Action and Learning: An Approach for Facilitating a Change in Knowledge and Power Relationship in Community Forestry

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Abstract

Though forestry issues have been associated with wider socio-economic, environmental and political concerns, the knowledge and power dynamics embedded in the process of its management has largely been ignored. The knowledge, tools and techniques that we had been applying in the past have not been useful to the extent of favoring the poor and marginalized section of community. There seemed a lack of effort for systematic learning to reflect and change the unequal relationships among stakeholders of resource management. This paper describes the action learning approach, which was implemented in a Community Forest User Group (CFUG) of Terai region of Nepal. Drawing lessons from the empirical evidences, it concludes that action learning can be an approach to change the status quo and the knowledge dynamics in CFUG by developing leadership and raising the critical awareness among the users, particularly the poor and marginalized.

Key words: Action and learning, knowledge, power, social justice, facilitation

INTRODUCTION

In the last two to three decades, there has been a rapid change in the perceptions of the role of forest in society all over the world. The forestry issues have now been associated with wider socio-economic, environmental and political concerns (Brown and Schreckenberg 2002; Nygren 2000; Timsina 2003). However, the forestry issues in general and those of the community forestry in particular, are viewed differently by different people (Edmunds and Wollenberg 2001) with the perspectives of different knowledge and power dynamics. Since community forestry is a political process, views of a few selected interest groups or stakeholders, mainly the government's Forest Department and/or outside donor agencies, have dominated the process of planning and implementing the programs and activities at national level and the elite and powerful people have dominated it at local level (Ojha *et al*. 2003; Timsina 2002; Malla 2001). Though the problem of elite domination in benefiting the poorer section of community has widely been accepted, there has been a little systematic effort for learning of the stakeholders that would be helpful to reflect and change the scenario. The knowledge, tools and techniques we used in the past do not seem useful to the extent that they would favor the poor and marginalized section of the community. It is because of the focus on technical aspects of forest management by largely ignoring the knowledge and power dynamics of the community members and other stakeholders. Therefore, there is a need to invent new concepts, approaches, tools and techniques that promote stakeholders' learning in bringing changes in the existing knowledge and power gaps between the stakeholders.

This paper details the approaches and methods that seem helpful in addressing the learning gap in forest management. The study is based on the action and reflection of a Community Forest User Group (CFUG) in Terai region of Nepal in a complex socio-political context of caste, class, gender and ethnicity. This paper adapts the concept of action and learning approach as the basis for analyzing the information generated during fieldwork. It provides a brief description of the study site and analyses the approach adapted for facilitating the action learning process. It explains the action steps adapted while facilitating different layer of interactions in the CFUG. It concludes that the learning from the action is an efficient process to empower the marginalized stakeholders by redistributing knowledge and power that facilitate democratization of CFUG at all levels.

ACTION AND LEARNING: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The word action conjures up images of individuals doing, expecting and implementing (Argyris 1993). In this article, we focus especially on actions that are designed to produce intended consequences and on behavior imbued with meaning by individual forest users as they interact with others in forest management. In this view, action is not simply the discoveries of new ideas or development of new polices, it is the implementation of these ideas and policies together with the evaluation of effectiveness at each stage of implementation.

Since learning is an action concept, it occurs only when we take effective action, and detect and correct error (Argyris 1993). The error is the difference between the intention of an action and its results. It means that it is a mismatch between what we intend an action to produce and what actually happens when we implement that action. Learning also occurs when we produce a match between intentions and results for the first time (Argyris 1993).

At a more fundamental level, action and learning is related to social learning process, which is sustained by a dynamic interaction of knowledge and power (Lee 1993). The learning/knowledge component is related to how various groups of people, who use, control, depend or otherwise have interest to some natural resources, make their way into an uncertain and complex environment, by engaging themselves through a process of learning. The politics or power play refers to all processes of conflict, negotiation, decision making, monitoring, enforcement that maintain compliance, redistribute power and benefits, and facilitates or suppresses learning.

