Forest Policy and Environment Programme: Grey Literature

Building state-people relationships in forestry

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Joint forest management (JFM), community forestry, collaborative management are just a few of the terms that have come into use over the last 15 to 20 years to describe a new set of relationships between the state (usually through forest departments) and people living in and close to forests and woodlands. In this overview, the origins of these forms of forestry are discussed and the implications in terms of the benefits accruing to people, the institutional responses and the ecological changes. This overview focuses on the changes in India and Nepal between the 1980s and 1990s where much of the earliest experience was gained and which was influential in many other countries in other continents.

Social forestry in India, and the early forms of *panchayat* based plantation forestry in Nepal, were the precursors to both joint forest management and community forestry. They shared a common set of features as described in Table 1 but their later form is significantly different in two key aspects: 1) sharing of benefits - in the hills of Nepal, community forestry user groups were in control of 100% of the usufructs from the forests, whereas in India there is a varying percentage sharing of benefits between forest departments and forest users depending on the quality of the forest; and 2) the relationship between forest departments and people – in Nepal control and management was vested with the forest users with forest department staff as facilitators and technical advisers, whereas in India forest department staff continued to maintain control over management and decision-making through their ex-officio presence on JFM committees.

Joint forest management in India emerged during an interesting period of heightened civil protest against the role of forest departments and their apparent alienation of forest lands from traditional users. In the early 1980s an attempt to bring in a new Forest Bill failed amidst massive protest from diverse groups of environmentalists and social activists, who had long claimed that government actions in the forests were not leading to the improvement of local livelihoods and were more in support of the needs of industry and capital (see social forestry overview and Kulkarni, 1983). Meanwhile forest departments were beginning to experiment with different approaches to forest management on state forest land, critically in West Bengal and Haryana (SPWD, 1992). Evidence from West Bengal in particular demonstrated the effectiveness of forest department facilitation of local people to protect and manage existing degraded forest lands (Malhotra et al 1989). These sets of empirical evidence began to legitimise the formal role of local people in management and contributed to the raft of government orders in support of JFM (Poffenberger and Singh, 1992).

Despite all the contradictions inherent with the policy and legislative frameworks and internal resistance in forest departments, changes in practice continued to occur, with forest department staff and NGOs experimenting with more participatory approaches. This mirrored the wider debates of the time concerning participation of people in decision-making and management of resources (Chambers et al., 1989). The new era for joint

forest management dawned in 1988 with the National Forest Policy with its explicit recognition of the importance of participation of local people in the management and protection of forests. This was followed by Orissa and West Bengal states passing Government Orders to permit and operationalise JFM, providing the basis for a national JFM resolution passed in 1990.

Whilst practice was changing as a result of contest between different actors in India, namely forest departments and activist NGOs; in Nepal, the international donors were having a major influence on the form of forestry during the decade of the 1980s. In contrast to India, the forest department in Nepal was relatively underdeveloped, external assistance dominated the sector and innovatory practice. This was an extraordinary period of experimentation with different forms of community forestry and unprecedented donor activity, with each donor adopting a different district and implementing its own interpretation of what constituted best practice. On the whole this cauldron of ideas allowed the emergence of a form of community forestry highly suited to the particular needs of the hills environment. Just as India had struggled with the implementation of social forestry which was top-down, prescriptive and target-driven, so too Nepal found that the form of community forestry practised during much of the 1980s was not really developing good systems of local management.

Table 1 What is new about joint forest management/community forestry?

