

Node: Suite Summary^{1,2}

Nepal: Livelihoods and NRM in forest CPRs

Context

There is now widespread acceptance that rural communities can and should play an important role in the management of their natural resources (NRs), particularly forests. However, the results of more localised NR management will be influenced by specific characteristics of the communities and NRs themselves. Understanding this has been an important part of recent research.

In Nepal, community forestry has been seen as a successful example of participatory forest development and the management of NRs by communities. Interventions have been based on the 'handing over' of forests to Forest User Groups (FUGs) which are expected to represent the interests of those who are dependent on the resource. These policies have been implemented principally in the middle hills. Although regarded as a success there is still little information on the impact of these policies on livelihoods and forest quality. At the same time, there is little understanding of the constraints and opportunities when such policies are transferred to very different social and physical contexts. For example, in the Terai lowlands on the edge of the Gangetic plain in the south of Nepal, forests are more valuable and accessible than in the hills and illicit felling of timber is widespread and well organised.

This Suite of projects therefore aimed to deepen understanding of the role of social context in the livelihood outcomes of community forestry in both the middle hills and the Terai regions of Nepal.

Research Topics

- What are the impacts of community forestry policies on the forest resource itself, and how does this vary?
- How does the institutional context influence the ways in which community forestry policies are implemented?
- What are the livelihood effects of community forestry, including the formation of Forest User Groups and how do these vary, both within and between communities?
- How sustainable are participatory community-based monitoring and evaluation processes in Forest User Groups?

Projects

Five projects were undertaken in this Suite. These were:

- R6778: Community forestry in Nepal: sustainability and impacts on common and private resources (Jan 1997-Dec 1999).

¹ This document summarises NRSP's work in one of its Uptake Promotion Node: suites. For further details and links to project and project documents see <http://www.nrsp.org.uk/6.aspx>

² This document presents research funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.

- R7514: Development of monitoring process and indicators for forest management, Nepal (Jan 2000 - Dec 2001).
- R7889: Dissemination of research findings regarding community forestry in Nepal (Nov 2000 - Feb 2002).
- R7975: Social structure, livelihoods and the management of common pool resources in Nepal (March 2001 - April 2003).
- PD119: Action and learning processes for common property forest management (Nov 2002 - April 2003).

