

EVENT REPORT



Reflective workshop on issues and opportunities of Community Forest Management

20th December 2022

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Organized By:



Southasia Institute of
Advanced Studies (SIAS)

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1. Context

Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS) organized a reflective workshop entitled “Issues and Opportunities of Community Forest Management” on 20th December 2022 in Kathmandu. The workshop aimed to unpack the challenges of community managed forests in recent years, create a space for open dialogue and draw insights for future policies and actions towards better management of Community Forests (CF) in Nepal. There have been profound changes in the ecological and socio-economic contexts since community forestry evolved; however, we witnessed few changes in institutional mechanisms. Thus, community forestry institutions are struggling to adapt to the changes and some reports suggest a decline in local collective action. There are challenges related to the equitable and sustainable management of forests. The workshop was participated by a diverse set of actors, researchers, and policymakers active in the forestry sector of Nepal.

2. Structure of the event

The workshop started with a few reflections and experience sharing regarding the shift in the institutional functioning of CF in the face of changing socio-economic and political context by Dr. Dinesh Paudel, Associate Professor at the Appalachian State University and Senior Research Fellow at SIAS. Followed by the presentation, was a discussion session moderated by Dr. Dil Khatri, Executive Director of SIAS. After the discussion session, a few reflections and take home messages were distilled.

3. Presentation by Dr. Dinesh Paudel

Dr. Dinesh Paudel, gave an opening presentation and provided reflections on recent collective action challenges in CF in the face of changing socio-economic and political context. He presented reflections and insights from the ongoing research and the recent field visit conducted by the team from SIAS in Sindhuli and Ramechhap and unpacked issues that forest user groups are facing on the ground, particularly related to increasing influence of forest bureaucracy on forest management. He highlighted, the situation has become worse after the implementation of scientific forest management. He shared that communities are demotivated and discouraged to maintain collective action because of the bureaucratic hurdles involved in forest management which restricts the uses of forest products. He highlighted that communities now want a concrete economic incentive and there needs to be more productive management of forests. Following are some of the key messages shared by Dr. Paudel from their study:

- After the implementation of scientific forest management (SciFM), users had two assumptions. For this, we can take an example from Chure region where we had conducted our research. First, they would get permission for harvesting green trees under the scientific forest management scheme. Second, they would receive cash support for the forest management activities like cleaning and pruning. Based on that, they managed the forest and tried to develop unproductive forests into productive ones. However, the decrees and rules that are not on the forest act or policy unnecessarily

restrict them from harvesting those trees. And if the communities ask for the reason, DFOs say it is the order from a higher authority.

- We 'the forest experts' do not regard users as technically capable even though they can manage forests. We call ourselves experts, but we feel shame to say that we are providing them new technology. However, users do not think of us as technical officers.
- In Sindhuli, users are paying for the scientific forest management bush-cleaning activities even though 2-3 trees are enough for managing 6 hectares. This is an example of non-voluntary support. However, we do not allow users to harvest those 2-3 trees. Now, this system is changing. People do not want to work voluntarily.
- There are changes in collective action. With the change in socio-ecological dynamics of the communities and the economic change of communities, we are seeing new dynamics in the forest communities. Now, people think that they are controlled by DFOs for forest management and use. This has left a negative image of the officials on users. The situation is not cordial, and we are witnessing a similar situation from the time earlier than the CF initiation.
- The FECOFUN (Federation of Community Forestry User Nepal) is gradually losing its legitimacy at the level of CF users. The organization has not conducted district coordination meetings for years now and has not reached out to the community forestry users and raised their voices.

Likewise, Dr. Paudel shared some ways forward. First, the institutional framework of CF has not been changed but it is functional. With that, CFs are more rational than us. Secondly, the expectations of forest officials and offices (DoFSC and DFOs) should be changed with the changing context. They cannot force people to protect forests without adequate provisions for utilization. Third, we should immediately revoke the ban on forest management. We should start cleaning, pruning, thinning, and other forest management activities. Because of the ban, the communities hate the officials and are dissatisfied that they are not allowed to use the resources they have been taking care of, for a very long period of time. Users doubt the role of the forest officials and are perceived to be biased toward the contractors.

