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Timber in Nepal***

Mani R. Banjade*

* Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National
University, Canberra, Australia.

Editors

Hari Dhungana
Hari Sharan Luintel
Rahul Karki

Design and Layout

Arjun Gyanwali

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Discourse and Discursive Practices Over Timber in Nepal

■ Mani R. Banjade*

* Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.
Corresponding author: mrbanjade@gmail.com

Abstract: Forest sector of Nepal is far from harnessing its economic potential, but witnesses a continuation of deforestation and forest degradation. This is largely because of the limited policy focus on the management of the most important forest product – the timber. Taking timber at the central stage in the debate on forest management, this paper examines the existing stakeholder relations, policy deliberations, programs and everyday practices in Nepal. This paper draws on the country's policy, legal and regulatory documents, policy deliberations on forest governance, media analysis and everyday practices of forest management. These policies and practices are analysed in relation to environmental discourse, social practices and hegemony in forest sector governance. This paper shows that, while timber occupies a central stage in the government's decisions, in most of forest-related contestations, and in everyday management decisions, timber management has received only secondary importance in the national forest policy and discourses. The analysis shows that since forest policy discourses have departed from timber, local communities and the government have lost significant incomes from the forest. The marginalization of timber in the policy discourse also encouraged deforestation and forest degradation especially through illegal logging and forest encroachment.

Key words: discourse, forest policy, timber, policy deliberation, media analysis, community forestry, forest governance.

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to show how national level policy processes and deliberations in Nepal fail to attend to the everyday practices and concerns of forest governance. I argue that the forest sector of Nepal in general and that of Terai¹ region in particular is far from harnessing its economic potential instead, it is experiencing a continuation of deforestation and forest degradation. The sector has confronted political and ethnic tensions and polarization, and is faced with a deadlock in forest governance. I suggest that structuring of the discourse around forest governance should be the starting point to ascertain the forest sector's optimum contribution to local and national economy.

It is evident that the forest policy process and discursive practices have failed to identify timber

as the priority forest product, even though it deserves to be so. Timber remains a prime forest product in Nepal, and it has been used for various purposes including the construction of houses, bridges and water canal links², furniture, crafts and many others. Since the trade with then British rulers in India started in 1924 (FAO 1999a), timber remained a very important source of state revenue. Despite significant contribution of timber to the national treasury, it could not become a part of government policies and programs, electoral politics and policy deliberations in Nepal.

The national forest policy discourses since 1970s have gradually shifted from timber-focused forest management to biodiversity conservation, non-timber forest products

¹ The southern flat land of Nepal, which extends from the East to West.

² Hollow trunk of water resistant tree species such as Sal (*Shorea robusta*) was historically used for culverts and water canal links.



(NTFPs) and environmental services and carbon. In the recent political discourse, Jal, Jamin, Jangal, Jan and Jadibuti (water, land, forest, human resource and NTFPs) have been popularized during the Constitution Assembly election held in 2008. The current approach paper of the government (Three-Year Plan for the period of 2010/11-2012/13) on forestry explicitly prioritises environmental services and seeks to explore policy and institutional arrangements for payment for environmental services (GoN 2010: p43). Meanwhile, with the commencement of the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility – a World Bank-supported programme – carbon trading, particularly Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) in developing countries, has dominated the forest management debate over the last two years. For over four decades, timber and its contribution to local and national economy have gone missing in the policy discourse and deliberations.

Part of this shift in focus of forest sector coincides with the changing programmatic priorities of the government, donors and other development agencies. This is evident from the analysis of USAID's forest programs over the last four decades. According to Brennan *et al.* (2003), the focus of USAID's forest program was on plantation of trees until 1970s, which shifted to biodiversity conservation and local forest stewardship by the mid-1980s, and recently to environmental services (carbon sequestration, watershed protection, and soil conservation) and forest certification.

To examine the divergence between existing practices on the ground and policy deliberations, this paper combines analysis of social practices within the critical discourse analysis (CDA) (van Leeuwen 1993; Fairclough 1993; van Dijk 2001; Toolan 1997) and discursive politics (Fischer 2003; Hajar 1995). The CDA studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text

and talk in the social and political context (van Dijk 2001: p352). In reference to forest sector governance in Nepal, discourse is defined as 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to social and physical phenomena' (Hajer 2006: p67). I acknowledge the inherent power asymmetries in the forest policy process, hegemony of powerful actors, and repertoires of struggles against domination prevalent in forest sector governance in Nepal. Therefore, I share the view that the 'local struggles over policy making could be seen as shaped by wider struggles between competing economic, social and environmental discourses' (Sharp and Richardson 2001: p 198). Looking at the policy narratives and everyday interface of various actors at community, meso, national and international spheres, this paper sheds light on the competing discourses and discursive practices around forest sector in Nepal. In this analysis, timber is recognised as a principal forest product, leading to a critical inquiry on how policy processes and contentions fail to recognize the centrality of timber in Nepal's forest management in practice.

