MODELS FOR IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY FORESTRY AND THE CONCEPT OF USER GROUPS

The Case Of Nepal

by

Bijay Kumar Singh

RESUMEN

El autor distingue cinco modelos de forestería comunitaria adoptados en Nepal hasta la fecha. Después de examinarlos individualmente, se concentra en el modelo de mayor implementación en la actualidad, el modelo forestal de asociación de grupos de usuarios. Discute las características claves del concepto de grupo de usuarios, especialmente el pleno reconocimiento de sus iniciativas propias, a las cuales se ha otorgado autoridad legal para diseñar planes de manejo propios. Todos los beneficios derivados del bosque son distribuidos entre los usuarios, sin imponer límites de tiempo sobre las actividades de manejo. Se reconoce la existencia de sistemas indígenas de manejo, y se dan descripciones de ciertos mecanismos reglamentarios de uso común. El autor discute los problemas encontrados durante la implementación de grupos de usuarios del bosque. En especial, hace resaltar la necesidad de un cambio de actitud radical tanto de parte de los forestales así como de las instituciones asociadas a la actividad forestal.

RESUME

Il est possible de distinguer cinq différents modèles de foresterie communautaire qui ont été adoptés au Népal jusqu'à nos jours. Le présent document présente chacun de ces modèles l'un après l'autre et se concentre ensuite sur le modèle qui est le plus largement répandu actuellement: le modèle associatif de foresterie gérée par des comités d'usagers. On y explore les caractéristiques du concept de comités d'usagers, notamment la responsabilisation des utilisateurs de la forêt au niveau local, à qui l'on confère juridiquement le droit de dresser leur propre plan de gestion. Tous les bénéfices dérivés de la forêt sont distribués parmi les usagers, et aucune limite dans le temps ne leur est imposée en ce qui concerne leurs activités de gestion. On reconnaît l'existence des systèmes de gestion indigène et l'on décrit un certain nombre de mécanismes de régulation qui sont communément utilisés. On y présente les problèmes posés par la mise en place de la foresterie gérée par des comités d'usagers, notamment la nécessité de promouvoir un changement radical dans le comportement des professionnels de la forêt et un changement institutionnel qui y est lié.

MODELS FOR IMPLEMENTING COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Community forestry programmes have been implemented in Nepal using a variety of methods. These may be described according to a number of models (after Palin, 1980).

Super Management Model

The super management model was adopted in early attempts to involve local people in forest management in Nepal, through the administrative and political unit of the village panchayat.[1] Rules promulgated in 1978 allowed for the redesignation of Government forest as Panchayat Forest (PF) and Panchayat Protected Forest (PPF). The involvement of local people in the management of PFs and PPFs was, in fact, very limited. Nursery and plantation work was funded by the government, and all management decisions were taken by the District Forest Office. Local people were simply hired to implement the programme, for example as labour for bush clearing, pitting, transportation of seedlings and weeding. The so-called "user groups" of the PF and PPF comprised loose associations of local people involved in community forestry activities. There was little or no respect for indigenous knowledge in PF and PPF management. Rangers or Assistant Rangers drew up a management plan along technical lines without consultation with the users; the result was a document that was often very difficult for the members of the "user group" to understand. Most of the Operational Plans therefore merely remained on paper, and were not actually implemented in the field. Although the intention had been to involve the local communities/institutions in forestry activities, this did not actually happen.

Support Service Model

The support service model has been used to implement the private planting component of the Community and Private Forestry Programme, under which District Forest Offices have distributed seedlings free of charge to local people and organisations for private planting. Forest Department staff provide little technical knowledge on how to plant seedlings. Local people generally use their own knowledge in the protection and management of seedlings planted on their own land. They decide themselves how many seedlings of which species to plant, but their preferences are often not matched in the supply of seedlings in departmental nurseries. For example, in hill areas local people need good fodder species but these are not readily available in nearby nurseries. The private forestry programme has become very popular in the Terai (the lowland part of Nepal), but as yet no organisation of private tree growers has been established in the country.

