

FECOFUN's Community Forest Users' Groups: From Collective Empowerment to a Democratic Force in Nepal

Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) have existed in Nepal since the 1970s, with a number of state laws, acts, and plans strictly regulating their formation, registration, and activities. A major turning-point, however, was the federation of these groups in the mid-1990s. The formation of the Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) exposed its member-CFUGs to emerging concepts of the rights based approach (RBA), environmental consciousness, and sustainable development; while at the same time giving a voice to the women, dalits, and the poorest of the poor. What was unforeseen—but perhaps inevitable—was the result of such organization, consciousness-raising, and voicing of needs. Not only did the CFUGs attain influence on policies and practices involving community forestry, they became a major force in the democratic movement of Nepal that reversed the abso-

lute rule of the King in 2006. It was a clear example of empowerment of the poor, 30 years in the making.

COMMUNITY FORESTS AND CFUGS

Much of forest management in Nepal focuses on community forests—especially in the hill districts. The legal basis for designating community forests is the National Forestry Master Plan of 1976. Community forests encompass those parts of “national forest” that have been “handed over” to a Community Forest User Group (CFUG) for its development, conservation, and utilization for the collective interest.¹ The CFUG is likewise entitled to sell and distribute forest produce, subject to strict regulations.² Moreover, any plantation of public land can also be granted recognition as community forests by the District Forest Officer.³

¹ *Forest Act 2049* (1993), S.2 (h)

² *Forest Regulation 2051* (1995, 2nd Amendment Aug. 12, 2002), S.28-35

³ *Forest Regulation 2051* (1995, 2nd Amendment Aug. 12, 2002), S.26 (2)

As of 2004, community forests covered approximately 15 percent of the forest area in Nepal, with 13,078 CFUGs having been granted user rights to these community forests.⁴

A REVERSAL IN POLICIES: EMERGENCE OF PARTICIPATORY FOREST MANAGEMENT

In the latter half of the 1970s, Nepal sought to reverse the existing top-down natural resource management policies. Recognition of peoples' rights to natural resource management and use was a key component of this reversal.⁵ This was particularly significant in a country where indigenous management practices based on collective use rights widely endure in local communities despite persistent efforts by some powerful sectors in the national government to subjugate and undermine their legal recognition.⁶

By the late 1970s, it had become clear that Nepal's forest resources were fast dwindling. Against this backdrop, the governing ideology for the forestry sector began to change. The National Forestry Plan of 1976 was the first

official document that acknowledged the need to rectify past mistakes. It admitted that the protection, maintenance and development of Nepal's forests were neither possible nor even practicable through government efforts alone.⁷ The Plan thus called for involving the citizens of Nepal in all aspects of forest protection, production and proper utilization, and also for recognizing the forest as the inalienable property of society.

The Plan, for the first time, categorized forests according to ownership and level of possible participation, into five types—government forest, panchayat forest, private forest, leasehold forest and religious forest.⁸ When later taken up for implementation with necessary legislative enactments, the Plan facilitated people's participation in all aspects of forest management except within government forests. This 1976 Plan and the subsequent enactments can be viewed as heralding a paradigm shift in the management of Nepal's forests. However, from 1976 through 1987, only a very small area of forest (36,376 hectares out of a targeted 1,835,000 hectares) was "handed over" to local communities.⁹

⁴ Bhattarai, Dr. Ananda Mohan and Dil Raj Khanal. *Communities, Forests and Law of Nepal: Present State and Challenges*. Kathmandu, Nepal: FECOFUN, Forum for Protection of Public Interest (Pro-Public), and Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL). 2005, p. 38.

⁵ Bhattarai and Khanal, p. 1.

⁶ Schmidt, Donald A. Messer, 1993, cited in Bhattarai and Khanal, p. 1.

⁷ Bajracharya, D., 1983, cited in Bhattarai and Khanal, p. 23.

⁸ The 1978 Amendment to the 1961 Forest Act added a sixth category, "Panchayat Protected Forest."

⁹ Bhattarai and Khanal, p. 24.

MASTER PLAN FOR THE FORESTRY SECTOR, 1988

The Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS) in 1988 pushed the participatory management trend further – perhaps fueled as well by the rise in environmental consciousness and the concept of sustainable development that began in the 1970s (see box). It gave emphasis to recognizing community rights over forest resources, addressing wider environmental issues, as well as meeting people’s basic needs for fuel-wood, fodder, timber, and other forest products.¹⁰

The organization of the growing number of CFUGs into a federation was primarily to carry out the spirit of the Master Plan—but unintentionally it also laid the groundwork for the CFUGs’ eventual role as a democratic force in Nepal.

GRASSROOTS FEDERATION TO NATIONAL PLAYER

The Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) emerged after four years (1991-1995) of discussions, interactions and workshops on how to assist the CFUGs of Nepal. FECOFUN greatly expanded its organization from the grassroots to the national level. Out of a total of 14,000

government-recognized CFUGs in the country, more than 10,000 became affiliated with FECOFUN through its 74 district chapters. Nine million people, managing more than 25% of the national forest as community forests, became directly involved in the FECOFUN movement.

FECOFUN strives to promote self-reliance among CFUGs through institutional capacity building to capitalize on the resources in order to meet their diverse needs.¹¹ Its objectives are to initiate efforts towards the preservation of natural resources by protecting the rights of CFUGs; creating awareness and imparting knowledge on forest-related policies, rules and regulations among uninformed users; developing a sense of community; and bringing dynamism to the research and development of forest management technology. FECOFUN conducts various programs to upgrade the economic and social status of women and disadvantaged communities, and contributes to the government’s poverty alleviation program through community processes.

