

Research Briefs

Stakeholder collaboration, adaptive management and social learning: a perspective for community forestry in Nepal¹

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Introduction

This note highlights the findings of a recent research on Adaptive Collaborative Management (ACM) of forest in which an assessment of ACM situation in eight selected community forestry sites in Nepal is made. The objective of the research is to explore connection between ACM and outcomes in forest condition and livelihoods in different conditions.

The research focused on two inter-linked elements: collaboration and adaptive management. In this research, collaboration among various interests groups within FUGs and between FUGs and six different types of stakeholders is assessed in relation to outcomes on forest condition and livelihoods. Similarly, adaptive management of forest at FUG level is assessed in terms of four key interrelated components, namely: mental models, shared vision, collective learning and systems thinking.

The evidences indicate that at all levels, decision-makers have overlooked the complexity and dynamism of the management issues and contexts. They have not only limited appreciation of monitoring the plans as they are put into practice but also limited tendency to challenge their own assumptions in which the plans are based. Forest User Groups (FUGs) as well as their collaborating institutions mostly follow "trial and error" or "unmonitored experiences" approaches to action and learning. As a result, the quality of individual as well as collaborative forest management decisions and actions are seriously affected, leading to sub-optimal outcomes on both forest condition and livelihoods. Key findings on collaboration and adaptive management are summarized below.

Collaboration

Collaboration can be understood at two different levels: internal and external. The former exists among various interest groups within community, also known as collective action. The study questions the conventional wisdom that a community is a homogeneous entity, and reveals that there exist several groups of people differentiated by class, caste, gender, physical access, power

¹ This note is based on the extended version of the research report prepared by ForestAction in collaboration with CIFOR and Nepal Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, under ADB funded CIFOR's ACM project. Anyone interested in the detailed report may write to ForestAction at forestaction@wlink.com.np

and social positions, who have inherently different interests and motives in forest management. This implies a need for a more disaggregated analysis and promotion of collaboration within community in forest management.

The second type of collaboration is between FUGs and outside stakeholders at different levels, who have different interests and potential to influence the policy, institutional and technical processes of forest management. The institutional landscape of community forestry has expanded from the initial resource-people relations to people-resource-multiple-stakeholders relationships. The research analyzes external collaboration between FUGs and other stakeholders; namely: government forestry organizations, local bodies, civil society, bilateral projects, and private sector institutions.

Analysis of collaboration in terms of stakeholder's relationships within and outside FUGs indicates that there are different sets of conditions in which various collaborative processes emerge and operate to deal with specific issues for negotiated desirable outcomes. The collaborative process is not linear and straightforward but involves a range of processes including conflicts, negotiations, resistance and debate. For example, there exist a number of conflicts within FUGs related to identification of FUG membership, distribution and sale of forest products, selection of FUG committee, fund mobilization, and delineation of forest boundary. Similarly, there are also situations in which specific conflicts and cooperation occur between FUG and DFO and other external stakeholders on forest management, income generation, and community development.

The overall outcome of collaboration has been found positive, more on livelihoods than on forests. Analysis of the eight case studies indicated that collaboration improves outcomes on forests if a) the collaborating agencies specifically deal with forest management issues as an agenda of collaboration, b) resource condition is better, c) where community response to forest is relatively over-exploitative, d) FUG has an explicit emphasis on forest management either for use or minimizing risks such as fire and flood. However, there are some evidences that even in a high level of collaboration there is low level of outcomes on resource condition, especially in areas where there was a poor natural resource conditions at the time of forest hand over.

Adaptive management

In its simplest terms adaptive management can be understood as a process of enhancing learning for improved management outcomes, by incorporating explicit learning plan (or monitoring plan) with management action plan. Key research findings on the status and outcomes of adaptive management are highlighted below.

"It seems Government is simply testing with us - it may withdraw authority of forest management any time" - says a chairman of a forest user group in Makawanpur district, central Nepal. Chairman of another FUG in Palpa district says, "Recent government circulars have created doubts in the intention of Government". A women leader in still another FUG adds "Women participation is emphasized only in labor contributions, but not in decision making". The research explored dozens of such '**mental models**' of forest user groups as well as their collaborators. While they look simple, they have powerful influence on how men, women of various wealth classes and castes respond to forest management problems, particularly in terms of deciding the extent of their investment in institutional processes and forest management.

Such deeply ingrained assumptions and images of local community members about the social and natural systems are one of the reasons behind many problems, which we see on the surface: passive forest management, inequitable distribution of forest products, and others. Such internal beliefs shape, and are shaped by, individual and collective visions, extent and processes of

collective learning, and the extent of systems thinking to take into account the wider consequences of their actions both on social and natural systems.

Visions of stakeholders within the community were found to be very diverse. Men and women of various wealth groups and castes differ in terms of focus and approach of forest management. Women do have larger social goals than usually projected and strive to achieve increased participation in decision-making, improved flow of forest products, preservation of forests, income generation, and community development. Village based youth clubs tend to emphasize more on community development activities, than sustainable forest management. Small-scale forest entrepreneurs want to secure raw materials and financial capital for their enterprises. Informal savings groups emphasize building up of financial capitals. Dalit households strive for livelihood security, enhanced access to forest products, and access to forestlands. NTFP collection groups are more concerned with collecting and selling NTFP for income and employment than anything else. Blacksmith's major concern is continuous access to charcoal. Political activists struggle for FUG leadership positions, and some times undue gains. Households who use fuelwood and who use alternative sources of energy also have different strategies and priorities. Business persons are more interested in greenery and social security, whereas farmers and livestock holders look for immediate tangible benefits from forests. This diversity of interests has created challenges to undertake collective action, both in terms of learning and the politics of negotiation.

