

Community Forestry in Nepal: Women and Collective Action



Community forestry has remained Nepal's forest management strategy since its introduction in 1978. Local communities make decisions regarding the use, distribution and management of forest resources, and are organized into Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) where each CFUG elects a set of officers composed of a chairperson, a vice-chairperson, a secretary, and a treasurer.

SOURCE:

Acharya, K. P. 2005. *Improving the Effectiveness of Collective Action: Sharing Experiences from Community Forestry in Nepal*. CAPRI Working Paper No. 54. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

There are currently 14,000 CFUGs controlling approximately 1.2 million hectares, or 25 percent, of Nepal's forest area. Forest conditions have improved upon the implementation of this strategy but concerns are being raised regarding equity and the role of women.

Women's Participation in Nepal Through User Groups

There are 143,000 CFUG members, but only 24 percent of them are women. Wealthier upper-caste men tend to dominate major decisions. The interests of women and other marginalized sectors, who earn their livelihood through common resources, are seldom addressed. It is essential

for women to be an active part of the CFUG, not only in the interest of equality, but also to ensure that the initiatives of the CFUGs are sustained and women are able to fulfill their roles in the community.

Several factors explain in part why women have very little participation in CFUG activities which impact decision-making. Traditionally, women are in charge of gathering produce from the forest, silviculture, forest management and other such tasks. These tasks consume most of their time and energy and limit the amount of time and effort that can be spent on active participation in CFUG activities.

Some initiatives were launched to encourage women to participate in the decision-making of CFUGs, although these initiatives had limited success. When community forestry was first introduced, the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MFSC) created a policy that women should make up 33 percent of the executive committees of CFUGs.

CFUGs composed entirely of women were also organized. Although this meant that women would monopolize the decision-making in this case, it was established that the household size



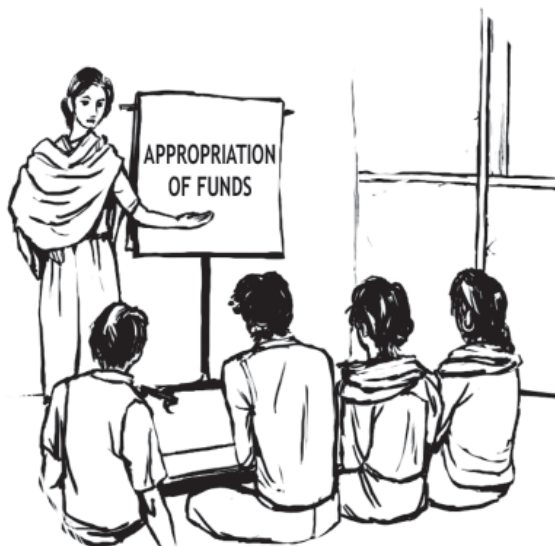
SAMARPAN Case Story: Creating Opportunities for Women

CARE Nepal, through the funding of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), ran the Strengthening the Role of Women and Civil Society in Democracy and Governance (SAMARPAN) Program in order to create opportunities for women. SAMARPAN aimed to improve the skills of women through advocacy and to get women elected into influential positions within the CFUGs. The program provided skills training that would enable facilitators to discuss policies and procedures, champion causes and thus have significant influence on decisions made by the CFUG. These facilitators, on the other hand, would pass on the knowledge they gained to the members of their community.

SAMARPAN drove women's participation in making decisions that affect the distribution of forest resources. Moreover, the program increased interaction between civil society groups and federations. As a result, there are more public hearings and audits being held regarding finances and more funds are being allocated for marginalized communities and women's needs.

To observe the benefits of the program at a micro level, a case study was conducted of six CFUGs implementing SAMARPAN methodologies. The six groups that were chosen shared several characteristics. Inasmuch that they had at least one woman in a key position, showed interest in tracking progress, had been founded two years or more ago, were stable in terms of migration, and were composed of members from different castes and of different lifestyles.

The information obtained from committee meeting minutes, along with financial and administrative records was used to substantiate information from other sources. Dissenting and similar comments were noted down. Focused group discussions and one-on-one interviews with both members and officers were also performed.



in these CFUGs was 1.5 times smaller than the household size in any mixed-sex CFUG. In addition, the average forest area per household in these CFUGs is only 50 percent of the average forest area per household for mixed-sex CFUGs. Furthermore, decisions were made according to the interest of women from land-rich, high-caste households.

Despite these initiatives, women's roles in decision-making in mixed CFUGs are not fulfilled because very few women are elected to key positions and gain tenure in those positions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Several observations/conclusions were arrived at, based on the experience of the CFUGs in Nepal (see SAMARPAN case study in the box above).

Women should be involved in decision-making processes. It is more beneficial to enable women to fill key positions in mixed-sex CFUGs, rather than creating a CFUG that has only women members.

An inclusive decision-making process is vital. All sectors of the community should be allowed to have a say in the decisions that are made about the appropriation and use of forest resources.

The critical mass theory versus the critical act. It is said that once the number of people considered as a minority in a population reaches 30 percent, change can take place. While there is safety in numbers, it is also important to consider the impact of the existing culture of the community and the existing homogeneity. This means that rather than just have the minority gain critical mass and instigate changes, the existing majority should also work towards improving the situation of the minority.

More women in the decision-making process means better governance. The women leaders of all six CFUGs took an active role in reviewing the appropriation of funds. In most instances, misappropriated funds were recovered and channeled towards the benefits of CFUG members.

The election of women into key positions in a CFUG remains a challenge. In two instances, women leaders resigned from their post after being elected in a key position. Reasons given were lack of experience, lack of confidence, lack of support from family, lack of time in which to perform duties, and other risks and threats inherent to the job. There was also resistance from men and the reigning majority.

Opportunities should be tied to continuous training and empowerment. It is not enough to merely put women in the position to make the decisions. It is also vital that the community works towards equity and understanding, and recognizes the role of women in the CFUG. The minority does need to be listened to, but the majority also needs to be considered.

Suggested Readings

- Acharya, K. P. 2002. *Twenty Four Years of Community Forestry in Nepal*. International Forestry Review 4 (2):149-56.
- Acharya, K. P. 2003. *Changing the Strategy for Community Forestry in Nepal: The Case for Active Management*. The Journal of Forest Policy 10(1): 43-50.
- Acharya, K. P. 2004. *Sustainability of Supports for Community Forestry in Nepal*. Forest, Trees and Livelihoods (Formerly called International Tree Crop Journal) 13(3): 247-260.
- O' Brien, P. and A. Jones. 2002. *Human Rights and Rights-Based Programming: Basic Training Manual*. Atlanta, USA: CARE.

Sourcebook on **Resources, Rights, and Cooperation**, produced by the CGIAR Program on Collective Action and Property Rights (CAPRI)