This paper builds on reviews and analysis of i) policy deliberations organized by the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MoFSC), donors, I/NGOs, and federations during the year 2010; ii) forestry sector government revenue and that of community forestry; iii) policy decisions made by the government, including policies, acts, regulations, directives, guidelines, as well as other decisions and circulars; iv) the information received from timber traders on the volume of trade and employment generated by the timber industry; v) media coverage in the year 2010; vi) annual reports of the MoFSC, Department of Forest (DoF), I/NGOs, donors and user federations working in the forestry sector; vii) interviews with community forest user groups (CFUGs), and other stakeholders from meso (district and sub-district) and national level, as well as the meeting minutes of CFUGs and meso-level forums; viii)



the review of coverage by forest related journals published from Nepal; and ix) analysis of FECOFUN³ movement and key narratives and slogans used.

This paper describes the significance of timber in national and local economy together with key conflicts between different actors in relation to timber in section 2. Then in section 3, it compares national level policy deliberations, media coverage and programmatic focus with everyday practices at local and meso levels. Similarly, section 4 of this paper links these inconsistencies with existing concepts of discourses and social practices while section 5 concludes the paper.

SIGNIFICANCE OF TIMBER IN NEPALESE ECONOMY

Historically, timber remained at the centre of the people-forest relationship and regulatory provisions. For example, Nepal was dotted throughout the hills with Raniban (literally, queen's forest) where felling of trees and extraction of other forest products were prohibited. Similarly, an ordinance promulgated in 1825 banned tree felling in specified areas. Paradoxically, however, the governments granted forestland to the ruling elite until the 1940s with an aim of converting forests into agricultural land (Satyal Pravat 2006; Regmi 1978). The government distributed forestland in the form of Jagir (a form of reward) for government employees or Birta (land grant) to the close allies of the rulers. When the British expanded the railway network in India during the early to mid-twentieth century, they needed sleepers in large quantities, and Nepal's Sal (*Shorea robusta*) timber had the requisite strength and weather tolerance. Since 1924, the government of Nepal began to sell timber to the then British ruler in India (FAO 1999b; Ghimire 1992). To oversee the trade, the government established a separate forestry

institution called Kathmahal in 1927. With an increased volume of timber export and related transactions, the forest agency expanded fast. Since then timber has become the major source of forestry sector revenue in Nepal.

The first five-year plan (1956-61) gave timber management a high priority and proposed the establishment of a forest service and enactment of a forest law. After the nationalisation of all forests in 1957, the government established Timber Corporation of Nepal (TCN) – a state-owned (parastatal) company in 1961. The main task for the forest service was to oversee timber production and trade (NPC 2008). Maximising state revenue through timber was at the heart of these policies. It has also been argued that massive resettlement programs in the Terai during 1960s was intended to supply timber to India (Ghimire 1992).

Revenue from forests contributed significantly during the early years of development planning in Nepal. For example, the share of forests was almost one-third⁴ during the first five-year plan period (NPC 2008). Similarly, the revenue from the forest sector reached NRs 93.3 million during the third plan period (1965-70) and to NRs 592.1 million in the fiscal year 2008/09. The timber-based revenue has been increasing significantly since the late 1990s (Figure 1).

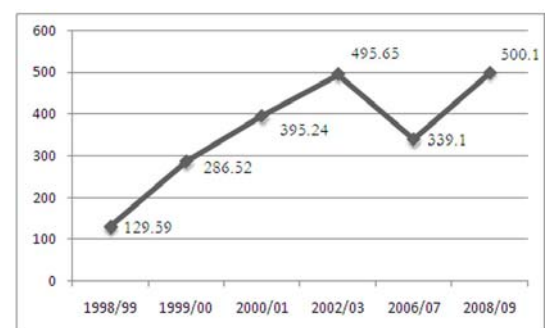


Figure 1: Government revenue from timber (in million rupees at current prices)

Source: DoF (2010, 2009)

³ Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal.

⁴ The forest sector revenue was NRs 5,65,000 during the first development plan period (1956-61).



The share of wood products remained over 90 percent of the total forestry sector revenue in the year 2008/09 (Table 1). It is worth noting that the revenue from community forests (CF) and private forests mainly constitutes the revenue from timber. An analysis of total revenue

generated from the government-managed forest for the period of 2004/05-2008/09 shows the gradual increase in the total revenue over the years (Gyawali 2010), and the relative contribution of timber has remained almost the same throughout these years.

Table 1: Revenue from various forest products

S.N.	Forest Products	Revenue (NRs)		
		FY 1998/99	FY 2002/03	FY 2008/09
1	Timber and fuelwood	129588236	437386477.5	375914343
2	Khair	NA*	8144269.46	7617863
3	Resin	NA	5358486.8	14336246
4	NTFPs	16647904	67377248	39329364
5	Stone, gravel, sand, etc	NA	NA	38334283
6	CF (15% tax)	NA	50122882	65691093
7	Private VAT	NA	NA	50878865
	Total	146236140	568389363.8	592102057

Source: Banjade et al. 2011

Note: *NA denotes data 'not available', or 'not applicable' because of non-existence of that source in the fiscal year.

