

Community Forest Management in the Middle Hills of Nepal: The Changing Context

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Abstract

This paper outlines the policy context and resource base for community forestry in Nepal. Drawing on a study of 11 Forest User Groups (FUGs) in the Middle hills region, the paper examines the process of FUG formation and post-formation support. The implementation process of community forestry demands rapid institutional change at Department of Forests (DoF) and village level, and changes in working relationships between these levels. The DoF's main responsibilities in the Middle hills are changing from the traditional role of forest policing and protection, and moving towards FUG facilitation. However, the limited capacity of the DoF has become the key constraint to implementation of community forestry, and finding a solution may involve re-organizing the DoF support role. As new priorities emerge in FUGs (relating to community development for instance) involving multiple support agencies is becoming increasingly necessary.

INTRODUCTION

This is the first in a set of five papers presenting the findings of a three-year research project (1997-2000) on 'Community Forestry in Nepal: Sustainability and Impacts on Common and Private Property Resource Management'. The project was undertaken by the University of Leeds (U.K.), in collaboration with the Nepal U.K. Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP) and Natural Resources International, and was funded by Department for International Development (DFID) through its Natural Resources Systems Program. It investigated the institutional development of Forest User Groups (FUGs) at the local level, and their impact on the forest resource, farming systems and livelihoods. A Participatory Action Research methodology was used across 11 FUGs and three non-FUGs, in four districts of the Koshi Hills Zone in Eastern Nepal. Nepal is currently undergoing a political crisis, which is casting a shadow over community development efforts. This research was completed prior to these developments, and so the findings do not refer to them. Reports suggest that FUGs are generally continuing their operations despite lower levels of support.

The objectives of this paper are to (a) provide a context to the study by outlining the policy and resource base; (b) provide an overview of the research methodology and study sites; (c) examine the process of FUG formation and post-formation support (highlighting the problems of defining a FUG); and (d) discuss the opportunities and constraints faced by community forestry in Nepal.

THE RESOURCE BASE IN NEPAL

Nepal covers over 1,000 kilometers in a transition zone between the Gangetic plain and the high Himalaya, lying between India and Tibet. It has a land area of 147,181 km², and a population of approximately 24 million. Nepal is characterized by intense diversity in physical agro-ecology, ethnicity and caste.

The climate of Nepal ranges from subtropical monsoon conditions in the *Terai* region to alpine conditions in the Great Himalayas. Annual precipitation is approximately 1,800 mm in the eastern *Terai*, and 760-890 mm in the west. Average winter temperatures vary from 19°C in the southern *Terai* region to 13°C in the inter-montane basins, with summer temperatures varying from 28°C to 21°C in the same regions.

Nepal has four main physiographic belts: the fertile and densely populated *Terai* plain, the Churia foothills and Inner *Terai* zone, the Middle hills and the Mountains. The community forestry program has largely been focused on the Middle hills. This administrative region is located between the *Terai* and the high mountains, with elevations ranging from 200m to over 3000m. Accounting for 41% of Nepal's total land area and 45.5% of its population, the Middle hills generally have a temperate monsoonal climate, supporting rain-fed and some irrigated terraced agriculture. There is intense climatic, ecological and social diversity across the Middle hills.

The implementation of community forestry has also proceeded in the *Terai*, with 1477 FUGs (12% of the total) now managing 224,136 ha (FUG Database – DoF 2003). However the different conditions of high value and accessible forests, recent settlement, and also wide-spread and organized illicit timber-felling have led to much slower progress.

Forest Types

Forestland accounts for about one-sixth of Nepal's area. There is great diversity of forest types across different altitudes and microclimates, each having specific uses. The main types for the Koshi Hills zone are illustrated in Table 1. Forests tend to lie in belts above and below agricultural land, and provide a variety of products and services, including grass, fodder, timber, fuel wood, medicinal herbs and other Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). One of the most lucrative NTFPs is pine resin, although many herbs are also collected and marketed to local wholesalers (Olsen 1997).

Table 1. Main forest types in Koshi Hills

Climatic Zone / altitude	Main Forest Types	Main Species	Uses	% of FUGs in Koshi Hills (study area)
Lower temperate 1700-2400m	Upper slope mixed hardwood forest	Oak (<i>Quercus spp.</i>) / Rhododendron	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> fuel wood and fodder 	5%
Sub-Tropical 1000-1700m	Lower mid-slope coniferous forest	Chir pine (<i>Pinus roxburghii</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> construction timber resin if there is road access needles are used in some areas for compost, esp. for potato growing 	20%
	Lower mid-slope mixed hard-wood forest	Katus / Chilaune (<i>Castanopsis sp.</i> / <i>Schima wallichii</i>). Utis (<i>Alnus nepalensis</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> most useful forest type for fuel wood, leaf-fodder and timber needs of local people fuel wood and fodder 	42% 8%
Tropical <1000m	Dry valley / deciduous hill forests	Sal (<i>Shorea robusta</i>):	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> durable high-quality timber, used for construction and agricultural implements such as ploughshares. leaves are collected for plate-making, but not unsuitable for fodder or compost 	20%
		Other tropical		2%
Other	e.g. scrub			3%

(Based on Branney and Dev 1994)

Most accessible, fertile forestland in the Middle hills has been converted into agricultural land. Generally, only inaccessible and unproductive land remains under forests, although as population levels fluctuate so does the forest-agriculture interface, and some areas of current forest have grown up on previously terraced agricultural land. Private forestry (i.e. small areas of forest under private ownership) and tree planting on private land (e.g. along field edges, etc.) have been increasing in Nepal because, after the nationalization of forests, security of access to forest products from common property forests decreased. At lower altitudes in paddy fields there is little tree cover, as farmers plant comparatively fewer trees in *khet* (irrigated) land as compared to *bari* (unirrigated) land in order to maximize productivity. National Forests mainly comprise of large areas of contiguous forest away from settlements, and patches of forest adjacent to settlements. It is the latter kind of forests to which community forestry has primarily been applied, although forests further from settlements (in the high hills areas) are also gradually being handed over.

