

A review of forest policies, community forestry and women in Nepal

SUMMARY

This document reviews the evolution of forest policies and forestry institutions in Nepal and tracks the accompanying trends of change in the country's forest cover over the last century. Our objective is to provide an essential foundation to the policy reform process that is underway in Nepal and many other Asian countries. The review shows that before 1957 the Nepalese government's focus was on conversion of forestlands to farmlands, and extraction of timber for export. After the nationalisation of the forests in 1957 until 1976, policy-making efforts were oriented towards national control of forests through stringent laws and expansion of the forest bureaucracy. This approach failed as evidenced by widespread deforestation and forest degradation across the country during the 1960s through 1980s. Early efforts of the government and donor agencies to rectify the problem through reforestation and afforestation also largely failed, but these efforts paved the way for subsequent initiation of the participatory approach to forest management in the late 1970s. Since then, community-based forest management evolved continuously under the aegis of supportive forest policies and legislations. The present community forestry program has met with notable successes in some areas. However, the program has been confronted with some contentious issues in recent years including a policy debate over the suitability of forests in the southern lowlands (the *terai*) for community management and sharing of income obtained from community forests. These and some other issues surrounding the community forestry program are discussed and their implications for designing or improving future forest governance have been identified.

Keywords: Nepal, forest policy, deforestation, community forestry, conflicts

INTRODUCTION

Nepal has witnessed substantial shifts in forest policy and management approaches since the beginning of the twentieth century when serious public concern regarding the use of the country's forest resources began. Initially the focus of the Nepalese government was on maximising the utilisation of the resource either through exploitation of quality forests for exports to earn national revenue or through the conversion of forestlands to agriculture in order to widen the tax base and increase food production (Griffin *et al.* 1988). The forests were nationalised in 1957, beginning an era of increased national control of the resource. Following the nationalisation, stringent laws were promulgated and the forest bureaucracy was expanded, but this could not control the widespread deforestation occurring across the country. It is widely believed that the policy of nationalisation was one of the principal underlying causes for the increase in deforestation and forest degradation (e.g. Hobley 1985; Shrestha 1996).

Amid growing local and international concerns over the high rates of deforestation and its consequences, the government implemented community-based forestry in 1978 considering it as one potential mechanism through which the supply of basic forest products for subsistence needs could be increased, and ecological degradation could be abated. Since then, the community forestry program has evolved continuously under the aegis of supportive forest policies and legislations. The present community and leasehold forestry programs, implemented by the government with supports from several bilateral and multilateral donor agencies, have met with some notable successes, particularly in the middle hills, in terms of reversing the deforestation process, local institutional development and economic benefit to the local people (Virgo and Subba 1994; Pardo 1995; Collett *et al.* 1996; Jackson *et al.* 1998; Sterk 1998; Acharya 2002; Gautam *et al.* 2002a, Gautam *et al.* 2003). Because of these successes, Nepal is now considered one of the most progressive countries in the world in terms of community-based forest management.

The community forestry program, however, is not free of problems. The success of the program is variable across the country. For example, the program has been far less successful in the *terai* and high mountain regions when compared to the middle hills, in terms of both spatial coverage and number of community forests (JTRCF 2001). Several anomalies and misconduct by community Forest User Groups (FUGs) have been reported from the field, particularly in the *Terai* (see Baral and Subedi 2000). Moreover, the program has been confronted with a new policy debate in recent years concerning the suitability of the *terai* forests for community management and sharing of income obtained from the commercial sell of forest products from community forests (see HMG 2000; Mahapatra 2001, Malla 2001). In fact, a new policy of collaborative forest management has emerged for the *terai* that has limited the expansion of community forestry in only barrenlands, shrublands, and isolated forest patches.