Similarly, an analysis of the annual income of 15 CFUGs in Nawalparasi district in the year 2010 showed that about 90 percent of their income came from timber sale alone. Likewise, a research conducted in a NTFP rich CFUG of Dolakha district showed that the contribution of timber and fuelwood to the CFUG income was more than 70 percent, though the CFUG could harvest only 30 percent of timber against the annual harvest prescribed by its operational plan (OP)⁵ (Banjade and Paudel 2008b). Pokhrel (2010) has made similar observations in Tanahu district and

shows timber as the most significant product of community forestry. The revenue from timber is high despite the strict restriction on its trade and transport, often involving various administrative and bureaucratic hassles.

In Nepal, wood-based industries provide employment to over 150,000 persons through manufacturing industries such as ply, veneer, Kattha (catechu), saw mills and furniture (Bhatta 2011)⁶. It is estimated that about 4,500 wood-based enterprises have invested over NRs 12 billion in these industries in Nepal⁷. Although there is no record of employment generated

⁵ An OP includes details of inventory of forest resources and estimation of annual harvestable amount of forest products for the forest. The OPs include objectives of managing and enhancing forest conditions, biodiversity, environmental services, NTFPs and other diverse products. However, in practice, the core area of contestation between the DFO and CFUGs lies around the volume of timber harvest.

⁶ He refers to the chairperson of the Federation of Nepal Forest-Based Industries and Trade (FENFIT).

⁷ About NRs 80 equals to 1 USD.



in timber harvesting and transportation, it would certainly surpass the employment generated by the timber processing industries⁸. This is because the harvesting and bulk of transportation of logs involve manual labour in Nepal.

Timber also defines the relationship between the community and government forest agencies (forest officials). The local communities are managing forests based on an OP, which is an agreement between the CFUGs and respective District Forest Offices (DFOs). But in many cases, a CFUG has to offer extra-legal payments to the government forest officials to include the legitimate annual harvest of timber into the OP (Paudel et al. 2008). The CFUGs, who need to extract timber from CFs are required to get permission every time from DFO for estimating total harvest for the year, marking of the trees to be harvested, clearance of the total volume at depot for the distribution within the members, and approval to sell the excess timber outside the CFUG. In addition, the leaders of the CFUGs and forest officials often engage outside the formal domain. Consequently, they tend to adopt informal practices; the collusion of some local leaders and government officials are often reported (see the analysis of media coverage below).

Most of the cases of corruption and abuse of authority by forest officials and community leaders are about illegal harvesting and trade of timber. For example, in 2010 alone, over five different investigative missions, including those from the MoFSC, parliamentary and high-level judicial commissions, have investigated massive deforestation in the Terai. Timber harvest and trade became the sole subject of enquiry in all of them, indicating the high economic value of timber and its consequent political salience.

Citing the various commission reports, the government came up with both short- and long-term measures. One of the immediate measures was the ban on tree felling and timber trade.

The government banned the trade and transport of timber for the year 2011 despite strong resistance from the timber industry, CFUGs and timber consumers. As a result, the price of timber during the ban of ten months increased by three-fold. In addition, the government proposed an amendment to the forest law and regulations to assert greater supervision and monitoring role over CFUGs. Most of these amendments are focused on timber harvesting and trade (Sunam *et al.* 2010).

RESPONSIVENESS OF POLICIES AND DISCOURSES AGAINST PRACTICES AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Since the emergence of environmental crisis narratives, especially the 'Theory of Himalayan Degradation', popularised by Eckholm (1976), timber management disappeared from the national policy discourse. The alarming rate of deforestation, highlighted by some researchers during the 1970s and 1980s, received attention of donors, followed by their support in massive afforestation schemes throughout the country (for the change in donor strategies and programs in forestry in case of USAID see Brennan et al. 2003). The debate on timber was gradually replaced by the discourse on biodiversity conservation, ecological sustainability and ecosystem restoration. The Rio Summit in 1992 further contributed to these shifting priorities on national forest policies.

The Nepal Country Report by FAO (1999a: p40) illustrates that the 'traditional forest management planning system in Nepal emphasized sustained yield of timber...' which started after the establishment of Ministry of Forests and its subsidiary apparatuses in 1960s. As a result, Forest Management Work Plans were developed in some Terai and Inner Terai Districts in 1960s (Chaudhari, 2011), and five year plans were developed in late 1980s and early 1990s but none of them were implemented (FAO 1999a: P43) mainly because of the apathy

⁸ Interview with Mr Dinesh Wagle, General Secretary of FENFTI.

of the techno-bureaucratic and political leaders, who were only concerned with exploiting timber to serve their personal and political interests.