Non-Government Organisation (NGO) Supported Model

In this model, the government provides land free of charge for community forestry development. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) assist the local community by

---

[1] **Editorial Note:** Following the political changes of 1990 which saw the demise of the panchayat system, the term became defunct.

contributing seedlings, technical knowledge, and by organising awareness programmes in the form of training, seminars, meetings, formal or informal discussions, etc. The NGO acts as a catalyst in the organisation of the user group/committee in the development of community forestry. The local community makes its own decisions in all matters. They use their own experience and knowledge, linked with technical knowledge from the NGO. Most of the labour is done by the user group members but materials are provided by the NGO. For example, the United Mission to Nepal is engaged in the development of community forestry in Jumla district, whilst CARE (Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere) and other NGOs are involved in similar work in many districts. Local people have been found to be very positive and receptive towards such programmes. However, they are pocket-sized, and focused on small areas in selected districts only.

Partnership Model

In the partnership model, there is a contract between the Department of Forest (DF) and forest user group for the management, development and utilisation of a forest area to fulfil the forestry needs of user group members. The government provides land, technical knowledge and financial assistance. The user group members share their own experience and knowledge, and their labour for the protection, management, development and utilisation of the community forest. Local people themselves identify their own user group and form a committee. They devise their own rules and regulations for the management of the forest and its products. This model is at present in practise throughout the middle hills of Nepal.

Leasehold Contract Model

In this model, there is a contract between the government and the leaseholder. The leaseholder may be an individual, a community, an institution or a private enterprise. The government provides land on lease for a certain period of time, as well as technical knowledge. In return the leaseholder pays a fee for the land. At present the government has fixed the maximum lease period at 25 years, renewable for another 25 year period. The leaseholders invest their own capital and use their own knowledge in forest management. They are allowed to sell tree products according to their own wishes, and can form their own organisation. Leasehold forestry is not popular in Nepal. The government has given it low priority to date, and people have not expressed much interest in it due to the frequent changes in government policy, and the behaviour of hard-headed forestry personnel.

THE USER GROUP CONCEPT

Empowerment of the Local Community

The concept of user group forestry is a revolutionary approach. It is a democratic exercise, empowering the local community and strengthening grassroots institutions. Local people themselves identify the forest users, who form a user committee from their number. Forestry staff act as catalyzers and facilitators to ensure the representation of all interest groups within a forest user group, but they do not interfere directly in forest user group and user committee

18

formation.

Users Prepare Their Own Plan

With the assistance of forestry field staff, users prepare an Operational Plan (OP) for their forest. An OP may include details about the protection and management of the forest and the system for sharing benefits amongst users. The role of forestry staff is an advisory one, the although the approval of the Divisional Forest Officer (DFO) is also needed. Users can set the time period of an OP, and can modify or change it if necessary, subject to DFO agreement.

Forest User Group/Committee - a Legal Stature

Once the Operational Plan has been signed by two concerned parties (ie. the DFO and the forest user group chairman), the new Forest Act 2048 (1992) recognises the forest users committee as a legal body, empowered to execute the OP. The committee can also punish any violater of the rules stipulated in an OP.

All Benefits go to the Local People

In a global context, there is no other example of community forestry in which the counterpart (government) contributes financially and does not expect direct benefit from its investment. Under the rules and regulations in community forestry in Nepal the government provides land free of

charge, invests capital, and assists in technical support to the local community or user group for community forestry development but does not expect a direct share of any benefit. All the benefits from community forests go to the user group or local community.

No Time Limitation

In the Philippines, the maximum period of forest land stewardship is 25 years, renewable for another 25 years. In India, forest land handed over to the local panchayat for community forestry development is fixed for a period mentioned in the contract, and the two parties (government and local panchayat) share benefits from the forest. By contrast in Nepal there is no set time period for community forestry and no sharing of benefits with the government. Once an area of forest is handed over to a user group, it can manage and utilise the forest for an unlimited period of time. It is made clear, however, that government has only handed over rights to forest management and utilisation and not the right of tenure; the forest users cannot sell or mortgage the land on which the forest is growing.

A Change in Forest Department Perceptions of Local People

Traditional forestry approaches have assumed that the people of Nepal's middle hills are log smugglers and forest encroachers or destroyers. However, a number of studies (Tamang,

1990; Fisher, 1990) have found that many rural hill communities possess indigenous forest management systems. Given proper incentives and motivations communities could be made effective partners in forest development. Therefore, the new policy of government gives local people the right and responsibility for forest management and conservation.