Social Forestry/ community forestry *panchayat*-focused	**Joint Forest Management/community forestry user group focused**
1. Objective: • satisfy local needs through fuelwood plantations to divert pressure from natural forest. Mechanism to be used - 'people's participation'	**1. Objective:** • meet local needs equitably for diverse range of forest products through natural forest regeneration under community protection • community empowerment to make decisions with Forest Department as joint partner (India) and as technical adviser (Nepal)
2. Who • private farmers (especially larger farmers with credit access) • 'communities' through the *panchayat* system, but without identifying particular social units	**2. Who:** • clearly defined and organised community user groups (formal/informal) supported by the Forest Department • focus on the most forest-dependent-women, tribals and landless
3. Where: • private lands • common property (revenue lands, village grazing, *panchayat* land, ill-defined tenure)	**3. Where:** • state forest lands (protected and reserved with clearly defined ownership)
4. Why: • farmers to produce supplies of fuelwood for commercial and subsistence purposes • to supply communities with fuelwood and fodder through community plantations	**4. Why**: • to extend authority to communities to control forest access and allow local management • to regenerate degraded under-productive forest land with regeneration potential (in India); to secure management of existing natural forests (Nepal) • to manage for biodiversity, ecological sustainability and environmental benefits
5. How: • setting budgets and targets • establishing nurseries and plantations • providing employment	**5. How:** • diagnosing social and ecological opportunities • defining rights and responsibilities with respect to products, benefits, protection duties • micro-planning process (negotiation of access controls, silvicultural operations to enhance

	natural regeneration) • legitimising authority of community management group
6. Benefit-sharing • uncertain and between *panchayats* and forest departments	**6. Benefit-sharing** • Nepal: 100% to community forestry user groups in the hills • India: variable percentage of usufructs to JFM groups

Source: Based on Arora and Khare, 1994

The government-supported community forestry programmes in the initial years of the 1980s were based on the assumption that the major cause of deforestation was illicit cutting and clearing of forests by 'short-sighted, uneducated and ignorant villagers' (Hausler, 1993). One of the solutions was seen to be teaching the villagers about the importance of forests and trees and motivating them to plant and protect forests (Campbell and Mahat, 1977). This led to a large programme of reforestation, with browse-resistant species, of *panchayat* and government lands, usually those identified as 'barren', again mirroring the debate about 'waste' lands in India (see social forestry overview). In the main, decisions were taken by a few of the local leaders on behalf of the local people, often with no consultation with those who were actually using the lands.

As project and government staff gained more experience there was a more general questioning of the underlying causes of deforestation. Several projects reappraised their interpretation of community forestry and began to look in detail at the communities and their existing forest practices. Unsurprisingly (although enlightened at the time) the studies found that farmers are not ignorant but are quite capable of managing their natural resources. Farmers have not been wantonly destroying forests and trees, but in many cases have preserved and planted trees on their private lands without any outside support and protected natural woodland (Campbell, 1978; Molnar, 1981; Messerschmidt, 1986; Pandey, 1982; Acharya, 1989; Campbell *et al.*, 1987; Byron and Ohlsson, 1989; Fisher, 1989, 1991; Fisher *et al.*, 1989; Malla *et al.*, 1989; Carter and Gilmour, 1989; Gilmour *et al.*, 1989; Hobley, 1996; King *et al.*, 1990; Gilmour and Fisher, 1991; Carter, 1992; Chhetri and Pandey, 1992; Karki *et al.*, 1994). This together with the increased acceptance of the existence of indigenous management systems (Molnar, 1981; Fisher et al, 1989) led to a major reorientation of practice in which projects (the institutionally dominant form of change in the forest sector) together with forest department staff, began to support local-level management of existing government-owned forests focused on the notion of forest users. The emphasis on user groups rather than *panchayat* or village development committees emerged from experience gained in this period and was formalised post-1990 in legislation and policy statements (Talbott and Khadka, 1994). This shift was to have profound effects in Nepal as it focused on the rights of individuals to use forest resources rather than simply the rights of an administratively bounded group to determine use.

As experience grew in India and Nepal, the focus of attention remained on the interface between local people and forest departments and the growing concerns about the capacity of forest department staff to respond to the demands of local people. Much work was directed at the so-called reorientation of staff and building their skills away from policing towards technical advisers and facilitators (Gronow and Shrestha, 1990; Saxena, 1994; Shields et al, 1999; Hobley and Shields, 2000). This was then coupled with growing concerns over the effects of establishing new institutions over-riding existing systems for management and often controlled by the elites; and issues of exclusion of secondary and temporal users such as pastoral groups and seasonal NTFP collectors (Poffenberger and Singh, 1992). On the success side there were many stories of ecological restoration and effective management of forest resources by local people (Malhotra and Poffenberger, 1989).