The action and learning approach in democratizing knowledge and power in community forestry process is not only required in order to act effectively, it is also necessary in order to codify effective action, so that it can be reliably used when it is appropriate. This means that effective action in changing the knowledge and power relationships are not only stored as rules in actors' head; it is known publicly, usually in the form of formal and informal policies and routines. Building policies, routines and culture requires learning (Argyris 1993) and such learning can be realized through experiences (Senge *et al*. 1994). Specifically, the action learning approach is used in a way that popular wisdom and common sense are enriched and defended for the necessary advancement of the poor and exploited in a more just, productive and democratic type of society (Rahman and Fals-Borda 1991).

This study, focuses on both the action and learning processes that are necessary to produce effective outcomes/impacts that address problems that may be embarrassing or threatening because their solutions require changing the *status quo* in the society, particularly in community forestry in this case. To be in benefit of the poor and marginalized section of the community, they have to specify the action strategies themselves that may achieve desirable outcome and seek the underlying values that guide and promote these actions.

DESCRIPTION AND CONTEXT OF THE STUDY SITE

Gagan Khola CFUG located in Siraha district of Eastern Terai region of Nepal has been selected as the case study site. This CFUG was officially handed over to the local community in 1997. This CFUG includes 165 user households with a committee of 13 members and it has a total forest area of 75 hectares. The users are divided into nine *toles* (small hamlets) with different ethnic and caste groups, namely Paswan *tole*, Magar *tole*, Tamang *tole*, Bohora *tole*, Sudi-Sahuji *tole*, Yadav *tole*, Rai *tole*, Bhandari and Bika (Blacksmiths) *tole* and Baluwa *tole*. Among them, Rai *tole* seems to be relatively prosperous in terms of access to livelihood assets followed by the Yadav *tole*. Paswan, Sudi and Bishwakarma, who are considered as *dalits* are among the poorest of the poor.

The Gagan Khola CFUG has recognized itself being one of the active and well-managed group of Nepal. As a token of its contribution in environmental conservation and effective institutional

procedures, the CFUG was conferred the coveted Ganesh Man Singh[1] Environment Conservation Award.

The leadership of the group has been significantly matured at the district level to lead the group to better manage the community forestry processes. This is evident by the fact that chairperson of the CFUG is also the chairperson of the district Federation of Community Forestry Users-Nepal (FECOFUN)[2], Siraha and also the elected Village Development Committee (VDC) chairperson.

Sambala Herbal Private Limited, a profit-making business company, has been promoting the cultivation and processing of some aromatic plants at the community level both in community forest and private land in the area. The local people are engaged in the cultivation of these grass species used in producing aromatic oil.

However, from the perspective of the poor people's access to and control over the Gagan Khola community FUG, the study team has found a different story. The people consider a position in the CFUG committee as a symbol of high social status and people crave to secure a post. Hence, most of the committee members were from the wealthy and elite groups. Only few members such as chairperson, who was also an elected representative of the local VDC, and the secretary, who being an ally of the chairperson, take the major decisions. Other members in the CFUG committee were mostly unaware of the activities of their own committee. The users, particularly the poor and marginalized were naïve to the activities of the CFUG and find insignificant contribution of forest in their livelihood strategies.

To address such unequal knowledge and power relationships in the community, the study team adopted a systematic approach of action and learning. This has been briefly described in the following section.

APPROACH ADOPTED FOR FACILITATING THE ACTION-LEARNING PROCESS

We considered the critical investigation approach for focusing on collective analysis of the past and existing situations as well as visioning and planning for the future. We have deliberately focused on the learning outputs of the process in order to facilitate the visioning and planning for change. We considered the identification of problems/issues and their root causes, which consequently capacitated the users of the CFUG to address such problems. We reached all the general users in an effective way to ensure their contribution in decision-making, which would enhance the outcomes of CFUG in terms of social justice particularly equity concerns, community FUG's internal governance, forest management and ultimately the livelihoods of the forest dependant people. For this purpose, participation of all strata of the community such as class, caste and gender in each step of the process to make aware the whole process to users in the CFUG was emphasized. During this process, individual concerns were socialized to the wider domain of the problem itself.

We encouraged the users to create forums for interest negotiation that recognizes the different segments of the community on the basis of various parameters such as wealth, caste, gender etc. by the mobilization of the forest resources. Finally, a negotiated proposal in the form of forest operational plan and the constitution of the CFUG was reformed that articulated the knowledge and power dynamics favoring the poor and marginalized.

