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Improving the Effectiveness of Collective Action: Sharing Experiences from Community Forestry in Nepal

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ABSTRACT

The forest management strategy of Nepal is based on people's participation, which is known as community forestry. This approach was formally introduced in 1978 to encourage active participation of local people in forest management activities as a means to improve their livelihoods. Under the community forestry structure, local people make decisions regarding forest management, utilization and distribution of benefits from a forest; they are organized as a Community Forest User Group. Presently about 1.2 million hectares of forest is under the control of about 14,000 Community Forest User Groups. It has received highest priority within the forestry sector and is one of the most successful development initiatives in Nepal. However, emerging evidence indicates that forest user groups have excluded rather than included women's participation in their activities

This paper is based on the findings from six forest users groups implementing a program aimed at strengthening governance at the local level through increased women's participation and increased advocacy skills and capacity of selected civil society groups. It presents the process of women's empowerment in forest user groups by describing changes made in those groups once women begin participating and holding key decision-making positions. The findings note significant variation in funds allocated for social and community development activities, which are necessary to address the issues of poverty and social equity in Nepal. In addition, they note the importance of building both the capacity of individual women leaders and an enabling environment to support the women's initiatives. A collaborative and inclusive approach that includes women and marginalized groups as committee executives and members of local government bodies is necessary to build the enabling environment.

Keywords: Community forestry, Nepal, gender, poverty, forest management and governance

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IMPROVING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF COLLECTIVE ACTION: SHARING EXPERIENCES FROM COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN NEPAL

Krishna P. Acharya¹ and Popular Gentle²

INTRODUCTION

COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN NEPAL

The need for people's participation in forest management was recognized in Nepal in the late 1970's as a strategy to mitigate environmental degradation and to fulfill the demands for forest products. Several policies were formulated to encourage active participation of local people in forest management. The Master Plan for Forestry Sector (MPFS) Nepal 1988 established the Community Forestry (CF) program as one of the major forestry components and decided to hand-over all accessible hill forests to Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) for their protection, management and utilization (HMGN 1988). The Forest Act of 1993 defines the CFUG as a registered group of those “desirous to utilize the forest products by developing and conserving such forest for the collective interest”. A CFUG is recognized as a self governing, perpetual and corporate body that must be legally registered at the relevant District Forest Office (DFO). Under the community forestry structure, local people make decisions regarding forest management, utilization and distribution of benefits from a forest (Gilmour and Fisher 1991).

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The last two and half decades of CF in Nepal have been successful in formulating people centered policies and recapitalizing people's ownership and commitment in forest management. By mid year 2005, over 1.2 million hectares of national forests (25 percent of total forest area of the country) have been handed over to about 14,000 CFUGs as community forests (DoF 2005). Currently, these CFUGs constitute about 35 percent of the total population of the country. It has been estimated that about 61 percent of the total forest area including the current CF area will be handed over as CF to the CFUGs (Tamrakar and Nelson 1991). The CF program thus became one of the major forestry components aimed at managing rural forests for equitable sharing of benefits among stakeholders and sustainable management of forest resources. Presently, CFUGs have been established as one of the largest and strongest civil society organizations in the country. According to current policies, the general assembly of CFUGs is the main decision-making body that represents all members of the CFUG. The membership unit is the individual household. The assembly defines the roles, responsibilities and mandate of the users' committee and users. To regularize the management of the forests and user groups, CFUGs form a user's committee of elected or unanimously nominated representatives. The committee is accountable to the user groups' general assembly. Altogether, about 143 thousands committee members are responsible for making day to day decisions about the management of forests, group funds, benefit sharing and other development of CFUGs through out the country. Of total committee members, about 24 percent are women (Kanel 2004).

The Community Forestry program has significantly contributed towards improving the forest condition, utilizing democratic processes in decision-making and promoting local development activities (Acharya 2002; Kanel 2004). However, emerging evidence indicates

that the decision-making process in most of the CFUGs is captured by wealthier and upper caste men, while the interests and concerns of poor women and *Dalits*,³ who depend more on common property resources for their livelihood, are not well addressed (Agarwal 2001; Bhatta 2002; Chhetri et al, 2001; Graner 1997; Nightingale 2002; Tiwari 2002; Warner 2000).

