



Have the Issues in Community Forestry Changed Over the Past Decade?

A Case Study from Mid-hills of Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal is widely recognized as a pioneer in community forestry, with its remarkable contributions to improving forest cover, enhancing biodiversity, empowering local communities, and supporting rural livelihoods. Despite these contributions, the community forests (CF) of Nepal have continuously faced issues and challenges since their inception, among which conflict remains a persistent issue. This study examines the issues of conflict in CF over time by comparing the conflict situation in 2013 and 2024 in Saunepani Bareli CF, Kaski district. The study employed a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII) for primary data collection, supplemented by a review of published journal articles and reports, for secondary data collection. The findings revealed that the major issues remain similar to those identified a decade ago, but with different dimensions. There are notable changes in leadership, benefit sharing, and governance. Users show limited interest in the leadership position, have reduced dependency on the forest, and compromised governance practices. Moreover, a decline in interest of users in CF activities has resulted in passive forest management. In this regard, the study recommends initiating forest-based income and employment-generating initiatives to revitalize users towards community forestry activities.

Keywords: Benefit sharing, community forest, conflict, governance, mid-hills

INTRODUCTION

The forest is an integral part of Nepalese livelihood. Subsistence farming practices in Nepal have made Nepalese people more dependent on the forest to meet their daily needs, especially for fodder, timber, forage, and firewood. This dependency has been prevalent for generations on different forest regimes in Nepal.

A community forest (CF) is any part of the national forest with entitlement to develop, conserve, use, and manage the forest and to sell and distribute the forest products by fixing their price independently (Baral, 2018). Community forest user groups (CFUGs) are self-formed local institutions comprising all the households of hamlets, which are typically the traditional users of a particular forest patch. People residing near the forest, willing to manage and conserve that forest, and whose livelihood depends on it, prepare an operational plan and Constitution, and apply to the Division Forest Office (DFO) for approval (Binod, 2016). On suitability, the DFO provides a certificate of handover of the forest to the user group. During the preparation of the Constitution and the Operation plan, the DFO may provide technical support to the user group (GoN, 2019). Based on necessity, the users can modify the Operational plan in consultation with DFO and local government. Approximately 30% of the national forest of Nepal has been handed over to around 23000 CFUGs involving 2,461,549 households (Bista et al., 2023).

Nepal's community forest is praised globally for its decentralized forest management and restoration of degraded land. It provides basic forest products to users, enhances their leadership quality through the democratic decision-making process, and improves household livelihoods (Dhungana et al., 2024). Its contribution to the socioeconomic aspect of forest-dependent communities is immense, from empowering women, poor and disadvantaged groups, generating income and employment, to improving rural livelihoods (Thani & Kandal 2021). However, CF has continued to face some issues and challenges since its inception, among them, conflict has remained persistent and often been overlooked.

Basically, conflict exists between the CF executive committee and users, between CFUGs, and within users (Acharya & Yasmi, 2008). Some issues of conflict in CFUGs include representation in leadership positions, fund mobilization, benefit sharing, Institutional development, forest boundaries, inclusion, and exclusion (Upadhyay, 2006). Conflict between users and the executive committee arises when executive members and elites capture the decision-making and benefit-sharing, fund mobilization process. The differences in the socioeconomic composition of users may lead to differences in interest. Similarly, conflict

between CFUGs arises over unclear boundaries and encroachment of the forest. In resourceful CFUGs, conflict frequently arises for fund mobilization and management. This occurs due to dissatisfaction with fund prioritization, lack of transparency, and sometimes a different interpretation of provisions mentioned in the CF Operational plan and Constitution.