Livelihoods and Forest use in the Middle Hills

There are three main livelihood patterns in the Middle hills:

- For most households agriculture is the primary livelihood activity, based on the ownership of small terraces of irrigated and / or un-irrigated farmland. Middle-class households commonly have land-holdings and cattle, but only modest private tree resources and grazing land. They tend to be heavily dependent on inputs to their farming systems from common forestland.
- Poorer and landless households depend on non-land based activities such as laboring, artisanal work and NTFP collection. To pursue these livelihoods they have specific needs from the forest distinct from the other wealth-rank groups; such as charcoal for blacksmithing, and fuelwood and medicinal plants for and sale.
- Richer households may supplement farming with incomes from local businesses or service employment. They often have land outside the village and may spend only part of the year in the hills. They commonly have irrigated as well as un-irrigated land holdings; extensive on-farm tree resources, grazing; land private forest; and a substantial number of livestock.

The main crops on irrigated land are rice and wheat, and on un-irrigated land, maize and other cereals and lentils. Due to the limited size of land-holdings, hill agriculture systems depend on interdependence between arable land, livestock and forest components. Broadleaf forests, particularly Katus-Chilaune, supply the most useful range of products for agriculture, such as fuel wood, fodder, leaf litter, foliage, small poles and fence-sticks. In the Koshi hills almost 50% of forests handed over to FUGs are Katus-Chilaune. In addition to agricultural needs, virtually all households depend on forests for a variety of domestic needs such as fuel and construction material. Furthermore, forests support certain rural livelihoods, e.g. as a source of charcoal for blacksmiths, fodder for livestock, berries for alcohol distilling, medicinal plants and so on.

THE STUDY AREA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research team aimed to ensure that the field research activities would be as beneficial for all parties as possible; primarily to forest users themselves and the agencies supporting them in their efforts to improve forest management and achieve sustainable livelihood benefits. The research method was planned to create a learning process with local forest users, so that the research project could be an enabling process for the local people. It required candid communication with FUG members, going beyond their 'public face' to find their personally held views regarding community forestry. The research provided an opportunity for team members, local support staff and forest users to work together to understand the community forestry process, forest users' needs and to develop processes to promote these.

A participatory action research approach was developed to reflect and combine the various needs of the FUGs as well as the research project objectives. Particular concerns were the need to:

- Include all groups and views as collective resource management involves large complex groups and sub-groups;
- Achieve genuine participation, i.e. an active involvement of local people in identifying and prioritizing research topics, interpreting, evaluating and disseminating findings; a focus on issues and problems at local-level; and a recognition that many solutions are site-specific;
- Generate information which could be easily disseminated and utilized by forest users and DoF staff;
- Integrate socio-economic and cultural aspects with technical issues.

Figure 1 shows how the overall research program was structured. 14 sites in the Koshi hills (the eastern extension of the Middle hills) were selected for study, involving 11 FUGs and three non-FUG sites for comparability (Figure 2). The characteristics of the study sites are described in Table 2, while Figure 3 describes the study process at each site. All the sites were first visited in early 1998, with the 11 FUGs also receiving a follow-up visit a year later.

