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# THE RESTORATION DIAGNOSTIC

*Case Example: Nepal Community Forestry*

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# CASE EXAMPLE: NEPAL COMMUNITY FORESTRY

## SUMMARY

Nepal is an example of forest landscape restoration achieved by sustained support for community forestry over several decades. Community forestry alone occupies nearly 23 percent of total national forest area (over 1.2 million hectares), reaching over 1.6 million households throughout the country (MSFC 2012a).

As early as 1975, forest loss was recognized as accelerating soil erosion, contributing to landslides, and increasing runoff and sediment transfer onto the plains (Pandit and Bevilacqua 2011). Population growth, agricultural expansion, and demand for wood products and fuelwood caused large-scale deforestation of Nepal's forests, a process that accelerated into the 1980s (LFP 2013).

For a variety of reasons—political, socioeconomic, and administrative—the rate of forest depletion was high up to the 1990s. Between 1978 and 1994, Nepal saw forest area decrease by 1.7 percent per annum (FAO 2010). In the most recent National Forest Inventory carried out in the early 1990s (FAO 2007), forests and shrubs covered approximately 5.83 million hectares—about 40 percent of the nation's land area. According to satellite data, despite a high population growth rate of 2.3 percent annually from 1990 to 2010, forest area has been restored at a rate of about 2 percent per year (Niraula et al. 2013).

A new approach—community forestry—emerged in Nepal in the late 1970s. The aim of this approach was to motivate and engage the rural population in protecting, utilizing, rehabilitating, and managing forests (Taylor 1993). Initiated by the government in the 1970s with help from donors,<sup>1</sup> Nepal's community forestry program now manages around a quarter of Nepal's forest resources. The Forest Act 1993 allowed for the formation of autonomous groups, resulting ultimately in the formation of some 18,000 community forest user groups (CFUGs), among others (Rutt and Lund 2014). The program bestows rights of access, use, exclusion, and management of national forestland to local user groups (Thoms 2008).



**TIME PERIOD:** 1975 to present

**AREA RESTORED:** over 1.2 million hectares

**TYPE OF RESTORATION:** Active restoration

Nepal's experience demonstrates the relevance of community forestry as a proven approach for forest landscape restoration in some contexts, with a number of notable environmental, economic, and social benefits, namely:

- **ENVIRONMENTAL:** Forests managed by communities have experienced fewer forest fires and less illegal felling. The number of trees<sup>2</sup> increased from 1,648 per hectare in 1994 to 2,126 per hectare in 2008—a 29 percent increase—across Swiss-funded sites (SADC 2009). Increased availability of grass and fodder from community forests has encouraged the practice of stall



NEPAL COMMUNITY FORESTRY BEFORE



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feeding. This practice has reduced grazing pressure and saved cattle herding time. In addition, the number of freshwater springs and volume of water has increased. Soil nutrition and moisture conditions in agricultural land during the dry season have also improved (Pokharel et al. 2005).

- **ECONOMIC:** The revenue generated by community forest groups<sup>3</sup> is 747 million Nepali rupees (more than US \$12.4 million) per year, which is greater than the total budget of the Department of Forests, and greater than the revenue the department generates from the rest of Nepal's forestlands (SADC 2009).
- **SOCIAL:** CFUGs play an important role in peace building. During the Nepalese Civil War (1996–2006), forest user groups were among the only local institutions that continued to operate (Karna et al. 2010). Community forestry in Nepal supports inclusive democracy by aiming for equal representation of women and men in groups, and reserves 33 percent of leadership positions for women. CFUGs also provide land to poor families and scholarships for children from disadvantaged families. Moreover, the improvements in forest conditions have had a significant impact on the time management of rural women and girls who now require less time to collect firewood, fodder, and other resources because of greater availability of resources. This in turn leaves more time for other activities such as attending school and childcare (SADC 2009).

