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Local-Level Natural Resource Management Networks in Nepal

An Additional Burden or Agents of Change Ensuring Environmental Governance and Sustainable Livelihoods?

20



Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) has become an important approach to restructuring social relations and governance and to promoting livelihoods and natural resource management practices in many parts of the world. Many people believe CBNRM has, in fact, successfully curtailed state-centered, top-down resource management practices and illegal extraction of resources. However, some people think the approach has supported neo-liberalization

and de-concentration processes, and created another layer of elite dominance at the local level. In the context of emerging local institutions, the growing concerns of civil society, and weak national and local governance mechanisms in managing natural resources, it was essential to undertake a study to explore the strengths and weaknesses of community-based groups and networks in the management of natural resources, linking policies and local-level practices.

A case study in the Ilam Siwalik Hills

The case study site is located in the southern Ilam District of eastern Nepal. This area is part of the Siwaliks or Churiya Hills, a fragile ecozone between the mid-mountains of Nepal and the Gangetic floodplains. The area serves as an important water recharge zone for the plains and is characterized by flash floods, soil erosion, river bank cutting and siltation, and relatively low soil productivity. Ilam Siwaliks is home to a population of approximately 56,000 people of diverse caste and ethnicity. People are primarily dependent on agriculture; poverty, inequality, and lack of secure tenure seriously threaten their livelihood security. Continued illegal encroachment into forestlands and illegal and unsustainable harvesting of resources by both the poor and powerful continue to undermine the natural resource base upon which they depend.

Two environmental governance networks

This case study aimed to understand the process of community or user group approaches that support local sustainable and equitable development in natural resource management. It explored the role of civil society in promoting good governance, especially in times of political crisis, as well as ways for better translating national policies into sustainable environmental management and enhancing livelihoods at the local level. The role of 2 networks—a community forest user group network (CFN) and a women's group network (WN)—in environmental governance was the main focus of a participatory

study using simple tools such as focus group discussions and key informant interviews with executive committee members of the networks, community members in the individual member groups, and IUCN project and program staff.

The WN and the CFN are federations of more than 60 women's groups and community forest user groups (CFUGs) in the project area. The executive committees of those networks are elected by a general assembly of constituents on a periodic basis and are accountable to their members. The networks strengthen the capacity of community groups to conserve and use natural resources in a sustainable manner through capacity building and awareness-raising activities in the Siwaliks ecozone (Figure 1). The CFN generates income primarily by selling forest products according to community forestry operational plans, whereas the WN is based on a membership fee paid by constituents. Both networks receive external support for implementing development activities, including support from IUCN Nepal.

Although there is some scope for further improvement in terms of social inclusion, greater transparency, and enhancing local capacity within the networks, the study revealed that the networks have indeed been more effective with regard to key governance issues, ie *inclusive decision-making, transparency, and accountability*. They have also succeeded in influencing local environmental practices and supporting more sustainable livelihoods. They have been effective in building local capacity, enhancing service delivery, supporting informed policy development, and translating policy into action.

Good governance principles: participation, transparency, and accountability

Understanding and internalizing community needs and improving accountability

The networks have been effective in mobilizing community participation through their member groups. Their membership consists of representatives of women's groups or community forestry groups from most of Siwaliks settlements in the project area. Because of the prevalence of community forestry in the area, the CFN reaches most of the households in the area. The WN has a more limited reach (only about 13% of the households in the area so far, as activities related to women are new initiatives in the project areas and are more focused on a targeted community). However, its membership has grown over the last 3 years and participation of women's groups and networks in natural resource management activities has increased in recent months.

Accountability is ensured through both formal and informal mechanisms. The networks are managed by members elected from the general membership, and there are provisions for regular general assemblies. Priorities and actions are determined by the membership through an annual participatory exercise where all member groups are encouraged to discuss their priorities in their own groups and

then submit their requests to the network. The networks then compile these requests and seek support to deliver their work plan. In addition to the formal mechanisms, as residents of the area, the executive committee members regularly interact with their constituents and can, therefore, be easily held accountable through peer pressure.

Reaching the poor and disadvantaged

The CFN represents almost all households through its CFUG members and includes poor and disadvantaged people. The diversity of the executive committee is one indication of the access of marginalized groups to decision-making bodies: more than 70% of the committee is from indigenous groups, whereas these groups constitute only 39% of the district population. The CFN also integrates issues of social equity and poverty reduction in its work, by working with the member CFUGs to help them design and deliver programs for the poor. The CFUGs promote equal participation in decision-making processes and equitable benefit sharing of forest resources among the users (Box 1).

The WN also facilitates targeted programs for *Dalits* (so-called 'untouchables' or occupational castes) and the poor, such as imparting income-generation skills and literacy, and providing savings and credit



FIGURE 1 Community-managed spurs to protect the land from seasonal floods. (Photo by Ram Chandra Khanal)

The communities' successes

22

Pro-poor community forestry

Following an intensive sensitization program in the Chulachuli Village Development Committee, CFUG members enacted 'pro-poor' mechanisms. Identified 'poor' households are now allowed to collect forest resources twice as often as 'non-poor' members. This is seen as a win-win arrangement, since poorer households can earn much-needed income from the sale of forest products, which reduces the likelihood that they will resort to illegal harvesting.