Women's participation in community forestry

The collection of forest products, mainly fodder, fuel wood, grass and thatches, is a woman's role in most parts of the country. In addition to the collection of forest products, women manage fuel wood, fodder and bedding materials, as they are primarily responsible for household chores. Being involved in the collection and management of forest resources, women have developed a traditional knowledge base about their management and utilization. Despite this, women are generally excluded in the decision-making process of CFUGs. As a result, most CFUG decisions, including funds management, are made in favor of relatively wealthier households (Bhatta and Gentle 2004; Gentle 2000; Ghimire 2000).

The exclusion of women in the resource management process has serious negative consequences not just for gender equity, but also for the efficient functioning and long term sustainability of these initiatives, and for women's empowerment (Agarwal 1997). Social exclusion has economic, social and political dimensions and it explicitly embraces the relational as well as distributional aspects of poverty (Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997). The main reason for the exclusion of the majority of the poor is the high opportunity cost of joining a

³ *Dalits* are defined as "historically and traditionally, socially discriminated so called "lower caste" or "untouchable" according to Hindi caste division system.

group, especially for income-earning women (Acharya 2004; Adhikari 2003; Gentle 2000; Maharjan 1998; Richards et. al 1999; Weinberger and Jutting 2001).

The Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MFSC) has encouraged women's participation in community forestry from the very beginning of the program. The MPFS made a policy recommendation for participation of at least 33 percent women in the executive committee of CFUGs (MPFS 1988); however, the provision does not specify women's participation in any specific positions of authority and decision-making. In addition, women-only CFUGs were created to increase women's involvement in community forestry since their participation in the decision-making of mixed-sex CFUGs was minimal. Currently, there are more than 600 women-only CFUGs throughout the country in which women exclusively represent the executive committee and general assembly as representatives of their household. However, a comparative analysis of 190 women-only CFUGs and 1,581 mixed CFUGs revealed that the average household size of women-only CFUGs was 1.5 times smaller than that of total CFUGs and the average forest area per household of women-only CFUGs was half the average of total CFUGs. Similarly, the average area of women-only CFs was three times smaller than the average area of total CFs (Gentle 2003). A similar observation was made earlier by Agarwal (2001) of women-only CFUGs in Nepal. She argued that women-only CFUGs receive small plots; some 50 percent of CFUGs control less than 10 hectares each and often this is barren land needing artificial regeneration. Thus, women-only CFUGs are not an effective means of equalizing women's and men's management of community forestry (Agarwal 2001; Gentle 2003; Gautam 2004; Graner 1997; Rai and Buchy 2004).

While women-only CFUGs do provide space for women to participate in forest management decision-making within the groups, it is important to analyze which caste, class and ethnicity of women are dominating the decision-making process in these groups. A study in the mid-western region of Nepal notes that women representing land rich and high caste households mostly capture decision-making positions and influence decisions according to their interests (Rai and Buchy 2004).

Besides the cases of women-only CFUGs, the participation of women in decision-making processes in the rest of the CFUGs is rather low. In most cases, only a very small number of women are elected to key positions,⁴ where there is a potential to influence CFUG decisions. The low participation of women in the decision-making process is a key issue that results in inequitable benefit sharing in community forestry.

Women do participate in general meetings, where participation of any household member is mandatory and where a fine often must be paid for being absent from such meetings. Primarily, women are active in the field in the collection of forest products, silvicultural operations and forest protection and management activities. These activities consume significant time and energy, take women away from the home, and limit their participation in CFUG activities, particularly if that participation does not lead to decisions that positively affect them. The participation of women without involving them in productive and community management roles increases their workload and ultimately contributes towards widening gender disparity in natural resource management. The challenge of addressing women's participation in CF and making decisions more favorable to women and

⁴ Key positions in community forestry users' committee are considered as Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. These positions influence significantly the decision making process of CFUGs.

the poor within the CF program requires the empowerment of women through advocacy (Gentle 2003). One option proposed in order to increase women's role in decision-making processes of CFUGs is to give them space in key executive positions so that they can influence decisions on their own behalf.