Despite a diversity of goals and interests in forest management, analysis of FUG decision-making processes indicated that the FUG level directions are set largely by visions of dominant people and those of less powerful groups such as women, disadvantaged and Dalits are mostly subsumed in the elite-led decisions. In addition, learning processes within the FUG are led by the same groups of dominant people. Further, the study showed that deliberate **collective learning** within the FUGs as well as between FUGs and their collaborators is limited due to a) limited valuing of failures, b) dominance of few elites in decisions and actions, c) limited monitoring practices connected to the learning process.

The staff of Department of Forest (DOF), which is the main service provider to date in addition to being the policy making and implementing body, has limited incentives, attitudes and time to learn together with FUGs. In some cases, there are clear indications of contradictions between the knowledge systems of local communities and formally trained forest officials, although there are cases of innovative staff increasingly committed to engage in a process of collective learning with forest users.

In a few innovative cases, FUGs have conducted experiments in resource management and institutional aspects, which are an evidence of deliberate collective learning. Learning from observation of successes in nearby areas is also common among FUGs. Reflections at individual (mainly leaders), sub-group, committee meetings, and assemblies create new learnings, but there are great opportunities to add value. In some schemes, users are aware to ensure intergenerational sharing of knowledge. FUG level learning has been instrumental even in changing the composition of forests, whereas the external input has contributed in most cases only to the development of hypothesis or learning question for the FUGs.

The process of community forest management is inextricably linked with social, ecological, economic, cultural, political realities of (lie site, and one of the issues has been that whether and how FUGs and their collaborators are able to address these diverse concerns, and possible effects, into forest management decisions and actions. **Systems thinking**, which means looking beyond the immediate in temporal, spatial and relational dimensions, is another element of adaptive management. Forest users were found to look for causes and implications well beyond the immediate problem domain in areas where there is a perceived threat from natural or human

induced sources. Examples of more systemic thinking of their management include: concern over the possibility of epidemics in mono crop and emphasis on multi-species forest, wild animals considered as a part of the system despite some harmful effects on human. Similarly, threat of fire to houses via forest has been the key stimulus of collective action in forests, and users are gradually changing the forest crop composition from pine to broad-leaved forest and fodder trees. In some instances, users are following a more holistic approach of natural resource management including creation of check dams and retention of economically inferior species as a measure of flood control. In order to enhance the outcomes of forest management in a sustainable and efficient way, system considerations need to be better integrated in the FUG forest management and annual operational plans.

An analysis in the study showed that adaptive management at FUG level has clear and consistent linkage with outcomes on both livelihoods and forests, though in varying degrees under different conditions. Within those FUGs in which men and women members of different social strata have actively participated in decisions and actions, with clear and conducive mental models, negotiated visions, deliberate learning and a systemic view of the social and natural system, it is more likely that they achieve goals of sustainable livelihoods, IfDFOs and other supporting stakeholders also treat uncertainties as the necessary conditions and therefore are prepared to follow consciously designed learning processes, they are likely to contribute better to community forestry, both in terms of service delivery, and meso and macro level policy development.

Five categories of **conditions** have been identified to influence the ACM process; namely policy and governance (mainly in terms of how they are interpreted and enforced), stakeholder diversity and social system, institutions, ecological system, and market and economic conditions. While these are relatively stable, it is argued that an effective ACM process can influence several conditions, mainly institutional and policy, within which ACM operates. Specific condition variables that were found to be supportive of ACM include: good community leadership, a perception of resource scarcity, presence of multiplicity of external stakeholders, ownership perception of users on forest, perception of natural threats, accessibility and exposure, community homogeneity, and supportive interpretation and implementation of forest policies by DFOs.

Conclusion and directions for future

The research concludes that, in order to enhance the livelihoods impact of forest management in a sustainable way, more conscious way of collaboration, adaptive management and social learning need to be integrated with stakeholder actions at all levels, from local communities to national policy makers. ACM could be an innovative approach to addressing the second-generation issues of community forestry, including equitable livelihoods, and this indicates a potential for key ACM processes to be replicated, widely advocated and strengthened. From social learning perspective, specific ways of moving forward to add value in community forestry are suggested in the table below.

Current community forestry situation and potential added value of ACM

Current situation	Improvement through ACM perspective
Emphasis on collective action within FUG Interaction among resource, people and government Retrospective learning, learning by surprise Monitoring for control FUG level management at operational choice level Over emphasis on target & process Action plan alone Punishes failure Policies and plans are blue print Sectoral thinking with reductionist views Participatory rural appraisal Scientific vs. participatory Horizontal linkages in the 'management plane' Upward accountability	Collective as well as collaborative action Interaction among resource, people, government, civil society and markets Anticipatory, conscious, and intentional learning Monitoring for control as well as learning, through integrating reflection into action Management at both operational as well as constitutional (direction setting) levels Emphasis on conditions, process and outcomes Action as well as monitoring plan Values failure Policies and plans are experimental & adaptive Scientific and participatory Participatory action research Scientific and participatory Horizontal and vertical linkages Two way accountability horizontally & vertically