Figure 1. Schematic representation of the research method

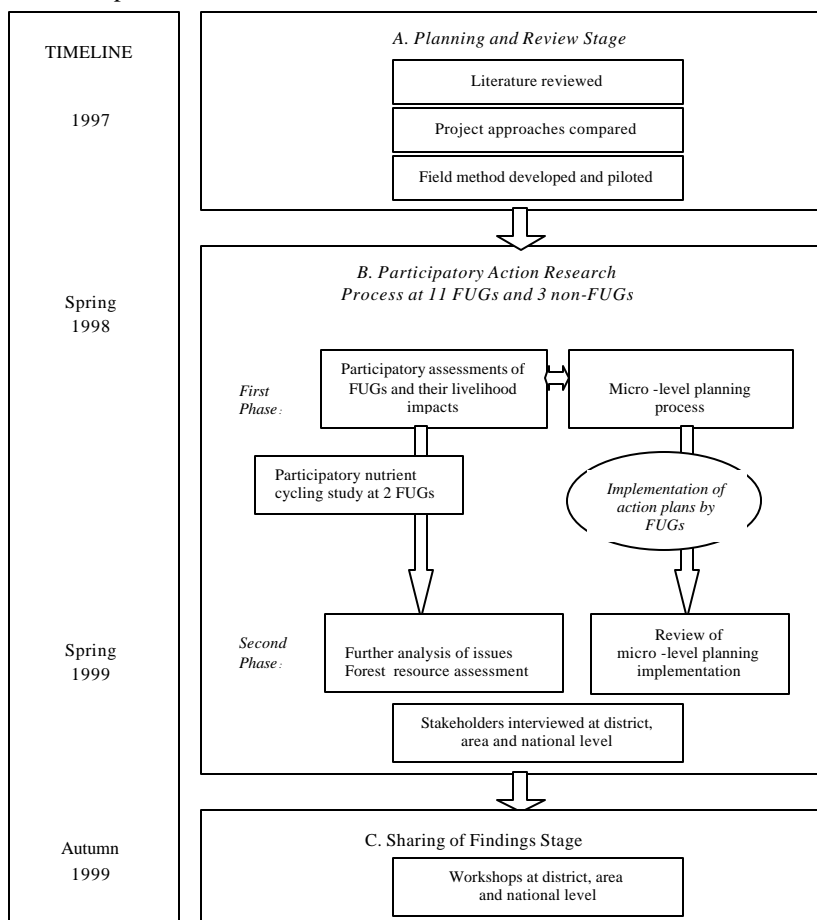


Figure 2. Study area and sites

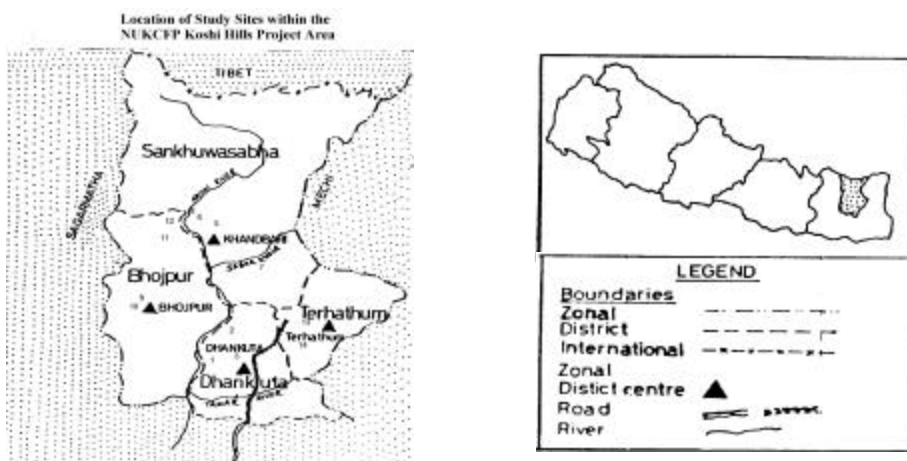


Table 2. Characteristics of study sites

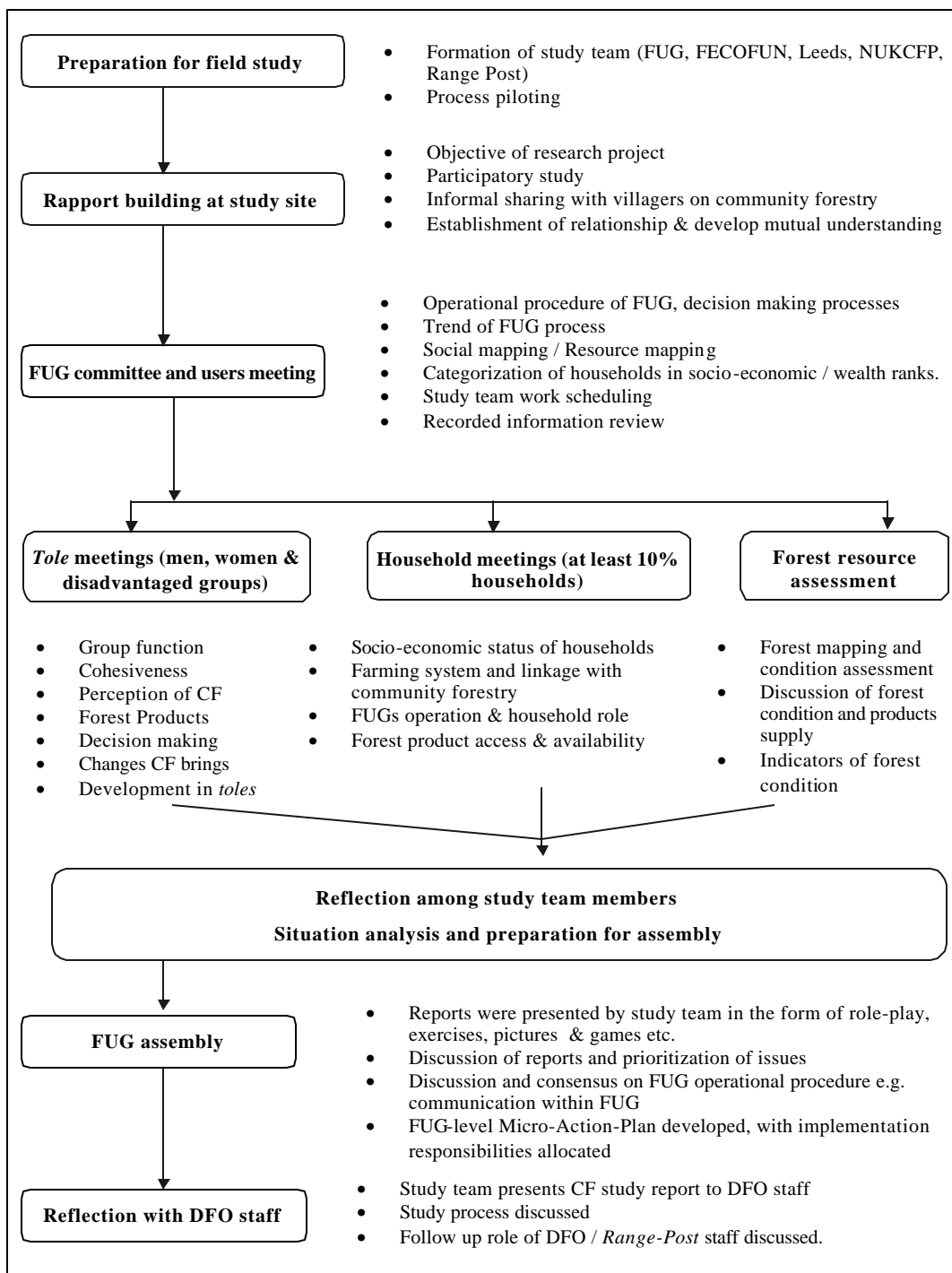
Site No.	Site Name	District	Accessibility ^a	Forest Area (Ha)	Forest Type				Forest Condition ^b	No. of Households	Forest area / Household (Ha)	Year of FUG formation
					Pine	Katus-Chilaune	Sal	Other				
1	Bhaludhunga	DHK	Good	23.0	-	K-C	-	-	Fair	105	0.22	'96
2	Jalkini Katlar	DHK	Medium	213.5	Pine	-	Sal	-	Poor	119	1.79	'93
3	Patle Sanne	DHK	Good	147.1	Pine	K-C	-	Utis	Good	287	0.51	'94
4	Chimsuwa (non-FUG)	DHK	Medium	-	-	-	Sal	Hade, Dangerso	Poor	*64	-	'98-'99
5	Ramche Sunkhani	SSB	Good	129.1	-	-	Sal	-	Good	132	0.98	'92
6	Dharma Devi	SSB	Medium	10.0	-	K-C	-	-	Fair	53	0.19	'91
7	Sibhuwa Salghari	SSB	Remote	107.6	-	K-C	Sal	Utis	Good	117	0.92	'93
8	Heluwa Besi (non FUG)	SSB	Remote	-	-	K-C	Sal	-	Poor	*65	-	'98-'99
9	Ahale	BJP	Good	24.0	-	K-C	-	Utis	Good	69	0.35	'90
10	Paluwa Pikuwa	BJP	Medium	104.9	Pine	-	Sal	-	Good	121	0.87	'93
11	Nakla Daskhate	BJP	Remote	34.5	-	K-C	-	-	Poor	140	0.25	'95
12	Nepale Danda (non FUG)	BJP	Remote	-	-	-	Sal	-	Poor	*125	-	'98-'99
13	Bokre Danda	TTM	Good	31.0	-	K-C	-	Alnus	Good	188	0.16	'89
14	Helebung	TTM	Remote	31.5	-	K-C	-	Alnus	Fair	151	0.21	'93
	Mean:			77.9		-				135	0.58	-