Concept of critical mass

Scholars in the past have applied the concept of "critical mass" in collection action as an essential factor for increasing the participation of women. (Oliver 1980; Oliver and Marwell 1988; Oliver, Marwell and Teixeira 1985; Dahlerup 2001). In social and political change processes, the size of the minority is important for the possibility of change. Small minorities are subject to marginalization, tokenism, invisibility, harassment, and over-adaptation to the dominant culture and norms (Canter 1977 quoted in Dahlerup 2001). Dahlerup argues that the crucial threshold for change often occurs at 30 percent; i.e. when women constitute less than 30 percent they will not be able to change the political scene. However, Grey (2001) argues that for critical mass to be a viable concept, it must take account of the impact of entrenched attitudes and positional power.

Promoting a critical mass is important to enhance women's effective participation in public forums and strengthen their bargaining power, especially in large heterogeneous groups (Oliver and Marwell 1988; Agarwal 2001). Similarly, social networks can also foster participation by utilizing existing social capital and well established trust among its members (Weinberger and Jutting 2001).

Dahlerup (2001) further explains five dimensions of possible change as more women are involved in decision-making processes. The five dimensions mentioned are: effectiveness

of women politicians, reactions to women politicians, political culture, political discourse and policy changes. The theory of critical mass is further elaborated as a critical act. According to Dahlerup (2001), critical act changes the position of the minority considerably and leads to further changes in policies. The critical act also considers that men and women both may be actors in attempts to improve the position of women. The most important critical acts are those that mobilize governing institutions to improve the situation of minority groups (Lovenduski 2001).

SAMARPAN's strategy and critical mass

SAMARPAN (Strengthening the Role of Women and Civil Society in Democracy and Governance) is a USAID funded three- year (2002-05) program implemented by CARE Nepal in partnership with national and international NGOs. The program was designed to contribute to strengthening governance at the local level through increased women's participation and increased advocacy capacity of civil society groups. The main targets are civil society groups, including CFUGs, Water User's Associations (WUAs), Savings and Credit Organizations (SCOs) and elected and nominated women representatives in the local government. The program provides skills-training to individuals and groups to increase their ability to dialogue, advocate, and ultimately influence policy decisions. The main component of the program is training in advocacy with a focus on relevant issues, such as forestry management policies, social equity and justice. Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) were selected to implement this program in the targeted districts, while locally available resource persons were trained as advocacy facilitators. The facilitators include a proportionate representation of women, *Dalit* and other marginal communities. The

facilitators, in turn, conducted echo training in the target groups and facilitated them in conducting public audit and hearings, assessing the governance status of groups and in monitoring of on-going activities.

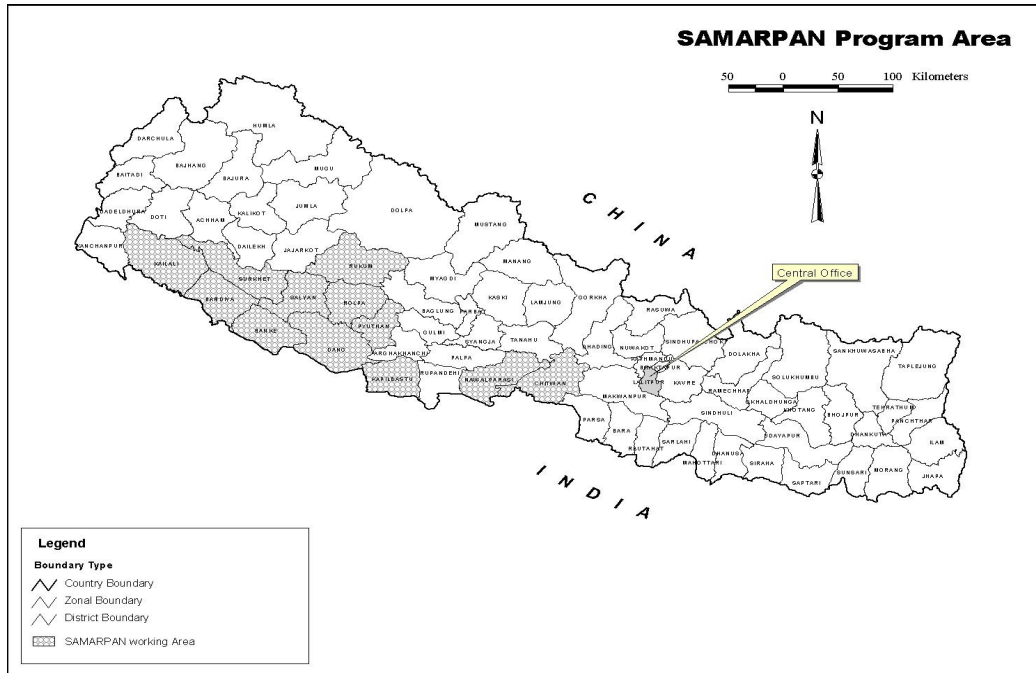
The program has reached more than 1,500 target groups, including 826 CFUGs through advocacy training, women's empowerment training and advocacy literacy classes for women. More than 1,000 training and workshop events were conducted for over 20,000 people with more than 50 percent of the training participants being women (APR 2005). Each training event concluded with an advocacy plan to address the locally identified issues. The output, effects and impacts brought by the implementation of advocacy plans were documented and monitored using advocacy diaries. The major achievements observed so far are increased participation of women in the decision-making process of CFUGs, increased affiliation of civil society groups with their federations, regular practice of public audit and hearings by the groups and increased allocation of development funds to address poor, women and marginalized people's needs and rights.

