs should be set in place and actively promoted and followed by the government in the interest of both local organisations.

Nepal's forests are not distributed equally in a geographical sense, or amongst its people. After accessible forest has been handed over to users, a portion of people have been excluded from forest resources. Suggestions that not all terai forest should be handed over to communities (Karki *et al.* 1994), the government should anticipate the need to counter this before problems arise. For the terai there should be a clear basis for allocation of national forest and community forest. Local communities must be persuaded that the policy is in their interest as well as that of the government.

The field staff should be made aware of their role as mediators when dealing with conflicts and should be trained to work according to the following guidelines:

- involve local people to resolve conflicts at the

level at which it occurs. Do not politicise the issue.

- allow sufficient time to cope and adjust to new methods and rules
- be aware that not all conflicts have negative impact and should be used as a springboard for desirable change
- encourage the formation of equal power - building alliances

In many FUGs, there are power imbalance amongst the members. These occur in the form of caste system, educational background, economic status and gender. The field staff should try to promote equitable dialogue and adequate representation of all groups to resolve any type of conflict. They should be pro-active and address the need for change in legal structures, rules and regulations.

The responsibilities of these staff are increasing as more and more forest areas are being handed over to FUGs. The existing pool of expertise is not enough to deal efficiently with such increase of FUGs. Some conflicts have worsened because of delay in getting the government's support.

A proper co-ordination between the DOF, FECOFUN, the Nepal Mediation Group, bilateral agencies and various NGOs working on community forestry is essential for the better resolution of community forestry conflicts.

## Recommendations

Based on the experiences gained through past studies the following eight recommendations are put forward:

- Conflict in community forestry should be resolved within local customary system and intervention from third party (government field staff/ranger) should be there only when necessary.
- Proper investigation of actors, stakeholders and resources related to community forestry should be conducted prior to, or at the time of, handing over process.
- Underprivileged groups should be empowered and fully involved in the programme and should be allotted appropriate use rights in terms of participation and decision making.
- There should be a well-defined forest boundary

(in terms of resource use) for every FUG.

- Adequate number of staff must be recruited in the DOF to deal efficiently with the increasing number of FUGs and conflicts.
- Training should be organised to equip the field staff for effective role of mediator during conflicts.

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