



Locally controlled forestry in Nepal – needed now more than ever



Timber piled up in Sundari Community Forest of Amarapuri Village Development Committee of Nawalparasi. © ForestAction

Forests are Nepal's major natural resource and a highly debated issue at political and civil society level. With ups and downs in the political system in the country, the rights over forest resources have been slowly shifting from the rulers or government to the communities. The debate is at a climax now, as the country is busy preparing a new constitution and the communities are demanding that rights over forest resources be included and that forests should be locally controlled.

The modern era of forestry in Nepal started in 1927 through the government's establishment of wood storage houses (Kathmahal), used to store logs for supplying railway sleepers to India. In 1947, the Institute of Forestry was established to develop skilled manpower to manage the forests and in 1959, the Ministry of Forests was established. Although some initiatives in forest management were taken, the planned management of forests only properly started after the National Forestry Plan was published in 1976. The plan established 74 district forest offices to oversee forest-related activities such as forest management, timber trading and forest resource assessment.

'Panchayat' and the people's revolution: 1960-1990

At the time the National Forestry Plan was published, the forestry sector was in the grip of an autocratic and highly centralised government – the Panchayat system – under the direct supervision of the late King Birendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev. The rights of communities over the forests were not even talked about before the 1970s. The autocratic government promulgated 'community forestry' rules in 1978, with the supposed aim of involving communities in forest management. But despite the name 'community forestry', communities were not actually given any decision-making rights;



decisions were made by government supporters at a local level.

The people's revolution in 1990 established a multi-party democracy in the country, thereby ending the Panchayat system. Panchayat was a government system under strict control of the king. It was established in 1961 by dissolving the democratic government, and until 1990 the political parties were prohibited to conduct any political activities. The government was formed by the king and the whole system was led by the king, with people's rights highly curtailed. With the rise of democracy in 1990, community forestry expanded rapidly throughout the country, resulting in the formation of more than 15,000 community forest users' groups (CFUGs). The communities began forming groups and asked the government to grant them full authority to manage forests or degraded land nearby. While forests under government control were rapidly decreasing due to rampant deforestation, communities started managing the bare land or degraded forests themselves. "The communities' tireless efforts proved that the locals were capable of managing forest resources and local forests better than government," says Ghan Shyam Pandey, former Chairman and present advisor of the Federation of Community Forestry Users Groups (FECOFUN).

Although a large proportion (about 75 per cent) of the forests remained under government control, certain rights to conserve and manage the bare land or degraded forests were given to the communities after huge pressure from CFUGs demanding their rights to natural resources. Having broken the government's monopoly on forest resources to some extent, the CFUGs successfully established themselves as major forest stakeholders. Donor agencies started supporting the forests managed by communities. Within a few years of the establishment of democracy, community forestry in Nepal achieved global fame.

Community forestry takes hold

Although community forestry at the initial phase just concentrated on conservation, as it expanded, a number of stakeholders started to propose various ideas and plans for making forests a multi-stakeholder issue. Many NGOs started working within the forestry sector to link forestry with the issues of poverty, inclusion and development. "Probably, we are the pioneer group which led the rights of the communities on natural resources in an effective and organised way," added Pandey.

Growing interest from the international community and increasing support from the political parties – combined with the establishment of democracy and the failure of the state to curb rampant deforestation – compelled the bureaucracy to promote community forestry. Today, although community forestry groups have been recognised as the sovereign body for decision-making over the forest land handed over to them, friction between the state and communities is increasing. "The deep rooted mindset of the bureaucracy that the state is the owner of natural resources has created

the problem and this has not changed much yet," says Dr Naya Sharma Paudel, executive coordinator of Forest Action – a forestry think tank in Nepal. "Although the government has formally accepted communities as a major stakeholder, it has not given the communities access to the decision-making process to date."

Civil war halts progress in forestry: 1996-2006

Just as the partnership on the forestry sector was beginning to be recognised by the state and some promising initiatives like participation of communities in conservation were being taken, an armed political movement emerged in 1996. Approximately 13,000 people were killed in the ensuing war. For the decade it lasted, the whole nation was highly affected, with most parts of the country under the control of Maoist rebels. As forests were used as shelter by the armed rebel forces, and even by the army, the growth of community forestry also was hindered to some extent. "Communities were highly active and they tried to minimize the impact of war as far as possible and kept the forest areas under the control of the communities but the government forests were under the control of rebels," says Apsara Chapagain, Chairperson of FECOFUN.



Ghan Shyam Pandey, Global Alliance of Community Forestry (GACF), former chairperson of FECOFUN.

After the massacre of the royal family in 2000, Gyanendra Bir Bikram Shah Dev replaced his brother on the throne and imposed rules which further curtailed the rights of the people and prohibited political activities. The people's revolution in 2006 compelled him to step down, he was deposed in 2008 and the country was declared a federal republic. The Nepal Communist Party (Maoist) signed a peace agreement guaranteeing elections, which the party subsequently won, and the creation of a new constitution.