Since the handover, there have been transformational changes in the social, economic, cultural, and environmental context of the CFUG (Cdmaeon et al., 2022). The changes in the mindset of users, their living practices, and economic activities, along with increased livelihood options, have led to a reduction in agricultural activities and, consequently, decreased dependency on forest products such as leaf litter, grasses, and firewood (Shahi, 2022). As a result, the interface between people and the forest has shifted, and so have the nature and sources of conflict. The low income of the CFUG, lack of personal and professional motivation programs such as trainings, seminars, workshops, exposure visits, etc., has turned users reluctant towards the proper management and utilization of the forest. Consequently, the Operational plan includes general activities related to forest management but lacks income and employment-oriented activities as provisioned in the CF guideline. Though users are passive and reluctant to manage the forest, interestingly, they prefer to be members and participate only in mandatory activities, especially in the CFUGs of the hilly region of Nepal. In contrast, in most of the terai's CFs, users actively participate in CFUGs' activities. These CFs have dominant high-value timber species such as Sal (*Shorea robusta*), Saaj (*Terminalia tomentosa*), providing significant income to the CF (Chhetry et. al., 2005) along with the users via selling timber, firewood, and through forest-based enterprises. It has also been seen that the CFUGs of hills have a submissive type of participation. If an option is given on whether to participate or pay a penalty without losing the membership for not participating, they prefer the later option. This shift in the interest of users sometimes gives rise to minor disputes among the members of CFUG, within the executive committee, and occasionally with migrants as well. Issues are a basic level of disagreement that turns into disputes, and unresolved disputes in the long run turn into conflicts (Warner, 2000). Though these types of issues in the CF are not taken seriously, they can sometimes be hard to resolve and may remain persistent. In this scenario, this study tries to investigate the nature of conflicts and issues in CF over time.

METHOD OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

This study was conducted in Saunepani Bareli CF of Pokhara Metropolitan City, ward number 31. The CF has an area of 41.59 hectares with 328 households and was handed over in 2048

B.S. The CF lies at 820 meters above sea level. The forest is a natural mixed type with Sal (*Shorea robusta*), Katus (*Castanopsis indica*), and Chilaune (*Schima wallichii*) as dominant species while the other species include Jamun (*Syzygium cumini*), Tuni (*Toona ciliata*), Mauwa (*Madhuca longifolia*), Simal (*Bombax ceiba*), Gurjo (*Tinospora cordifolia*), Aiselu (*Rubus ellipticus*) etc. It is surrounded by Begnash lake in the East, Maudi lake in the West, Raule ko awadi, Ban Pokhari, Bauthar in North and Katunjemul and Boskikuna awadi with Bagnas lake in the South (SPBCFUG, 2024).

Table 1

Aspects of CF

S.No.	Aspects	Status of forest	
		2013	2024
1.	Forest area (hectares)	40.49	41.49
2.	Average crown cover (percentage)	65	70
3.	Average growing stock (cubic meters per hectare)	122.11	157.38
4.	Timber AAH (cubic feet)	468.93	1076.96

(Source: SPBCFUG, 2024 and SPBCFUG, 2013)

This is a follow-up study of the similar research carried out in the same CF by applying similar techniques in 2013. There were 307 households in 2013, and 328 households in 2024 (Figure 2). There is a slight increase in the number of households due to property partition (*aamshabanda*) and the addition of new users in the CFUG.

The study has employed a focused group discussion (FGD), and Key Informant Interview (KII) for the primary data collection, while the published research articles, information from DFO, CFUG, and research reports were used for the secondary data collection. Three FGDs with executive committee members, women, and men were carried out separately. Similarly, eight KII were done with school teachers, knowledgeable people, youths, and DFO staffs. Some of the KII were also conducted via phone/mobile due to the time constraints of the key informants. The data thus obtained were analyzed by using computer software like SPSS, GIS, MS-Word, MS-Excel, and presented in tables, bar diagrams, and pie charts.