The main approach of this program has been guided by a Rights Based Approach (RBA) to development, which deliberately and explicitly focuses on people realizing their human rights (O'Brien and Jones 2002). It does so by exposing the root causes of vulnerability and marginalization and expanding the range of responses. It empowers people to claim and exercise their rights and fulfill their responsibilities. Advocacy has been applied as a major tool which aims to hold others responsible for their actions and/or omissions, and potentially, in the process, to encourage and assist them to meet their responsibilities.

The program area

SAMARPAN has covered 12 districts of Nepal including the central, western, mid-western and far western development regions namely, Chitawan, Nawalparasi, Kapilvastu, Dang, Salyan, Pyuthan, Rolpa, Rukum, Banke, Bardia, Kailali, and Surkhet (Fig 1).

Figure 1 – The SAMARPAN Program area



MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

This paper is based on the findings from a case study of six forest users groups implementing the SAMARPAN program. Among 12 Program districts, two districts each from western and mid-western regions, namely Nawalparasi and Bardia, were selected for this study. Following the selection of sample districts, six CFUGs, three each from Bardia and Nawalparasi districts, were selected based on the following criteria.

- At least one woman in key position
- Accessibility of the group by location
- Interest of the group, committee and women leaders to take part in tracking process.
- A mature group (> 2 years of formation)
- Heterogeneous group in terms of wealth status and caste
- Relatively stable community in terms of both inward and outward migration.
- Two groups where women leaders were not successful to continue their tenure.

Table 1--A glimpse of the selected groups

SN	Name of the CFUG and district	Year CF handed over	# of Households in CFUG	Total population	CF area (ha)
1	Chautari, Nawalparasi	1997	618	4000	354.70
2	Lakhana, Bardia	1998	149	1077	80.25
3	Sundari, Nawalparasi	1998	1032	7224	384.75
4	Amar, Nawalparasi	2000	1300	9100	384.00
5	Ram Nagar, Bardia	2001	40	240	10.25
6	Chandanpur, Bardia	2003	213	1618	125.00

Source: CFUG records

Methods

Following the selection of CFUGs, the following methods were used to generate information.

Reviewing secondary information

The operational plan, minutes of committee meetings and general assemblies as well as financial and administrative records of each sampled CFUG were reviewed thoroughly. This information was also useful for interpretation, comparison, and triangulation of information gathered from other sources. Similarly, complementary research papers on

community forestry and women's participation were reviewed and analyzed, and commonalities and differences were observed.

Focus group discussion

Focus group discussions were organized with elected women in key positions of CFUGs. The discussions were mainly focused on identifying interventions and strategies responsible for the election of women to key positions; the major successes and challenges concerning the election of women; and the strategies and plans recommended for the future.

