

# Community forestry in Nepal

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**Establishment of community forestry in Nepal is a successful step in conservation of forest. Community forestry programme through the local forest users group has shown its positive impacts in the society. This paper discusses an overview of the present scenario of the community forestry in Nepal. It describes the brief historical background, some important forest legislations, and organization of forest. The paper also describes the internal conflicts between forest users and district forest offices, and possible resolution. It also suggests some of the aspects of community forestry in which the research needs to be focused for the better management of the forests in Nepal.**

## Background

Nepal is one of the first countries to introduce people-focused forest policy. Community Forestry Development Program (CFDP) is a major program in the forestry sector of the country. The main objective of the community forestry is to meet basic needs of the local people, particularly fuelwood and timber, through a sustainable forest management and utilisation. Before the Rana regime, the forest cover was good, and no special efforts were made for forest protection. During that time, in addition, under the provisions of Jagir, Kipat and Birta, forests were given to army officers and high ranking palace officials. These forest areas were used for their own interests, which increased encroachment. But during the Rana Regime encroachment on forests increased due to conflicts among the Rana brothers over power. A number of rules were drawn up to regulate access to forest and for removal of forest products (Mahat *et al.* 1987). The promulgation of these rules coincided with increased removal of forest products of sale to India. After the dawn of democracy different political movements caused deforestation, particularly the political change of 1950/51 and the political movements of 1979/80 and 1989/90. An estimated 4% of the total forest land was cleared during 1979/80 (Thapa *et al.* 1995).

It was in 1957, the nationalization of forest led most of the forest of the country toward deforestation due to its improper management and increase demand of forest products by increased population of man and livestock (Shrestha 1995). As a result of nationalization of forests in 1957, people gradually lost all benefits and deprived their right to manage and benefits from forests. Similarly afforestation programs on a wide scale could help to close the gap of energy crisis and to meet the increased demand of the fodder, timber and other forest products. Prior to 1957 the state exercised little control over the forests. On the contrary, individuals were encouraged to convert forestland into agriculture land as means of extending state control over territory and increasing state revenue (Wallace

1987). Having failed to manage the forest resources through bureaucratic machinery, the government in 1976 recognized that management of forests by local villagers who had used the forests in the past was the only practical way to ensure protection and sustainable supply of forest products for subsistence needs. By law, resource was entrusted to the community through the local political body called the *panchayat*. This policy was continued over a decade, which finally proved to be ineffective because of lack of requisite infrastructure. Finally the government has come with the new Forestry Act, Rules and Regulations by implementing the Forest Act 1993 to meet the growing needs of various forest products and to restore the ecological balance as well as to make economic use of the forest.

## Evolution of community forestry and forest legislation

In recognition of the people's intimate involvement in local forest management and of failure of previous government efforts to control forest protection and management, His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMGN) moved towards the adoption of community forestry in the late 1970s. The government has introduced a scheme of community forest development project to improve and reestablish forest so as to increase the supply of fuel wood, fodder and timber for construction. Subsidiary aims will be to check land erosion, ensure village spring-water supplies and foster the spirit of self-help among villages.

Community forestry through forest users groups is the major policy initiative for the forestry sector in Nepal. Under this programme the user group accepts the responsibility for forest protection, management and sustained use of their community forest. Rural people of Nepal, because of their dependency on a variety of forest products to maintain their subsistence agricultural lifestyle, have for a long time played an important role in the use and management of the forests of the Middle Hills (Bartelett and Malla 1991). The major use of forests by the people shown by Mahat *et al.* (1987) were gathering of leaf material for fodder and for animal bedding, collection of fuel wood and the extraction of timber for building and agriculture implementation.