Partnerships with service providers

"We have facilitated contact with the bio-gas company and secured service to the area for installation and maintenance of bio-gas, as well as negotiated a 20% NRs 3000–5000 subsidy for the participating households." (Durga Dhakal, Secretary, WN)

"Our technical capacities in CF management have been enhanced. Initially we used to hire consultants but now we do ourselves, especially for legal empowerment, silviculture, nursery management and record keeping training. We are currently undertaking a forest inventory on our own capacity." (Tek Bahadur Rai, CFN secretary)

Conflict and CFN's response

"During the last 5 years, the entire country has been severely affected by conflict. But we worked without hindrance from the conflicting parties, as we maintained transparency in our work. In some training events, we were even safeguarded. We have our own platform where we resolve disputes, and advocate appropriate means for going into target communities. We also play a bridging role between communities and the District Forest Office (DFO). For example, the Ilam and Jhapa DFOs requested a meeting to control the illegal timber trade, and we successfully conducted such a meeting recently." (Medini Siwakoti, President of Community Forestry Network, Ilam Siwalik)

options as well as student scholarships. They have established revolving funds that increase access for those who cannot afford initial capital, for example to install improved cooking stoves and bio-gas equipment. In other cases, disadvantaged individuals have been targeted for capacity building in specific roles.

FIGURE 2 Fuelwood collection—a common livelihood activity pursued by rural women. "Due to forest patrolling, we are proud to report that illegal extraction has been greatly reduced in community forests where they made intense efforts," said Ms Nirmala Dahal, President of the WN. (Photo by Ram Chandra Khanal)



The road to success: impact, efficiency, and effectiveness

Enhanced services to build capacity; incentives for sustainable resource management

This was seen as one of the strongest benefits of the networks to date. The WN has facilitated a wide range of capacity-building and awareness-raising programs for its members, such as group savings and credit, and natural resource-based enterprises (eg squash and pickle production). One of the most successful programs of the WN has been the introduction of alternative energy that reduces the need for fuelwood and diminishes health risks, especially to women and children. For poorer households who cannot afford bio-gas, the WN has facilitated the installation of improved cooking stoves. A revolving fund also exists to support the upfront capital costs. The CFN also facilitates the provision of services to its member CFUGs, including forest management and CFUG operation. They have undertaken a capacity assessment of their member CFUGs and target capacity building according to this categorization (see Box top left).

Local network influence on NRM and equitable development

One area that both networks spoke of was their interest in reducing illegal harvesting of timber and other forest products in the area. This is a major challenge, as many poor people are dependent on illegal felling of trees for a livelihood (Figure 2). Members of the CFN and WN executive committees undertook an intensive awareness-raising session and discussed the rights and responsibilities of CFUG members. The WN also promoted the role of women as forest patrollers, since women can monitor forest use while they are routinely collecting forest products.

The 2 networks are also working together to enhance understanding of how poverty contributes to unsustainable resource practices and to facilitate the development of poverty alleviation measures. For example, they are collaborating to support individual CFUGs in implementing actions drawing on funds set aside for poverty reduction. Many CFUGs are not looking for additional funds, but

FIGURE 3 WN members participating in the local-level annual planning process.
(Photo by Ram Chandra Khanal)

seek advice on how to design and deliver these programs.

Advocacy on behalf of constituents and influence on district and national processes and policies

The influence of the networks at the district level is most prominent regarding their ability to advocate for technical support from district line agencies for their constituents. The CFN has effectively worked with the District Forest Office and District Federation of Community Forest User Groups (FECOFUN) to deliver forest-related programs in the Siwaliks. The WN has successfully negotiated with district development authorities for funds, materials, and technical assistance to support the WN's priority programs. The WN has proven to be an empowerment tool for women in the project area (Figure 3).

The local authorities, ie the Village Development Committees and the District Development Committee, now recognize the WN and the CFN as relevant and useful representatives of people in the Siwaliks area, and seek their views during the planning processes. The networks were able to obtain support from those local government institutions.

Operation in times of instability and models of good governance

In 2002, locally elected representatives at the local level were dismissed, and in 2005 multiparty democracy was suspended. As the Maoist armed conflict intensified, access of government bodies to rural areas diminished greatly, largely because government officials did not feel safe venturing into areas controlled by the insurgents. Due to the lack of 'development space,' local budgets were also cut in both governmental and non-governmental sectors. The project area is heavily affected by the conflict, and many areas are controlled by the Maoist insurgents. Despite this fluid politi-



cal environment, the 2 networks have been able to continue implementing their programs, and therefore provide important services to the community members in this area (see Box top left).

Conclusion

Community natural resource networks offer great potential for strengthening local environmental governance, especially through increased transparency, accountability and participation at the community level. In the Ilam Siwaliks area of Nepal, they have started to show an impact in terms of improved service delivery and in catalyzing more sustainable resource use practices. Such networks have the potential to serve locally as agents of change and as a forum for greater public deliberation, with a view to achieving more informed action and advocacy. They need to be established in ways that promote accountability to communities and enhance rather than weaken other local actors in governance. While their effectiveness in national governance crises is even more apparent, such networks can complement rather than duplicate government functions, and help to translate policies into practices.

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