Interview with committee members

In addition, committee members of selected CFUGs were interviewed using a semi-structural interview. The key questions related to the study and issues identified during information collection were discussed during the meetings. The committee members were asked about the strategy and approach of the committee in increasing the participation of women in decision making processes, the allocation of CFUG resources to pro-poor and women focused activities, and the institutional and policy commitments to make the results sustainable. Discussions were also conducted to assess how committee members perceived the effectiveness of inclusive decision-making process in CFUGs.

Individual interviews

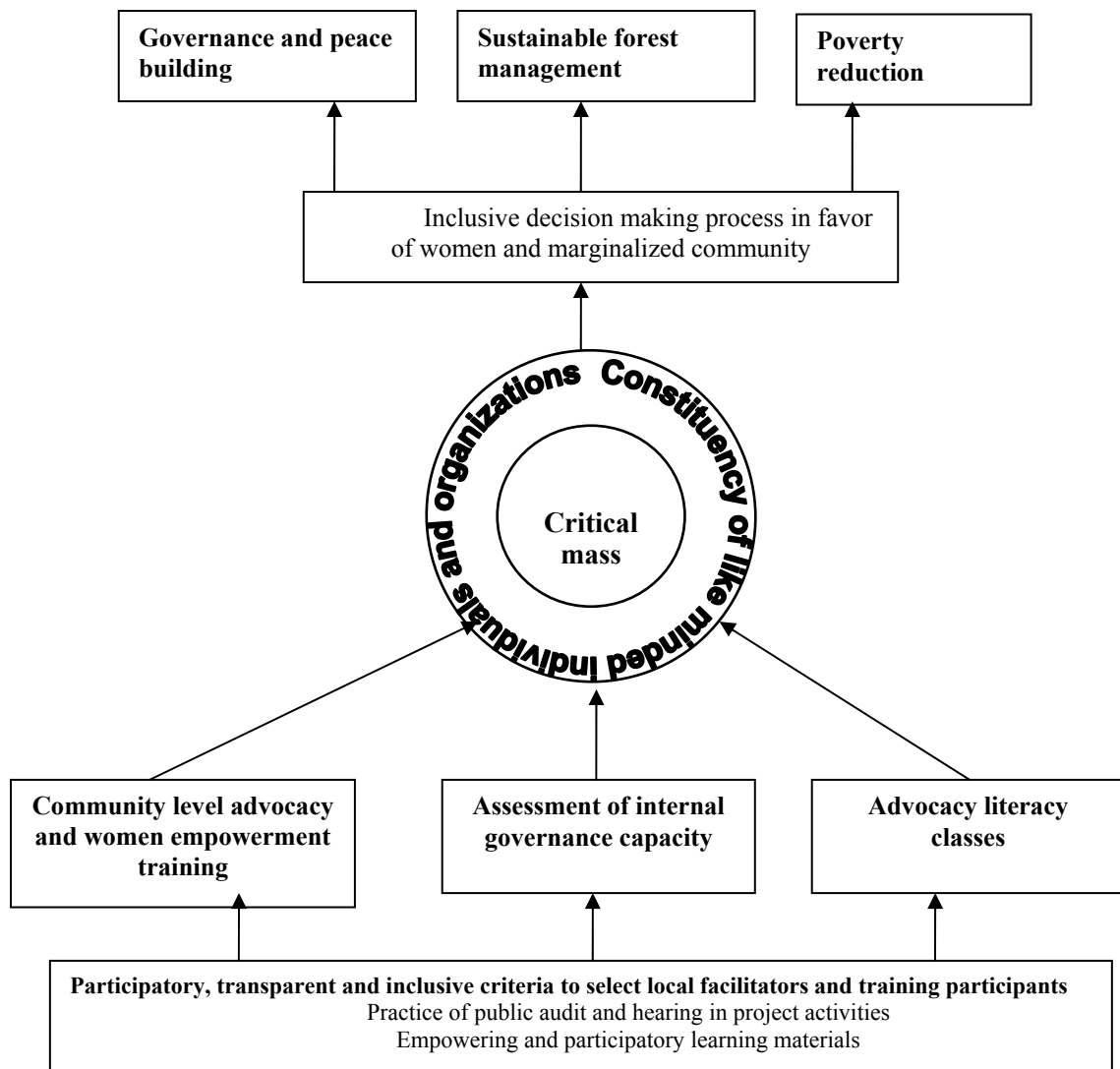
Individual interviews were conducted with key informants, including CFUG network members, and government and I/NGO staff associated with the community forestry program in the respective districts. The basic question asked in the interview was how these individuals and institutions saw the process and outcomes of the program, focusing on the effectiveness of an increase in women's participation and the enhancement of their advocacy capacity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Empowerment process