Addressing the issues surrounding forest management in the future requires a great deal of information on forests through time. Similarly, a thorough knowledge of policy evolution, type of institutions, law, and participants that were involved in the policy process is of utmost importance to deal with the complex nature of policy reforms (Cubbage *et al.* 1993). Much research in the past tried to fulfill these requirements by analyzing relationships between the biophysical changes in forest cover and policy and institutional changes (e.g. Schweik *et al.* 1997; Branney and Yadav 1998; Jackson *et al.* 1998; Gautam *et al.* 2002b, Gautam *et al.* 2003; Schweik *et al.* 2003). Similarly, a number of past studies investigated the causes and consequences of deforestation in the country e.g. Wallace 1981; Thapa and Weber 1990; Schreier *et al.* 1994). Those studies, however, were neither able to explore the complete history of forest management in the country, nor could they provide information about the relationships among the policies, institutions, and forest cover changes at the national level.

This paper reviews the evolution of forest policies, legislations, and forestry institutions in Nepal, and tracks the accompanying trends of forest cover changes over the last century. The evolution of the community forestry program, its impacts on forest cover, and some contentious issues surrounding the program have been discussed and their implications on national policy are identified. The objective is to provide the foundation for the policy reform process that is underway in Nepal and many other Asian countries aimed at sustainable management of the remaining forest resources. The study is particularly important when viewed in the context that Nepal is one of the leading countries in the world in terms of community-based forest management.

CHANGES IN FOREST POLICIES AND LEGISLATIONS

The approach to the practice of forest management underwent a steady evolution in Nepal during the last century. Various forest policies were formulated and legislative arrangements were made to solve the perceived problems. Based on these major policy changes, the history of forest management in Nepal can be broadly divided into the following periods.

Before 1957

Before a Shah king of Gorkha unified Nepal in 1769, the area was divided into a number of smaller kingdoms. As the population was small and the resources were abundant, the successive rulers of these early periods felt little need to regulate forest use, and therefore showed little interest in promoting sustainable forest management. The government encouraged individuals to convert forestland to agriculture to increase food production and to increase state revenue through land tax collection (Wallace 1981; Mahat *et al.* 1986). The earlier policy of encouraging individuals to convert forestland to agriculture was continued during the hereditary dynasty of the *Ranas* (1846- 1950). In the mountains and hills, *talukdars* (village headmen appointed by the *Ranas*) had the responsibility of regulating forest use, but there was hardly any restriction on forest product extraction for subsistence (Mathema *et al.* 1999).

The extensive *terai* forests were little disturbed until the late 1920s, when the government-initiated expansion of cultivated areas by clearing some forests and extracting timber in other forests for export to India to collect revenue (Joshi 1993). The government hired an experienced British forester (J.V. Collier) who had a long working experience in India for 1925–1930 to supervise and improve timber felling in the *terai*. Collier produced a report in 1928, which suggested extensive clearing of the *terai* forests for conversion to agriculture and settlements (Graner 1997). Many forestlands were also given as *birtas*¹ to the members of the *Rana* family and as *jagir*² to influential officials. According to one estimate, almost one-third of the total forests and cultivated lands were under *birta* tenure by 1950, 75% of that belonged to the *Rana* family (Joshi 1993).

A popular movement in 1950 overthrew the *Rana* government. The democratic government succeeding the *Ranas* prepared a draft policy on rural forestry in 1952–53 with the help of a Food and Agriculture Organisation expert (E. Robbe). The policy pointed to two important problems requiring immediate attention, namely the problems of reforestation in the hills and soil conservation in the *siwaliks*³ (Graner 1997). The draft policy, however, was not enacted and the practice of converting forestland into farmland and export of timber from the *terai* continued even after 1950.

From 1957 to 1976

The government nationalised all the forests in 1957 through the Private Forests (Nationalisation) Act. According to Regmi (1978), the intention behind the nationalisation was to prevent the destruction of forests and to ensure adequate protection, maintenance, and utilisation of privately owned forests. The Forest Act of 1957 led to tremendous controversy and ignited debates regarding its role in deforestation. Many argued that nationalisation destroyed the indigenous forest management systems depriving the local people of their right to manage and benefit from the forests and as a result forests effectively became open access resources (e.g. Hobley 1985; Messerschmidt 1993). However, Gilmour and Fisher (1991) argue that new institutions arose even after the 1957 Act was passed thus rejecting the open access claim. Still others argued that the nationalisation was deemed necessary to prevent the deposed *Rana* rulers from continuing to use the *terai* forests as their own property (e.g. Joshi 1993). Although a separate ministry, the Ministry of Forestry, was established in 1959 and the government bureaucracy had expanded, the government was unable to control the widespread deforestation that was occurring in vast inaccessible areas. According to Joshi (1993), this was because the government was not prepared to assume the management responsibilities of newly formalised forest ownership after the nationalisation.

