

Challenges for service providers in community forestry governance: A case study of a community forest users group in Parbat, Nepal

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This study was carried out in Bhodkhore Community Forest Users Group in Parbat district, Nepal with the overall objective to develop a clearer understanding of the challenges for service providers while working towards improving the Community Forestry governance. The primary data were collected through personal interviews, group discussions, key informant interviews and direct observations using a series of questionnaires and check lists. Similarly, the secondary data were gathered from reports and records from Community Forestry User Group and service providers, and from relevant scientific literature. The data were analyzed using qualitative and quantitative tools. The results show that the existing challenges for service providers mainly include financial resource management, time management and inadequate technical support for forest management.

Key words: Community Forestry, Governance, Service Providers, Challenges

The introduction of Community Forestry (CF) programme in Nepal is a courageous, innovative and promising step towards participatory forest management and this has been well recognized throughout the world as a successful people centred programme (Gurung, 2007). The District Forest Office (DFO), which works under the Department of Forest (DoF), is the responsible authority to hand over national forests as community forests to local communities and to provide them necessary services for the better management of their forests. However, it alone is not able to fully provide the supports needed. Community Forestry User Groups (CFUGs) are not fully capable of managing their forest on their own. Thus, they have to depend on external organizations/institutions (Ghimire, 2005). Many of the Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) which grew rapidly after 1990 with the change in political conditions in the country (Edwards, 2001), are now involved in the promotion of CF programme (Timsina, 2003).

The support services provided by the government and other organizations have remained inadequate compared to the increasing demand of CFUGs. As a result, several second-generation issues have

emerged in CF all around the country; one such issue is good governance in CFUG (Bhatta and Gentle, 2004). These emerging issues have made providing adequate support services to CFUGs more challenging for the Service Providers (SPs). One of the major challenges in CF of Nepal is to ensure poor people's meaningful involvement in its process, their access, rights and benefits for livelihoods (Pokharel and Niraula, 2004). Acharya (2002) reports the following challenges that Nepal's CF is presently facing: redefining policy objectives from basic needs to poverty alleviation; mechanisms ensuring benefits and access in decision-making for disadvantaged groups; shift to active forest management; restructuring of DFO to deliver quality extension services; and reviewing CF process and practices to maintain people's participation.

The Fourth CF workshop identified the following major challenges concerning CF governance: ensuring inclusion at every level of CF governance; unclear role of all stakeholders in policy-making; one-way flow of information; and lack of appropriate mentality for promoting good governance (DoF, 2004). DFO, Parbat (2006) has mentioned the following major issues which led to the challenges for SPs to work in CFUGs: low representation of

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women and *Dalit* (the lower caste people which are also socially deprived) in community forest users group's committee (CFUGC) as well as passive participation of their representatives in decision-making; ineffective implementation of operation plan (OP) and constitution; difficulty to amend OP and CFUG's constitution on time; and passiveness of CFUG to submit audit reports on time. In this study, the challenges for service providers while working towards improving the situation of Community Forestry governance in Bhodkhore CFUG are identified. In addition, these challenges are also analyzed from the users' and service providers' perspectives.

Materials and methods

Study site

Bhodkhore CFUG of Parbat district was selected as the study site considering the following criteria: legal tenure, direct involvement of SPs, and CFUG's heterogeneity. In this district, CF is considered as a successful programme and 45% of the total forest has been handed over to 299 CFUGs by the mid-2006, and consequently 24,908 households have benefited from this programme. The SPs selected for this study are those which have been involved in Bhodkhore CFUG and conducting their activities including CF management and they are DFO, Federation of Community Forest Users, Nepal (FECOFUN), and National Educational and Social Development Organization (NESDO). A brief introduction of each of the SPs is presented in Table 1.

The Bhodkhore CF covers 57 ha of land, is basically a pole stage, predominantly natural Sal (*Shorea robusta*) forest. It was traditionally managed under the *talukdari* (a *talukdar* was responsible for it and for controlling forest management) system of land revenue collection. In 1957, the forest was nationalized and the *talukdar* was no longer able to resist the state's decision. As a result, the forest was accessible to all and used up without controls. Such unrestricted access degraded the forest to a greater extent. Only after the event of a large landslide in 1977, the villagers realized the importance of forest cover and agreed to protect this forest through indigenous forest management system. In April 1993, the forest was officially handed over to the CFUG with its constitution and OP. At present, the CFUG has an executive committee so-called CFUGC of 11 members including six women and five men who represent Brahmin (6 members), Newar (1 member), Chhetri (2 members) and *Dalit* (2 members). As mentioned in its constitution, the CFUGC is reformulated every two years and bears the responsibility to implement the OP and constitution.