The first legislative measure initiated by promulgation of

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the Private Forest Nationalization Act 1957 abrogated private ownership of forests and transferred it to the government. No compensation was given to private forest holders for the loss of their forest land (Shrestha 1995). Immediately in 1961 the second legislative measure was brought under the Forest Act 1961 which was provided for regulation of sales of forest products, and it also empowered the government to classify the forests under different categories according to use. The amendment in Forest Act was made in 1976 which classified the national forests into four different categories. In 1978, the panchayat forest rules were promulgated. The legislation provided for handing over parts of accessible government-managed forests to village development committees (VDCs), formerly a village panchayat, as a panchayat forest. The VDC is the lowest level political body and not a user group (Kanel 1993). In the subsequent years, amendments were made by emphasizing community participation in the management, conservation, and use of forest resources.

In 1988 the Master Plan of Forestry was finalized with the help of national and international experts. The document gives a policy and planning strategy to forestry sector, which stretches into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, setting medium and long-term objectives. The high priority objectives are: 1) to meet the basic needs for fuel wood, timber, fodder and other forest products on a sustained basis, 2) to promote people's participation in forestry resources' development, management and conservation.

Following the changes in the political system in 1990, the community forestry regulations were revised consequently and the revision in definition of user group (community) was done (Forest Act, 1993). The Forest Act of 1993 is the latest forestry legislation, promulgated by royal decree on the 18<sup>th</sup> January 1993. This new Act follows the recommendations of the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS 1988), of which most important are: 1) community forests should have priority over other uses of government-owned forests, and 2) the protection and management of community forests should be entrusted to the actual users. The Forest Act 1993 categorizes the forest into two broad classes: National Forest and Private Forest. The National Forests are further divided into five sub-categories: 1) Protected Forests, 2) Community Forests, 3) Leasehold Forests, 4) Religious Forests, and 5) Government Forests.

Some of the features of the Forest Act are as follows:

- ◆ Users' group should be registered in the district forest office;
- ◆ The district forest officer is empowered to hand-over a part of national forest to users' group;



**Plate 1: A typical community forest has features of luxuriant growth and regeneration due to protection**

- ◆ An operational plan should be prepared and submitted along with the application to the district office;
- ◆ The users' groups can price the forest products independently;
- ◆ The users' group can also raise funds from various sources, including the collection of fines;
- ◆ A users' group formed under this Act will be an autonomous and corporate body.

### Organisation of forest

In Nepal, the forests are under the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation. The territorial set-up consists of Regional Forestry Directorates in the five development regions (established in 1981), 74 District Forest Offices, 222 Ranges Offices, and 888 Forest Guards (Palit 1996). A Community Forestry Division has been established to deal with community and private forestry programmes, although its main task is to coordinate the community forestry development. The main tasks of five Regional Directorates include monitoring and clearance of technical matters with the districts. Each district is subdivided into 2-5 Ilaka Forest Offices (Ranges). All 23 districts (covering all the terai and some parts of the siwaliks and middle mountains) have been provided with armed guards to control encroachment and illegal felling (Bhatta 1989).

### Non-government organisations

Among the strategies adopted for the implementation of the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS), one is 'active encouragement to NGOs to participate in implementing the programmes under the leadership of the Social Services' National Coordination Council'. This enhances a number of NGOs working under various categories in Nepal. Due to their ability to reach disadvantaged people and promote self-reliant development, the NGOs are used to promote community



forestry, particularly at the grassroots level. Some NGOs are at national level while some of them are locally based. These NGOs play a very important role by activating a grassroot level process of needs, identification, project formulation, and implementation of development activities (Bhatta 1989). The United Mission to Nepal (UMN) has been involved in community forestry in Nepal since 1981. Its programme focusses on general education, raising awareness, and capacity building for general community development (Kinsely 1993). The strategies adopted by UMN envisage an integrated and coordinated approach between different government line agencies as well as NGOs working in the same area. The ultimate objective is training communities in skill and capacity development, not only for community forestry but also for improved, overall community development.