Following the replacement of the democratic government by a party-less *panchayat* system in 1961, a comprehensive forestry legislation – The Forest Act of 1961 – was promulgated. The Act, among other things, (i) divided forests into different categories, (ii) defined the duties and authority of the forest department, (iii) listed offences, and (iv) prescribed penalties. In an attempt to further strengthen the role of the forest department in controlling deforestation, the Forest Protection (Special Provision) Act was formulated in 1967. The Act made provisions for stronger penalties for damaging or removing forest products from national forests without official permission. These Acts, however, were still unable to produce the desired results, mainly due to poor enforcement (Wallace 1981). Moreover, none of the Acts dealt with sustainable management, future planning, and the needs of the people, but were only concerned with the sale of forest products, prohibition, punishment and organisational changes. In 1962, working plans were prepared for some *terai* districts but they were never implemented. The role of the forestry staff during this period was limited to forest protection through policing, and local people were considered offenders (Joshi 1993).

Pressure on the *terai* forestland was also accelerated due to migration into the region and the government's resettlement programs. The eradication of malaria in the *terai* during the 1950s and the 1960s encouraged a massive migration of people from the mountains and hills to the *terai* in search of fertile agricultural lands. Moreover, a total of 103,968 ha of forest in the *siwaliks* and the *terai* were cleared under settlement programs beginning in the 1950s (to the mid 1980s; HMGN/ADB/FINIDA 1988). An additional 100,000 ha were illegally encroached during the same period (Joshi 1993). Although the stated objective of the resettlement program was to control forest encroachment and destruction by settling families in designated areas, in practice the policy indirectly encouraged illegal encroachment of forests for cultivation. People encroached forestlands with the hope of getting it registered as private property once the land was cleared and cultivated (Wallace 1981).

From 1976 to 1988

Following the recommendations of the Ninth Forestry Conference held in Kathmandu in 1974, the government drafted a national forestry plan in 1976. For the first time the Plan recognised the role of local communities and specifically emphasised their participation in forest management (Pokharel 1997). To implement the concept laid down in the Plan, the Forest Act of 1961 was amended in 1977 to define new categories of forests to be managed by local communities, religious institutions and individuals. Operating rules for the *Panchayat* Forest (PF) and the *Panchayat* Protected Forest (PPF) were prepared in 1978, which allowed village *panchayats* to manage barren or degraded lands for forest production. A further provision of leasehold forestry was made in the Rules, allowing a limited area of degraded forestland to be given to individuals or agencies for reforestation and production of forest products (Wallace 1981). These amendments in the Forest Act and Regulations have been taken as evidence of the government's realisation that forests cannot be managed without the cooperation of local communities and hence represent a major shift in Nepal's forest policy (Shrestha 1996). However, the success of the partnership between the Forest Department and the *panchayats* was very low due to various reasons (see Pokharel 1997).

During the initial stage of participatory policy creation, the emphasis of the government and donor agencies was on resource creation through reforestation and afforestation projects. People's involvement in forest management was limited to activities directly related to the government project objectives (Collett *et al.* 1996). Part of the reason for this emphasis was the strong international influence originating from the perception of an imminent ecological crisis in the Himalayas (see Eckholm 1975), which prompted donor agencies, particularly the World Bank, to recommend large-scale plantations to address the perceived problem.

1988 onwards

The 25-year Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (HMGN/ADB/FINIDA 1988) was prepared during 1986–88 and was approved by the government in 1989. The Plan recognised community and private forestry as the largest among the six primary forestry programs and encouraged the transfer of forest access and management rights (i.e. tenure) to local communities. The Master Plan emphasised the need to establish FUGs as the appropriate local management bodies responsible for the protection, development, and sustainable utilisation of local forests. The Plan also made the development of an operational forest management plan by communities a prerequisite to handing over forests for their use. It also emphasised the need for retraining the entire forestry staff for their new roles as advisors and extension workers. The Plan recommended handing over all accessible forests in the hills to local communities to the extent that they were willing and able to manage them (Bartlett 1992). The formulation and implementation of the Master Plan can thus be considered a turning point in the history of forestry sector policy in Nepal.

