

INTRODUCTION TO A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF FOREST USER GROUPS IN NEPAL

by
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The Yale University/Institute of Forestry Project in Nepal has recently begun comprehensive research on forest user groups. This short article describes the project's ongoing research on user groups in support of national forestry development and improvement in the institute's community forestry curriculum.

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the IOF forest user group study—the first of its kind on a national scale—is to:

1. Examine the many examples and processes by which forest user groups are mobilized, organized and supported by government foresters, donor assisted projects and NGOs.
2. Identify indicators or factors that foster 'success' of forest user group development in different contexts.
3. Provide findings of fact and recommendations to guide future forest user group development by government field foresters, project staff and NGOs.
4. Provide new, more relevant and timely materials to IOF faculty for improving the community forestry curriculum as taught to IOF students at the Ranger and Officer level, and to government department and project in-service and community forestry orientation training programmes.

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RESEARCH METHODS: RAPID APPRAISAL

The five member interdisciplinary team is using the processual RA approach devised at Khon Kaen University, Thailand (KKU 1987). This research methodology relies on sets of protocols agreed upon by the team for field work planning, local rapport building, group interviewing and team debriefing. The heart of the research system in the field is a series of semi-structured interviews with villagers (the forest users and local managers) and with district, project and NGO forestry staff. Interviews are combined with a variety of rapid diagnostic tools (RDT) and other observational techniques which allow the villagers to participate actively in the research. Data analysis is enhanced in the field by team debriefings in which the team members organized their notes and related them to a pre-determined, but flexible, matrix of topics and indicators. Further debriefings are held at critical junctures during the research cycle, such as at the end of project site or district tours.

The researchers are attempting to define 'success' in terms of the **cost-effectiveness** of the effort (time, energy and budget), **replicability** (spread effect) and long-term **sustainability** of user group development styles, after donor assistance is over. Much of what we count as 'success' relates to local **user satisfaction** with the results and with the condition of the resource over time. The researchers examine these issues from many sides by using the time tested RA methods of 'triangulation', examining an issue from several perspectives at different times, in various settings, and 'probing', asking in-depth questions about topics important to the subject. The old style survey questionnaire format is avoided.

As background to the field interviews, but mostly in debriefings, the researchers analyze their findings according to four indicator categories (Parker *et al*, 1988)¹.

1. **Institutional** Relating to the process of user group mobilisation, formation and continuing support.
2. **Social** Residence patterns, community organisation and history. To include information about leadership patterns and history of forest use, abuse and management.
3. **Economic** Incentives which support forest protection and restricted access management. Analysis of pressures on the forest that affect management. Impact of nearby markets, urban areas and roads on management options. Analysis of whether such economic factors serve as incentives or disincentives to user-managed forestry.
4. **Technical** —including legal aspects. Analysis of the nature of the forest, its species, condition and the existence of both scientific silvicultural prescriptions and indigenous technical knowledge about management. For example, is there a management plan? Does it include legal rules as well as management prescriptions? Did villagers help to write it?

¹ We have borrowed and adapted Parker's evaluation matrix (1988:21, Table 2) to our own n rating and ranking forest user groups.

SOME TENTATIVE FINDINGS

It is too early to give concrete findings or suggest fully-formed recommendations, but several very tentative notions are beginning to emerge, some of which appear self-evident. For example, 'successful' forest user group development seems to be strongly correlated with:

- ! The pre-existence of an indigenous or traditional forest management system in the community
- ! Good representative leadership that fosters user participation in, and satisfaction with, decision-making
- ! Strong local feelings of forest resource 'ownership' and pride
- ! Homogeneity of values and desires regarding forest management, products and benefits. Socio-cultural homogeneity of a community may also play an important role.

An additional and interesting finding is beginning to emerge that the place and role of women and of lower castes on local forest management committees appears in some communities to be an important indicator of the maturity, strength and success of the user group. The involvement of these typically much-seen but little-heard from categories of people, who are often the principal forest product harvesters and users, seems to increase in direct relationship to the maturity (age, condition and productivity) of the resource base and the concomitant increase and sophistication of the group's management needs and options.

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