An additional attempt was made to invigorate active management of Terai's productive forests in mid-1990s when the government prepared Operational Forest Management Plans (OFMPs) for the Terai and Inner Terai districts⁹. However, the plans could not be implemented largely due to the opposition of local people, FECOFUN and NGOs; the latter were not sufficiently consulted during the planning process. In later period, the management of forest was not seriously considered, nor did timber promotion remain an issue of national policy process. As shown below, government policies, forest sector spending, media coverage, academic publications and key narratives of social movements show indifference to the fact that timber related issues are central in the media and local stakeholder relationships.

Analysis of government policies and legal documents provides an understanding of the government's forest sector priorities. For this purpose, we reviewed 66 government policies, acts, guidelines and directives issued since 1993, the year when the present Forest Act was promulgated. Not surprisingly, most of the policies and legal documents are developed around biodiversity, environmental services, NTFPs, soil conservation, protected areas, leasehold forestry and broader governance issues, including aid policy, gender mainstreaming and involvement of NGOs corresponding to the international discourses and donor interests. Eighteen of them, mainly the umbrella acts and regulations have some implications for timber-related issues. Only three out of the 66 policy decisions exclusively deal with timber (Figure 2) but targeted only to impose ban on timber harvesting.

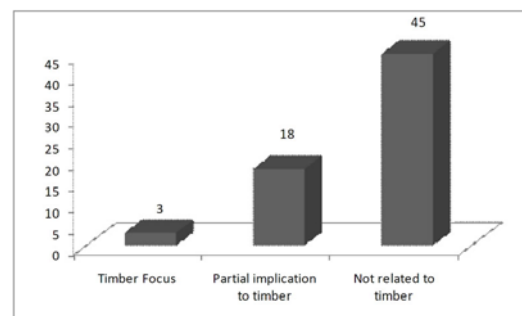


Figure 2: Government policy decisions and their focus in relation to timber

However, as one of the senior government officials shared with us, when two foresters meet in private they never talk about biodiversity or environmental services; most of their chat is rather focused on timber trade, timber smuggling and dealing with traders and related actors. It indicates that timber management and timber business have been largely kept under private domain of forest officials and political leaders and they hardly come to public debate and scrutiny.

An analysis of the government's relative spending on timber development shows that the major part of the government fund goes to cover recurrent costs. Within the capital budget¹⁰ only 3 percent is allocated to timber-related activities (based on the information provided by Lamsal 2010). Besides, part of the budget is allocated to the community forestry programme, which includes training provided to CFUGs in forest management. Though there are other related headings such as 'forest management operational plans' and the 'national forest development programme', activities under these headings involve extraction of dead and fallen trees from government-managed forests and forest protection activities (DoF 2010).

⁹ Finnish International Development Agency (FINNIDA) supported the development of plan in the Terai region.

¹⁰ In Department of Forest, capital expenditure includes the budget allocated to any programme areas, including training, extension and forest protection.

An analysis of programmes of seven non-government agencies, including bilateral projects, INGOs and NGOs, showed that virtually none of them supported anything directly related to timber. Donor projects on forestry have promoted the agenda of gender, equity and livelihoods within the community-managed forestry, which is normally welcomed by government officials. Donors have chosen to engage in non-traditional forestry issues such as biodiversity conservation, forest certification, environmental services, NTFPs, and recently on climate change mitigation, especially on REDD+.

An analysis of media coverage on forestry, excluding protected areas, was done for the year 2010 and first half of 2011. The news and articles were selected from three popular national dailies, namely The Kathmandu Post (in English), Kantipur (in Nepali) and Gorkhapatra (in Nepali). A total of 215 news items published in these newspapers in 2010 were associated with forest sector. About 88 percent of the entries were related to timber (see Figure 3), while the rest were related to issues such as NTFPs and governance.

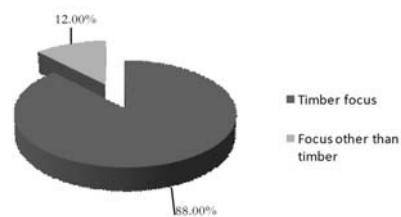


Figure 3: News coverage by major national dailies

Almost all the news and articles, which had some focus on timber, conveyed the negative side of it; they highlighted the issues of illegal logging, corruption, encroachment, tree felling and confiscation of timber. Moreover, they highlighted the misuse of power by some local leaders, over-harvesting of timber by CFUGs

and illegal selling for personal benefit. In most cases, the involvement of government staff at local level was reported. The media reports also highlighted the nexus of government forest officials with timber traders and local community leaders (Box 1).