*Note: Estimated number of households for non-FUGs

^aAccessibility was classed according to whether FUGs were less than 1 hour from District HQs (good), between 1-2 hours (medium), or more than 2 hours (remote) – a conventional approach in the Middle hills.

^bForest condition assessment was agreed by research team and forest users, according to density of stands, forest product availability and level of regeneration.

Figure 3. The study process at each site



THE POLICY CONTEXT: AN 'ENABLING ENVIRONMENT' FOR LOCAL-LEVEL FOREST MANAGEMENT

Early Origins

Community forestry policies emerged in Nepal as a response to 'institutional failure' at the local level, which had led to progressive degradation of hill forests. Prior to the 1950s, forests in the Middle hills of Nepal were held by local landlords, client elites loyal to the King who granted rights to local households to use the forest. Although timber extraction was regulated, local people generally had free access to non-commercial forest products. During the initial period of democracy (1951-61), the forests were nationalized and transferred to the control of the DoF. However, the DoF lacked the capacity to protect or manage them, and this created an 'open access' situation (Soussan *et al.* 1995), where local users lacked incentives to regulate forest use. Resentment against nationalization contributed to unregulated extraction, creating conflicts between villagers and DoF staff. Land registration processes also contributed to encroachment, and consequent forest degradation began to threaten the sustainability of livelihoods in the Middle hills.

In the late 1960s and 1970s there was increasing recognition of the inadequacy of the prevailing exclusionary model of forest management. Re-involving local people in forest management came to be seen as imperative, and community forestry was the policy response. The fundamental concept of community forestry is to establish community-based organizations through which forest users are given collective management responsibility (but not ownership) for the local forests on which they depend for product flows. This also empowers them to plan forest management activities on the basis of their needs.

Major Milestones

Community forestry policy emerged in a series of milestones between 1975 and 1993. The first of these came between 1975 and 1978. In 1975 the DoF National Conference in Kathmandu concluded that there was a pressing need to involve local people in forest management (Hobley 1996). The 1976 National Forestry Plan acknowledged deterioration in the hill forests and the need for community involvement. Following the plan came two amendments to the Forest Act in 1977 and 1978, providing for the handing over of forests to *Panchayats* (the lowest level of administration at the time). After 1978 the handover of forests proceeded on a gradual basis. This policy, however, transferred 'responsibility without authority', and the emphasis was on protecting new plantations and on 'motivating' people from outside, rather than providing livelihood incentives for protection. In 1978 a World Bank review prompted action to reverse forest degradation in Nepal. Bilateral donors, especially Australia and Britain, also later pushed for reform of the forestry sector in the 1980s.