It is realised that rural communities are an integral part of middle hills ecosystems. The major problems in these areas such as deforestation, soil erosion, rapid population growth, decrease in per unit agricultural production, and poverty are inter-related. They should not be viewed in isolation. Forestry staff cannot ignore the local community in the management of forest resources; they are just as much a part of the ecosystem as the forest.

Recognition of Indigenous Forest Management Systems

Indigenous forest management systems are largely the result of local initiatives. Although not recognised by government, these systems have been accepted by local communities. They are unofficial in nature. Fisher (1990) differentiates traditional management systems from indigenous systems, arguing that traditional implies continuity. To describe a system as "traditional" indicates that it was inherited from generation to generation, whilst an "indigenous" system may have been developed either long ago or recently, but was initiated by the local community and is accepted in their social norms.

Traditional and indigenous forest management systems are most prevalent in Nepal's middle hills. As yet there has been relatively little appreciation of these systems. Traditional and indigenous management systems could be the main basis and building block for user group forestry. Identification and recognition of these systems should occur at the very beginning and only then should further steps be taken.

Approaches Adopted in Indigenous or Traditional Forest Protection Systems

Approaches adopted within indigenous or traditional forest protection systems may be divided as follows:

a   Manapathi system

b   Rotational system

c   Collective watching system

d   Self-disciplined system

e   Imposing of sanctions and/or punishment

f   Combination of any of above

20

a Manapathi System

`Manapathi' is a local measuring unit of cereals or liquids which prevails in the middle hills of Nepal. In this system, the villagers agree to the appointment of one or more watchers to look after the forest. Often poor people are appointed. Watchers are paid in cereals (rice, corn, wheat) from each village or family once or twice a year, the quantities paid being fixed in pathi and mana per year. The system is common to many places. For example, Baral (1990) reports that in Bhat Danda Ban in Achham district, villagers have been paying a forest watcher one pathi of rice and four mana of wheat per household per year. The manapathi system occurs not only in forestry work but also in other work, for example the communal payment of the Katuwale (local messenger who publicly transmits messages to all the community people for mass meetings, collective work etc). In the Terai (lowland) area of Nepal, villagers also pay rice and wheat to their barber, blacksmith and others who regularly provide them with services.

b Rotational System

In this system, each household to takes care of the forest for a fixed time period, decided at a mass meeting of local people who use the forest. Responsibility for forest protection is rotated in turns amongst the households. In some places, a stick and/or hat is handed over when responsibility is passed from one household to another.

c Collective Action

In this system, all the community members are alerted to take care of the forest. This situation mainly arises where there is a great scarcity of forest resources, and a fear of illicit harvesting of forest products by neighbouring communities or outsiders.

Competition or conflict between communities may also result in collective action. When one community closes its forest area for a certain period of time, the burden is transferred to neighbouring forests. A second community may then also take collective action to manage their forest, creating a chain reaction in the locality.

d Self-disciplined

In this system, there is no appointed watcher. The community agrees to abide by certain rules formed by themselves, for example, prohibiting the grazing of animals within all or part of the forest for a set period. The author observed this system in Jumla district, whilst Baral (1990) reports that the communities of Madan Pokhara and Baughapokharathok of Palpa district have self-disciplining systems for the protection local forest.

e Imposing of Sanctions and/or Punishment

In this case, socially accepted rules are enforced by confiscating tools and collected forest

products, and imposing fines. Sometimes the violator of the forest protection system may also be subjected to a boycott from the community.

Main Elements Lacking in User Group Forestry

The main features currently lacking in user group forestry may be listed as follows.

1   There is no provision within the law for user group associations at district, regional and central level. These associations could strengthen their policies and seek markets for their products.

2   There has been a failure to address the potential of agroforestry properly. Community forestry is only directed towards the development of long term forestry tree species, and has not included the provision of short-term benefits to the local community.

3   Within community forestry there has been a failure to address the problem of small scale soil erosion in the middle hills.