### Present status of community forestry

For the management of proper utilization of the forests, in earlier days, field staff attempted to motivate the local villagers towards the management and sustainable utilization of the forests. They tried to encourage the villagers towards community forestry eventhough the staffs were not well trained for that purpose. Initially, community forestry, which was viewed as a solution to deforestation problem, depended mainly on tree

planting. It was thought that this would solve the fuel and fodder crisis. Attention and funds were diverted to plantation programs in the 1970s and 1980s. The formation of users' groups and handing over of the community forests was very slow. Field-level training programs were planned and carried out extensively in districts and other areas for field staffs as well as the user groups and local leaders. Various types of short-term training programs workshops, study tour programs were organized to discuss the management, utilization and protection of the community forestry. INGO, NGO and local NGO were highly involved in such programs mainly focusing on women involvement in community forestry. By this women are quite liberated socially and take an active part in community forestry.

Since forestry was basically funded by different donor agencies through projects, a reappraisal of projects, which took place in the mid-1980s, led to a change at policy level. The emphasis shifted from plantation on *panchayat* lands to government- owned natural forests. One factor (in present days), which shifted the emphasis, is the realization that natural forests can be renewed at much lower cost than plantations, and the flow of subsistence goods from natural forests is usually much higher. The non-governmental organizations are actively involved in convincing local villager in this direction. Non-governmental organizations provided opportunities to the user groups to discuss ways and means of proper management of community forestry through various participatory activities in districts, regional and national level. The local level forestry staffs are encouraged to plan community forestry level planning, by a method of Participatory Rural Appraisal (Shrestha 1995). As a result of these activities the formation of users groups and handing over of forest is accelerating, where 9,10,370 ha of forest were handed to 11,586 users groups including 1,276,433 households (Table 1). This rapid growth in community forestry was due to enactment of the New Forest Act 1993.



Plate 2: Several community forests exist in riverine areas

Table 1: Community managed forests (2001/02)

Regions	FUG Nos.	CF Handover in ha.	No. of Households
Eastern	2,144	2,41,067	2,50,780
Central	2,584	1,93,783	3,00,990
Western	3,178	1,48,895	3,47,126
Mid-western	2,078	2,19,183	2,24,707
Far-western	1,602	1,07,442	1,52,902
Total	11,586	9,10,370	12,76,433

(Source: Community and Private Forestry Division, Department of Forest 2001/2002)

### Conclusion

Initiated only in the late 70s, the implementation of community forestry programme through forest users groups has started showing its positive impacts in the society (Bartlett *et al.* 1992). Such impacts are revealed in the form of income generation, construction works and above all a distinctive awareness of people on the need for conservation of natural resources.



Establishment of community forestry in past 24 years (1978-2000) is a successful step in conservation of forest and it is gaining popularity not only in country but also throughout the world. This is because the users groups are also interested in such conservation activities since the fruit of such activities comes to themselves. They also get their livelihood requirement of fodder, firewood, and leaf litter. They prepare operational plan of their forest by themselves with the help of DFO for management and manage according to it. When innovative foresters have built upon community initiatives, the results have been excellent (Singh and Singh 1993). In Nepal, it is now recognized that "an important element for being successful with community forestry implementation is the field staff's ability to identify and incorporate existing local systems of forest management into their recognized system of community forests" (Bartlett and Malla 1992). It is seen that many forests are managed quite well while others have conflict within them, or between user group or between user group and DFO's. In some user groups, internal conflicts that occur primarily due to the violation of rules and regulations by members have been reported. Such conflicts are usually settled by the Executive Committees of these user groups through the imposition of penalties or fines. Some of the workers pointed out the immediate research in community forestry. The socioeconomic aspect of community forestry is an important area of research. Prajapati *et al.* (1990) identified the three areas of research in the community forestry as they occupy the top three spots. These are natural forest silviculture, agroforestry, and fodder trees. The forests of Nepal have never been managed systematically. Even though the forests were nationalized in 1957, effective management of forests could not be introduced for various reasons. Even in the terai, where commercially valuable trees occur over extensive areas, efforts to introduce management plans were unsuccessful due to encroachment and sociopolitical reasons (Kayastha 1991). Very little information is available on these areas. In general the community forests were being managed under protection-oriented management systems, allowing the utilization of dry forest products but not providing additional green forest products. This management system of forest through the initiation of community forest project will give the positive result in the conservation of natural resource of the country. This will ultimately increase the socio-economic status of the local people and the whole country. ■

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