Figure 1

Map of Nepal showing the study area in Kaski district

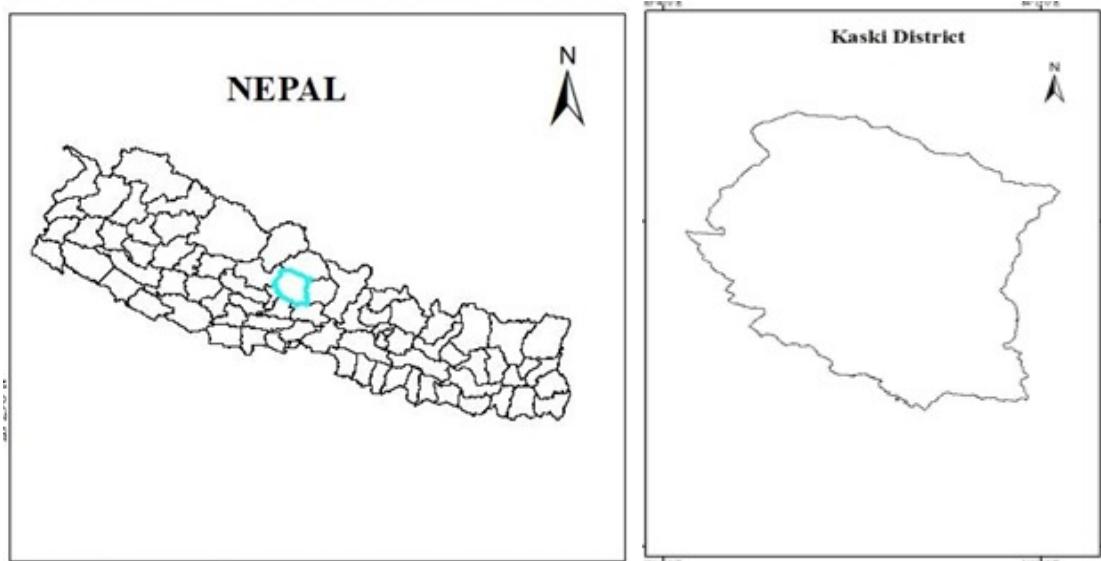
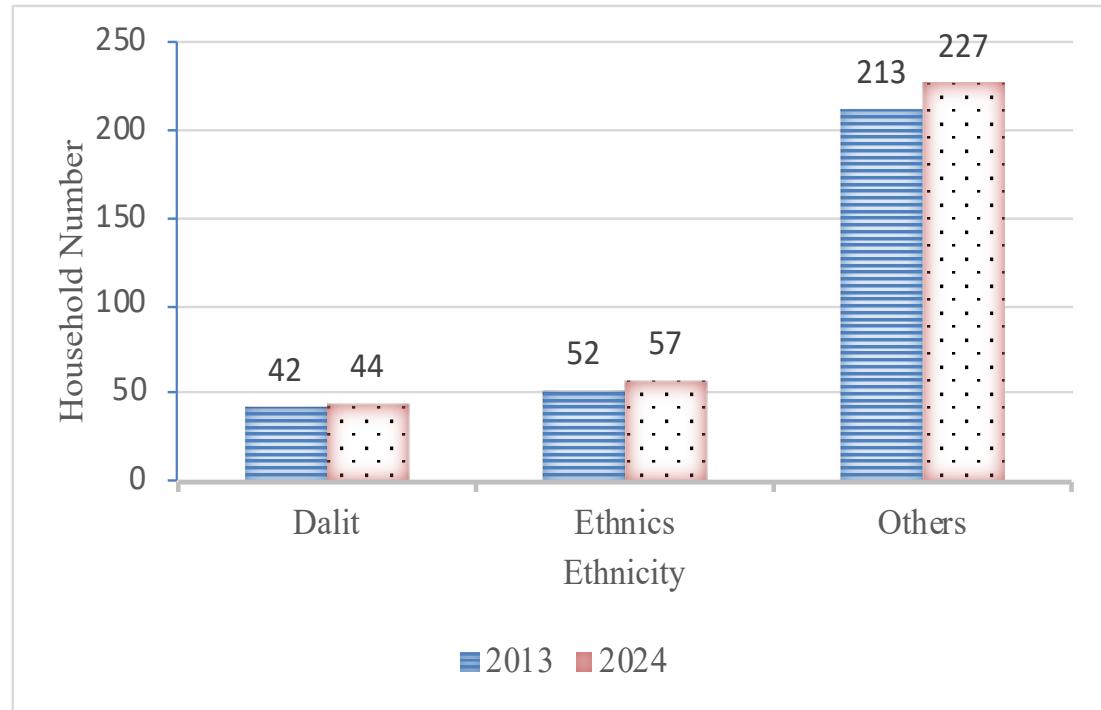