4   There has been little or no technological development of fodder tree species, although these are the preferred species amongst the hill people. Rangers and Assistant Rangers (who are the main field technicians) lack training and knowledge regarding how to propagate fodder tree species.

5   There has been no programme to develop rural based forestry industries.

Problems Encountered in User Group Forestry in Nepal

Problems encountered to date in implementing user group forestry include those listed below.

1   The lack of a clear concept of community forestry and its philosophy amongst most of the field staff and even many of the central staff.

2   The failure within forestry to apply knowledge from the social sciences in an organised and systematic manner to study local communities, their problems and constraints.

3   Training of field staff is outdated; the curricula of the Forestry Institute and Forestry Training Centres are very traditional and have not been brought into line with the new policies and strategies.

4   There are difficulties in changing the attitude of forestry professionals from traditional forestry to people-oriented forestry. Many professionals do not readily adopt the change of roles from policing to that of extensionist and advisor.

5   The role of the different organisational strata within the Department and Ministry is unclear. Job descriptions and responsibilities are vague.

6   There is a low sense of accountability amongst operation staff. There is no incentive for

staff to perform well, and no dis-incentive not to perform. Staff often have a low sense of responsibility to the general public.

7   Amongst many forestry professionals there is scepticism over the successful implementation of community forestry.

8   Bureaucratic complexities are a major problem in the successful implementation of community forestry.

     a   The financial regulations of government are not oriented to support development but rather to control activities.

     b   Budget release is invariably late. Release procedures are cumbersome and always cause delays, sometimes of several months. Field operations that are seasonally dependent are often delayed with disastrous consequences, particularly plantation programmes.

     c   Planning and budgeting procedures are too centralised and too rigid. There needs to be greater delegation to the districts so that locally feasible planning can replace centrally dictated targets.

Limitations of User Group Forestry

User group forestry may be limited in a number of ways, as follows.

1   It may not work in large scale forestry.

2   Complex forest management systems may not work in it.

3   It is subsistence oriented because it has to fulfil basic needs.

4   It is not commercially oriented, although surplus forest products may be sold to increase user group funds.

5   High quality work may not always be achieved because the involvement and participation of rural communities in forestry activities depends upon their motivation. Users will learn from their own experience.

CONCLUSIONS

Community forestry development began in Nepal in the late 1970s, based on the concept of people's participation through forest user committees. The initial approach did not work satisfactorily, mainly because the local forest committee was not vested with legal rights, nor was it actually involved in forestry matters. The programme was almost totally dependent on plantations hiring local people.

The Forest User Group/Committee is the focal point of current developments in community forestry policy. The Forestry User Group and Forest User Committee have legal status and are

viewed as the main mechanism through which all the community forestry activities will be conducted. They have a key role in both forest management and conservation, and are empowered to fulfil their basic needs through their own efforts. At the same time, the former policing role of forestry staff is changing to one of extensionist and adviser.

The real intention of the user group concept is to empower local people and strengthen grassroots institutions. The forest users are identified by local people themselves, and form their user committee from amongst their number. For the first time legal recognition is provided to indigenous forest management systems. The two crucial characteristics of the user group concept are that there is no limitation of time framework and no sharing of direct benefits to the government. Once management rights are handed over to the user group, they can manage and utilise the forest area for an unlimited period of time. The concept is highly flexible, and can work in different political, administrative, social and physiographic situations. However, it is not without problems. Many of these centre around the need for a thorough change in the attitude of staff, both at field level and in the central corridors of power. Associated with this, there is a need for institutional change at Departmental and Ministerial level to eliminate bureaucratic difficulties.

REFERENCES

Baral, J C, (1991), `Indigenous Forestry Activities in Achham District of Far Western Hills of Nepal', Community Forestry Development Project, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Fisher, R J, (1990), *Institutional Incompatibility in Community Forestry: the Case of Nepal*, Environment and Policy Institute, East-West Centre, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Palin, D, (1980), *Management of Development Forestry: a Comparative Study of Public Forestry Administration in the Asia-Pacific Region*. Report GCP/RAS 46 (SWE), FAO, Rome.

Tamang, D, (1990), *Indigenous Forest Management Systems in Nepal: a Review*, HMG Ministry of Agriculture, Winrock International, Kathmandu, Nepal.