

Inventory Related Problems and Opportunities in Community Forestry: Findings of a Survey

Narayan Dhital QNP, China Email: ndhital@mountain.org.

Krishna Paudel ForestAction, Nepal Email: forestaction@wlink.com.np

Hemant Ojha ForestAction, Nepal Email: forestaction@wlink.com.np

Abstract

This article highlights the findings of a recent survey to assess the extent of problems, and opportunities, relating to the issue of community forest inventory in Nepal. An interaction with 133 respondents from 40 districts identified seven major problems in institutional, policy and technical aspects. Despite the emergence of several innovations in districts to cope with the issues, the inventory guideline it self has largely been unsuccessful in facilitating sustainable management of forest. A key recommendation following the analysis is outlined. The authors suggest that the policy intervention should allow innovations and context specific resource assessment methodologies to emerge.

Key words: forest inventory, community forestry, service delivery, policy

INTRODUCTION

In March 2000, the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (MOFSC) issued a circular to District Forest Offices (DFOs) and Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) obliging them to undertake detailed inventory of community forests for prescribing harvest levels of forest products in Operational Plans (OPs). The idea was to ensure sustainable harvesting by limiting the extraction within the annual increment. Hence the Department of Forest (DoF) issued a directive for the inventory of community forest in August 2000 along with a practical guideline for field foresters and Rangers for the assessment of growing stock and increment. It is perceived as mandatory for DFOs and Rangers to follow these directives while handing over a forest to communities or renewing OPs.

The issue of community forest inventory has become one of the most discussed area in the community forestry arena in Nepal. Anecdotal accounts suggest serious unintended consequences of the guideline including delay in forest hand over, halting the revision of operational plans, and consequently problems in forest harvesting and use. The problem has also been sensed by the Community Forestry Division of the DoF, and a taskforce has been constituted to review the guideline.

In this context, a rapid problem survey¹ was designed to collect evidences of the extent of problems and unwanted effects resulting from the enforcement of the directive and guideline, and to explore avenues for improvement. Both quantitative and qualitative evidences were gathered from 40 districts around the country through a field study (13) and a telephone survey (27), covering all the five development regions as well as major ecological zones of the country. The sample also captured parts of project areas supported by various donors. Altogether 123 respondents were consulted during the study including 33 DFOs.

NATURE, DIMENSIONS AND EXTENT OF INVENTORY INDUCED PROBLEMS

Respondents identified seven major problems induced by inventories, which are discussed below:

Costly Inventory Procedures

Rangers stated that they, with at least four additional supporters (either forest guards or CFUG members), require 12 to 15 working days to carryout an inventory in an area of 50 ha. at the intensity

specified in the inventory guideline in average forest conditions². If Rangers are paid @ NRs. 300.00 per working day and @ NRs. 500.00 for assistants, the cost of an inventory of 50 ha Community Forestry (CF) with average condition at the recommended intensity is NRs. 10,800.00 to 13,500.00. Stationary, equipment, social survey, plan writing, analysis and documentation, and contingency costs are not included. The current funding level of DFOs and financial position of Forest User Groups (FUGs) do not allow this cost to be managed for hundreds of FUGs in each district.

Limited Technical Capacity of DFOs to Provide Forestry Services

The manpower available in hill districts has limited technical skills for providing the services envisaged by the guideline. On an average only 10 Rangers are capable of carrying out inventory in hill districts. There are some forest guards who are capable of carrying out inventory work, but their capability or the potential of using them isn't recognized.

The new directive has tremendously increased the workload of Rangers. One Ranger in Dadeldhura district used to spend seven working days to facilitate a CFUG in preparing an OP for a forest of 50 ha. However, now he needs at least 21 working days to do the same job with inventory. All the Rangers consulted are experiencing a 2 – 3 fold increase in the demand of their services to CFUGs since the issuance of the inventory directive.

Complex Inventory Procedures for FUG Understanding and Interpretation

Community Forest Users have a limited understanding of the guideline and find it rigid, complex, time-consuming and costly. They feel that CFUGs are insufficiently involved in the process. Users are also critical to the silvicultural prescriptions for their operational plans written by Rangers as they do not understand the results of the inventory as presented in the OP. Ideally the results should be presented in the formats that users can understand, and then the users should prepare the plan in consultation with Rangers, who should play the role of explaining and interpreting the analysis of inventory data and helping the users to prepare the plan.