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[1] Ganesh Man Singh is the supreme commander of popular people's movement of Nepal in 1990. This award is conferred to the organizations contributing significantly in the field of Environment Conservation.

[2] FECOFUN is a network of community FUGs established to articulate the interest of users, defend their rights and provide services as demanded by the community FUGs.

ACTION STEPS ADOPTED

The monitoring action is not only required in order to act effectively, it is also necessary in order to codify effective action, so that it can be reliably used in other circumstances as a learning from experience followed during the process of action and learning, the steps are described as follows:

1. Informal Meeting with the Members of CFUG Committee

An informal meeting was organized with the selected office bearers (chairperson and secretary) of the Gagan Khola CFUG committee to discuss on the need and methodology (the steps to be involved and the processes) of action learning process for better management of forest and consequently enhancing the livelihood of the poor and marginalized. As they expressed the interest for further discussion on the issue, a formal meeting of the CFUG committee was organized to discuss the issues in more details.

2. Formal Meeting with CFUG Committee

We posed various questions to the CFUG committee members in-group and separately to individual members in a critical and reflective ways. In this step, our objective was to explore the overall situation of the CFUG committee in terms of knowledge and power relationships the way the committee members perceived and played their roles in forest management. We asked some critical follow up questions one after another in the form of what, how and why. The CFUG committee members were questioned on equity and social justice and the ways the poor and marginalized can benefit from the community forest and the role and responsibilities to be played by the CFUG committee in order to be more accountable and democratic.

The CFUG committee members responded to the questions in many ways. They reflected that they could not conduct assembly of the CFUG since its establishment. Only chairperson and secretary of the committee seemed to be active in the management process and they paid minimum attention to the opinions of other users (as other members were also passive) in decision-making process. Finally, they expressed the interest to adapt the process of action learning to bring the changes in relationships between the users of the CFUG and continuously monitor the whole process of community forestry development and realized the process needed to be established and institutionalized in a cost effective way.

The CFUG committee members agreed and decided to conduct the *tole* (hamlet) meetings to sought opinion of all villagers. Then they divided the whole FUG in 9 *toles*. Specific CFUG committee members were identified and asked to organize the meeting in the *toles*. Before organizing the *tole* meetings, the whole (cycle/action) steps and objectives of participatory action and learning were discussed with the committee members, which was helpful to create the feeling of ownership of the process.

3. *Tole* (small hamlet level) Meetings

Nine different *tole* meetings were conducted with 100% participation of the households to understand the views of the users regarding the management of the community forest.

During the *tole* meeting, CFUG committee members were not allowed to speak[3]. However, the CFUG committee chairperson introduced the facilitators and clarified the importance of the learning approach to the CFUG to establish a trust and mutual understanding between local people (*tole* residents) and the facilitators.

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[3] Our assumption for this was that the CFUG committee members are of elite class and have a sort of informal and formal control in the decision making in the village and in the community forestry development process. The poor, marginalized, women and *dalits* generally do not speak against CFUG committee members.

The meetings were facilitated asking the critical and reflective questions personally to each participants to explore personal feelings, perceptions and concerns such as benefit sharing mechanisms, the implication of decisions taken by the CFUG committee, rules and regulations of community FUG, individual contribution to community forestry development, fund mobilizations etc.

People from most of the *toles* were found to be emotional (spoke loudly and critically and became sensitive), assertive and enthusiastic while discussing. Everyone enthusiastically participated in the discussion and readily expressed their opinion and feeling. Almost all people expressed their dissatisfaction with CFUG committee decisions and working procedures. They showed strong willingness to be involved actively (if recognize and provide opportunity) in the community forestry development process and extend contribution.

Some of the critical issues that the users raised in the *tole* meetings

- *Narayan Teli* (a poorest of the poor in the village) could not buy firewood to cremate his wife and, therefore, buried the dead body near the village. A fox dug the body out and dragged it to the village. Some of the users argued that if he had been provided firewood, such dreadful incident would not have occurred. However, there existed another opinion on the woman's cremation as she died of maternity problem with the baby in the womb. In such situation, the Hindu rituals do not allow the dead body to be cremated[4].