This was a time of intense change in both countries with strong pressures to decentralise governance and the withdrawal of the state from many areas of activity. Both JFM and community forestry provided the ideal vehicles for addressing these sets of issues, with the state being more willing to shed its costs for forest protection and management to its citizenries (Roychowdhury, 1995).

Although Nepal and India continued to follow separate paths for the devolution of forest management there were some common threads and problems that emerged and continue to be issues of concern. Perhaps the primary ones surround the growing inequalities around access to, and control over, forest resources and the ability to access markets; and the unclear role of the state, its tendency to overburden local people with over-regulation and the dangers of its reassertion of control over resources once they become valuable again. Indeed in India the debate raged on as to whether local people should ever be entrusted with joint management of high value resources. This was mirrored in Nepal where the government refused to countenance community management of high value forests in the Terai. Box 1 provides a summary of some of these major problem areas.

Box 1 The effects of devolution in India and Nepal

- **Limited transfer of authority with limited pro-poor effects** devolution appears to be transferring little or no authority to local forest users and is having, at best, no significant positive impact on the livelihoods of the poor
- **Lack of local accountability** local institutions set up under devolution have often been accountable to forest departments and other government offices, rather than to local people with the possibilities of genuine co-management being quite limited
- **Disadvantaging the marginalised** not proportionately benefited women, ethnic minorities(scheduled tribes) or the very poor (i.e. those groups who are generally politically disadvantaged who were often unaware of the implications of policy reform or unable to affect policy implementation to protect their interests)
- **Small income improvements** gains in income have been relatively small for most people and often overshadowed by negative trade-offs in resource access and control
- **Undermining local institutions** pre-existing local institutions have been undermined by their lack of legal standing and clear property rights relative to institutions that are newly created or sponsored by government
- **Trade taken over by elites** policies that expanded opportunities for locals to sell forest products directly, often led to poor and minority men and women losing their place in the trade to elites within and outside of the local community
- **Regulatory frameworks as major barriers** states impose excessively burdensome regulatory frameworks making it difficult (time and financial costs) for poor to enter markets – particular barriers include the use of complicated management planning processes
- **Increased state penetration – territorially and in terms of decision-making** state retained control over management decision-making (India); and had through JFM arrangements extended its control into local areas; building alliances with local elites to control decision-making and usurping the existing institutional structure to manage forests

Source: Hobley et al, 1988; Karki et al, 1994; Dahal, 1994; Chhetri and Pandey, 1994; Dhar et al, n.d.; Datta, 1995; SPWD, 1992; Sarin and SARTHI, 1994; Mukherjee, 1995; Sarin et al, 1998; Edmunds and Wollenberg, 2003

The experience of the 1980s and 1990s in India and Nepal reviewed here should continue to inform current debate, since many of the issues highlighted in Box 1 are still relevant and unresolved. In the rapidly changing political contexts in both India and Nepal there are some fundamental questions to be addressed about the nature of the relationships between poor people and natural resources, the increasing evidence of elite control and the insufficient means by which to protect the rights of poorer more marginalised groups.

What is clear from these two decades of practice is that the presumption that forest management and its associated problems were purely technical in nature and to be resolved through technical solutions was finally successfully challenged. No longer was it possible for forestry and foresters to hide behind assumptions of the feckless nature of peasants but rather they were forced to begin to engage with the social, political and economic realities of rural livelihoods and their interplay with forest resources.

Note: The references with an asterisk (*) are included in the ODI Forest Policy and Environment Programme's *Forestry Grey Literature Collection*: www.odifpeg.org.uk/publications/greyliterature

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