Non-recognition of Competent Service Providers

In the context of poor security situation, only local forest guards and Community Based Organizations (CBOs) are able to undertake fieldwork such as inventory. However, most DFOs and their staff are reluctant to accept services provided from outside the DFO. DFO staff in Banke for example mentioned that they would like to verify the sampling carried out by service providers by 10 -15 % before approving the job questioning the professional ethics of service providers expressing the feeling of service providers as being biased to FUGs and recommending over-harvesting. This misses the point that OP preparation and forest resource inventory are separate activities, and do not have to be undertaken by the same people. DFO Banke suggested that there should be either a temporary hiring system of Rangers by DFO, or payments should be channeled through DFO to service-providers. Otherwise, in his opinion, it would be very difficult to recognize the adequacy of their work. DFO Baglung suggests enlarging the organizational structure thereby deputing more Rangers and officers to the field. He approves of services provided by outsiders given that it is adequately monitored.

A common concern raised by DFO staff was that service-providers must be accountable for their work. They pointed out the need for a nationally agreed standard or legal framework, which makes the service providers accountable for their work. Accountability could be ensured by the careful drawing up of contracts that include sanctions and definitions for inadequate performance, as well as mechanisms for checking the quality of the work by DFO staff. Formation of foresters' council and certification of service providers could also be a good idea.

The evidence from the study suggests that a major source of the inventory problem is a result of the government forestry department being the sole service provider, which, due to limited technical capacity and responsiveness to users, and in some cases, rent seeking behavior, has not been able to

meet the escalating demand for inventory related services. This is compounded by a concurrent lack of alternative service providers, due to the limited recognition to the private service providers in the forestry service.

Delay in Forest Handover and OP Renewal

In the 28 hill districts studied, a total of 7,048 CFs are handed over but only 21.53% of these (1,518) have been inventoried to date. More than 100 CFs have been inventoried in Baitadi, Tanahun, Dolakha and Doti. But in ten of the districts studied, less than 10 CFs have been inventoried to date. There are different reasons for this situation. In Doti and Baitadi, it is relatively easy to carry out forest inventory because of single species forests. In Tanahun, it was easier because of capable human resources and in Dholakha because of the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP)'s explicit emphasis on seeking and strengthening non-governmental service providers. In districts with less than 10 FUGs inventoried, the reason is basically. In responsiveness and unaccountable and in many cases negligence or in capacity of DFO staff, compounded with absence of alternative service providers.

All this has created a significant delay in forest handover and renewal of OPs in these districts. In total, there are 5,516 FUGs requiring inventory, of which 2,365 are the current year's backlog (as of December 2002). In Kathmandu district, no CFs have been inventoried although forest handover and OP renewal is still going on.

Demands for Discretionary Rights and Rent Seeking Behavior

DFO Banke expressed his strong disagreement to the Annual Allowable Cut (AAC) recommended by the guideline. Despite increasing the AAC planned for in the OP of Laligurans CF, he believes that the AAC mentioned in guideline is excessive, ultimately degrading the forest as Current Annual Increment (CAI) is far below the Mean Annual Increment (MAI) in mature Sal forests. This argument does not consider the need to revert the forest back to a more actively growing state, and hence the need to remove a high proportion of the current over mature stock to encourage vigorous regeneration. He adds that contractors pursue CFUGs to use the guideline as a tool for over-harvesting in community forests in Dang and Banke districts. Better field monitoring to prevent over harvesting above the limits set in OPs does not occur in practice is required.

DFO Ilam has a similar view that an AAC estimated in accordance with the guideline provides room for over-harvesting. He urged that allowances for variables like grazing, fire, encroachment, illegal felling, girdling, and landslides. should be quantified and deducted from AACs to maintain the fragile ecosystem of the siwaliks and the mountains although he was not clear how to quantify it. It seems that DFOs are looking for more discretionary rights in the guideline regarding the extent of products to be harvested from CFs. However, these concerns are not directly related to inventory per se, but about how to interpret and use inventory data to develop appropriate and sustainable OPs.

Charpala CFUG in Rupandehi paid NRs 150,000 for the inventory of their forest to Range post staff (NRs. 300/day/ranger and NRs. 200/day/helper). It is not known whether this money goes into DFO accounts or DFO staff pockets. It raises a serious question as to whether DFO staff can legitimately claim a consultancy fee from CFUGs. This is contrary to the legal provision that technical services will be provided by DFOs as a basic service to CFUGs. The Department of Forest should respond to this as a policy issue.

DFO Palpa appreciates the guideline for initiating sustainable management of community forests. He has instructed his staff to adapt guideline where necessitates, for e.g. the use circular plots instead of the rectangular or square plots recommended by the guideline, as this was one of the practical difficulties of the guidelines faced by field staff. Most consulted DFOs noted the need for a NTFP inventory guideline as well.