Box 1: Some media reporting on timber

- Timber smuggling in collaboration with forest officials (Gorkhapatra, 14/04/2010)
- Timber smuggling in nexus (Gorkhapatra2/06/2010)
- Pine trees destroyed in close nexus (Kantipur, 7/07/2010)
- Cash and timber request by government staff from community forest (Gorkhapatra, 15/07/2010)
- Government staff and users collude in forest clearing (Kantipur, 25/02/2010)
- Timber smuggling intensifies with the involvement of police and forest officials (Gorkhapatra, 12/09/2010)
- Forest destruction in collusion (The Kathmandu Post, 16/06/2010)
- Forest destruction accelerates in nexus (Gorkhapatra, 29/12/2010)

Similarly, an analysis of academic publications published from Nepal indicates that they echo the major discourse promoted by development industry. The articles published in three main periodic journals from Nepal that cover forestry issues, namely Journal of Forest and Livelihoods (JFL), Banko Janakari (BJ) (Forest Information) and Hamro Ban Sampada (HBS) (Our Forest Resource) were analysed. While JFL and HBS are published by an NGO (ForestAction), BJ is published by the Department of Forest Research and Survey. While all the articles from JFL and HBS are included in this analysis, articles from BJ could be accessed only from 2005 onwards. A total of 411 articles from the three journals were

analysed which included 116, 83 and 212 articles from JFL, BJ and HBS respectively. Surprisingly, only 15 articles were directly related to timber (see figure 4), though the schooling in forestry in Nepal is mostly confined to timber promotion such as sustained yield, plantation, silviculture and forest management.

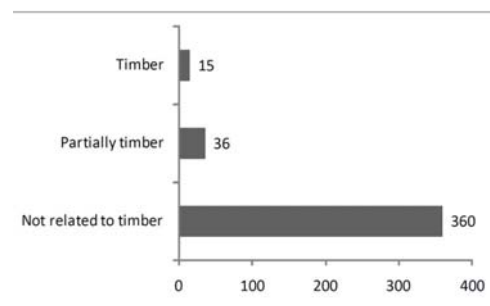


Figure 4: Focus of articles in the three forestry journals published from Nepal (total 411)

The articles having a timber focus were mostly related either to the growth and yield estimation or biomass estimation of some species. Articles having partial relation to timber included those with REDD+ focus or which included timber as part of overall use patterns within community forestry.

These publications had some correlation with larger policy discourse as well as local political struggles. While HBS seems to have its correspondence with local and national level policy discourses, JFL picked the issues coming from international policy arenas, donors and broader theoretical developments. BJ on the other hand has not shown very significant departure from its technical forestry focus such as growth, yield and biomass estimation of few species though it included limited number of articles on the recent developments such as biodiversity conservation, NTFPs, and environmental services. JFL had a significant shift in focus from participatory governance and NTFPs to poverty reduction and forest tenure, and finally to REDD+ and climate change. Similarly, HBS gave emphasis on poverty reduction, CF governance, inclusion and equity issues until 2004. During 2005-2008, it focused on Terai forest governance, NTFPs, pro-poor governance and forest sector restructuring, and from 2009 onwards on REDD+ and food security (See Table 2).

Table 2: Shift in focus of the JFL, BJ and HBS over the period of time

Journal	Focus		
	2001-2004	2005-2008	2009-2011
JFL	Participatory governance, forest management, NTFPs (diverse coverage)	Poverty reduction, forest tenure,	REDD+, climate change, environmental services
BJ		Growth and yield estimation, biodiversity conservation, NTFPs	Species conservation, socio-economic issues of management regimes, environmental services
HBS	Governance of CF, Terai forest governance, inclusion and equity, livelihoods and poverty reduction, NTFPs	NTFPs and biodiversity conservation, Terai forest governance, equity, democratic and pro-poor governance, forest sector restructuring	Forest sector in federal state structuring, innovations in CF, democratization within CF, REDD+, food security

The key messages and narratives used in the social movements are important to analyse the influence of wider discourses and donor agenda. Recently, FECOFUN organized agitation against the government's decision of a) tabling the bill for Forest Act 1993 second amendment which arguably limits the autonomy of forest users, and b) banning timber and fuelwood harvesting, transportation, distribution or sale. The MFSC claimed that the bill was prepared upon the instructions and recommendations of various legislative and judiciary committees¹¹. For instance, the instruction from the Committee on Natural Resources and Means (CNRM) to the MoFSC on 20/06/2010 (CNRM 2010: p2) reads:

‘...stop timber and fuelwood harvesting from national as well as community forests, and ban on transportation, sale and distribution of already harvested timber and fuelwood...’

The FECOFUN centre and its district chapters organized a series of protest programs, and prepared and disseminated pamphlets and other materials to inform the public. They organized the movement in four phases over the period of nine months during August 2010-May 2011. The third phase culminated with the program of mass demonstration on 4th December 2010 in front of the Parliament¹² by thousands of forest users coming from all over Nepal together with solidarity from other stakeholders including NGOs, civil society networks¹³, and some political parties. Many of the participating users held placards and banners with slogans. Surprisingly, however, none of them was about releasing the timber ban, the main concern of the forest users; rather they were on other general issues that FECOFUN has been forwarding since its establishment in 1995. Some of the slogans read:

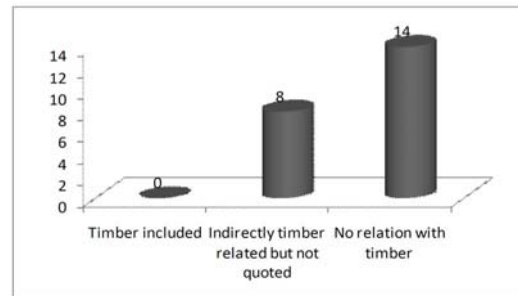


Figure 5: Slogans used during mass rally of FECOFUN centre

- Abolish Autocracy
- No to anti-people conservation areas
- Make forest sector corruption free
- Stop the amendment process of Forest Act 1993 and Forest Regulation 1995
- Take action against forest mafias

The total of 22 slogans used in the demonstration can be categorized into the following:

- Against the proposed Forest Act amendment bill arguing that it would essentially reduce the autonomy of CFUGs
- Against declaration of new protected areas – in most of the cases that would force existing CFs to be taken back
- Against corruption within forest sector – this is the main instruction given by authorities such as Commission on Investigation for Abuse of Authority (CIAA) and CNRM for change in existing policies and practices, and
- Hailing CF

A discussion with the FECOFUN leaders who participated from Morang district of the eastern Terai region revealed that most people came to the demonstration when they learned from

¹¹ The recommendation/instructions include those from the CNRM within Legislative Parliament, made on 20/05/2010; the Commission on Investigation of Abuse of Authority on 6/06/2010; and Chure Conservation Task Force of the MFSC.

¹² Though the planned program was to gherao (or rounding) of the sitting parliament and pressure all the parliament members to listen to their concerns, the sitting of the parliament was postponed due to some unavoidable circumstances.

¹³ They include federations such as those of community groups belonging to irrigation, drinking water, community electricity and local governments.



their local leaders that 'Sadupayog' (literally, "proper utilisation," but understood for annual timber harvest) was completely banned by the government, and they believed that the movement was to regain the permission. When the question was raised on why none of the placards or banners had included anything against the ban on timber harvesting and sale, a leader of the group said:

'Perhaps this is to get a media attention. If we demand to lift the ban on timber extraction from CF, the media would not support us, or rather oppose, because the media exaggerated the timber issue and is partly responsible for regressive government decisions and proposal for Forest Act amendment.'

The same issue was discussed with the three leaders of FECOFUN centre separately. Similarities in their statements include:

"Some CFUGs were involved in corruption and over harvesting making it difficult for FECOFUN to strongly protest against the ban on timber."

"By including slogans such as 'make forest sector corruption free', they could receive wider support because public sentiment against corruption was also increasing."

"We cannot organize mass rally of huge scale every now and then. We could utilise the event to legitimise our movements of other forms such as issuing press release, organizing media debates, raising concerns for inclusion in policy deliberations, filing cases in the court, publishing articles in various journals and newspapers, and organizing gheraoing of DoF in order to oppose government's regressive decisions."

Prior to the central level demonstrations, FECOFUN district chapters also organized various activities to protest the decision on ban of timber extraction and on Forest Act amendment. Mass rally in Nawalparasi district

headquarters was a notable one which was claimed as probably the largest public assembly in the district. While in private conversation FECOFUN as well as CFUG leaders expressed their concern on the ban on timber harvesting as follows:

"Many users have planned to build their house this year. If they won't get timber, they will get it illegally from forest."

"The CFUGs are providing financial and material support to many schools, clubs, community development projects, and poverty reduction activities. If harvesting is banned, many students cannot go to school and the poor have to suffer further."

"Many CFUGs have paid staffs, who have to work without pay if timber harvesting is banned. Similarly, they are paying forest watchers in monthly basis. If harvesting is banned, forest protection will be severely affected."

"When government bans timber harvesting frequently, the commitment of users in forest conservation is obviously deteriorated. That makes conservation efforts more challenging."

Surprisingly, these narratives were not reflected in the speeches of any leaders. For example, rather than using the real concern of 'banning timber and fuelwood harvesting, transportation and sale', a leader said "the movement is to denounce the government's intrusion against CFs" and former chairperson said, "fight against government's attempt of curtailing the rights of communities". Interestingly, the chairperson used highly loaded language, less legible to the masses, probably to generate rhetoric. He raised two important points for the purpose:

"We now have learnt that the forests we conserve provide more benefits than fuelwood, fodder and timber such as conservation of water sources,



maintaining earth temperature, and sequestration of carbon emitted by the industrialized countries. Recognizing these added contributions from CF, scientific world have started compensating our effort for environmental conservation."

In other words, he meant to say that while the 'scientific' and developed world had recognized the contribution of CF and offered material incentives for conservation, the government of Nepal was discouraging CF, thus the government was irrational. The use of these recent buzz words such as climate change and REDD+ at meso level are common these days since most of the focus of national and international actors has been shifted to these issues recently and they have put a significant effort and resources in awareness raising activities. It is not new, though. For example, CFUGs focused on NTFPs for several years since mid-1990s because of the overwhelming resources and discourses around NTFPs supplied until recently. The time and energy put by the CFUG was so immense during this period that almost everybody in the villages started talking about it. However, the return was not encouraging. Earlier Banjade and Paudel (2008a) showed that discourse around NTFPs have shifted the core issue of economic significance of timber. As put by one NGO leader in forestry, 'If the same amount of energy and resources were put into promoting timber, the return would have been many times higher'.