The following section presents the key activities and approach that were applied by SAMRPAN in the process of empowerment. The schematic representation is given in Figure 2.

Figure 2-- The conceptual model showing input and output linkages



Assessment of internal governance capacity of CFUGs

The SAMARPAN program developed a participatory tool to assess the internal governance status of CFUGs. The guideline defines four basic attributes of governance, viz., transparency, accountability, participation and predictability. One of the basic parameters of enhanced governance is the participation of women and marginalized groups in their decision-making process. The majority of group members participated in the day long assessment process.

Based on the grades and values of each attribute, the group members identify their relative position (score) in each attribute. The score sheet is then translated into a visual diagram based on a spider web tool. The presentation of the diagram helps to visualize the current, proposed and ideal situation of their governance. The assessment also identifies the current status of the governance and the gap between the current and ideal situation. Based on the results of the assessment and discussions to improve the weaker areas, the group members prepare an action plan to address the gaps.

Mobilization of local facilitators

The project has trained local facilitators through a 14-day advocacy training. The local facilitators represent NGOs, federations of user groups and other civil society organizations. The trained advocacy facilitators, in turn, facilitate community level advocacy and women's empowerment trainings and support CFUGs in the assessment of governance capacity. The support also includes preparation and implementation of group level advocacy plans as well as monitoring and documentation of the changes following the implementation of those plans.

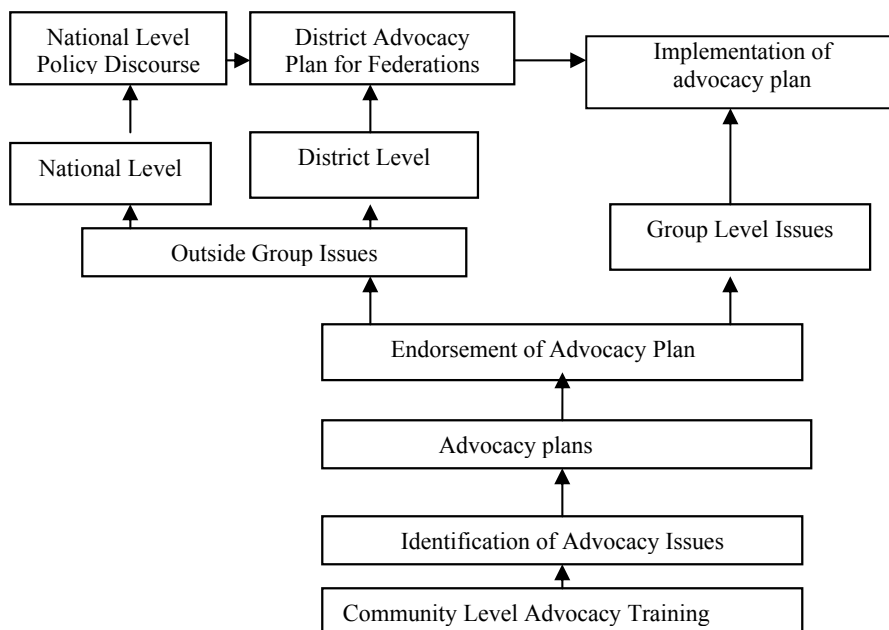
The facilitators are selected based on a transparent and participatory selection criteria developed in consultation with major stakeholders. A major focus of the criteria is to give priority to women and *Dalit* facilitators. Local NGOs and federations identified the facilitators. As a result, out of 363 facilitators trained, 47 percent are women and 14 percent are *Dalit*. The women and *Dalit* facilitators are able to reach women and *Dalits* to help them in identifying their issues and concerns and to support them in enhancing their advocacy capacity. Regular monitoring of the status of the advocacy plan's implementation, review and reflections, and the documentation of all changes in a chronological order using an advocacy diary helped the facilitators to support the whole process. Some collaborative and public advocacy tools like mass meetings, door-to-door visits, songs, dramas, and talk programs were useful in formulating and mobilizing constituencies in favor of women.