4. Discussion

The presentation was followed by a plenary discussion moderated by Dr. Dil Khatri. During the session, some participants pointed out the problem caused by the 'one size fits all' approach of CF institutions in the mountains and resource rich region of Tarai and Chure. Others pointed out the need for stronger civic movement to counter the increasing bureaucratic dominance on forest management and restrictions posed to CFUGs (Community Forest User Groups) on carrying out harvesting of timber. Here are the key points discussed by the listed individuals:

Netra Prasad Timsina: Dr. Timsina shared some of his reflections based on the report they have prepared on their observations after the scientific forest management retraction¹. He mentioned, that they recommended to open the forest and initiate harvesting as soon as possible. However, this did not happen and sustainable forest management could not be implemented. He added that, to draw the attention of the policymakers these issues need to be highlighted and discussed at the political level (cabinet). This can certainly bring a positive turning point on revitalizing productive forest management. He finally suggested that CSOs like FECOFUN change their working modality. They should not only raise the personal and political agendas rather they should focus on raising the voice of users' agendas.

Srijana Baral: Dr. Baral remarked that the same management approach has been applied to different ecological regions (resources and socio-economic context). However, the approach is not fruitful and needs to be changed. Though we claim to be open and allow users to manage the forest, the users are still bound to many new rules and regulations than the earlier period. And this applies not only to the timber but for the NTFP (non-timber forest products) harvesting as well. She further reflected that 16-step process to get a harvesting permission in the scientifically managed forest is too complex for users to understand and get the work done. She also shared that the women-led community forests, face more problems than men-led community forest as the women leaders are not taken seriously by the forest officials. She shared experience of one of the women leaders of CF who was rather asked by the forest officials to send the secretary for the meeting.

Shrabya Timsina: He shared that SciFM is being used as a threat weapon for community forest management and have rather intensified techno-bureaucratic dominance. The traditional community practices and knowledge of forest management has been disregarded. He added that most of the projects and program are donor funded and run according to their interest. For instance, REDD+, the project in which we do not have our own vision. Similar projects like tiger conservation, carbon trade, etc. are operationalizing as per the donor interest. He proposed hiring extension officers to support the community forests and the management practices and providing incentives to the community forests for their good practices.

Sirjana Shrestha: She shared that in the present context, socio-economic changes in rural areas due to out migration has change population dynamics and so the demand from the forest products. The need today is strengthening the governance of community forest, but we are just discussing the issues of thinning and pruning only. She added, one of the demotivating factors for forest management is caused by CIAA have created some kind of fear to both the forest officials and committee members and hesitate to take needed decisions. She further highlighted

¹ Dr. Netra Timsina was one of the team members of a high-level commission formed by the Prime Minister of Nepal that was charged with investigating the implementation of Scientific Forest Management.

that the directive of scientific forest management has been revoked, but the alternative for the management has not been provided yet.

Sindhu Dhungana: Dr. Dhungana commented that changing policy is not easy due to the scalar impact of different policies. Policy statements can be made but drafting new policy or making changes to the existing policy is difficult. He reflected that the national forest policy was only possible due to the like-minded people who worked together otherwise it would have been really difficult. He remarked that there are many unforeseeable factors that need to be considered. Among those, CIAA factor is the most prominent one. Additionally, there is a perception that there is corruption in the system which is causing a huge challenge.

He further shared that these kinds of issues are seen in many of the forests in the terai as well as many other parts in Nepal. Locals are losing their sense of responsibility in conserving and managing forests. They are neither given allowance or any benefits to take care of the forest but due to the wrong perceived notion, it is not being done. The only benefit they have is the nominal forest products only in the amount that they are allowed to. He also shared that, FECOFUN though raise the rights issues, there is a problem on their approach. He also suggested the researchers and academia to work on it as well. He mentioned that on the report of SciFM they have not only included the theoretical aspect but have also highlighted to strengthen the community institutions. He added that providing a concrete way out is difficult but more communication and coordination among the stakeholders is needed in this regard. He further emphasized that sensitization at the local level (officials) is equally important because sensitizing of the officials in the department will not be enough for the active implementation of the plans that the government has made.

Dr. Dhungana stated that all the decisions relating to timber and other products should be of the general assembly of the user groups which can further be verified by forest offices. He emphasized to establish the community rights in the community forestry regime and for that they should be given the freedom to utilize the rights given by the law.

Regarding the role of the provincial government, he said that unless the roles are defined in the forest act, it is difficult to avoid the duplication and mismatch of the roles of the central and the provincial governments. He suggested that multi-stakeholder mechanisms should be made at every province-level. He further mentioned that we also cannot idealize the local communities' contribution (voluntary) like in the past. So, we need to think of economically incentivizing local communities to encourage them. He also reviled that there are many challenges in the contractor-led system of forest harvesting and selling but for the management of forests, contractors are necessary. Unless we involve the private sector, keeping community rights intact, forest management is almost impossible.

