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Community Forestry and Integrated Natural Resource Management in the Churia Region of Nepal

The author contends that the prevailing community forestry policy and legislations can be implemented to solve problems of Terai forest management. Based on on-going experiences in the Chure and inner Terai region in eastern Nepal, he puts forward an approach that integrates community forestry with natural resource management involving various stakeholder groups. The conclusion is that before attempting any change in legislation, more experiences may be gained by sincere efforts to implement community forestry in the Terai region of Nepal.

Introduction

Experiences of many stakeholder groups on the processes and impacts of community forestry in Nepal provide evidences that with implementation of Community Forestry (CF) Policy, community participation in forestry development activities have changed the forest greenery dramatically. The forest policy stipulates a strategy to hand over the authority to conserve and use the forest resources to local people, and this has engendered a deep sense of ownership over forests and created incentives for community investment in forest management. As a result, thousands of forest user groups (FUGs) have improved the conditions of about a million hectares of community forests over the past two decades in the hills, mountains as well as the Terai region of the country.

Despite these successes, recently Government is making some attempts to abolish community forestry in the Terai and curtail several FUG rights related to forest management nationally. The main arguments for such a change is that Government should manage the Terai and Chure forests for ensuring inter-community equity as well as conserving the fragile landscape of the Chure region. The widely held assumption within the Government is that unlike in the hills, the forests in the Terai cannot be managed with the simple hill model of community forestry as the socio-economic situation is too complex and communities alone cannot protect and manage the forests effectively and equitably. This paper challenges some of the Government assumptions underlying the new policy initiatives, and puts forward an approach (that is being innovated) to devise appropriate institutional arrangement for community forestry within the existing policies based on the experiences of Churia Forest Development Project (ChDP) in the eastern Terai of Nepal.

Initial successes and unaddressed challenges

A number of successful cases of community forestry can be found in the Chure Region. Forest User Groups (FUGs) have protected, regenerated and managed the forests more effectively than they were before hand over. Several FUGs have created positive livelihoods impacts at the household level through effective farming of community forests, mobilizing group funds earned from forest management, and fulfilling forest products needs. Such successful examples have become attractions for people interested in community forestry. For instance, Lalpur Gagankhola Community Forest in Siraha district has become a focus of attraction to the visitors both from within the country and abroad. Like wise, Malati CF at Mahuli area of Saptari district has contributed significantly to households incomes and livelihoods mainly through livestock and fodder production. There are many other successful models that are being exercised by FUGs in Terai, which are suitable for this region.

Despite the success of FUGs, many challenges to forest management remain, particularly in Siraha and Saptari districts of eastern Terai. The forest resources are retained in northern upper part known as Churia range where as the majority of people live in southern-lower belt with plenty of arable plain fields but without forests. Geographically the Churia range itself is highly fragile and on top of this, due to the degradation of forest resources, the arable fields in the south are getting flooded every year, ultimately changing the fertile area into unproductive land.

Exploring an Innovative Approach

To address the above mentioned problems, ChDP has been trying to evolve an innovative approach in the area. Several workshops among stakeholders including

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Box 1. Process and Steps of exploring institutional arrangement for integrated natural resource management in Chure region of Nepal

- a. Round table workshop among stakeholders with representatives from all concerned stakeholders
 - ▣ identification of stakeholders' interests in natural resource management (poor households, fuel wood sellers, encroachers, etc.)
 - ▣ identification of current problems regarding availability, management, utilization of natural resource (soil erosion, forest deterioration, arable field cutting, damage of infrastructures, timber smuggling etc.)
 - ▣ clarification of roles of the various stakeholders to mitigate the problems.
- b. INRM Process clarification workshop with stakeholders: clarification on why this approach is essential in natural resource management
 - ▣ what are natural resources? emphasis will be given to forest resources management
 - ▣ interest of downstream - upstream
 - ▣ interest of resource controller and resource scarce analysis
 - ▣ balance of interests between stakeholders
 - ▣ possibility of sectoral integration will be identified and local group will be sensitized for receiving sectoral line agency support.
- c. Legal awareness workshop for local stakeholders
- d. Legal awareness campaign among general public and plan implementation support
- e. Situation analysis and plan formulation workshop
- f. Identification of focus areas and area stratification
 - ▣ Possible FUGs allocation.
 - ▣ Possible Soil Conservation groups allocation.
 - ▣ Sensitive area identification in terms of landslides or erosion.
 - ▣ Required upstream – downstream mediation group allocation.
 - ▣ Resource pressure area in terms of smuggling and scarcity.
 - ▣ NTFP potential area.
 - ▣ Biological diversity area.
 - ▣ IGA area (Bamboo, Broom etc.)
- g. Formulation of strategies
 - ▣ Possible strategies development for illegal tree felling (timber smuggling).
 - ▣ Sectoral integration/coordination/cooperation possibilities with line agencies (DSCO, agriculture, livestock etc.)
- h. Formulation of local INRM plan
- i. Preparation of Action Plan
 - ▣ Focus on organizational capacity and social capital building through community forestry
- j. Implementation of Action Plan
 - ▣ Community Forest User Group formation
 - ▣ Soil Conservation Group formation
 - ▣ Formation of mediation and monitoring group
 - ▣ Networking and experience sharing (upstream-downstream, outside etc.)
 - ▣ Coordination between local stakeholder groups

local bodies were held and an integrated natural resource management (INRM) concept has been initiated, within the existing policy framework. The INRM concept provides an adequate room for a dialogue among stakeholders so that the interests of upstream areas (resource controlling groups) and downstream areas (flood affected groups) could be balanced. And also, the interest of people from forest surplus and deficit areas could be brought together. One of the key themes of INRM is to improve the dynamics of natural resource use and management by communities from wider range through participatory action research, dissemination of knowledge and information. This approach is being tested in Sarrekhola watershed area in Siraha district and in Rampur valley of Udayapur district. Churia Forestry Development Project is facilitating this process.

The objectives for INRM program is to develop Natural Resource Management Plan at district, watershed, and sub watershed levels or based on forest resource availability, and implement these plans in a collaborative way. Steps and activities that are being

conducted for the development of a local INRM plan and for its implementation are given in the box.

Conclusion

It is essential to realize that successful experience and learning are emerging and being replicated even in Terai like in the hills within the existing forestry policy. Technical support and facilitation in developing users' action plans are much more crucial than attempting to change the Forest Act and its by-laws which may complicate the delivery of needed services from government as well as Non-Government sectors. The most appropriate strategy could be to explore possible institutional arrangement within the existing legislation before attempting any significant shifts in the policy and regulatory framework. INRM experience in Chure may generate lessons on how best we can move without changing legal framework.