Community level advocacy training

The three day community-level advocacy and women's empowerment trainings were the major input of the project. Topics included in the training are: social and stakeholders analysis, concepts of RBA, governance and power dynamics as well as the concepts and practical application of advocacy, e.g. the development of an advocacy strategy and plan. The training concludes with the development of an advocacy plan, or a simple action plan, which defines: advocacy issues, the deprived groups, their advocacy strategy, time frame of the action, result indicators, possible risks and monitoring responsibilities.

Altogether, 20 participants participated in the training. The participants were selected based on criteria defined by the project strategy. The strategy was developed through a participatory process and has a provision to include proportionate participation of women and *Dalits*, executive committee members and the participants of local government bodies in

community level training. The objective of the inclusion of different types of participants is to forge linkages between non-government target groups and government agencies to facilitate better participatory planning and good governance processes. Similarly, participation of executive committee members has been crucial to finalize, endorse and implement the advocacy plans. The approach to include all stakeholders together in the training and the implementation of an advocacy plan also helped to minimize resistance from power holders. The subsidies of the training are made transparent and the training expenses were made public at the end of each training event. After the training, most of the advocacy plans are shared in the general assembly of the user groups and endorsed by the assembly and executive committee meetings. Similarly, the outside group issues were forwarded to their respective district level federations. The district level federations compiled such advocacy issues received from their member groups, analyzed and prioritized issues and prepared district-level advocacy plans based on those issues (Fig 3).

Figure 3--Advocacy process in SAMARPAN Program**Advocacy literacy classes**

One of the objectives of the SAMARPAN Program was to increase the literacy of the women members of advocacy groups. The literacy program was reviewed from the perspectives of REFLECT⁵ and popular education approaches with the aim that the literacy program must contribute to the change process, especially to lift the culture of silence among rural and disadvantaged women.

The literacy classes were designed exclusively for women with a majority from the marginalized communities and with a significant representation of *Dalits*. The discussion forums were planned once a week as literacy classes. The classes of each day were divided into four sessions; first, review and reflection of previous weeks learning and performance;

⁵ REFLECT (Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques): The approach seeks to build on the theoretical framework developed by the Brazilian Paulo Freire, but provides a practical methodology by drawing on PRA techniques (Archer and Cottingham, 1996).

second and third for discussion on new topics and the fourth for preparation of a weekly action plan and strategies for the week. Following a formal discussion and preparation of an action plan, the participants were encouraged to implement their advocacy plans.

The resource materials

The learning materials for training, workshop and literacy classes were developed as booklets, comics, posters and human-interest stories. The training materials are based on local context and carefully designed to make them participatory and empowering. Some materials were also developed in local dialects. The resource materials also include the successes, struggles, real life experiences and learning of project participants and partners.

Two reading books, *Susasan Sangalo* (collection of reading materials on governance) Part I and II, were developed to facilitate the process. The reading materials were developed in consultation with program participants, partners and target audiences. The advocacy facilitators were involved in order to forge a link between the literacy classes and ongoing advocacy efforts. Each facilitator was provided with an advocacy diary to document the advocacy issues, advocacy plan and the changes observed after the implementation of the plan in each center. The advocacy literacy empowered women by enhancing their confidence, helping them to become elected in key positions of CFUGs, and providing enough courage to raise their issues and concerns to influence group policies and practices.

Increased women's participation in key positions

The assumption behind the increased participation of women in key positions is to enable women to influence local level policies and decisions in order to practice a democratic

process of natural resource management and to ensure equitable benefit sharing. Table 2 presents the changes in women's participation in four key executive positions of CFUGs.

