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## Nepal: An experience of Community Based Forest Management

Until the late 1970s, the approach to community based forest management in Nepal implied community resource relations along the lines of the indigenous system of forest management prevailing in Nepal's hills.

During the 80s and early 90s, community based forest management became a government priority programme and the new policy framework set up implied an interface between communities, natural resources and government bureaucracy.

Further on, community forestry has been understood and conceptualised in terms of stakeholders relationship. There has been an increasing emergence and growth of mutually influencing community forest user groups, service providing agencies and organisations with diverse interests.

The present legal framework has legitimised the concept of Community Forest User Group (CFUG) as an independent, autonomous and self-governing institution responsible to protect, manage and use any patch of national forest with a defined forest boundary and user group members.

CFUGs are to be formed democratically and registered at the District Forest Office, with a CFUG Constitution, which defines the rights of the users to a particular forest. The forest is handed over to the community once the respective members, through a number of consultative meetings and processes prepare the Operational Plan, a forest working plan, and submits it to the District Forest Officer for approval.

There are now around 12,000 Forest User Groups (FUGs) formed in Nepal during a period of 14 years, with nearly 1.2 million household members, which account approximately 20% of the country's population who have taken over responsibility to manage about 850,000 hectares of forest areas, nearly 16% of the total forest land of the country.

The process of community based forest management has contributed to the improvement of forest conditions as well as to a reduction in the time spent for collecting forest products, thus improving community livelihoods. It has also increased social cohesion, integrating those who have been excluded from mainstream social and political processes, and has increased knowledge and skills related to forest and organisation management, as well as community and leadership development through several training, workshops and exposure visits at community, government and non-government level. FUGs have been able to generate financial capital from the sale of forest products, levies and outside grants. In turn, many of these FUGs have established low interest credit schemes as well as grants to poorer household members.

However, there are still gaps to fill in the implementation of community forests which reflect weak FUG level governance in many cases. Examples of that are measures which have reduced access to forest products and forced allocation of household resources for communal forest management with insecurity over the benefits, or marginalisation of groups in multi-stakeholder settings which have often been excluded and under-valued, with the perception that they have less ability to make and act

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on decisions. Further innovation, reflection and modification in community forestry is needed according to local contexts to address social issues such as gender and equity.

In spite of those shortcomings, the Nepalese experience is a source of inspiration to all of us working for sustainable forest management and users' rights, since it has proved that communities are able to protect, manage and utilise forest resources sustainably.

Article based on information from: "Contribution of Community Forestry to People's Livelihoods and Forest Sustainability: Experience from Nepal", Dr Bharat K. Pokharel.