Bir Bahadur Khanal Chhetri: Dr. Khanal remarked that, we observed reluctance in restructuring in the federal context as compared to other sectors. He mentioned that the low return of the sector, bureaucratic responsibility shift, and highly context-specific policies have been major limiting factors in the sector. Though these reflections are being made in the institutions and academia, regarding forest science studies in Nepal, we have been observing

lately that these are not only focused on National issues. He added that the other bitter truth of our country is no matter how high-level research is done, those research outputs are never put into action. Even if they are widely communicated, they are never translated into policy. He highlighted that it's high time we rethink the objectives of our research. He further suggested that not only academia, but the government should also be involved in research and should bring the results of those research into policy.

Popular Gentle: Dr. Gentle remarked that, all of us blamed communities and users for the bad management. However, the major problem lies in the mismatch of the user's dependency with the forest and the changing demands and needs. We cannot expect the sector to be functional if it does not match with the changing demands. He pointed that the civic voice shall be represented effectively by FECOFUN. He remarked that critical reflection is required in the sector and the local government should be capacitated and should work together with the civil society organizations to change the current state of the community forestry sector. He raised the question, why forest bureaucracy does not want to shift to local government for better services?

Dr. Naya Sharma Paudel: Dr. Paudel mentioned that we should not only think about the problems on the top-level bureaucrats, but also on the communities. There is no rhythm between DFOs and communities. The societal change is overlooked. Dr. Paudel mentioned that currently CF requires concrete and economic justification rather than emotional. We should not say that regulations are baseless. Rather than that, we should remove the false arguments from those regulations. He suggested that the regulations should be redefined based on scale (area managed, economic transactions, operations, risk) and the value chain. Some products may not require the complex value chain. He reflected that there has been no investment from donors and government on CFs in last two decades. Now, operation cost is higher, but it is not under the DFOs and CFs. We should increase the investment. He suggested that categorization and differential treatment of CFs is required.

Dr. Ambika Gautam: Dr. Gautam commented that we have not moved ahead from the conservation centric approach even though CFs played exemplary role in conservation. When will we get return from CFs? He shared that we have 45% of forest that should be optimally utilized. Maybe, stakeholders have not thought about it or do not have clear understanding. He pointed out that another problem is ad-hoc policymaking process. One rule overtakes the policy even though policy is implemented. Stakeholders have biased attitude towards SciFM. That means they also have diverse views for the policies. He shared that the forest ministry did not speak a word even after the chaos on SciFM. He further added, FECOFUN also does not talk about the benefits of users. It only speaks about the users' rights.

Dr. Bishnu Hari Poudyal: Dr. Poudyal reflected that FECOFUN does not listen to critical discussion but they initiate action on similar issue. He mentioned roles of each stakeholder should be differentiated and there should be synergy between stakeholders. His view was that FECOFUN thinks itself as campaigner rather than critical stakeholder. The stakeholders should have common say on the process and they should also critically reflect themselves.

5. Conclusion and ways forward

During the session, some participants pointed to the problem caused by the 'one size fits all' approach of CF institutions in the mountains and resource rich region of Tarai and Chure. Others pointed to the need for stronger civic movement to counter the increasing bureaucratic dominance on forest management and restrictions posed to CFUGs on carrying out harvesting of timber. Few participants pointed to the problem that local right movement is weakening. One of the participants reflected that change in forest people relation is due to the changing socio-economic context and rural economy. He concluded that concrete economic incentive and differential categorization and treatment system can improve the degraded management scenario of the CFs. Likewise, the other participants stressed the need of intensive dialogues with the major stakeholders during the policy formulation process.

The take home message of the workshop was that there is a clear need for reimagining collective action in the context of changing forest-people relations. For local collective action to sustain, participants pointed to the need for generating financial resources for incentives. The discussion ended with the conclusion that we need more open dialogue towards revisiting some of the institutional constraints and resolving some practical hurdles that demotivated local communities.

Annex 1: Event details

Name of the event	Reflective workshop on issues and opportunities of Community Forest Management
Date	20th December 2022
Venue	Indreni Food Land, Baneshwor, Kathmandu Nepal
Time	09:30 AM-1:00 PM
Organizers	Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS)
Presenter	Dr. Dinesh Paudel, Associate professor at the Appalachian State University
Moderator	Dr. Dil Khatri, SIAS
Number of Participants:	24

Annex 2: Participant lists

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Annex 3: Photos of the event