- Users and sometimes the treasurer himself do not know of the financial transaction of the group.

- The CFUG fund has been used to develop drinking water facility in the village. Most of the rich and powerful people have fixed separate taps for each household (they even use it for irrigating kitchen gardens) whereas the poor and marginalized especially *dalits* have a single tap in a *tole* to be shared many households, where the supply is inadequate.

- Some of the users have been provided with the opportunity to cultivate aromatic plants (grasses) in the forest area. However, the poor households have not benefited from the sales of the products, as the cost of production is higher than the sales value due to 25 percent levy imposed by CFUG committee on the total income.

- The poorest users do not know who are in the CFUG committee and what they do.

- Members of the CFUG committee do not listen to the voices of the poor and marginalized.

Tole meetings were found to be useful for politicizing the individuals' needs and concerns that encourage marginalized people to speak and share their ideas, organize people for future actions etc. Two *tole* representatives (one male and one female) were selected during the *tole* meeting to represent the *tole* and raise the issues and concerns in larger forums.

4. Workshop of *Tole* Representatives and CFUG Committee

A two-day workshop of *tole* representatives and CFUG committee was organized in the village to discuss individual and *tole* level concerns. Eighteen *tole* representatives (nine male and nine female) and nine CFUG committee members participated in the workshop.

The respective *tole* representatives shared the issues and problems raised during the *tole* meetings. Some of the *tole* representatives could not put their critical views as assertively as they had in the *tole* meetings due to the fear of being isolated.

Some of the members of CFUG committee were criticized in joint workshop. A small group work to facilitate the critical self-assessment of the users and CFUG committee proved to be useful to reduce the tension between the CFUG committee and the *tole* representatives.

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[4] The issue of Hindu ritual was raised in an interaction with the team of a Bilateral Forestry Project. However, Narayan Teli did not speak about the ritual to the facilitators.

The fundamental concepts of the social justice (positive discrimination on resource sharing i. e. giving privilege to the poor, and ensuring livelihood support to everyone particularly poorest and marginalized section of the society) and good governance (participation, accountability, rule of laws, transparency etc.) Principles were discussed during workshop so as to sensitize participants to move towards more equitable, democratic and sustainable future.

A discussion was carried out regarding the ways to translate these concepts into action so as to change in knowledge and power relationships. For the purpose of addressing the problems/issues raised during the *tole* meetings, the issues were grouped into three broad categories namely social justice, governance and technical aspects so that the policy formulation process would be easy while reforming the constitution and forest operational plan of the community FUG. The workshop has formulated three different sub-committees to perform various jobs i) policy shaping sub-committee to formulate the poor-focused and better governed CFUG policy and present in the general assembly for further discussion and approval; ii) account sub-committee to make all the previous financial transaction transparent to the user group during the general assembly and iii) general assembly preparation sub-committee.

5. Sub-committee Meeting

Separate meetings of the sub-committees were organized to properly accomplish the assigned responsibilities to them. Sub-committees also reflected that the middle and/or rich categories of users still depend on forest resources to some extent; their rights should not be undermined in the name of the poor focused programs. Thus, they tried to promote community's agendas in general within which nested poor-focused agendas were envisioned as first priority. Learning from the interaction and reflection, a few practical options to address the existing problems were designed as draft.

6. General Assembly

A general assembly of the forest users was organized in the CFUG with necessary homework done by the preparatory committee. A formal session was organized first followed by an informal session and a zero hour for further discussion.

More than 200 people from 165 households participated in the assembly. Users were divided into groups on the basis of the *toles*. When the former chairperson presented the financial and progress report of the community FUG, each *tole's* users were allowed to put their views separately. So, there were mixed reactions on the report presented. Users raised several questions on the use of fund and asked for clarification on the ways the funds have been used. The critical questions of the users on the governing of the CFUG committee created a difficult situation for the committee members. However, users ultimately approved the report in the condition that the CFUG committee will keep all the transaction discreet and transparent in future.