## WHICH FEATURES AND KEY SUCCESS FACTORS WERE EXHIBITED?

The successful spread of community forestry and the restoration of forest landscapes in Nepal were driven by a number of factors, namely:

### Motivate

- **CRISIS EVENTS.** Crisis events were leveraged as a motivating factor for forest landscape restoration in Nepal. From 1950 to 1980, about half a million hectares of forests were cleared in Nepal (Pokharel et al. 2005). In the late 1970s, serious flooding downstream in Bangladesh focused the Nepalese government's attention on the rapid depletion and degradation of forest resources in upstream Nepal. The disaster in Bangladesh highlighted the risk of erosion, landslides, sedimentation, and localized flooding (SADC 2009).
- **AWARENESS.** The benefits of restoration were adequately communicated. For example, the Livelihoods and Forestry Program (LFP) included approximately 12,000 community forest user group members in awareness raising campaigns, focusing on forestry and more recently climate change. LFP developed guidelines, training materials and tools, and demonstration plots for active forest management. They addressed issues such as natural resource governance, poverty, and inequity (LFP 2013), which raised awareness and stimulated participation in restoration activities.
- **BENEFITS.** Governments and people in the region started to pursue forest landscape restoration with the expectation that it would yield a number of economic, social, and environmental benefits. Benefits included the reduction in downstream flooding and increased supply of fuelwood (Gautam et al. 2002).

### Enable

Several enabling conditions came into place to facilitate restoration in Nepal, namely:

- **ECOLOGICAL CONDITIONS.** The soils and water (rainfall) availability are naturally conducive to rapid growth of planted trees and to the regeneration of managed forests. Where source populations did not exist, nurseries were developed. For example, financial and technical support from Australia between 1966 and 2006 focused on establishing nurseries (NACRMLP n.d.). Initially, restoration efforts concentrated on non-native plantations. Non-native *P. roxburghii* and *P. patula* were the focus for international aid agencies, although technical designs were later modified to stress the importance of better forest management and to include multiple native species (Gautam et al. 2002).<sup>4</sup>
  - **POLICY CONDITIONS.** During the course of several decades, the government of Nepal created policy conditions conducive to restoration through the establishment of a supportive policy framework for community forestry. In 1956, all forests were nationalized for "their protection, conservation and sustainable management through enactment of the Forest Nationalization Act, 1957" (FAO 1999). Combined with weaknesses in the capacity of the government to directly protect and manage forests, this nationalization laid the grounds for a period of high rates of deforestation and forest degradation. The government moved toward the adoption of community forestry in 1978 by enacting legislation that allowed the transfer of forest management responsibility from the government to local panchayat (the lowest level political and administrative unit) as panchayat forest and panchayat protected forest (Pokharel 2012). The concept of community forestry and decentralized forest management emerged in 1978, but was not formalized until preparation of the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector in 1988. In 1989, the master plan identified 3.5 million hectares of Nepal's forest area (61 percent of forests) as suitable for community forest user groups (MFSC 1989).
- The decade of the 1990s witnessed the emergence of democratic government and an active civil society. This created new dynamics for forest management and use at the local level. These new dynamics were reflected in the Forest Bill of 1992 by the renaming of the panchayat forests and panchayat protected forests to "community plantations" and "community forests," respectively (Taylor 1993). The Forest Act of 1993 legitimized CFUGs as independent, autonomous, and self-governing institutions responsible for protecting, managing, and using a patch of national forest.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, the "Forest Regulations and Community Forestry Operational Guidelines" were prepared in 1995 to facilitate smooth implementation of the community forestry program (Ojha et al. 2014).

- **SOCIAL CONDITIONS.** Local people were empowered to make decisions and were able to benefit from improved forest management and the restoration of forests. In response to rapid deforestation in the late 1970s, the government initiated a community forestry program that encouraged people's participation in the protection, management, and utilization of forestlands. These CFUGs form the foundation of the community forestry program (Uperty 2006).

- **INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS.** Roles and responsibilities for restoration are somewhat defined, particularly those of the CFUGs. Shortly after the formation of the guidelines for CFUGs, a nationwide federated body of community forest users known as the Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) was founded. FECOFUN has emerged since 1996 as one of the nation's most powerful civil society organizations, representing thousands of CFUGs throughout the country (Timsina 2003). It is a prominent actor in the policymaking process, as well as an advocate for CFUGs.
- **MARKET CONDITIONS.** Value chains for products from restored landscapes were established, including for fuelwood, fodder, construction materials, composting materials, supplementary food, and raw material for direct sale or processing (SADC and DFID 2012). In Nepal, household energy and forestry are closely linked. Over 80 percent of the country's energy is derived from fuelwood, which is used mostly at the household level (Thoms 2008). While there are markets in some cases, in the foothills of the Himalayas many community forests are managed by CFUGs for subsistence. CFUG forests are generally used to meet basic needs such as fuelwood and leaf litter for mulch, fodder, and bedding. Some construction materials can be sold, but most CFUGs ban tree cutting unless approved and used for local needs (Webb, E. 2014. pers. comm., 9 September). For example, in Dhulikhel, the local municipality imposed a total ban on the harvest of forest products (Gautam and Shivakoti 2005).