Data collection and analysis

Primary data was collected through personal interviews, group discussions and direct observations. Secondary data was obtained from OP and constitution, minutes and other records of the CFUG and records from the SPs. Related documents and reports, and relevant scientific articles were also reviewed in detail. During the field study conducted in 2006, 49 out of 115 households were selected and

Table 1: Service Providers in Bhodkhore CFUG

Description	Service Providers		
	DFO	FECOFUN	NESDO
Location	District headquarter, Kushma		
Establishment	2042 B.S.	2054 B.S	2052 B.S
Staff	1-DFO, 1-AFO, 11-Rangers and 40-Forest Guards, no female staff	3-regular staff (2 male, 1 female) and 25-facilitators (10 male, 15 female)	1-Programme coordinator and 16-animators (10 male, 6 female)
Working area and CFUGs	Parbat district including 320 CFUGs	Parbat district, 265 CFUGs	Parbat district, 145 CFUGs
Major activities	CFUGs formation and forest handover; constitution and OP preparation/amendment; trainings/workshops/tours conduction; technical support for annual plan preparation; facilitating CFUG's fund investment; and coordination with other organizations to provide support for CFUG, etc.	Advocacy; conflict management; constitution and OP preparation/amendment ; good governance; social mobilization; leadership and skill development; and fund mobilization, etc.	Support to hold committee meetings on regular basis; facilitate committee meetings and GAs, facilitate participatory annual plan formulation; and facilitate CFUG's fund mobilization, record keeping and accounting; etc.

one person from each household was interviewed. Stratified random sampling was adopted to select respondents from the CFUG. The total respondents interviewed from SPs were 12 (6 were from DFO, 4 from FECOFUN and 2 from NESDO). Purposive sampling was adopted for selecting respondents from SPs. Separate sets of questionnaires including both closed and open-ended questions were used for respondents from SPs and CFUG.

Additional method of data collection included key informants interviews and separate discussions held with each homogeneous group (consisting of 7 to 10 people) in the CFUG and with the representative group from each SP. Checklists were used to track discussions on given issues. One of the authors (A. Paudel) also observed a general assembly (GA) and a CFUGC's meeting during the field study. Nine key informants from CFUG and SPs were selected and interviewed using the open-ended questions.

Pre-testing of tools and questionnaires was done in neighbouring CFUG to find out any ambiguities and inadequacies in the interview schedule. Furthermore, the data collected by different methods and from different sources was cross-checked through triangulation to improve the reliability of the results. Both qualitative and quantitative tools are used for data analysis. Information from group discussions and open-ended questions is transcribed and presented in tabular and textual forms where appropriate. Data from closed-ended questions was analysed using Microsoft Excel and the result is presented in the form of column diagrams.

Results

All the respondents from CFUG and SPs were asked about the challenges that SPs have been facing while working towards improving the situation of CF

governance. Out of the total 61 respondents (comprising 49 from users and 12 from service providers) about 70% of them expressed one or more challenges whereas rest of them either were unaware or could not see any challenges for SPs. Responses of similar concern are grouped under 9 different topics. These challenges and the total respondents' number for each of them are presented in Table 2.

Making CFUG and CFUGC more accountable

SPs had to organize some specific programmes to make illiterate users aware of their roles and responsibilities. Moreover, they had to motivate some users who were aware but had not performed well being skeptical of getting any benefit from CF. Some users were of the opinion that the committee has to be more responsible for forest development activities than the general members, and they would join such activities only if they were invited. Such a perception of the users created an uneven sense of ownership among themselves. SPs had difficulties in making these users aware of their equal rights in benefits from forest and their responsibility in forest management activities. In addition, monitoring and evaluation of executive committee's performance by the CFUG is still weak that has provided the committee an opportunity to hide the unwanted results of its activities. Therefore, these conditions have created a challenge for SPs in making CFUG and its committee more accountable.

Financial resource management

When SPs organized supportive programmes related to CF management, especially poor users could not attend all of them. The reason behind this is that poor users can't spend days in receiving the service at the expense of their work on which they depend for their daily diet and SPs also can't provide them both the free-of-service together with the allowance.

