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Community Forestry in Nepal

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Background

Issues associated with the planning and management of common lands, and the linkages between these lands and private farmlands, are relevant to livelihood systems throughout the developing world. The understanding of these interactions and the development of management options are key development challenges at the forest/agriculture interface.

Forests are a crucial component of the hill farming system in the mid-hills of Nepal. They provide fuel, fodder, bedding materials, medicines, timber and construction materials; a source of income through sale of products; and services including water catchment, grazing areas, recreational and religious use. The sustainability of the agricultural system in the hills is particularly dependent on the transfer of nutrients through grazing, fodder, bedding and litter collection, for the maintenance of soil fertility on cultivated land.

The implementation of community forestry has involved the setting-up of local-level Forest User Groups (FUGs). Each FUG has a management committee which represents their members (the forest users) in the development and execution of village-level management plans. These plans determine the uses made of the forest resource, and the level of products harvested. The committees also liase with Department of Forests (DoF) officials.

The Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP) has been actively working since 1993 with His Majesty's Government of Nepal (HMGN) Department of Forests to promote the formation and development of FUGs. Prior to this, between 1987 and 1993 the Koshi Hills Community Forestry Project was performing this role.

In many instances forest management plans have involved a change in access rights to some of the forest resources. Users of the forest have different requirements for products depending on their household resources and livelihood strategies. The many stakeholders involved in the implementation of Community Forestry initiatives clearly have potentially diverse interests and criteria for success.

The development of the policy of community forestry, and its implementation through collaboration between the DoF, NUKCFP and other bilateral donors, and the local forest users, may be seen as an ongoing and evolving process, in which all parties are learning through experience.

Firewood collectors

Project Purpose

To investigate the actual and potential role of the community forestry process in Nepal, including the analysis of changes to forest conditions, the development of participatory resource management, the impact of community forestry on the wider farming system of the hills, and national level policy development.

Research Methodology

A review of different approaches to community forestry has been completed and the analyses presented as a working paper (Baumann et al. 1997).

Real insights into the development and impacts of community forestry in Nepal could only be gained through a substantial programme of field research, which will meet three inter-connected project outputs:

- an analysis of the process and implications of community forestry for farming systems and livelihoods in the Koshi Hills;
- key indicators to assess the progress and development of the community forestry 'process'. These indicators will reflect different stakeholder perspectives (it is expected these will reflect both technical achievement, for instance fulfilment of forest product demand, and subjective assessments, for example of satisfaction of communities aspirations);

- a methodology to assist communities in assessing the implications of community forestry and its outcomes.

These outputs are being developed using a method which emphasises action research, i.e. research insights are gained at the same time as the local communities, as key stakeholders, benefit in a direct and tangible way from the research process. The method developed by the project is based on the procedure set out in Figure 1. It combines observations, discussions and questioning at community, tole (hamlet) and household levels, which provides information on all aspects of livelihoods, forest use, participation in the FUG, nutrient management and wider aspects of local institutions and community development.

The procedure itself, which includes both small group and community-wide meetings, has created a context within which different stakeholder groups are able to articulate their needs, interests and perceptions of community forestry. This has in turn enabled the FUGs visited to identify where potential internal conflicts exist and to prepare an action plan to address the issues identified. The approach has now been adopted by NUKCFP for wider implementation and the action plans will be followed up over the next 6 months.

Research Findings

Areas of Conflict

Virtually all of the FUG members are enthusiastic about community forestry, and express their support for it in principle. It is seen as a great improvement over the previous regime. Nevertheless, there are a number of existing and potential areas of conflict that can affect the functioning and sustainability of FUGs once they are formed:

- Between toles (hamlets). In some cases one or two particular toles ensure their interests dominate the FUG's functioning at the expense of more distant, or poorer toles;
- Between different livelihood groups. In many cases the interests of livelihood groups that depend upon access to forest resources (such as firewood sellers, blacksmiths, and liquor distillers) are not taken into account in the operational regimes introduced by the FUG;
- Between the FUG committee and the wider membership. In some cases many FUG members feel the FUG committee is serving their own interests at the expense of those of the wider community;
- Between the FUG and private individuals. In some cases private individuals are claiming ownership of part of the forest handed over to the FUG.

The key to the resolution of conflicts is outside provision of an institutional context in which the needs and interests of all parties involved in a conflict can be addressed, and which is acceptable as independent and legitimate by all parties. In some areas FUG networks are developing to provide a forum for conflict resolution.