## Implement

Implementation capacity and resources for restoration also emerged during this time period, including:

- **LEADERSHIP.** Leadership existed at both the national and local levels to drive restoration. FECOFUN, as an institution, has provided a platform for local leadership to arise. It has been a pioneer in driving forest restoration through its support for community-based protection and management of forests. The main objective of FECOFUN is to raise the awareness of community rights of access and the importance of devolution of responsibilities to communities for forest management (Timsina 2003).

Apart from FECOFUN leadership, sustained commitment to restoration existed from donors and the NGO sector through continuation in funding. Good donor coordination reduced duplication, as each donor project focused on different districts. Donors also have made long-term commitments to Nepalese forest restoration, with partnerships lasting as long as 40 years.

- **KNOWLEDGE.** Restoration “know-how” relevant to the landscape exists and has been transferred via peers through community group training (see: Awareness). This has been demonstrated through the accumulated experience in restoration from FECOFUN, NGOs, and donor coordination.

■ **TECHNICAL DESIGN.** Restoration was technically grounded. Emphasis in the early years was on classical aspects of forestry—nurseries, seedlings, and tree planting. Then tree planting was questioned as a “busy” solution for those who seek to be doing something. The key to restoration in Nepal was better management, not just tree planting alone. The restoration approach was modified to include agroforestry and the use of multiple species other than pine (Taylor 1993).

Different projects focused on various priorities. For example, Swiss-funded projects focused on establishing forests, establishing methods for afforestation, infrastructure development, and community forestry promotion through training, forest demarcation, and seedling distribution (SADC 2009). Other projects, such as The Western Terai Landscape Complex Project (WTLCP), focused on connecting fragmented forest patches and boundaries for wildlife grazing. The WTLCP project initiated planting 747 hectares of corridors and buffer zones and the construction of a 20-km trench with bio-fencing, safeguarding 675 hectares of community forest from grazing and encroachment (WTLCP 2010).

- **FINANCE AND INCENTIVES.** Funds were accessible to create incentives for restoration. In 1984, the Nepalese government and major development assistance agencies in Nepal met to review ongoing and planned programs, such as the Forestry Sector Master Plan. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) took the lead in preparing the proposal and finding funding for the Comprehensive Forestry Sector Master Plan. The master plan was developed into six “primary development” programs and six “supportive development programs,” which were instrumental in revolutionizing forestry in Nepal (Taylor 1993).

Donor support has been instrumental in driving government support for community forestry and FECOFUN schemes (Timsina 2003). Australian funding supported two districts with US \$40 million over 40 years (1966–2006) (AusAID 2006). Funding from Switzerland supported three districts with investment of over US \$2.2 million over 20 years (1989–2011) (SADC 2009). UK DFID supported fifteen districts with US \$43.67 million over 10 years (2001–2011). DFID’s program area employs 2.8 million person-days a year within the project area, creating an annual income in the forestry sector of US \$4.3 million (LFP 2013). WTLCP had an investment of US \$13.1 million over eight years from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). WTLCP has developed a three-year plan for piloting payments for environmental services (PES) in western Terai. The goal is to provide scientific evidence to government officials to develop appropriate national policies on PES. Most community forest user groups in WTLCP sites have a savings fund generated from forest revenue. This fund gives credit at a fair rate (around 12 percent per year) to members, who would otherwise have to depend on money lenders (who charge rates of at least 24–36 percent per year) (WTLCP 2010).

## LOOKING FORWARD

While there has been much progress in the spread of community forestry and its contribution to forest landscape restoration in Nepal in the past 40 years, challenges still remain.