Encouragement of community forestry continued over the early 1980s in various policies. In 1982 the Decentralization Act empowered *Panchayats* to form people's committees for forest management. The Seventh Five Year Plan (1985-90) prioritized the mobilization of people's participation in forest management to ensure their subsistence needs were met. In 1987 the concept of 'Forest User Groups' was introduced by the Decentralization Act.

The second major milestones came in 1987-88. Following recommendations from the First National Community Forestry Workshop' (1987), the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (HMG/N 1988) declared that all the accessible forests in the Middle hills should be handed over to FUGs, and that there should be a reorientation of DoF staff towards this new priority. It allocated 47% of investment within the forest sector in support of community forestry programs. The abolition of the *Panchayats* after the 1990 resumption of democracy led to FUGs becoming the unit for organization for community forestry. FUGs were provided a strong independent legal foundation, as they could not be closed by the DoF. Each FUG has a management committee which represents the forest users in the

development and execution of village-level management plans, including the uses made of the forest resource, and the level of products harvested.

The third milestone was the Forest Act (1993), which formalized the innovations in community forestry practice, and provided the legal and procedural basis for FUGs to become local-level autonomous forest management bodies.

Current Status

Since the resumption of democracy in 1990 there has been some degree of political reform, though land reform has not materialized. In villages power holders from the *Panchayat* era have continued to exert influence. Despite this, community forestry policy has made considerable headway in transforming local level power structures over the forest resources.

Community forestry, as any policy, continues to evolve. Initially adopted by policy makers as a means for improved resource management, it has gradually come to be seen *also* as a means to achieve local livelihood development and wider community development activities. The regulatory structures within which FUGs currently function remain based on the original resource orientation, and are static and somewhat inflexible: FUGs' forest-related activities must proceed according to 5 year Operational Plans (OP), agreed with the District Forest Officer (DFO). However, communities have traditionally managed local decision-making on shorter time horizons, according to their development needs and priorities. Many FUGs are seeking demand-responsive and needs-oriented support for a more dynamic livelihood-oriented mode of FUG operation. Issues raised are often beyond the DoF's specific resource-related support objectives and responsibilities. The most pressing 'second generation' issues include how to avoid restricting the developmental potential of FUGs to the forest sector, and how to ensure FUGs' wider support needs are fulfilled, along with their forest management-related support needs.

Recent developments, particularly the debate over the proposed Forest (Second Amendments) Bill (2001) have given rise to concerns amongst some activists that the policy environment may be becoming less sympathetic to strong and independent FUGs. On the other hand with the ongoing strengthening of local governance bodies (until the recent suspension of elections at least) a clarification of their relationship with FUGs may require amendment to the forest act.

The likelihood of successful community forestry collaborations is greatest where the motivation of the DoF and local people are both high. These conditions are most likely to be found where: (1) the forest is partially degraded and of little immediate revenue potential to the DoF, and (2) where local people are in settled, cohesive communities, and dependent on the forest for essential products. These 'ideal' conditions are often found in remote hill areas, and inaccessible areas not strongly incorporated into market relations (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). However, where forests have revenue potential, the DoF may not be so willing to relinquish control over them. Conversely, where local people's livelihoods do not depend highly on forest products, they may not be so inclined to commit time and energy to community forestry. Thus, community forestry has been most widespread in the Middle hills, whereas in the *Terai*, where the Sal forests are of much higher value, its take off has been more problematic. Handover has been slow, and has been stalled for the last two years. Now new initiatives are afoot to experiment with 'co-management' models in which district-level stakeholder consultations are conducted.

IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY FORESTRY

The implementation process of community forestry demands rapid institutional change at DoF and village level, and changes in working relationships between these levels. For both parties, implementation has meant a long-term, ongoing capacity-building and reorientation process. The DoF's main responsibilities in the Middle hills are changing from the traditional role of forest protection and policing, and moving towards:

- FUG formation and forest handover;
- Post-formation support to FUGs, and monitoring;
- Protection and management of remaining National Forests not transferred to FUGs.

However, the limited capacity of the DoF for post-formation support to FUGs has become the key constraint to implementation and consolidation of community forestry.

The Forest Handover Process

The forestland identified by the DoF for community forestry was 61% of the total forests (an estimated 3,551,849 ha). Formation has proceeded at the rate of about 1,000 FUGs per year. By 2003 there were 12,079 formed across Nepal, managing over 15% of Nepal's total forestland area, and over 28% of the land allocated to be handed to communities (Table 3). Given the resource constraints and ongoing reorientation within the DoF, the progress is remarkable. Nevertheless there is some distance still to go: for instance over two thirds of the forestland originally allocated for community forestry is yet to be handed over.

Table 3. Proportion of potential community forestry area under FUG management in Nepal

No. of FUGs formed	Forest Area under control of FUG (ha)	Potential CF area (forest and non forest) (ha)	Total Forestland Area	% of Forestland area under FUG management	% of potential CF area under FUG management
12,079	955,358	3,551,849	6,306,000	15.1%	28.6%

Sources: Community & Private Forest Division, Department of Forests 2003

As the handover process has proceeded, it has been recognized that the data for potential community forestry land are inaccurate in many districts. Potential community forestry land available is sometimes far less than estimated, and so statistics on forest extent need to be revised downwardly through a re-survey of remaining forest areas.