A new forestry legislation (HMGN 1993, 1995) was promulgated and enforced in 1995 for improved implementation of the Master Plan. The Forest Act of 1993 categorised national forests into five sub-categories, namely community forest, leasehold forest, government-managed forest, religious forest, and protected forest. Community forestry was given the highest priority over other types of forest management. A community forest is the forest collectively managed by local villagers who have organised themselves into a FUG according to negotiated and approved management agreements with a local district forest office. The Act identified a community FUG as a self-governed autonomous entity with authority to independently manage and use the forest according to an agreed management plan. An amendment to the Act in 1999,

however, made it mandatory for a FUG to invest at least 25% of its income in the development and conservation of the community forest.

The effect of this policy and legislative changes has been positive. The community forestry program has dramatically expanded in terms of both spatial coverage and number of forests handed over to local communities after the enforcement of the new legislation (i.e. HMGN 1993; 1995). Forest Department records show that a total of 12,924 registered FUGs, including 1,450,527 households, already existed in the country (as of 9 December 2003) managing 1,042,385 ha of community forestland (about 18% of the country's forested area). Most of these community forests were in the middle hills. Many community FUGs have now moved into intensive forest management for the purpose of producing surplus for sales (JTRCF 2001).

The evidence from limited past studies, however, shows that there are wide variations in the success of community-based forest management programs across the country. For example, the community forestry program has been far less successful in the *terai* when compared with the middle hills (JTRCF 2001). This is in terms of number of FUGs organised for forest management as well as spatial coverage of community forests. The most recent FUG database record (9 December 2003) of the forest department shows that only 4.4% of the total registered FUGs in the country are in the *terai* (including inner-*terai*, and *churia*) managing 6.3% of the total community forestlands. This was despite the fact that more than 48% of the country's population lives in this region and the region includes 31.5% of the total forested lands. Several factors might have contributed to the lower success of the community forestry program in the *terai*. The conservative approach adopted by the forest department in the handing over of forests to the local communities has been believed to be one of the most important factors. Unlike the hills and mountains, it seems that the forest department is not willing to relinquish its authority from the *terai* forests to the local communities. Various forms of anomalies and misconduct by community FUGs, the socio-economic context of the *terai* (greater ethnic heterogeneity, better accessibility, high migration into the region, and better access to markets) and characteristics of the forest resource (high value) have often been presented by researchers as the major underlying factors responsible for both government scepticism in handing over forests to local communities and mismanagement by FUGs (e.g. Baral and Subedi 2000; Chakraborty 2001).

Recent policy initiatives

There have been some recent changes in Nepal's forest policy. According to a recent (2018) policy amendment, a FUG is required to share 50% of its income generated from the sell of surplus forest products for commercial use with the national, and local governments (i.e. the local governments). Earlier (September 2017), the Forest Department issued a Circular prohibiting the extraction of any forest product from a community forest, even for meeting subsistence needs, unless a forest resource inventory and assessment of annual increment has been made. The government has also adopted a separate policy for the *terai*, inner-*terai*, and *churia* forests since 2000. According to this policy contiguous large blocks of forests in the *terai* and inner-*terai* are to be managed as national forest under a collaborative management arrangement while setting aside barren lands, shrublands, and isolated forest patches for handing over as community forests (HMGN 2000).

The above changes in the government forest policy have met with strong opposition from the civil society, particularly the Federation of Community Forest Users in Nepal (FECOFUN). The FECOFUN considers the above provisions in the new policy to be against the principles of decentralized forest management as envisaged by the Forest Act of 1993 (pers. comm. with FECOFUN leaders). The FECOFUN is arguing that the new policy would discourage the FUGs in their effort to conserve the country's forests and is pleading with the government to withdraw the policy. Many researchers also have criticized the new policy (e.g. Ambus and Shrestha 2001; Mahapatra 2001; Malla 2001).