Box 1: Characteristics of Community Forestry in Nepal

- Community forestry has reached a self-sustaining stage where there is little chance of the spread of FUG formation being reversed.
- The condition of forest resources is improving in all areas where community forestry is well-established which may be due to the conservation-oriented management regimes which most FUGs initially adopt.
- Community forestry has been developed at all levels, from policy to local, with the restructuring of laws, policies, procedures and practice at these different levels.
- The policy assumption that community forestry is about meeting subsistence needs does not reflect the dynamics of change in many rural areas, where it may be used for other objectives, such as timber production.
- Community forestry in Nepal is broadening out from narrow forest management into wider processes of social and economic change. Some FUGs are active in areas such as education, irrigation and drinking water supply provision, road and path construction.
- Many FUGs are dominated by men from the social and economic elite.

Box 2: Challenges Facing Community Forestry

- Do the FUG management regimes meet local needs in a sustainable manner?
- What are the implications of the dominance of FUGs by men from the social and economic elite in terms of equity and representation? Is it a case of the 'rich getting richer', or that the most effective individuals, those best placed to negotiate with outside agencies, are taking the positions of responsibility?
- Are the needs and interests of different stakeholder groups adequately understood and taken into account in FUG management decisions?
- What implications are there from the commercial exploitation of community forest areas for inter-group equity and market access?
- How will community forestry, as it evolves, relate to wider processes of social and political development in Nepal?
- What form should FUG-DoF relationships take as the community forestry process moves beyond forest management into other spheres of life?
- What form should future external support, from projects and other sources, take?

Group meeting, Paluwa Pikhuwa Forest User Group

Equity Issues

Where the committees do operate to incorporate the interests of all the users, FUGs are generating a wider process of community development. Such a process is still nascent in most cases and needs further support (a point discussed below), but the potential clearly exists for community forestry to be a significant factor in the wider development of these communities.

Where, however, the interests of all users are not represented the whole role of community forestry becomes a contentious issue. The voice of women and the poor are not heard, and the introduction of the FUG as an institution with control over forest resources results in reduced access to and benefits from the forest for these groups. Structural social inequalities can be reflected in unrepresentative decision-making. However the research team found that in general, biased decision-making reflects ignorance and neglect of the needs of poorer groups rather than conscious decisions to repress these interests. The action research process assisted in creating a structure in which better internal communications were established, through tole-level meetings. It remains to be seen from the follow-up site visits whether, through post-formation support, FUG decision-making becomes more representative.

The present formal structures and constitutional arrangements of FUGs, as imposed by the Department of Forests, do not promote the development of representative and participatory decision-making processes. The policy question, of what formal structures and constitutional arrangements might better facilitate effective operation of FUGs, will be explored further in the next phase of research.

Better Managed Forests

The condition of the forests handed over to the FUGs had improved in 10 of the 11 FUG sites studied. These improvements are in marked contrast to the general deterioration of other forest areas, including both those forest areas in the 3 non-FUG communities in which fieldwork was done, and also areas of forest nearby the FUGs forests, not yet handed over to a FUG. District Forest Offices (DFOs) have a great backlog of villages waiting to be formed into FUGs, and to be granted authority over the forests they use.

The improvement to the FUG forests is a consequence of the management regimes the FUGs have introduced and enforced. All FUGs have initially closed their forest to allow regeneration, with very limited access for product extraction, and virtually all have successfully enforced this closure to date. Some of the earlier FUGs have, after a few years of forest closure, progressed into active management of the forest, including planting, thinning, tree-nursery establishment and rotational harvesting. The management is, however, far from optimal. There is poor knowledge at the community level of the technical potential of the forest to supply different mixes of products, and little assessment amongst the users of what community needs could be met from the forest. There is much room for improvement at the FUG level in matching users' needs assessment to technical forest management planning.

Livelihood Effects

The initial field results suggest that community forestry is causing some households to have significant problems in meeting their needs for forest products, and especially fodder. Poorer households are particularly affected by restrictions on forest product collection, because whereas wealthier members of the community may have private forests or trees on their private land, poorer households have fewer alternative resources from which to meet their needs.