With pressure on DFOs to form as many FUGs as possible (pressure both from the center and from forest users themselves), the initial emphasis on 'quality' of the formation process gradually changed to an emphasis on 'quantity'. This led to short-cuts in the FUG formation process, and also to a deferral of the more difficult locations (especially those with conflicts present). Demand for FUG formation has exceeded the capacity of the local *Range-Post* staff (field-level forest officers), resulting in long backlogs. User groups awaiting formal handover of forests are advised to protect the forest on an informal basis until formalization can be effected.

The FUG Formation Process

In the FUGs studied, the initiative to form the FUG had come either internally or externally, and sometimes both. Four of the 11 FUGs had given the formation request to the *Range-Post* staff. In another four, the DFO had requested the users to form an FUG with *Range-Post* support, out of concern for the deterioration of forest. In three FUGs there was a combination of initiative from both sides.

The FUG formation and forest hand-over procedure involves a number of steps, which are carried out by DoF field staff (Box 1). Ideally this process should involve extensive discussion and awareness raising, and should take several days.

Box 1. The recommended FUG formation process

- The actual local forest users are identified and involved in initial discussions with DoF field staff (regardless of users' location with regard to administrative boundaries – non-local forest users are identified and involved where possible.)
- *Tole* (hamlet) meetings are held to raise awareness about community forestry concepts and practice. The users' forest needs are discussed.
- A general assembly meeting is held in which:
 - The users are constituted into a FUG, legally formalized in a Constitution drafted by the users in conjunction with field staff.
 - The FUG committee and chairman are elected by all members.
 - The field staff discuss best practices for inclusive decision-making and planning, technical advice on forest potential, and recommendations for optimum management.
 - The users draft their forest management plan (Operational Plan). The forest to be handed over is clearly defined, with all parties having a clear understanding of the actual forest boundary.
- The DFO must then approve the Constitution and Operational Plan (C&OP). The FUG can then commence forest management operations.

In practice, serious short-cuts in the formation process have been the unfortunate norm, as *Range-Post* staff rarely complete all of the required procedures. In nine of the 11 FUGs studied, users found the formation support unsatisfactory and hasty. In only two FUGs did users consider the formation procedure thorough and satisfactory. Since the initial formation strongly conditions the future development of the FUGs, the rapid pace of FUG formation has inevitably led to institutional weaknesses in the FUGs. The main concerns which arose from the field study are as follows:

- The formation process is often elite-based. *Tole*-level bottom-up planning is not emphasized as a best practice for decision-making within the FUG. *Range-Post* staff generally liaise with elite groups and only rarely hold in-depth discussions with all the users in the individual *toles* (hamlets) making up the FUG, in order to identify their needs and wishes. Even where wider discussions are held, non-elite users often feel that their views have not been taken into account.
- Actual forest users are often not properly identified. User lists often have to be revised after formation, sometimes leading to conflict.
- The forest boundary is often not clarified at handover. The survey maps on which forest handover is based are almost invariably out of date. If the actual boundary is not clarified at this stage, the FUG can inherit serious boundary and encroachment conflicts which can cause problems for years.
- Constitutions and OPs are often drafted by the *Range-Post* staff themselves, without a thorough process of consultation to reflect users' needs and objectives.
- Poor awareness of community forestry concepts, best practices, roles and responsibilities amongst users, as these are often not fully imparted to the FUG during formation.

An efficient FUG-formation procedure remains a pragmatic necessity. It is also imperative that 'problem' FUGs are not neglected after formation.

How are FUGs Defined?

A key element for ensuring community forestry success, is the definition of FUG membership. People in the Middle hills live in scattered *toles* surrounded by agricultural land. These *toles* are located between belts or patches of forests. FUGs are usually made up of several hamlets. The actual 'community', however, exists at the hamlet level, where there is ongoing face-to-face daily interaction, and ethnicity-based cohesion. Forest users can sometimes belong to more than one FUG as they have different needs from different local forests. On the other hand some FUGs have management responsibility for two forest areas, where the local forest alone is insufficient for their needs.

In those case-study FUGs where users have been properly identified, and are known to each other within the community, the feeling of ownership and cohesion is high, especially where there is ethnic homogeneity. Where diverse users are unable to base a working relationship on common understanding or interests, conflicts can result. This is evident in a number of the larger FUGs studied where elite interests diverge from those of poorer groups.

Three broad types of users may be distinguished:

- *Regular forest users*: depending on the forest daily or weekly for products such as fuel wood and fodder.
- *Occasional forest users*: users living at a distance tend to visit less frequently and collect fewer products and may only use the forest only seasonally or infrequently. This is particularly applicable to customary seasonal grazing.
- *'Future' forest users*: some richer or remote households may not be users currently, but anticipate timber and other products for themselves, or for future generations. These sorts of users are not involved in community forestry activities.

It is becoming an increasingly frequent practice for the FUGs to differentiate the status of different types of users, for instance so that a 'quorum' can be reached at meetings even if 'occasional' or 'future' users are not in attendance.

Five of the 11 FUGs studied had problems with user identification issues. These included:

- *Incomplete FUG formation* where the basic listing of users was not accurate, leading to the exclusion of some forest users, and the inclusion of some non-forest users. This might be avoided if *tole* representatives were responsible for identifying actual users;
- *Deliberate exclusion* of some forest users from the FUG. During formation this may be due to distance, unpopularity and prejudice. After formation this may be due to disobeying rules or failing to pay levies;
- *Disproportionate influence of 'occasional' users*. In one FUG this was because the DFO had insisted that some bazaar-inhabitants should be included in the FUG. In fact, these secondary users were only interested in timber supply and influenced FUG decisions to receive high quantities of timber.