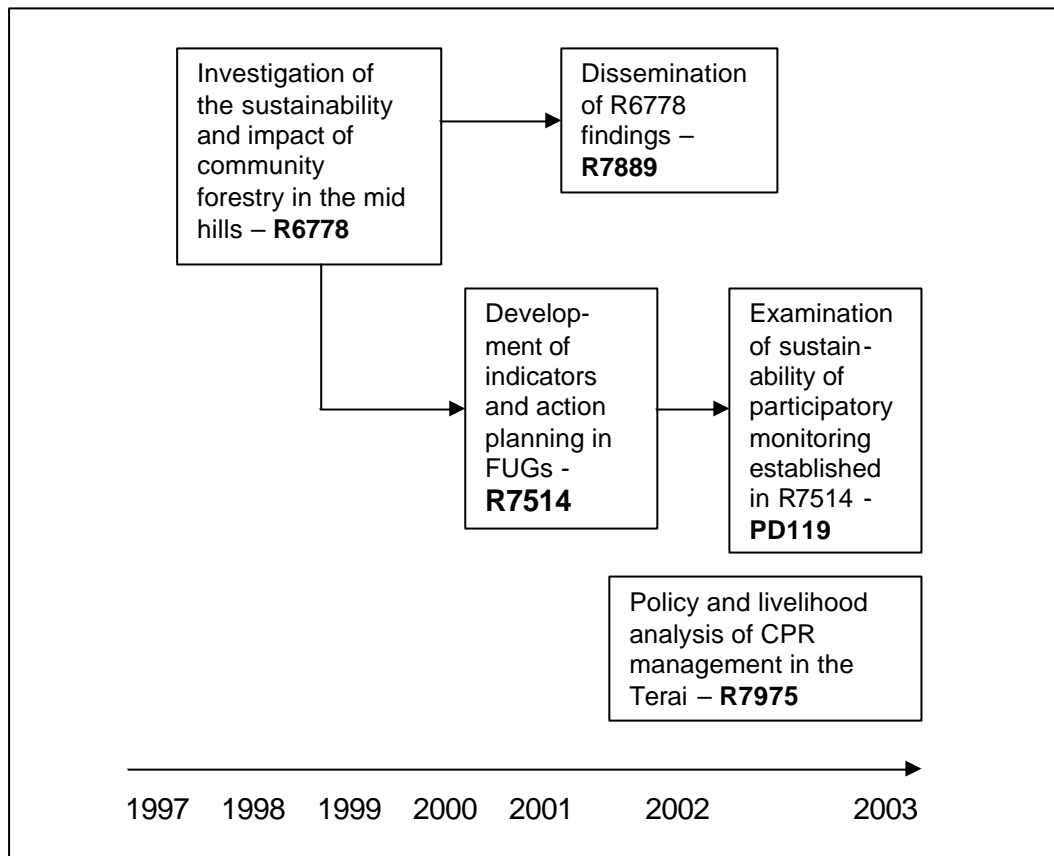
The first project, R6778 (see project links below), was designed to deliver an improved understanding of common pool resource (CPR) policies, issues and tenure rights that could be incorporated into land use management and planning strategies. To do this, the project developed a Participatory Action Research methodology called Micro Action Planning, which enabled communities to assess the implications and outcomes of community forestry. The project took place across 11 FUGs and three non-FUGs in the middle hill districts of the Koshi Hills Zone in Eastern Nepal. R7889 was a follow-up dissemination project which aimed to make the findings of R6778 accessible to a wider audience through the production of five papers.

Project R7514 was also based in the middle hills, in Baglung District in Western Nepal. Working in five villages, the project aimed to develop methods for facilitating group level action with a focus on self-monitoring. In its development of an action learning process, the project emphasised an understanding of the constraints imposed by differences in each FUG's situation. Research also considered whether decentralisation of power had led to new alliances being made between the target-driven forest bureaucracy and elite members of local communities. Project PD119 was a follow-up to R7514. It aimed to provide evidence of the sustainability - continuation, adoption or rejection - of the monitoring processes initiated by R7514.

R7975 examined the management of CPRs, particularly forests, in the Terai. In partnership with a Nepali NGO, NORMS (Natural and Organisational Resources Management Services), it aimed to explore how new systems of management were linked to existing social and political relationships and hence to resource access for different groups of people. Research was undertaken in five Village Development Committee areas in the Western Terai. It involved both key informant interviews and participatory research tools.

Work in this Suite informed other NRSP projects on CPRs such as a CPR workshop (PD104) and the CPR synthesis study in 2005-06 (R8501).

Project links within Nepal Suite 1: 1997 - 2003



Outputs

Findings

The projects based in the middle hills (R6778, R7514, R7889 and PD119) found that community forestry was generally flourishing. The reasons for this include i) a high dependency on forest resources across most households and ii) a good degree of cohesion and homogeneity at the level of the hamlet – or tole. In addition, because access to markets is quite weak, there are lower incentives to break the forest management rules. These circumstances have enabled improvements in forest quality and productivity.

However, closer examination of the FUGs and their relationship with formal forest management institutions indicated a more complex picture. The projects found levels of forest management that were below what had been expected. This was partly attributed to extreme variation in the composition of FUGs and to poor relationships with the District Forest Office (DFO) and Range Post staff.

Project PD119 explored some of the monitoring mechanisms that were put in place by its predecessor project, R7514. These were sub-committees which were formed through a process of Participatory Action Research. PD119 found evidence of continuation of various elements of the action learning process, including better resource access for some of the poorer households. In addition there was some evidence of spontaneous and planned scaling-up of the processes. However, these findings were strongly mediated by the degree of social cohesion in the study sites and by the quality of relationships between the DFO and the FUGs.