Once the policy formulation sub-committee presented the draft policy, some of the rich and elite people who have been exercising informal power in the community opposed the policy and showed indignation saying that the policy focused on only the interests of the poor at the cost of the interests of the other categories of users behind. They presented an alternative draft, which was less focused on the poor. The users seriously discussed and debated on both draft policies and ultimately they reached into a negotiation that favored the poor and marginalized users. However, a proposal forwarded to provide the revolving loan without interest to the selected poor (exclusively) for the income generating activities was rejected by the general assembly.

NEGOTIATED OUTCOMES OF THE ACTION AND LEARNING PROCESS

Inclusion of Excluded

The users from each *tole* selected their representatives to represent the CFUG committee that included all categories of users including women, *dalits* and poor. However, a lobbying was

facilitated in favor of selecting the poor, marginalized and *dalits* so as to enhance the access of those categories in formal decision-making body. The present CFUG committee formation process seems more representative and democratic as compared to the previous one, which used to be formed haphazardly under the influence of few elite people. With the active engagement of users in critical reflection and learning, existing elite domination in benefit sharing, representation and governance systems were challenged. This resulted into some mechanism for institutionalization of inclusion of previously excluded section of community especially poor, *dalits* and women.

Creating the Bridge between CFUG Committee and the Users

A decision has been taken to institutionalize provision of the *tole* representatives and defined their roles to bridge the gap between CFUG committee and the users. *Tole* representatives are responsible for maintaining the smooth communication between CFUG committee and users as well as ensuring the participation of the users in the forest management and community development activities. At the same time, they are responsible for providing feedback to the CFUG committee. The *tole* representatives' usual term is defined for two years, however *tole* members can change them any time.

Mechanism for Continuous Monitoring

A mechanism for regular monitoring is established in the community FUG. For this purpose, a monitoring sub-committee other than CFUG committee was formed. The sub-committee would regularly and closely observe and analyze the functioning of the CFUG committee and users as a whole and provide feedback to them.

Equity-based Forest Product Distribution System

As an important outcome of the action learning process, equity in benefit sharing mechanism is one that has created sensitivity towards poor *dalits* and women, and priority was given to the poorer members in distributing forest products. The distribution of fuel-wood is decided at differentiated rate as Rs. 50/- per quintal- for rich and Rs. 25/- per quintal for poor with the priority for the poor. Previously the rate of fuel-wood was Rs. 50/- per quintal for all users, which was considered to be costly for the poor. There was no priority to the poor and marginalized in the forest products distribution system favoring equity.

Yet the new CFUG committee is supposed to find out 10 poorest of the poor households on the basis of locally accepted criteria and distribute fuel-wood to them free of cost. However, a provision was made to provide firewood free of cost for the purpose of cremation for all the users irrespective of economic classes considering the socio-cultural value of Hindu funeral rites.

Poor Focused Income-generating Activities

A decision was taken to provide some part of the community forestland to the selected poor families to cultivate aromatic grasses without disturbing the trees. The 25% levy, which has been charged previously, was exempted and now all the income will be of the users engaged in its cultivation. Similarly, a rule was set to give priority to the poor and marginalized while mobilizing CFUG fund.

CONCLUSIONS

Action learning can be a useful process to change the *status quo* and the knowledge dynamics in CFUG by developing leadership and raising the critical awareness among the users, particularly the poor and marginalized. It can be achieved through various inter-personal skills such as communication, negotiation, lobbying, pro-activeness etc., which resulted into the improved management of the local resources along with the increased output for their livelihoods. Interactions between users and committee members at different levels led to the social learning that proved to be a useful process in understanding the relationship between human and nature and changing the relationship between the users. In the learning process, an analysis of power dynamics within a

community seemed to be important tool to facilitate and encourage people to organize and empower for identifying the issues to be advocated within and outside the community FUG. This joint analysis reflection and learning can empower people to be involved in the higher level of power dynamics. The special focus to empower the poor and marginalized involves a rigorous political process which also will sensitize the power elite at the local level as has been reflected in the *tole* meetings and subsequent interactions between the members of CFUG committee, *tole* representatives and the users.

Moreover, the learning process appeared to be useful in creating and sustaining the forum for collective action so as to actively facilitate the users for the discussion, planning, monitoring, and evaluating the activities and performance of the CFUG committee and users. However, the role of the facilitators is crucial although it may vary according to the situation during the process.

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