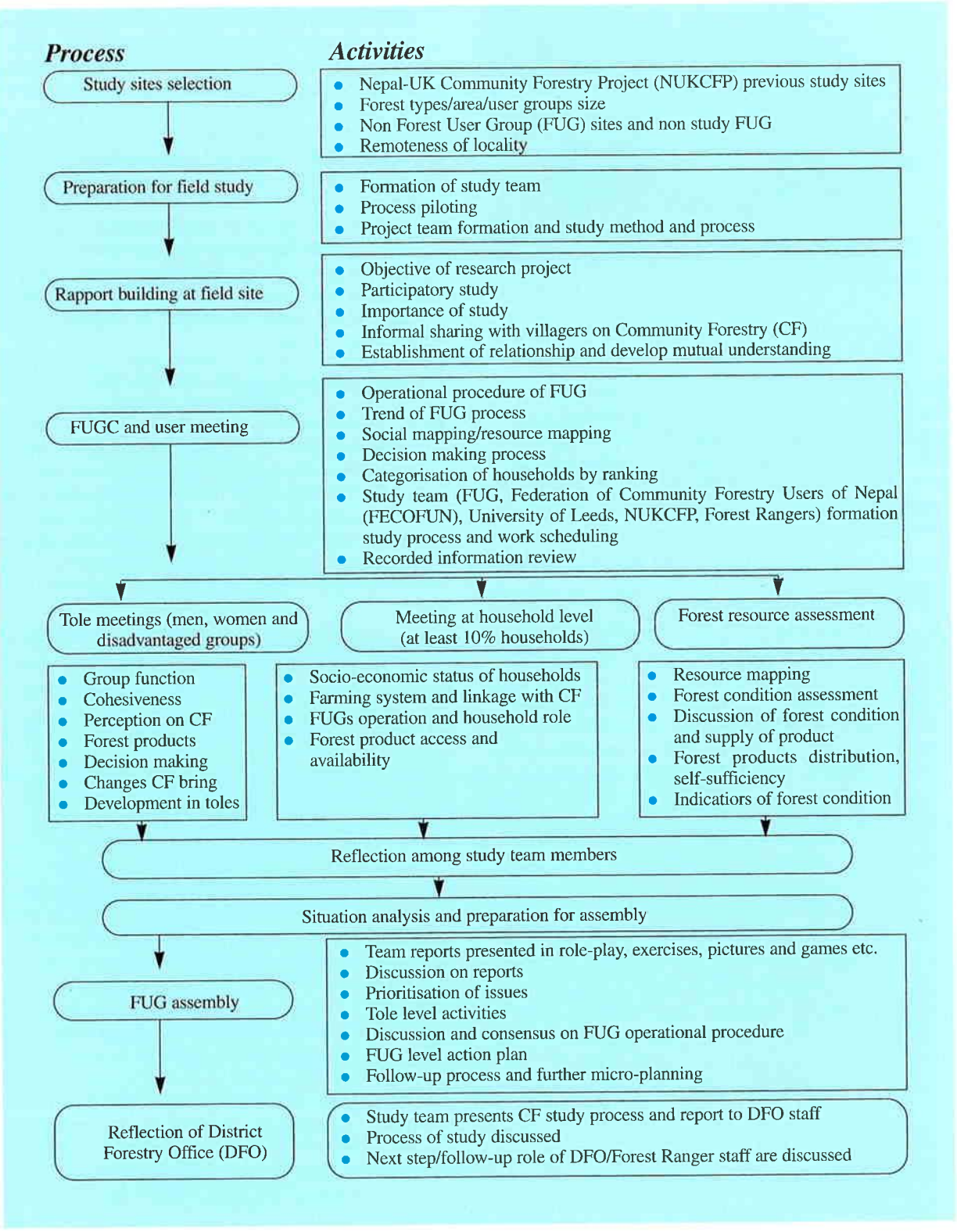
Reduced availability of fodder is in many cases leading poorer sections of the communities to keep fewer livestock. This in turn means is that there is less manure available for maintaining soil fertility. Limitations on the collection of leaf litter can compound this. The growth in use of inorganic fertilisers is in part due to declining fodder availability and livestock numbers, because of restrictions on forest use.

Key Issues for Future Research

The development of FUGs and their efficient management of the forests is presently constrained by their inexperience, low levels of awareness, and lack of confidence. This is generally appreciated by the FUGs themselves, who are clear in their need for (presently limited) post-formation support from the Department of Forests (and others). The issue of support to the FUGs in their management of the forest, the selection and distribution of the forest product 'mix', and the effective operation of the FUG as a local participatory institution, emerged as the critical issues of concern articulated by the forest users at all of the field study sites.

This means that full realisation of the potential of community forestry to provide a catalyst for a broader process of community development will need a much wider range of institutional support. Defining the most suitable form of institutional support is the key challenge for the future of the NUKCFP, and of community forestry in general. One of the main directions of the remaining phases of the research project will be towards defining what support is needed, what form that support should take, and the way it should reach FUGs.

Figure 1: The Research Process



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