Two of the FUGs studied were able to address these problems through a process of micro-level-action-planning based at the *tole* level, discussed in more detail in Dev *et al.* (2003a).

Post-formation Support From the DFO

Initially after formation, the case-study FUGs apparently functioned with limited effectiveness. They often restricted their initial activities simply to forest closure for regeneration. However with time and effort their institutional capacity developed (as discussed in Springate-Baginski *et al.* 2003). The DoF's role is to monitor and support FUGs' progress. FUGs have the legal right to claim support services from the DFO, and are also free to collaborate with other organizations. FUGs have a

number of needs, specific to their particular stages of development. The most common needs relating to forest-management issues are:

- Conflict resolution (especially regarding forest boundaries);
- Awareness-raising and facilitation of inclusive planning and decision-making;
- Technical advice on specific issues (e.g. plantation, fund management etc.).

Currently DFO field level support activities are annually pre-planned on a somewhat inflexible target-oriented and budget-led basis. The main emphasis of DFO support has been on training (until recently commonly off-site) for individuals, usually FUG Committee members. This is not highly valued by the FUGs, as individual learning is rarely transferred to the whole group. In the 11 FUGs studied, most committee members wanted more regular contact with *Range-Post* staff for moral support, awareness-raising, and technical and legal advice. This could be dealt with through regular attendance of *Range-Post* staff for facilitating assembly meetings.

Although *Range-Post* staff are on the front-line of contact and service provision to FUGs, many staff members feel they lack the capacity, training and re-orientation for their new responsibilities. Forest guards often adopt a passive or over-formal role in villages, and lack the confidence or social skills to participate actively. The motivation and manner of *Range-Post* staff was questioned by some of the FUGs. Improvement of field staff capacity is critically important. This needs to be accompanied by more effective planning of *Range-Post* staff time, given the large number of FUGs requiring support. *Range-Post* staff need to know the specific and prioritized support needs of each FUG in their Range. The micro-level action planning procedure (detailed in Dev *et al.* 2003a) is one tool that supports this in a 'bottom-up' process. FUGs can follow an annual planning process and then give the *Range-Post* staff a copy of their action points and support needs for the year ahead.

Post-formation Support from FUG Networks

Many of the FUGs have shown that they can go beyond forest management to having a role in community development planning. This is reflected in the fact that they are beginning to develop networks and linkages to resolve conflicts, make resources and techniques available, share experiences, and get support for their planned activities. Some local networks have emerged due to the inability of *Range-Posts* to provide a sufficient level of support to the FUGs' growing needs and aspirations.

There are various types of FUG network operating at different levels:

- Village Development Committee (VDC)-level FUG networks are very actively supporting FUGs in local development issues and conflict resolution.
- Product networks are formed by a number of FUGs which are producing and marketing a Similar product (e.g. the resin marketing network in Dhankuta). A network can give Collective strength in marketing negotiations, and can facilitate local processing activities.
- *Range-Post* level networks (which can include 10-30 FUGs) are formed to address various community forestry issues.
- Two national level federations exist. The Federation of Community Forestry User Groups of Nepal (FECOFUN) is a national federation of FUGs which provides support to individual FUGs (e.g. in resolving conflicts) as well as representing their interests at national level. It has developed a high level of political clout. It has recently been joined by the Nepalese Federation of Forest Resource User Groups (NEFUG).

In spite of the existence of these networks, the majority of users in the *toles* studied are not aware of them. However, they felt that their FUG needs to develop linkages with line agencies and other supporting agencies to acquire the necessary help.

CONCLUSIONS

The Status of Community Forestry in Nepal

Community forestry in Nepal has been 'the' paradigmatic example internationally of participatory forest management over the last two decades. The innovative community forestry policy has been widely implemented in the Middle hills area. Over 12,000 FUGs have been formed to date, managing over 15% of the total forestland. Community forestry has been facilitated by an enabling policy environment, international donor support, and conscientious efforts by field-staff and local people.

FUGs have become established local institutions. Although the village elite is responsible for decision-making in most of the FUGs studied, only about 20% of them showed evidence of this leading to manipulation of decisions in favor of elite interests. Thus, while one should not be politically naive about the nature of village society, neither should one ignore widespread evidence of social cooperation across wealth groups. Local people are found to be generally very satisfied with the formation of FUGs and there is widespread local agreement on the basic principles of community forestry.

As discussed in other papers in this series (Yadav *et al.* 2003, Dev *et al.* 2003b), it is the overwhelming finding of this study that most FUGs are diligently protecting their forests and regulating product extraction. The previous trend of widespread forest degradation has generally been reversed and communities are beginning to benefit from improved forest product flows, as well as wider community development. Although many of the FUGs have been hesitant to mobilize their funds for non-forest related activities, recently many have started community development activities, such as credit facilities, and support to schools.

Community forestry in Nepal is now at a crossroads. Many FUGs have been operating for several years and have become firmly institutionalized. They represent an effective local development institution increasingly involved in wider community development activities, often networking with a range of government and non-government groups. The success of community forestry has unleashed tremendous forces of social activism – FUGs are now leading the process and waiting for the DoF to catch up in terms of providing support-services. There are many signs that the DoF is evolving towards this new role, although there is also a need for wider stakeholder involvement.

