

Peasants' livelihoods and community forest: An example from Nepal

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I am writing this paper on the basis of my recent field study, a survey of the forest user groups in far-west Nepal. The main objective of the study is to analyse the impact of community forest on people's livelihood and to examine the factors affecting its development and sustainability. I have studied four user groups, two from hill district- Dadeldhura and two from Terai district –Kailali. The total sample size is 235 users. Structured and unstructured interview methods were used in data collection. Three of four studied user groups are managed by women. The study conducted in between February 2004 to July 2004.

Rural people in Nepal rely on forest for fuel wood, grass, wood and medicinal plants for their daily needs. Without having these valuable forest products, the livelihoods of the rural people would be unimaginable. They are only familiar with hearth of cooking that need fire wood; they are not familiar with other means of cooking. They don't know the packing milk obtained from market for their loved one and for them, rather they know the milk and milk product is possible only through livestock farming. For farming livestock they need grass, fodder and animal bedding daily, which they get from community forest. For the rural peasants the forest is a source of medicinal plants. They use medicinal plants to heal their diseases what they or their loved one suffer.

Livestock farming is an integral part of rural peasantry in Nepal. Generally, every rural household keep either cow or buffalo or both animals for milk, male buffalo and bull for plough their field and manure, goat for meat to fulfil the subsistence needs of the household and all these animals are also used for bio gas which is lately become popular means of cooking in Terai region of Nepal, but the bio-gas is not applicable in the hill and mountain region of Nepal. The survey data shows that the forest dependent had 44 buffalos, 138 cows, 88 male buffalos and oxen and 83 goats were found in four sampled group' household of forest user in study site. For feeding animals the peasants depend on grass, fodder and the agricultural wastage like straw, hey etc. Lately, the community forest is a good means of supplying grass and other needs to the rural peasants according to their operational plan.

In every community forest group there is a working committee, which is also called forest user committee. It is responsible for making a decision on the basis of operational plan to distribute the forest products to the group member of the community forest and to coordinate with district forest office, the government authority in the district level. The forest user committee decides when and how, and how much forest products are distributed to the group member. In Nepal, the master plan of forest 1988, the forest act 1993 and forest regulation 1995 are the legal tools for handing over the government owned forest to the rural people. In the community level the traditional user of the forest form their group and on the basis of their application to district forest office, can handed over the government owned forest to communities for sustainable management and utilization for the renewal fixed period. On the basis of approved operational plan, the forest user group can utilize the forest products from their community forest. These are the direct benefits from community forest.

Besides these direct benefits from community forest management system, rural peasants are also benefiting through the institutional development of community forest in Nepal. These institutional benefits are also known as indirect benefits. These institutional benefits are the development of livelihood assets (social, physical, human, and financial capital) at the community level.

The forest user group and their working committee are the institutions of the community forest management system in Nepal. The forest user group has its own constitution and operational plan to use and manage the local forest. The forest user group has built up the network from rural community level to urban central level Federation of Community Forest Users Nepal (FECOFUN). Through their network, they are in many places launching their own projects and already had links with donor agencies. There were 13,113 forest user group functioning over the country that comprises of 1.5 million households (Community Forest Division, Nepal, 2004). The 13,113 user's group means there were the same number of working committee and average size of working committee was 11 members. In each working committee there are secretary, treasure and other positions having some particular assignment. These either elected or nominated bodies of the working committee act as rural public representatives, which develop the leadership capabilities of the rural shy people and formation of rural social groups that is a live example of social assets through community forest.

Also, through the institutional development of forest user groups, a number of training, workshops and exposure visits have been conducted through governmental and non-governmental organisations. Rural peasants have been getting education and training both from government and non-government organizations. The organizations that are working for the forest sector has/had training program in their annual plan and according to their plan they organize training, seminar and study tour each year at the community level, where the target group are forest user groups members.

Here, I present an example from government offices that provide training to the forest user group. The official data of regional forest office, Kailali shows that; 17 district level government offices have launched training/study tours in 2003/04. 2365 female users and 4065 male user benefited from these training in the region. The data from Kailali and Dadeldhura district where I did my study shows that, 166 persons including 50 women and 116 men benefited from training and study tour along with some training allowances and similarly in Dadeldhura, 711 including 336 women and 375 men have got training with some allowances from different district based offices under ministry of forest and soil conservation.

There were several other non-government organisations such as CARE Nepal, also closely working with forest user groups and providing training to the users in the grass root level. The numbers of population benefited from these organisations was nearly same to that benefited from government offices. These were examples from one development region of the country, out of five such administrative development regions, and the other regions have/ had similar program each year. These were the example of human capital or assets formation through community forest which is considered as the livelihood assets.

Rural peasants also benefited from subsidised loans from community forest user group committee. The subsidised loan from forest working committee has been invested on various income generating activities such as goat farming, bee keeping, buying buffalo and cow for milk. Each community forest user group has its own fund earned from various activities such as levy from group member, selling of timber, fine and punishment, new membership fee etc.

The samaichi forest user group, which is one of my sampled forest user groups, had presented total Nrs 925,088 (US \$ 12672) estimated income for the fiscal year 2003/04. They had plan to expense the group fund in various community development activities including graveling roads, supporting schools and clubs, and constructing culverts. The group allocated Nrs 600, 000 to concrete the road which connects their settlements to the Dhangadi bazaar. Also the available data from the Department of Forest shows that the forest user group of Terai region spent 24 percent of their total income on community development. The total income from the various activities raised by Terai forest user was Nrs

75 million in 2002/03 (CF bulletin, 2004). The working committee has the right to decide for investing the fund. So, it is the example of financial capital or assets developed through community forest which directly assist the rural livelihood of the peasants.

These are the very important means of livelihood in the rural part. The rural people can decide about the investment of their collected fund to themselves.

Challenges for sustainable livelihoods of the rural peasants are:

1. Natural Resources based conflict management: There are many reasons, and sources of resources conflict and they generally emerge in every social group. Competition for use of and control over natural resources is increasing as a result of pressures from growing populations and the diverse interests of user groups. In the context of current trends of democratization, decentralization and devolution of authority, communities now have both a greater need and more opportunity to participate in natural resource management.
2. Lack of social skills at the grass root level to handle disputes and emerging conflicts in the forest user group. The district forest office neglects the disputes that emerge among the forest users because of the still existing traditional role of forester, which later grow up and upset the institutional development of the community forest.
3. Delay to hand over the Terai forest to the local communities. Terai forests have great potential of commercial timber production due to the endowment of high value timber forest. But, the government instead to hand over the Terai forest to the local communities as community forest, brought debatable "collaborative Forest Management System in 2003" which was already opposed by the forest user group and Federation of forest user of Nepal (FECOFU). If government hand over the Terai forest like it did the hill forest to the local communities, it would be crucial to the livelihood of the rural peasants.
4. Lack of transparency of the community forest fund and weak guidelines for fund mobilization.
5. Illiteracy is another problem in community forest users group in Nepal; most forest users in rural village are illiterate. Even the chairman, secretary and treasure were found illiterate in Suraksha women forest users group in Kailali. This was not the only case; there are many such women groups who are illiterate. The committee member including chairperson, secretary and treasure are the decision makers in the group. While doing group meeting they hired other persons to write the decisions on the minute.

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