FECOFUN helps CFUGs by providing training and other support – such as boundary dispute settlement; preparation, revision and renewal of constitutions and operational plans with wider people’s participation, reflecting the needs and

¹⁰ HMG/N/ADB/FINNIDA, 1988, Master Plan for the Forestry Sector, Nepal, Kathmandu, His Majesty’s Government.

¹¹ IIDS, 2005: report on assessment of FECOFUN and its programs and strategies.

aspirations of the users, particularly women, the poor and dalits.¹²

FECOFUN'S POLICY ADVOCACY CAMPAIGN

A new program that FECOFUN entered into in 2005 was its Policy Advocacy Campaign (PAC), which was implemented in 24 districts. The objectives of the PAC were to develop common understanding on governance, the rights-based approach (RBA) and advocacy; to increase the capacity of NRM-based federations, other CSOs and political parties at the district and national levels; and to form and strengthen advocacy forums at the district and national levels to effectively mobilize constituencies to influence policies, such as.

- *Contribution to the restoration of democracy* – The most important contribution of the project was its role in restoring democracy in Nepal through a people's movement in 2006. FECOFUN concluded that, unless democratic rights were established, people's rights to sustainable and equitable natural resource management (including community forestry) would not be secure. Thus, the program utilized mass demonstrations against the King's rule. Being a people-based organization, FECOFUN enjoyed the comparative advantage of people support to gather

hundreds of thousands of people in the streets. Various district reports and media agencies announced that FECOFUN organized the largest demonstrations during the democratic movement. It was estimated that over 500,000 people (half of whom were women) took part in 43 FECOFUN/CFUG-led mass rallies.

- *Initiation of dialogue with government* – Dialogue and negotiation were used to resolve issues with the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation (Mo FSC) in June 2006. An eight-point agreement was signed to resolve CF issues. Following this central-level agreement, about 30 FECOFUN district chapters also negotiated with their respective District Forest Officers. Meanwhile, FECOFUN is actively participating in a task force formed by the Mo FSC to resolve forestry-related issues. Such dialogue has eased common understanding and joint action among the various stakeholders, and will hopefully dispel the belief that advocacy means confrontation.
- *Constituency building in support of community forestry* – As a result of program activities, the critical mass supporting community forestry was significantly increased. Out of a total of 17,000 participants in such activities, a large percentage were representatives from

¹² IIDS, 2005: report on assessment of FECOFUN and its programs and strategies.

non-FECOFUN/CFUG organizations. Expressions of solidarity from other CSOs likewise reflected the increased support for community forestry. For example, in the central PAF meeting, political parties and CSOs arrived at a common understanding on people's rights in NRM and CF and prepared a joint declaration in favor of community forestry.

- *Formation and mobilization of Policy Advocacy Forums* – Policy Advocacy Forums (PAFs) at the district and national level emerged as a common platform for various CSOs and political parties to identify, prioritize, and advocate district and national level issues. It was also recognized by the general public as a vehicle for reporting complaints involving inequity and injustice. The PAFs provided a common ground for communications, information sharing, and discussions on relevant issues and have helped promote understanding and consensus among key stakeholders and service providers. The PAFs even addressed issues beyond natural resource management and community forestry. For example, they successfully raised issues of disabled persons and of students needing transportation discounts.
- *Training and media exposure* – Within the one-year duration of the PAC (September 2005-September 2006), FECOFUN conducted 533 events and

Major features/premises of the MPFS

1. Four imperatives of development are as follows:
 - Fulfillment of basic needs
 - Sustainable use of forest resources
 - People's participation in the benefit sharing and decision-making process
 - Social and economic progress
2. Prerequisites of national development, like peace and security, can be fulfilled only if the basic needs of the people are satisfied.
3. Over-centralization of the decision-making authority would weaken the morale and confidence of the people.
4. Abundant local resources and power of local communities may be creatively managed and mobilized through a community forestry development program.
5. If the right of decision making was decentralized to the level of the user groups dependent on the forests, their decisions would be more action oriented.
6. Key to sustainable development of forest resources of the country is the involvement of the user groups in the process of decision-making and benefit sharing.
7. The major responsibility of the government field workers shall be to facilitate and to support the people in the sustainable use and management of the forest.
8. The people's traditional accepted right to make decisions on fuel wood and fodder collection free of cost shall be systematized.
9. Information dissemination will be emphasized so that women and wood cutters may take active part in decision making and benefit sharing.
10. The livelihood of poor and landless people will be maintained by forest-related activities.
11. In line with the principle of decentralization, community forestry plans shall be formulated and implemented immediately.
12. Local users should be made aware that they shall receive the direct benefit from the conservation of natural resources and plantation areas.

activities (workshops, seminars, and field visits) at the district and national level— involving a total of 17,000 participants. It also conducted media advocacy through television and radio programs, field visits, a video documentary, website updating, and IEC materials production.

SUCCESS IN POLICY INFLUENCE

Owing to the above efforts and accomplishments, the PAC program was successful in influencing policies in favor of community forestry. Perhaps its most significant achievement was the handing over of the Terai forest to the local community. Others were: (i) the safeguarding of CFUGs' autonomy and rights, assuring that the government would not interfere with their bank accounts; (ii) the abolishing of the 15% tax imposed on certain forest products; (iii) the removal of “double hammering” practices; and (iv) assisting local communities to stop the declaration of certain conservation areas.

Three major policy analysis documents also resulted from the PAC: one on the restructuring of the forestry sector, a second on the prospects of the Policy Advocacy Forum, and a third on community forestry policy.

CONCLUSION

FECOFUN's experience has allowed for the formulation of an advocacy plan for

all participating districts as well as for the national level. It has also proven that a common forum is possible for all stakeholders to lobby in favor of the poor and marginalized. Finally, the CFUGs' experience has shown how collective empowerment has emerged as a major force in Nepal's democratic movement. □

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