WHY DELIBERATIONS AND EVERYDAY PRACTICES CONTRADICT?

The dominant discourse during the 1970s centred on strict conservation, followed by ensuring people's participation during the 1980s, handing over forest patches to local people during the 1990s, linking forestry with rural livelihoods during the early 2000s and more recently, harnessing of benefits of

environmental services, particularly that of carbon, since the mid-2000s. The current approach paper of the government (Three-Year Plan for the period of 2010/11-2012/13) on forestry prioritises environmental services and seeks to explore policy and institutional arrangements for payment for environmental services (GoN 2010). Meanwhile, with the commencement of the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility – a World Bank-supported programme – carbon trading, particularly REDD+, has dominated the forest management debate over the last two years.

Since 1980s, the national forest policy deliberations, commissions, task forces, donor projects, and many policy documents talk of the non-timber goods and services including NTFPs, biodiversity, environmental services, and recently on REDD+. In contrast, as revealed by the commission reports mentioned above, everyday practices in forest sector are rampant corruption and rent-seeking mostly around timber. As elaborated below, the general divergence between the national forest policy deliberations and everyday practices on the ground can be largely attributed to: a) the interest of political and bureaucratic leadership in keeping timber in a low profile outside the public domain so that the timber business does not come into public scrutiny; and b) donors avoiding socio-politically contested domain and wanting to work in a comfort zone by building a healthy relation with the bureaucracy.

As mentioned in previous section, a wide range of stakeholders such as political leaders, government officers, timber traders and local elites are involved in illegal practices, including illegal timber extraction and encroachment. Because the discourse of "forest for economic growth" has been largely obsolete since mid-1970s and subsequently replaced by the discourses of forestry for people, sustainable forestry and forestry for environmental services, the NTFP discourse has influenced local



perspectives since 1990s. However, the contribution of timber in local economy has remained at the crux and invited market actors and interest of government forest staff.

Recent discourses of climate change and environmental services have penetrated the meso sphere, as many of the actors here have started talking about these themes. For example, as quoted in the section above, the FECOFUN leaders started talking about them in mass meetings. However, they have not been sufficiently transmitted to the local level. It is also because the actors involved in national level policy deliberations and everyday practices are different. That is, very few of them have institutional linkages from everyday practices on the ground to the national policy-making processes. While some senior government officials, donors, NGO professionals and consultants dominate the forums and processes at national policy-making, operational level forestry staffs, timber traders, CFUG leaders and brokers are involved in both legal and illegal timber logging and trade.

The divergence of everyday practices at the local level and those of national level can be partly attributed to the absence of deliberative links between CFUG and meso level actors with national level policy processes. In the absence of informed deliberation, public perceptions are often influenced by the distorted communication induced by the mass media. For example, public perception in Nepal is largely shaped by the portrayal that felling of live trees is essentially bad. The media has played a significant role in this, as reflected in the sample of media coverage in 2010:

- 'Live and healthy trees are being extracted from... forest'
- '200 pine trees are destroyed in close nexus'.
- '16 green trees are felled in CF'
- '25 logs of 12 feet girth recovered from 10 houses of CF'

- 'Many CFUGs are cutting green trees'
- 'Dozens of green Pine trees are cut by CFUGs in nexus with government officials'.

The media has generated a public perception that tree felling is not an acceptable act. Media coverage has mostly portrayed tree felling or other activities related to timber harvesting and trade as negative. Many of such news have resulted in the suspension or transfer of DFO staff and action against forest user group leaders. A DFO expressed his opinion that when journalists see even legitimate harvesting of timber from the forests, they conceive it as bad and highlight it as a case of forest destruction or deforestation. In this way, the media fabricated the issue rather than supplying 'real' information. Even if the officials knew that there was little technical deficiency in forest harvesting, they didn't have a capacity to inform the media to clarify that it is a necessary thing to remove trees to get new regeneration in the forest.

Many civil society actors showed concerns about the way the media reported the cases without adequate understanding of the forest science and everyday practices. For them, there might have been some cases where few CFUG leaders colluded with some corrupt government officials and timber traders. However, the real issue was fabricated to create hype rather than delving into the legal and scientific analysis of the cases. Intentionally or unintentionally, the negative projection from the media supported the regressive intensions of the government against the autonomy of local communities over the management of forests. The leaders further argued that the hype sidelined the real issue that the government should handover remaining potential forests to local communities and expand their autonomy. In other words, they claimed that the media happened to back the techno-bureaucrats to pursue their vested interest of controlling CF practices. Responding to their claim, techno-



bureaucrats later banned felling trees and transporting timber without scrutinizing its scientific merits and practical implications. In addition, the government made a decision to amend Forest Act 1993 to limit rights of local communities over forest management and increase government rights and roles over forest governance.