- **FEEDBACK.** An effective performance monitoring and evaluation system has yet to be developed. For instance, the most recent National Forestry Inventory was conducted in the 1990s (Rutt and Lund 2014). The government of Finland, however, is funding a forest resource assessment that will provide 0.5–1 meter resolution remote sensing images and data for Nepal. Additional resources are needed to provide a baseline for the Nepal government's new ten-year Multi-Stakeholder Forestry Program, as well as community forestry and forest management outcomes (SADC and DFID 2012).
- **INSTITUTIONAL CONDITIONS.** Although the roles and responsibilities of the CFUGs are relatively clear, there are overlapping responsibilities among some other institutions. Responsibilities for restoration vary across different Nepalese ministries, including the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, the National Planning Commission, the Department of Soil Conservation and Watershed Management, the Department of Forest Research and Survey, and the Department of Forests. These institutions have been criticized for inefficiency, a top-down approach, and biased management of community forests (Agrawal and Ostrom 2001; Winrock 2002). One additional challenge is the tension between the government mandate for forest protection and the community desire for improved livelihoods through the utilization of forest products.
- **SOCIAL CONDITIONS.** There are governance challenges regarding CFUGs (Thoms 2008). Since CFUGs represent a dynamic combination of various castes, ethnicities, and economic classes, existing social norms can empower the wealthier, higher caste individuals and exclude the poorer ones who are unable to influence the more powerful CFUG members (Winrock 2002). In some cases, marginalized individuals are not being included in local decision making and planning (Gautam 2006). Building pro-poor and inclusive institutions for local forest governance necessitates coaching, training, and mentoring through community facilitators. Addressing this challenges requires updating CFUG constitutions and operational plans, increasing networking and interest group formation among the poor and the excluded, and increasing support from committed civil society organizations (SADC and DFID 2012). While community forestry can potentially improve rural livelihoods, its actual contributions to improving the livelihoods of the poorest remain unfulfilled. Local elites tend to dominate decision making and favor strict forest protection over active use and management of resources, which effectively constrains the livelihood potential of most community forests (Thoms 2008).

■ **FINANCE AND INCENTIVES.** While finance and incentives from donors to implement community forestry activities exist, the more complex forms of incentives—such as carbon markets and PES—have proven difficult to establish or maintain. For example, the LFP partnered with Plan Vivo Foundation in 2009 to develop a pilot project that would provide income from the carbon market, but unless a number of issues—such as ownership of carbon, establishment of baselines, and benefit and cost-sharing agreements—are resolved, carbon markets will not be an option in community forests (SADC and DFID 2012). LFP has shifted the program emphasis from income-generating activities to increasing private sector partnerships. However, private investment in community forestry remains limited (LFP 2013).

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1. Two of the pioneering efforts in community forestry were the Nepal Australia Forestry Program (NAFP) started in 1979 and the World Bank-funded, UNDP/FAO-implemented Community Forestry Development Project (CFDP) launched in 1981 in 29 hill districts. They were eventually complemented by programs supported by a range of bilateral donors, including Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Taylor 1993).
2. Trees are defined as woody vegetation exceeding 3 meters in height.
3. In the 22 percent of forest land they manage.
4. Studies showed that native species can grow very well on degraded sites. *P. patula*, an exotic species, also showed outstanding results. An important caution regarding non-native species is they may be invasive (Jha et al. n.d.).
5. The Forest Act 1993 provides the following rights to Nepalese citizens who depend on forests and are willing to be members of a CFUG: (a) right to get organized with perpetual succession; (b) entitlement over forest growing stock; (c) right to use 100 percent benefits resulting from the sustainable yields; (d) unalienable citizen rights, even if a community forest is withdrawn by the government in case a particular CFUG executive committee does not meet sustainability standards in forest management. These rights have significant incentives and motivated local forest-dependent citizens to participate in forest governance (Dahal 2014). The Forest Act 1993 identifies two primary kinds of forest (national and private) and six secondary kinds of forest under national forest (government managed, community managed, protected forest, leasehold forest, religious forest, and private forest) (MSFP 2012). Policy changes led to a more participatory planning process and an emphasis on a community initiated, active forest protection system. Forest boundaries were no longer restricted by political boundaries, and forest area was determined by local peoples' capacities, willingness, and customary rights. CFUGs were allowed to establish industries for profit, grow cash crops along with forest crops, and were free to seek support and funding from any organization. In addition, standing forest products could be mortgaged in financial institutions in order to obtain loans (Pokharel et al. 2005).

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