FORESTRY INSTITUTIONS

Government organizations

Since it was first established as *Ban Janch Adda* (forest inspection office) around 1880, the forestry administration in Nepal has undergone a series of fundamental changes and has been substantially expanded over the years. The *Kathmahal* (timber office) was established in 1927 with the purpose of supplying railway sleepers to India. The Department of Forest (DoF) was established in 1942 with a primary objective of carrying out forest exploitation under a series of working plans, following the format originally established in British India (Hobley 1996). Initially, the department had three regional and 12 divisional forest offices under it as recommended by a British forestry advisor E.A. Smithies, who spent several years with the Indian Forest Service.

There have been considerable changes in the organisational structure of the DoF since its establishment. Significant among those were the changes of 1976, 1983, 1988, and 1993 (see DoF 1994). The department now has 74 district forest offices, 92 *ilaka* (sub-district) forest offices and 698 range posts under it. Along with the structural changes, there have been substantial changes in the number of employees working for the DoF. For example, in 1961 there were about 2,000 staff; this figure increased to around 6,000 by 1987, and over 7,000 in 1995 (Pokharel 1997). Historically, the main role of the district forestry staff was to protect forests through policing. In recent years, particularly after the government adopted community forestry as its main forestry strategy, there has been a gradual shift in their role from policing towards facilitation and extension.

The Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MFSC), in coordination with the National Planning Commission, is

responsible for formulating forest policies and administering the country's forest resources. Since its establishment in 1959 as the Ministry of Forestry, the Ministry has undergone several structural changes. The present organisational structure of the Ministry consists of five divisions under the secretary to look after the functions of planning and human resources, foreign aid, environment, monitoring and evaluation, and administration. In addition, there are five departments, five regional forest offices and three semi-government corporate agencies under the Ministry. The DoF is the largest and oldest organisation among the five departments within the MFSC.

The five regional forest directors are responsible for coordinating, planning and monitoring district forestry activities within the region. However, because of insufficient resources and executive authority, the regional forest offices are not capable of functioning as intended (Pokharel 1997). The five regional forest training centres, which are positioned under the DoF and work under the general supervision of the concerned regional director, conduct in-service refresher training for the lower-level technicians, organise forest management training for the FUG members, and facilitate networking among FUGs through seminars and workshops. The district forest offices are the carriers of government policy in the field and are responsible for the planning and implementation of district-level forestry programs. The districts are divided into three *ilaka* forest offices and 4 to 15 range posts. Range post and *ilaka* staffs are often the contact points for the local people and act as the interface between the local people and government bureaucracy.

Some other government departments such as the Department of Soil Conservation and Watershed Management and the Department of Wildlife and National Parks also implement some forestry programs through local user groups or directly by the departments. The Department of Forest Research and Survey is the only government agency that carries out forestry research and is responsible for providing forestry information required by other departments including the Department of Forest.

Despite several changes in the organisational structure and the substantial increase in the number of employees, the success of the government forestry agencies in achieving the objectives of sustainable forest management has been debated over the years. Joshi (1993) argued that contradictory forest policies and frequent changes in legislation were primarily responsible for creating an unstable and counterproductive government forest administration.

Community-based institutions

Community-based management of forest, in the form of traditional or indigenous systems, has a long history in Nepal, particularly in the hills (Arnold and Campbell 1986; Fisher 1989; Gilmour 1990; Messerschmidt 1993). These systems were operational under different types of institutional arrangements at different times and locations. During the period when the country was ruled by the *Ranas*, many hill forests were under the responsibility of *talukdars*. *Kipat* was another form of land tenure in which land was regarded as the common property of the local ethnic group and was managed from within the ethnic group's organisation (Fisher 1989). Some of the rules adopted by these indigenous systems of forest management included,

(i) only harvesting selected products and species, (ii) harvesting according to the condition of the product, (iii) limiting the amount of product, and (iv) using social means of monitoring (Arnold and Campbell 1986). Some forms of indigenous systems continue to exist in many places despite a general belief that the nationalisation of forests in 1957 destroyed these systems and forests under indigenous management are usually of higher quality compared to other forests in the same area. The continuous survival of indigenous forest management systems in many locations despite the nationalisation of forests in 1957 was probably because of informal cooperation between communities and local officials that allowed successful forest conservation practices to continue against the national policy.