Figure 2

Ethnicity of the Saunepani Bareli CFUG



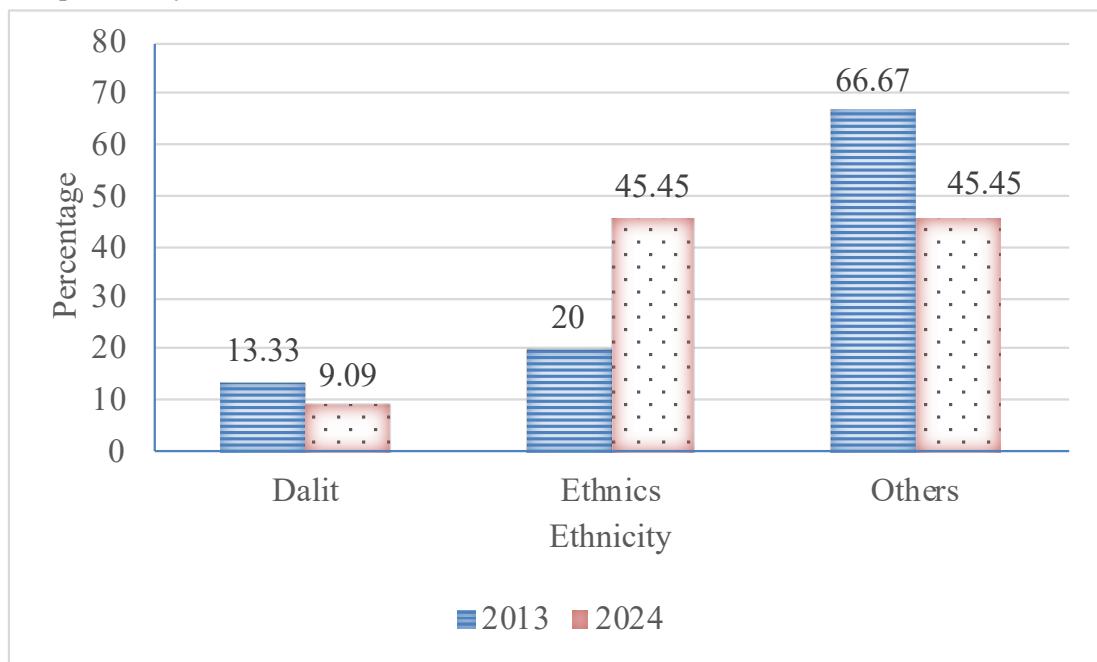
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Compromised Governance

Governance is one of the governing factors for the proper functioning of any institution. Participation, transparency, responsiveness, rule of law, effectiveness, and accountability are the crucial components for good governance for any institution. A decade ago, there were issues in participation, transparency, elite capture in decision-making of benefit sharing, and fund prioritization and management, leadership position, as reported by Uprety (2006) and Lamichhane (2012). However, at present, from a bird's-eye view, governance seems good; however, closer investigation revealed compromised governance. The CFUGs conduct regular meetings and general assemblies, have an inclusive executive committee (Figure 3), and perform yearly financial audits. These are the mandatory provisions that CF tends to follow. However, inadequate information flow has led to disproportionate participation of users in the CF meetings and other activities. Users lack clear information and have less interest in their CF, indicating that there is insufficient information flow, which points towards compromised governance. These factors lead to weak governance that escalates conflict (Nepali, 2010).

Figure 3

Composition of an executive committee



Changing Leadership Context

Paudel et al. (2022) have stated that CFs of Nepal are acting as a vehicle to produce leaders and enhance leadership qualities in users. Conflict for vital positions was regarded as one of the major issues in Nepal's CFs a decade ago (Uperty, 2006). Subsistence agriculture, forest-dependent livelihoods, less monetized economy were the key factors motivating users towards forest conservation, management, and willingness to hold the power (Paudel, 2022). However, the scenario has been changed in the present context. A monetized and remittance-based economy has changed the perception and dependency of users towards CF. People are no longer interested in subsistence farming. They are only attracted to the opportunities that provide income. As indicated by research, CFs of the mid-hills region of Nepal have very low income, which makes users reluctant to be in a leadership position (Bhusal et al., 2025). The executive committee of some of the CFs of the mid-hills has repeated its tenure due to the limited interest of users in the committee. Therefore, the decreased share of forests' contribution to the household economy and livelihoods has weakened community forest members' interests in participating in forest management.

Encroachment

Saunepani Bareli CFUG is composed of traditional, local, and migrant users. The traditional users, particularly *Jalari* community, have been residing near the forest area for generations. Their daily livelihood activities are heavily dependent on the forest, especially for fodder, firewood, and timber. The forest area has been encroached on for more than a decade. The area of the CF increased to 41.49 hectares (2024) from 40.49 hectares (2013) (Table 1). This increase in the CF area indicates the settlement of some of the encroached area. However, there are still some encroachment issues that need to be addressed. The study carried out by Lamichhane (2012) also shows a similar issue in the study area. The study carried out in Bardiya by Panthi (2020) has also indicated the CF area encroached by squatters for generations. This is one of the persistent issues in the CFs of Nepal.