Apsara Chapagain, Chair of Nepal's Federation of Community Forests Users Groups, in protest against Forest Act amendment, 2011. © ForestAction Nepal

Present day: a new constitution, the 1993 Forest Act amendment, and Growing Forest Partnerships

Following the radical changes over recent decades, the forestry sector is also changing rapidly. Firstly, feudal control over forests is reducing, and deprived and marginalised groups – indigenous communities and Dalits (untouchables) as well as women – are raising their voices. Secondly, the international community's interest in Nepal's forest sector is increasing and civil society is very active. Thirdly, growing demand for timber and non-timber products from an increasing population is creating a huge pressure on forests – the increase of trade has established the timber trade as one of the major sectors of the economy. With all these players on the stage, the major issue now is – who should have the control over the forests, the government or communities?

The structure of the federalised state is yet to be finalised and the writing process for the new constitution is underway. The issue of forests is one of the most highly-debated issues in this transition phase. How the roles of various stakeholders should be defined in the new constitution is currently under discussion at the constituent assembly.

It is in this context that Growing Forest Partnerships (GFP) started an initiative for developing bottom-up processes in the forestry sector through continuous dialogue among a range of stakeholders at various levels. Aimed at improving forest management and raising the issues of forest-dependant people by reducing the gap between stakeholders during negotiations, GFP has provided a common platform to discuss essential forest issues. "After 2008, the Ministry

of Forests and Soil Conservation (MoFSC) took some major decisions which widened the rift between the communities and the government. So, GFP since its beginning in 2010 has provided a common platform to discuss the problems related to policy-making and other forestry-related issues," says Dil Bahadur Khatri, Coordinator, GFP in Nepal.

In 2010 the MoFSC proposed an amendment to the 1993 Forest Act in an attempt to curb the rights of communities on forests. Following heavy but peaceful protests from the communities under the leadership of FECOFUN, the government withdrew its proposal in July 2011. In 2010, major multi-stakeholder discussions on the Forest Act amendment were conducted through GFP at regional and district level. "The rigorous discussions conducted through GFP in 2010 helped to clarify the amendment and its consequences. This helped to disseminate the nationally debated issue to the grass-root level and finally the government was compelled to withdraw its decision," explains Khatri.

The benefits of multi-stakeholder discussions

GFP has also held major multi-stakeholder discussions in 2010 and 2011 following contention around the government's creation of two conservation areas and one national park in 2009. Communities were irked after the decisions came without consulting them and this is still a burning issue in the forestry sector today. "From the discussions conducted over the last one and half years, the government has realised that decisions made inside the walls of administrative buildings in the capital are non-productive and people's consent on every major decision related to forests is the need of the hour," says Chapagain.



The last two years saw government and communities fighting each other. Great effort went into amending the existing Forest Act and the declaration of the conservation areas. But ultimately, the government has had to withdraw its own proposal on the Forest Act and has been facing difficulties in implementing the conservation areas also. The track record of the last two years shows that it is now impossible to take any decisions without the consent of local people, and greater consultation with stakeholders before taking any major decisions would be more productive than trying to exercise power unilaterally on the forestry sector.

Times have changed, new forest sector stakeholders are gaining in strength but the government is trying its

best to exclude them from policy-making processes. Increasingly, decisions are taken without consultation and stakeholders have to raise their voices against the government's decision. This pattern is a regular phenomenon and an increasing trend. "Stakeholders are exercising their right to include their agenda in the new constitution but the greater consultations and rigorous discussions could help to build a major common agenda. GFP in 2010 focused on grass-root level problems and in 2011, the policy discussions are ongoing. Discussions conducted so far have been highly fruitful" Khatri says.

- Ramesh Prasad Bhushal, February 2012



Charnawati watershed in Dolakha District, Nepal – pilot site for Forest Carbon Trust Fund (REDD+). © Ramesh Prasad Bhushal

Further information

Growing Forest Partnerships (GFP) is an initiative that helps develop and support networks of people and organisations at local, national and international levels towards an equitable and sustainable management of forestry resources. It brings together actors who may not have worked together before, to ensure that global discussions about forests include the real and current challenges that forest-dependent people and local forest managers are facing and to develop and test new and innovative ways of tackling those challenges.

'Forest voices' and the GFP in-country journalist programme

In 2011 GFP established a journalist programme in Ghana, Guatemala, Liberia and Nepal. In each country, a local journalist has been recruited to report on relevant issues in the forest sector, as well as providing updates on the work of GFP. The journalists work in close coordination with the in-country GFP teams, however, they also look beyond GFP to report on some of the other issues that affect forest-dependent people. The articles and features produced by the journalists are a result of interviews with a wide-range of stakeholders, including: local communities, regional and local government authorities, civil society organisations and private sector workers and business owners.

The 'Forest voices' series aims, through the work of local journalists, to provide insight into the forestry context in each of these countries and illustrate how locally controlled forestry and partnerships are working in practice on the ground.

For more information on GFP and for more updates on the in-country projects, please visit the GFP website:
www.growingforestpartnerships.org