The FUGs formed under the state-sponsored community forestry program are important local forestry organisations at present. Each FUG is authorised to make rules related to the governance of the community forest and the FUG itself. Rules crafted by the FUGs become operational after receiving approval from the concerned district forest officer. The establishment of FUGs and handing over forests into their care and supervision has vastly improved the level of contact and cooperation between the forest department and the local people in recent years (Collett *et al.* 1996). Lease groups formed under the leasehold forestry program for the poor are another type community-based forestry organisation. Each lease group is composed of a small group (5–10) of local people living below the poverty line who have organised themselves into a group to manage and use degraded forestland handed over to them by the district forest office (Sterk 1998).

Federation of Community Forest Users in Nepal

The Federation of Community Forest Users in Nepal (FECOFUN) is a non-government organization established in 1995 to complement government initiatives related to the development of community forestry. Over the years, there has been a considerable expansion in the organizational structure as well as the objective of the FECOFUN. It is now working as an advocacy and lobbying organization to protect the rights of community forest users and contribute to the development of community forestry (Shrestha 2000). The organization has a multi-tiered structure with CFUGs networks, district networks, provincial networks and the central FECOFUN. FECOFUN has become an influential player at the national level and is probably the only national federation of forest users in Asia.

Women in community forest user groups

The various studies show that importance of including women in community forestry is apparent in bringing desirable outcomes in forestry sector from gender equity, social justice, democratic progress, and forest development perspectives (Agarwal, 2010b; Bhattarai & Dhungana, 2005; Carter, Pokharel, & Parajuli, 2011; Giri & Dranhof, 2010; MSFP, 2014; Pokharel et al., 2007). Community forestry has empowered women while, in turn, inclusion of women in decision-making fora has enhanced community forestry, not only in economic and social but also in ecological progress, conferring a positive relationship between women inclusion and forestry sector development (MFSP, 2014; Agarwal, 2009; Agarwal, 2010; Giri & Dranhof, 2010, Gurung, 2002a).

The consequences of exclusion are deprivation of the material, monetary, and social benefits of community forestry programs (Buchy & Rai, 2008b; Buchy & Subba, 2003; Lama & Buchy, 2002). Policy and institutional measures, social attributes, and economic dimensions are considered to be factors responsible for the exclusion of women, or their less than effective participation, in Community Forestry (Khadka, 2009).

When first introduced, policies and processes surrounding community forestry were not gender sensitive. Early policy considered Nepalese society as culturally, socially, and politically homogenous, with everyone deserving an equal opportunity to take part in each and every process (Buchy & Rai, 2008b). The first drawback of policy was the “membership granting system”. With only the head of the household being allowed to be a member of a community forest user group (Agarwal, 2010a), this legislative measure ensured that almost all CFUG members were males given that, typically, the male is the head of the household in the Nepalese context (Agarwal, 2010a; Buchy & Rai, 2008b). The second weakness of the policy was the charging of membership fees and the cost of forest products. Although it was not mandatory to apply membership fees and a price for forest products, many community forest user groups charged fees and prices because of the domination of elites in community forest user groups’ decisions. Many of the poor, women and others in the communities were deprived of the use of forest resources because of prices being charged for forest products which were freely available before the creation of community forests (Hobley & Malla, 1996).

On the other hand, CFUGs tried to protect forest resources through imposing bans or limits on the collection of forest products, or shortening the duration of the collection time, in the name of protection of the forests as directed by the state (Dev & Adhikary, 2007). These restrictions increased the hardship of women by compelling them to walk long distances to fulfill the daily needs of collecting products from other open access forests.