A principal finding of R7975 is the crucial role played by forest value in driving outcomes that may limit the establishment of effective and equitable FUGs. High value forests tend to have a 'hidden economy' of transactions and subsidies that contributes to institutional instability and, importantly, may have distributional biases that work against the poorest people. FUG policies that support this include access restriction, membership pricing and mechanisms for the allocation of products. This is particularly important in the Terai, which is very mixed socially in terms of caste, economic class and ethnicity. The project warns that participatory approaches based on the need for consensus may be neither achievable nor desirable in this context.

Research messages

- The impact of community forestry on the resource itself varies both according to institutional context and to forest value.
- Institutional relationships, particularly between representatives of the government and 'community-based' organisations have an important influence on the livelihood effects of community based NR management.
- The distributional outcomes of FUG policies need to be systematically evaluated.
- Policy formulation needs to recognise the ways that variation in forest value influences the stability of management institutions and the potential for CPRs to make a difference to the well-being of the poor.
- In contexts where organisations are complex and control substantial resources, the extent of meaningful participation needs to be carefully assessed by those promoting participatory forest management.
- Community-based monitoring processes that focus on the tole level and build on existing social cohesion have a greater prospect of sustainability.

Key research products

- Journal of Forest and Livelihood, 3(1). Special Joint Issue with Rural Development Forestry Network and ODI (R6778/R7889).
- An analytical framework that draws attention to key factors and their relationships that determine potential outcomes from community forestry in the Terai (R7975).
- A background literature review on the experience of community forestry in Nepal (Pant 2002) (R7975).
- Soussan, J.G. 2000. Community forestry in Nepal: sustainability and impacts on common and private property resource management. Final Technical Report of project R6778. Leeds: School of Environment, University of Leeds.
- Malla, Y. 2002. Development of monitoring process and indicators for forest management, Nepal. Final Technical Report of project R7514. Reading: International and Rural Development Department, University of Reading.
- Springate-Baginski, O. 2002. Dissemination of research findings regarding community forestry in Nepal. Final Technical Report for project R7889. Leeds: School of Geography, University of Leeds.
- Seeley, J. 2003. Social structure, livelihoods and the management of common pool resources in Nepal. Final Technical Report for project R7975. Norwich, UK: Overseas Development Group.

- Paudel, K.P., Neupane, H.R., Ojha, H.R. and Barnes, R. 2003. Action and learning processes for common property forest management. An assessment of the current status and impacts of local action learning processes for common property forest management developed through a participatory action research project in Nepal. Final Technical Report for PD119. Kathmandu, Nepal: ForestAction.

Impacts

The findings from projects based in the middle hills indicate that there have been some positive livelihood impacts of the community-based mechanisms put in place. However, the formation of the FUGs preceded the involvement of NRSP funded projects and so changes in livelihoods are not necessarily directly attributable to the NRSP projects. For R7514/PD119 there is evidence that decentralisation of negotiation processes to the tole level initiated by the project has had beneficial effects on democratic functioning within the groups. Forest Action, the Nepal based NGO that played a central role in the research project, has continued to refine and apply the method to other areas.

The project finding that, in the Terai, community forestry management may not result in livelihood improvement for the poor could have a significant impact on forest management policies. The information from R7975 on CPR management in the Terai has been taken up by the DFID funded Livelihood Forestry Project (LFP) which has been looking into ways to test the findings more widely. Key aspects that the LFP has shown an interest in include the calculation of forest value and the investigation of distributional policies. In addition, ICIMOD (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development) decided to use the findings in a broader study on CPR management. Finally, the Nepali-based partner, NORMS (Natural and Organisational Resources Management Services), benefited from considerable capacity development during the research. This was a result of the UK-based team taking a more advisory role than initially planned, due to the political and security context in Nepal at the time of the research.

Further work

The worsening political and security situation in Nepal meant that no further NRSP funded research work was planned after 2003.