The extremely progressive Self-Governance Act (1998) in Nepal has sought to coordinate development planning and implementation at District Development Committee (DDC) and Village Development Committee (VDC) level. However currently line agencies continue to establish 'proprietary' user groups for each different function (agriculture, livestock, watershed management, etc.) below ward level, leading to a 'dis-integration' of development planning at the grassroots. It is not unusual for the chairperson of one group to also be chairperson of as many as 10 other types of group. Coordination and integration is now needed at the grassroots level so that local people can 'own' and manage their own development agenda. Since it is now clear that FUGs will remain as grassroots institutions for local resource management below the VDC and ward level, they represent a key opportunity for coordinating grassroots local development planning and implementation across line agencies. Already the more dynamic FUGs are coordinating their planning processes and activities with VDCs. In future this role could receive recognition, endorsement and support in development planning policy.

Strengths and Opportunities of the Community Forestry Process in Nepal

1. Local people can be the most effective managers of forests, given the right institutional arrangements and conditions.

This study found that the 'right institutional conditions' for successful forest management are:

- Participation based on an authentic sense of ownership / tenure of the forest. The legal independence of FUGs has helped this, although sometimes the DFO's rejection of an FUG's proposed changes to the Constitution and Operational Plan can give users the sense that the forest really belongs to the DFO.
- Clear formation procedures. The best performing FUGs are often those, which have had a good start, in terms of identification of actual forest users, awareness raising, inclusive decision-making, and clear definition of forest boundaries (which is best done at *tole* level).
- Consistent post-formation support and guidance from the DoF field staff.

These conditions are discussed in depth in Springate-Baginski *et al.* (2003).

2. FUGs can effectively utilize the energies of members through robust and inclusive planning and decision-making processes, based on *tole*-level interaction.

Community forestry has been criticized as a 'poor policy for poor people' (Graner 1999). We have found that it can be a very empowering policy for poor people, but this depends crucially upon the nature of the planning and decision-making processes within the FUG. Many of the more dynamic FUGs now follow a micro-level action planning process (Dev *et al.* 2003a), based on discussions at *tole*-level and involving *tole*-representatives in the FUG committee. This process enables them to plan activities on a year by year basis and update their activity plans as needs and opportunities change. All that is initially needed to promote such a process is an outside facilitator (e.g. DoF field-staff, or an NGO facilitator). Current DoF planning procedures have a static orientation, with activities focused on following the OP as laid out at the time of FUG formation. Changing the OP is a bureaucratic and lengthy procedure. If FUGs are to evolve dynamically, the DoF must help them by making Operational Planning a more flexible and action-oriented process.

3. Support relationships must be needs focused and demand-led.

DoF field staff must play a facilitation role, particularly in the following key areas:

- The general body of users in most FUGs is unclear about the basic concepts of community forestry. Awareness raising is a widespread need.
- Many FUGs need support in improving their planning, decision-making and implementation processes (see Dev *et al.* 2003a). Once FUGs have effective planning processes they can pass their list of support needs to the *Range-Post* and other relevant agencies, who can then use these demands as a basis for planning support activities. There has been a proliferation of development agencies, Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs) in rural Nepal. It is essential that their efforts are coordinated to avoid duplication and to ensure a cumulative impact on poverty and livelihood development. Since poorer households tend to be clustered in specific *toles*, FUGs can coordinate support to poorer *tole*'s own developmental priorities.
- There are many opportunities for livelihood development of FUGs. Marketing support through support agencies, bilateral projects and networks could promote these.

4. Community forestry has a generally beneficial impact on household livelihoods.

FUGs are improving users' livelihoods not only through forest management, but also through wider community development activities (see Dev *et al.* 2003b). Among the various benefits are:

- Improved flows of forest products on a sustainable basis.
- Improved social capital: the development of a local community planning institution.
- Improvement in community infrastructure such as schools and roads.
- Livelihood opportunities such as NTFP collection and credit facilities.

Weaknesses and Constraints of the Community Forestry Process in Nepal

About one-third of our sample FUGs are developing very successfully and are in a self-supporting mode. However, the remaining two-thirds are at an earlier stage of development, and need external support. There are a number of key institutional weaknesses among the FUGs, which require urgent attention.

- FUG-level decision-making processes are crucial to determining the impact of community forestry. In the majority of the FUGs decision-making processes are weak and not completely inclusive. Although poorer households are generally benefiting from the improved security of forest product flows, they are often marginalized from decision-making processes to some extent, leading to dissatisfaction. Women are also generally not involved in decision-making. Collective decision-making remains a great challenge. The larger and more ethnically heterogeneous the FUG is, the greater the challenge. Over two-thirds of the FUGs studied could be characterized as 'committee' forestry, in terms of decision-making processes being dominated by the FUG committee. In the late 1990s, the differentiated impact of community forestry within a community has been recognized, and 'gender and equity' issues have come to the fore in project support activities and sensitization training for DFO staff. However, community forestry policy still does not explicitly address livelihood or poverty alleviation issues.
- Conflict, particularly regarding forest boundaries, is a chronic problem in many FUGs. It requires urgent attention from the DoF, as it is often beyond the capacity of the FUG to deal with.
- Over-extraction of forest products has been an initial problem in some FUGs. On the other hand, forest utilization in many FUGs is sub-optimal: the forests could be managed to be more productive in terms of household needs and marketable surplus. This is due to lack of awareness, lack of spare time amongst users to participate, lack of external support, and lack of market linkages.

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