Surprisingly, the donor communities remained indifferent to the issue of timber extraction during this period. Neither any of donor-funded programs nor the deliberative forums sponsored by them brought timber extraction as an important issue.

While many of the ongoing conflicts between various actors are seemingly framed around other issues, the control over timber is the core of such contestations. This reality explains the calculated attempt to keep timber in low profile despite its economic significance. The debate around community forestry versus collaborative forest management (CFM) in Terai is the case in point. After a decade of introduction of CFM, arguing that community forestry could not benefit distant users, there are hardly any satisfying answers whether it has benefited the large mass of the poor in southern Nepal. The government sought to interpret the CFM as an approach to ensure people's participation in government-managed forests. But, most of the critics consider it as essentially an extension of government authority in the decorated terms of 'collaborative management'. Control over Sal timber, particularly access to and share of revenue and other benefits, is at the crux of polarization of actors for and against collaborative management of Terai forests. Similarly, control over revenue from timber is at the core of the government's recent attempts to amend the Forest Act. All the debates, including on increasing the tax on the sale of timber, restricting trade in timber, limiting annual allowable cut and the ban on timber harvest, indicate that the government aims to maintain its control over timber.

There have been various attempts to promote discourses of NTFP management by the government, NGOs and donors since mid-1990s. All the actors engaged in NTFPs produced exaggerated narratives, particularly on economic contribution of NTFPs. However, some researches have shown that the field of NTFP-based enterprises is not very convincing, especially in terms of its long-term business viability (Bhattarai *et al.* 2003; Bhattarai and Dhungana 2008; Subedi 2006; AEC/FNCCI 2004). The relative importance of NTFPs over timber may be argued for some high mountain districts. However, despite the limited scope of NTFPs, aid-funded projects and NGOs are encouraged to prioritise NTFPs, mainly because of the constraints imposed on timber trade by the regulatory and institutional hurdles. Consequently, the development agencies are left only with peripheral products to harness commercial opportunities (Banjade and Paudel 2008a). Despite the strict restriction on the trade and transport, the revenue from timber is high. The share of timber in total forest-based income could be much higher if the regulatory and institutional practices were supportive of the management and trade of timber. Surprisingly, the total revenue generated in the year 2008/09 comes from only 38 thousand cubic metres of timber (DoF 2010), which is less than two percent of the projection made by the Master Plan for the Forest Sector (MPFS) in 1988.

In contrast, the government is making *ad hoc* and irrational decisions such as ban on timber harvest, transportation and trade. These decisions have induced gambling on timber trade. Non-transparent trade or black market has been encouraged throughout the country largely because of the government's policies and bureaucratic hurdles. The bureaucratic hassles have resulted in illegal harvesting, trade and smuggling of timber and timber products. Consequently, while timber [Sal] price at source is NRs 300 per cubic feet, it is sold in the retail



market of major cities at the rate of NRs 4,000-5,000 for the same amount¹⁴. It is believed that corruption throughout the market chain of timber and the risks associated with it are responsible for this price discrepancy.

Similarly, the ban on tree felling and timber transport simply encourages the import of wood products. The ban on wood supply together with hassles and corruption within forest sector would ultimately pave the road to ruin the sector. In Nepal, several Kattha industries have been already shut down and several others at risk due to uncertainty of raw material supply. If the industries fail to secure raw materials supplies from local forests, they will have to either stop production or import raw materials from other countries.

Given the multi-level governance context of Nepal, where deliberative links across levels are often weak, the dominant discourse at one level does not necessarily become dominant at other levels. When financial, intellectual, bureaucratic and symbolic resources are asymmetrically distributed at various levels, mostly significantly higher at national level, dominant discourse at national level is presumably dominant in other levels. However, in practice, the nature and content of discursive struggles vary at various levels. In addition, actors at various levels are different with little information exchange across them. This is demonstrated by the disconnection of policies, discourses, deliberations at the national level with the issues, content and interface at community and meso level actors.

CONCLUSION

The negative picture promoted by the media and the absence of a supportive policy and investment environment have resulted in missed

opportunities of benefiting from timber management in Nepal. On one hand, local communities, traders and the government are losing millions of dollars in income from timber potentially available from sustainable forest management. On the other hand, there is little encouragement for entrepreneurs to enter into timber business as the whole sector is criminalised and corrupt. As there is neither government investment nor an encouraging environment for other actors to invest, the forest sector goes on poorly managed.

While national level multi-stakeholder deliberations, programs and academic publications have shown their inclination and accountability towards the donors and international communities, local practices and relationships do not reflect the content of national level discourses. At local level, the power relationship between the CFUG and government forest authorities is largely confined to timber and its trade. However, social movements around community forestry are facing the challenge of finding an appropriate language to get attention of both the national level actors and local people. While they use the highly loaded developmentalist language of autonomy, rights and inclusion during their meso and national level movements and deliberations, they change the language to address the daily concerns of local people. While language used in the higher-level discourse is formal, their communication with local people is apparently informal.

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¹⁴ Based on 2010 estimates.



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