Table 2: Challenges for SPs while working towards improving the situation of CF governance

S.N.	Challenges for SPs	Total Respondents No.
1	Making CFUG and CFUGC more accountable	13
2	Financial resource management	36
3	Time management	34
4	Developing good working environment	17
5	Leadership development in target group	18
6	Convincing rich users for effective launching of poor-focused programmes	23
7	Providing adequate technical support in forest management	25
8	Working with women and <i>Dalit</i>	18
9	Making fund management more transparent	22
10	No challenges	9
11	I do not know	10

(Source: Field study 2006), (N=61)

Moreover, CFUG itself can't provide allowance to participants in such programmes as it does not have sufficient funds. Thus, the financial resource management has been a challenge for SPs.

Time management

Majority of the users are farmers who mainly work during the daytime. Other users (service holders) are busy during the daytime in weekdays. When SPs visited the CFUG during the day in weekdays, few users were available. Therefore, arranging time suitable to all users and SPs has been a difficult task for the SPs.

Developing good working environment in CFUG

SPs' activities were duplicated sometimes because of the lack of good coordination among them. Moreover, few members of the CFUG did not support some of their programmes, thereby creating difficulty in launching them. This worsened the working environment for SPs in the year 2061 B.S. and thus developing good working environment in CFUG was a challenge. LI-BIRD (2003) mentioned in its district level review report the lack of coordination, communication and linkage between and among the SPs in Parbat district.

Leadership development in target group

Usually, the elite group in the community have been dominating in decision-making (Paudel, 2003). In this CFUG too, elites had in the past captured the leadership positions in CFUGC and thus dominated in decision-making process. As a result, target group had to remain passive during the discussions in assemblies and meetings, and there was clearly a lack of two-way communication. Therefore, developing leadership skills for these socially deprived groups and bringing them in decision-making forum (CFUGC) was a challenge for SPs. Still today, elites are influential in decision-making process especially in emergency meetings.

Convincing rich users for effective launching of poor-focused programmes

To launch any programmes in CFUG, an approval is needed from GA. When SPs tried to launch poor-focused programmes, they found rich users pretending to be ignorant. This situation created difficulty for SPs and thus effective launching of such programmes in CFUG had been one of their

challenges. In addition, they also faced difficulties when facilitating to identify poor users through well being ranking.

Providing adequate technical support in forest management

CF programme is moving towards sustainable management from its conservation motive. For this, CFUG needs scientific knowledge and skills of forest management that can be provided by forest technicians only. SPs, with limited number of forestry professionals and broader working area, have difficulties in providing enough technical support to CFUG. Therefore, providing adequate technical support to forest management has been a challenge for SPs.

Working with women and Dalit

Because of discriminative social structure in terms of caste and gender, there is a lack of freedom for lower caste people compared to upper caste and they have higher chances of being dominated in decision-making (Paudel, 2003). In this CFUG, SPs had to take permission from men before talking with women from their family. In addition, women also did not feel easy to talk with people, especially males whom they are not accustomed to. Moreover, upper caste people looked down on SPs if they worked with *Dalit* people. The latter also felt uneasy to be hospitable for upper caste people and work together with them. In fact, these situations still persist but to a lesser degree. Thus, working with women and *Dalit* has been a challenge for SPs.

Making fund management more transparent

Most of the users were not interested to be informed about the CFUG's fund management which easily caused difficulty for SPs to create interest in them. In addition, record keeping system was not in a good shape. Thus, SPs had to facilitate CFUG to improve record keeping system. Moreover, they had to facilitate the discussions on the details of income and expenditure in some GAs. Therefore, making CFUG's fund management more transparent was a difficult task for SPs in the past years, which has been easier nowadays.

Response to each of these challenges from both SPs' and users' perspectives is graphically presented in Figure 3.1.

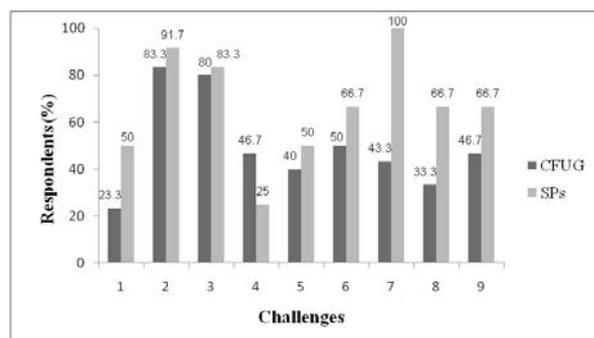


Fig. 3.1: Challenges for SPs in their own and users' perspectives (Source: Field study 2006), (N=42 of which CFUG=30 and SP=12)