Entry Fee for the New Users

This CF is located in Pokhara-31, which is considered as one of the fastest-growing urban areas of Pokhara Metropolitan City. People from the nearby village municipalities, especially Modi and Rupa, migrate to this area. The migrant population is showing interest in getting entry in CF, but not all migrants can afford the entry fee. They have requested the executive committee to reduce the entry fee; however, the users are not positive about it. Kanel & Kandel

(2004) have also stated that new users tend to pay a high amount of money to get access and use rights like those of traditional users, which may give rise to some minor disputes in CFUG.

Benefit Sharing

Users of saunepani Bareli CF are heterogeneous with respect to ethnicity, culture, economic class, profession, etc. (Figure 2). This heterogeneity leads to diverse interests in access and use of forest resources, giving rise to disputes in the CFs (Ojha et al., 2006). The study area had a similar scenario 12 years ago. Conflict due to an inequitable forest product distribution system, good quality of timber and firewood captured by elites, preferential participation in trainings and other incentive-based programs by members closely associated with the executive committee, were the conflicts related to benefit sharing (Lamichhane, 2012). However, the situation is different in the study area now. FGD and KII have indicated a reduced dependency of users on the CF. Mechanized agriculture, particularly the use of small portable tractors, has largely replaced oxen for ploughing fields, leading to a decline in the number of livestock and the need for grass/fodder. Use of LPG gas for cooking, along with income from remittance, trade, and business, has gradually replaced traditional subsistence farming, thereby weakening a decreased forest-farm linkage. Similarly, the use of metal-based construction materials such as iron rods, cement, aluminum, pre-fabricated, and plastic fibers has replaced timber for construction purposes, further minimizing users' dependency on the forest (Paudel et al., 2022). Consequently, this leads to less concern among users regarding the use of forest products and other benefit-sharing mechanisms in the CF (Shahi et al., 2022).

What Motivates Users in Community Forests?

A decade ago, the key drivers of conflict in CFUGs included issues related to benefit sharing, participation, forest boundary, caste and gender related leadership, and traditional use rights (Uperty, 2006), at a time when users were highly dependent on the forest. However, at present, dependency has decreased significantly, especially in mid-hilly urban areas such as Pokhara. Even though the Saunepani Bareli CFUG is dominated by the poor households (7 well-off, 112 medium, and 209 poor households) (SPBCFUG, 2024), users have less dependency and interest in the forest. In such a ground reality, we could not imagine the situation of other CFUGs that have dominant well-off households. Therefore, there is an immediate need to explore and start the income and employment-generating activities in the CFs so that the users get motivated towards the forest.

The current trend of migration, changing demography, shift in people-forest relationship, increasing market dynamics, and opportunities have collectively reshaped the CFUG in the way it operates (Paudel, 2022). This has resulted in a change in the people's perception and expectation of CFs. At present, users are more inclined towards ecosystem services, eco-tourism, and similar other services provided by the forest. Timber sale and value addition in non-timber forest products could be an attraction for users in CF. Forest Act 2019 and Forest Regulation 2022 have given the right to harvest and sell surplus timber from the CF. According to DFRS (2015), the growing stock estimation for Middle Mountains is 124.26 m³/ha, while that of Saunepani Bareli CF is 157m³/ha (Table 1). Commercialization of timber could be one of the sources of income for CFUG, including users.

Community forests produce forest products and services that are essential for the forest ecosystem and landscape, meeting people's subsistence needs. It further provides raw material for forest enterprise, thereby creating jobs and income at the local level, and thus contributing to improved livelihoods of users (FRTC, 2020). Medicinal and aromatic plants, and other non-timber forest products, fruits, fodder, and wild food-based agroforestry practices can be carried out in CF (MoFE, 2024). Likewise, ecotourism could be another option to generate income in community forests like Saunepani Bareli, which is in the proximity of the tourist area like Bagnas lake, with the mesmerizing view of the Annapurna range. With an income and employment-based mindset, CFUG can upgrade the well-being ranking of its users to at least one higher category.

CONCLUSION

The decreased dependency of users in the CF has led to reduced interest in CF activities, thereby reducing disputes in the CF. Community Forest needs to be transformed in a way to regain users' attraction and motivation by increasing the income opportunities from the CF. For this purpose, the collective action is needed from CFUG, DFO, the local government, and other related stakeholders.

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