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Urban forestry in the federal context of Nepal

With rapid urbanization throughout the world, urban and peri-urban forestry (UPF) has become a priority area for policy makers and development planners. UPF simply refers to the management of trees, shrubs and other vegetation in urban areas. It includes urban parks and gardens, roadside plantations, trees along the banks of rivers, streams and canals, surrounding houses and private properties and forests in peripheral of urban areas. UPF is valued for its psychosocial, cultural, environmental and economic benefits to the urban dwellers. It is regarded as the symbol of civilization and prosperity of any city.

The concept of UPF was emerged worldwide in response to the adverse environmental effects due to increased urban population and infrastructure. In Nepal, the practice of urban forestry dates back to the Malla reign. A review of historical documents reveals that King Jayasthiti Malla (1380-1395 AD) issued an order to his officials and commoners to plant trees alongside walking streets and wells. This practice continued; and even some exotic trees were planted alongside streets and in the premises of palaces in the Rana regime. During the Panchayat regime, the government introduced modern urban-environment planning in the 1960s and 1970s, and renovated roads and trails in Kathmandu with massive plantation along the sides. For example, the plan of the ring road had included green belts on both sides, where thousands of fast growing trees were planted. Now, the government has emphasized urban forestry through its various programs, including 'Nepal Clean Environment Grand Expedition 2075 AD' and the 'Forest Decade Program (2014-2023)', the latter promoting afforestation in public and private lands with the theme of 'one house: one tree, one village: one forest and one town: several parks'.

Despite several efforts as mentioned above, we have not been much successful to achieve expected results in UPF development, mainly due to three reasons. First, most cities have been built haphazardly and in a piece meal approach, rather than through planned and holistic approaches. With rapidly growing prices of land in the urban areas, the private interests have played a key role in city planning; and spaces for trees have been rarely considered. Second, the open spaces like riverbanks and other public lands, in which urban forests could be developed, have been encroached for gray infrastructure. Third, the distinct values of forests in and around urban areas have been hardly recognized; *i.e.* no specific policies and plans have been in place for the management of urban and peri-urban forests. These have resulted in what we see and feel while living in crowded and polluted cities like Kathmandu today.

With the promulgation of the Constitution of Nepal in 2015, the nation has adopted the federal system of governance. The federal structure includes three tiers of government, *i.e.*

a federal government, seven provincial governments, and 753 local governments. The local governments include 6 metropolitan cities, 11 sub-metropolitan cities, 276 municipalities and 460 rural municipalities. The first elected governments are functioning in all the three tiers of governance. Sustainable development, in which protection of environment is one of the key considerations, is the main goal of the governments in all levels. In the context of rapid urbanization, developing and managing urban and peri-urban forests are one of the key functions of local governments, particularly metro/sub-metropolitan cities and municipalities. It will also address at least a part of fundamental right of every citizen to live in clean environment as ensured by Constitution of Nepal.

The local governments have both opportunities and challenges for UPF in their territories. There could be little room for developing UPF in the already crowded cities with narrow roads and limited open spaces like Kathmandu, but there are ample opportunities for the new municipalities. The only thing they need to do is to introduce holistic urban plans, consisting of parks, gardens, and green belts along the roadsides and riverbanks, and implement them strictly. One of the main challenges they would face is the fragmentation of lands coupled with their high prices; this can be addressed through a land pulling mechanism as we have already experienced in city planning in some areas around Kathmandu. Not Planting trees now would not be a big issue, but not having a space for planting trees would be a very big issue for our cities in the future.