Fig. 3.1 shows that most of the respondents (> 80 %) from both the CFUG and SPs comprehend financial resource and time management as challenges for SPs (challenges 2 and 3). SPs have found it challenging to provide adequate technical support in forest management (challenge 7), and nearly half of the respondents from CFUG affirm this difficulty. Two-thirds of the respondents perceived challenges for convincing rich users for effective launching of poor-focused programmes, working with women and *Dalit* and making fund management more transparent (challenges 6, 8 and 9, respectively). Half of them comprehend as challenges for making CFUG/C more accountable and developing leadership in target group (challenges 1 and 5, respectively). From users' perspectives, all others except 2 and 3 are reported by less than half of the respondents as challenges for SPs.

Discussion

Despite some achievements and contribution of CF, there are many unresolved issues and challenges in all areas of capital as well as governance (Timsina, 2002). Providing adequate technical support in forest management, financial resource and time management are still the major challenges for SPs in this CFUG. SPs have difficulties providing both the free service and the allowance for poor users who do not attend SPs' programmes at the expense of their daily work. With the increasing number of CFUGs in the district in recent years, the available financial resources of DFO has become insufficient to provide increasing and varied types of support as demanded by the CFUGs (Kanel and Kandel, 2004). FECOFUN has also limited financial resources of its own (Timsina, 2002). Moreover, CFUG itself can't provide allowance to participants in such programmes as they do not have sufficient fund. Thus, financial resource management is one of the major challenges for SPs to work in this CFUG.

Acharya (2002) reports that shift to active forest management from the existing passive management system have been one of the major challenges in Nepal's CF. Pokharel (2007) has reported that lack of technical knowledge and some policy implementation constraints have resulted in relatively 'passive' managements of forest. In this CFUG, SPs have found challenging to provide adequate technical support to CFUG for active management of forest. The limited capacity of the DoF for generating positions to support CFUGs has become a key constraint for the implementation and consolidation of CF (Springate-Baginski et al., 2003).

Managing the time suitable to all users and SPs has been a difficult task for the SPs. During weekdays, SPs cannot assemble most of the users (both farmers and service holders). Ghimire (2005) reports that most of the NGOs have the scarcity of regular staff to work in CF, thus users have to wait for a long time to get services from them. The poorest cannot afford to participate and take leadership responsibility because they are not compensated for their time (Pokharel and Niraula, 2004). Poor and lower caste users do not fully participate in community development activities because of their daily household, agricultural work and other livelihood requirements (Uprety, 2005). Kafle (2005) also highlighted the lack of proper management of time in meetings and assemblies in his study area. According to Paudel (2003), most of the poor and *Dalit* in CFUGs of Parbat district were not able to attend all meetings and GAs of their CFUGs and also not able to participate in programmes organized by external organizations mainly due to time constraint. This has not only lowered the overall leadership quality of the committees but also led to a degradation of forest condition. Thus, to ensure poor people's meaningful involvement in CF process is one of the major challenges in CF of Nepal (Pokharel and Niraula, 2004).

Convincing people to mobilize local resources for the benefit of the poor, *Dalit* and marginalized groups is difficult, and transfer of power from elites to the marginalized and poorer people is really a challenging task in CF (Maharjan et al., 2004). This could be due to that rich users are usually not the primary beneficiaries of poor-focused programmes and thus they show less interest in launching them. However, in this CFUG difficulties in convincing rich users for effective launching of poor-focused programmes and developing good working environment have been

reduced to a greater extent. Making CFUG/C more accountable and fund management more transparent, leadership development in target group, and working with women and *Dalit* still exist as challenges but to a lesser degree. Kanel (2004) supports this view stating that making CFUG and its committee more accountable and responsive to all users including poor, women and disadvantaged groups is one of the major challenges in CF.

Conclusion

Since their involvement, SPs have been facing several challenges while working towards improving the situation of CF governance. Some of them have been successfully overcome; some still exist but to a lesser extent and the some are still intensive. Developing good working environment in CFUG and convincing rich users for effective launching of poor-focused programmes have been successfully overcome now. Making CFUG and CFUGC more accountable; leadership development in target group; working with women and *Dalit*; and making fund management more transparent still exist as challenges but to a lesser degree. Financial resource management, time management and providing adequate technical support in forest management are still the major challenges for SPs.

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