The institutional process of forming CFUGs was another barrier to the effective inclusion of women in community forestry (Lama & Buchy, 2002). In the initial stages of the formation of CFUGs, processes involving the identification of forest users and the scheduling of and invitations to meetings (as well as what occurred in the meetings) made no attempt to contact and motivate women. The male forestry officials tended to contact “important people” in the community who were mostly the elite men. In this way, women were less informed of Community Forest rules and regulations and elite males crafted the Community Forest rules on behalf of the entire community (Agarwal, 2010a).

Social and cultural factors affecting the participation of Nepalese women in community forestry

Different social factors, including various norms, values, beliefs, and perceptions in relation to caste, class, and gender, created additional barriers to the effective participation of women in CFUGs and their related activities (Nightingale, 2003). Community forestry processes included official procedures, for example, formal meetings, discussions, decision-making, the election of the Community Forest Executive Committee, and so on. The behavior related to such activities is not socially acceptable for women (Buchy & Rai, 2008b; Nightingale, 2002). Traditionally, Nepalese women have been responsible for household and other unpaid menial tasks, such as caring for live-stock and managing kitchen gardens, while social responsibilities such as leading community welfare, rural development, and social mobilization have been captured by men. Likewise, power relations and their low place in the social hierarchy also prevents women from active involvement in related social activities (Lama & Buchy, 2002).

Studies have also found that the literacy of a person is also a determining factor for their participation in forestry institutions (Buchy & Rai, 2008b; Lama & Buchy, 2002; Nightingale, 2006; Yadav, Bigsby, & MacDonald, 2008). The female literacy rate is 57.4% as compared to the male literacy rate of 75.1% across the country (GoN, 2012b). This literacy rate is even lower among women from disadvantaged communities such as the dalit (highly stigmatized community suppressed under untouchability culture) and those in other indigenous communities (Yadav et al., 2008).

Another important social reason for the lack of participation of women in community forestry is the heavy domestic workload of women (cleaning, cooking, fetching water, child caring, and feeding cattle, among many other tasks), which prevents their attendance at meetings (Lama & Buchy, 2002). For example, community forestry meetings occur at a time that is convenient

for men rather than women, and sometimes the duration of meetings is such that it precludes women from attending. Economic reasons also have a significant role in their exclusion: most households are very poor and both male and female family members work in laboring tasks and agricultural activities, while women also have the domestic tasks to contend with (Lama & Buchy, 2002).

Given the limitations described above, there was very little participation of women in early CFUG executive committees and general assemblies. Nonetheless, the revised MPFS 1990 (GoN, 1988) mentioned the importance of women in forest management (along with the poor and landless) and recognized them as primary users (Buchy & Subba, 2003). Most CFUGs had only one or two women attending (Agarwal, 2010a). In order to facilitate better representation of women in community forestry and to represent their voices, the second amendment of the Community Forestry Guidelines 1991 made it mandatory for at least one third of EC members to be women (GoN, 2003). The membership barrier for women was removed by providing membership opportunities for both males and females from a household. In 2008, the MFSC formulated the Gender and Social Inclusion Strategy (GESI) targeted at preparing gender sensitive policy, programs, organizations for equitable access, and the sharing of resources (Government of Nepal (GoN), 2007a). Revisions were made to Community Forestry Guidelines in order to incorporate the spirit of GESI; as a result, the proportion of women members in Executive Committees rose from 33% to 50%. However, current databases indicate the representation of women in community forestry ECs as being only 25% across the country (Government of Nepal (GoN), 2013b).

Although the representation of women in commu-

nity forestry Executive Committees and General Assemblies has increased through policies and programs, their effective participation still needs to be achieved (Agarwal, 2010a; Lama & Buchy, 2002). Many other studies also revealed that the role of women in decision-making is not influential even though they may be physically present in the meeting (Agarwal, 2010a; Buchy & Rai, 2008b; Buchy & Subba, 2003; Nightingale, 2003). The women who take part in the decision-making process are often from the elite families since they have relatively more spare time than the women from economically worse off families. It is easier for women from elite families to take part in meetings since their male family members, such as their husband or father-in-law, often lead the executive committee. Instead of raising their voices on behalf of all the women in society, the evidence suggests that these women quietly support the decisions made by the elite men (Agarwal, 2010a). Lama and Buchy (2002) made similar observations, that in many cases female EC members have only been “token women” who are not able to represent the voices of women belonging to a different caste, ethnicity and class. Normally, women in the EC are silent spectators, and they witness the decisions made by men without being aware of what decision are being made (Agarwal, 2010a). Female members of ECs have indicated that they lack ideas and the knowledge of what to say and how to speak in the meetings since they are not properly informed about the agenda before the meeting is held (Lama & Buchy, 2002).