Reinforcement of Power Imbalance between Communities and Forest Bureaucracy

Rangers and DFOs consulted were very reluctant to discuss the change in the power structure of community forestry after the new intervention. However, some (e. g. a Ranger from Dadeldhura) mentioned that power has shifted from CFUGs to DFOs as most CFUG decisions regarding forest product use and forest development activities are made only with the consultation and consent of DFO staff. The level of awareness amongst users about community forestry is still very low and not as hoped or assumed at the center, resulting in forest management decisions being made by the Ranger in many cases.

Forest users know when their OP expires and that it must be renewed to further manage the forest and use forest products. However, they do not understand why their OPs cannot be renewed. This has created an environment whereby users ignore the inventory and OP renewal and continue to harvest forest products in an unplanned fashion. This situation challenges the assumptions regarding the need of an OP and undermines the whole idea of planned forest management for sustainability and equity. The inventory has yet to be perceived as a management tool; instead, it is seen as a bureaucratic requirement. This reflects the scenario of changing power structures in community forestry.

Users consulted mentioned that their decision-making capacity has been limited due to complex Tables included in their OPs after the introduction of the guideline. It has compelled them to call rangers to most of their executive committee meetings to take decisions relating to forest management and harvesting. This indicates decreased CFUGs self-reliance after the intervention.

The study makes evident negative consequences of the well-intentioned policy instrument due to the political imbalance among various forest stakeholders, particularly between the forest administration and CFUGs. Although some argue that forest users should just be the users of inventory information and not involved in the process, the current socio-political context in which forest management decisions are made and implemented, is not conducive for this. For example, technical aspects of the inventory in many situations has further disadvantaged the illiterate, who are generally the poor, in their effort to negotiate forest management arrangements as informed user/decision-makers.

KEY INNOVATIONS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF RESOURCE INVENTORY

DFOs, Project staff, NGOs and users have developed a range of ideas and methods to overcome some of the constraints imposed by the guideline. Key innovations are identified below:

- Training to enhance the capacity of forest Rangers and Forest Guards
- Simplification of the guideline to assist field workers
- Different inventory methodologies developed by different donor funded projects
- Different interpretations of the inventory directive and guideline by several forest officials to address the practical problems of forest operational plan renewal and new forest handover:
 - ◆ Renewal of OPs without inventory (e.g Kathmandu)
 - ◆ Categorization of community forest according to commercial and non-commercial use, with inventory required only in commercially harvested forests e.g. Kaski)
 - ◆ Not strictly adhering to the guideline as a provision of an Act (Kathmandu)
- Additional manpower mobilization within DFO system (e.g NARMSAP³)
- Providing space to private service providers (e.g IOF⁴ students hired by CFUGs with NARMSAP grants,)
- Enhancing the capacity of CFUGs, Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and local NGOs (micro-project scheme in NSCFP)

CONCLUSION AND RECOMENDATION

The community forest inventory directive and guideline have resulted in a range of problems for different stakeholders while attempting to implement it

The evidence from the study suggests that a major source of the inventory problem is a result of the government forestry department being the sole service provider, which, due to limited technical capacity and responsiveness to users, and in some cases, rent seeking behavior, has not been able to meet the escalating demand for inventory related services. This is compounded by a concurrent lack of alternative service providers, due to the limited recognition to the private service providers in the forestry business. Capacity building of locally based Non-Governmental Organizations / Community Based Organizations (NGOs/CBOs) who can provide the services requires special consideration. There seems scope of forestry services supply through non-governmental institutions in Nepal. Simultaneously, the purpose of inventory has to be clarified as being primarily for the users themselves to have appropriate information on which to base their management decisions. Therefore, the people responsible for most of the inventory work should be the users themselves. With appropriate trainings and guidelines with a series of options for different local forest situations, outsiders only need assist users to design an appropriate inventory, and analyze and interpret the resulting data.

To this end, the current inventory directive and guideline as a national policy instrument should be limited to 'principle'/criteria of sustainable forest management, thus allowing context specific methodologies of resources assessment/management to emerge.

REFERENCE

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¹ In collaboration with the Livelihoods and Forestry Program (LFP), ForestAction undertook this study to assess the extent of problems, and opportunities, relating to the issue of community forest inventory in Nepal in October-November 2002. This report presents the findings of this short review study. The report aims to assist policy makers, forestry projects, researchers and advocacy NGOs, who wish to pursue the agenda of improving the current Community Forest Inventory Guideline (CFIG).

² Average condition of forest has been considered in this study as a forest area with 40–70 % crown coverage and 20 - 25⁰ slopes.

³ Natural Resource Management Sector Assistance Program

⁴ Institute of Forestry