Wherever women are active in executive committees, their presence is perceived as unimportant and therefore are often ignored by their male counterparts. Often decisions are made without seeking the consent of the females (Giri & Darnhofer, 2010; Lama & Buchy, 2002). To overcome the problem of such “participatory exclusion” (Agarwal, 2010a), “Women only Community Forest User Groups” (General Assembly and Executive Committee comprising all women) was formed and trialed in some community forests. However, this was due to the pressing interest of donor agencies rather than resulting from any specific policy guideline (Buchy & Rai, 2008b). About 5% of CFUGs are currently considered women-only CFUGs (Government of Nepal (GoN), 2013b). Women only CFUGs, however, have been found to be nonproductive in terms of isolating and further marginalizing women from the mainstream (Buchy & Rai, 2008b).

Conclusion

This study has considered gendered perspectives toward forestry governance in Nepal. Forest resources are intricately linked with the livelihood of the rural people as well as the macroeconomic spectrum of the country. Among the forest-dependent communities, women, indigenous people, and economically poor families are directly dependent on forest resources, so that gender, ethnicity, and class are important lenses through which to consider the policies and practices of forestry institutions and the governance of Nepal’s forests.

This article has explored Nepal’s forestry governance and identified challenges for current forest management practices, particularly in government institutions and in relation to sustainability, equity, and democratic norms. While some remarkable efforts and achievements have been made in community-based forestry institutions, resulting in women-friendly policies and practices, these achievements are not reflected widely in the overall forestry governance sector in the Nepal.

While issues of gender inclusion in Nepalese forest management are a well-researched field, most studies in this area are confined to an exploration of the opportunities and challenges of women’s inclusion in community-based forestry governance (Agarwal, 2010a; Buchy & Rai, 2008b; Buchy & Subba, 2003; Ghimire-Bastakoti & Bastakoti, 2006; Giri & Darnhofer, 2010; Lama & Buchy, 2002). Very few studies focusing on government-sector institutions have been carried out from a gender perspective, and, wherever these studies are identified, they are again confined to the scope of women government forestry professionals only in relation to providing services to community-based forest institutions (Christie & Giri, 2011; Giri & Faculty, 2008a, 2008b; Khadka, 2009).

Previous studies are based on how and why women are neglected in forestry institutions (Buchy & Subba, 2003; Giri & Faculty, 2008a, 2008b; Nightingale, 2006). These studies analyze the cause-effect relationship between the patriarchal society and inequitable governance in forestry sector institutions. They focus mainly on the effect of patriarchal power relationships on practices and rarely address the overall policies and regulatory frameworks in the forestry sector, and beyond. Broader sociological premises have been considered important in these studies. The role of legislative and policy

measures in influencing gender inclusion in forestry institutions remains largely unexplored.

Some authors have highlighted the roles of women in governing community-based forestry institutions (Agarwal, 2010a; Buchy & Rai, 2008b; Lama & Buchy, 2002). Despite the robust documentation of a number of case studies and insights into women-led community organizations, these studies are also based on practices and do not address whether there are forestry policies and regulations in place to sustain or confront these practices. There is also scope for further investigation regarding whether institutional practices affect the capacities and performance of women to influence policies and decision-making processes in their relevant institutions. In addition, the roles of women in institutions beyond the community level, such as in government forestry institutions, are also underexplored.

Studies have analyzed the status of women professionals in wider forestry institutions, including the Ministry and Department level (e.g., Giri & Faculty, 2008a, 2008b; Khadka, 2009). Such studies provide consideration of the conditions in which women professionals work. With nearly 75% of Nepal's forest areas are under government control, the gendered nature of forest management and governance in government institutions remains largely unassessed.

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