Table 2--Changes in status of women participation in key executive positions of CFUGs

Year	2002	2005
Number of CFUGs recorded	644	823
Number of available key positions	2576	3292
Number of women in key positions	521	1076
Percent of women in key positions	20	33

Source: FPR, SAMARPAN Program, 2005

Like Tables 2, Table 3 demonstrates an increasing trend of women participating in key executive positions of selected CFUGs. The increased participation of women in key positions has occurred in all CFUGs except Lakhana and Sundari CFUGs, where the women quit their tenure after the election. The main reasons given for quitting the Lakhana CFUG were external factors such as resistance from family, colleagues and traditional power holders. In contrast, internal factors were cited as reasons for quitting the Sundari CFUG, including limited experience and knowledge on legal, administrative and procedural matters of community forestry and inadequate experience and confidence in leadership roles. Within the scope of key positions, the majority of women were elected to the Vice Chairperson position, which is relatively less influential in comparison to others. Of the 1076 elected women representatives in all of the CFUGs, the distribution of positions is: Chair Person, 17 percent; Vice Chairperson, 40 percent; Secretary, 17 percent; and Treasurer, 26 percent.

Table 3--Women's participation in the key positions

Name of the CFUG	Number of women in committee		Duration in key positions		
	Member		Key positions		
	<i>before</i>	<i>after</i>	<i>before</i>	<i>after</i>	
Chandanpur	0	2	1	2	8 months
Ram Nagar	0	3	0	2	9 months
Lakhana	3	4	0	1	dropped after 1 year
Amar	2	5	0	1	8 months
Chautari	0	4	0	1	8 months
Sundari	0	2	0	1	Terminated after 2 months

Source: Field survey

Contribution of women leaders in women-focused activities

Following their selection in key positions, the enthusiastic women tried to influence CFUG decisions in the areas of their interest, needs and rights. Most of the women who were elected in key positions had their own agendas. The majority of them were interested in governance, equity and poverty reduction.

Contribution in governance

As the program was mainly focused on governance, the efforts of elected women were significant in this area. Similarly, the internal governance in the CFUGs is one of the major areas where there has been a noticeable change.

Transparency in fund management

It was found that the women leaders of all six CFUGs took active roles in public audit and hearing of the CFUG income, expenditure and progress, as well as in annual program and budgeting. The practice of public audit has contributed towards the recovery of misappropriated/misused funds in many CFUGs. Similarly, it has significantly contributed

towards reverting executive committees' decisions, where the decisions were not in favor of general users. Misused and inappropriately handled money was also recovered through collective action of user group members. The Lakhana CFUG of Bardia recovered US\$ 600.00 from the former executive committee members and utilized the recovered money in the construction of an office building. Similarly, the Ram Nagar CFUG formed a women's watchdog group to monitor group activities. The Ram Nagar CFUG also recovered misused money equivalent to US\$ 430 from members.

Capacity building through advocacy literacy

The Amar, Chautari and Chandanpur CFUGs conducted 16 weeks of advocacy literacy classes for women. The women leaders coordinated this process to get resources externally and internally. The advocacy literacy classes were very successful not only at enhancing the literacy skills of women but also at integrating women's empowerment into the development process. The Chautari CFUG conducted a legal awareness campaign on CF aimed at creating awareness of women members.

Gender sensitive and pro-poor policies

The women representatives initiated actions to include the name of both men and women as household heads representing the CFUG. Chandanpur and Chautari CFUGs are practicing this provision. In Chandanpur CFUG's amended the constitution so that both the husband's and wife's names as CFUG member have been incorporated as a mandatory provision. The Sundari CFUG provides free membership to new households who were excluded and would like to join CFUG and mention a woman as household head. Likewise, the Chautari CFUG provides a subsidy if a new household would like to register its name and

mentions a woman as household head. Following this provision, 37 woman-headed households registered in the Chautari CFUG in the last year.

Contribution in sustainable forest management

Sustainable forest management is one of the less prioritized areas of CF management. The CF management, in most of the CFUGs, is passive and timber oriented rather than focused on the production of multiple forest products to meet the demands of local people (Gentle 2000; Acharya 2003). However, based on practical needs, the women are demanding changes in forest management. The CFUGs are now able to implement an Operation Plan in an effective and efficient way to increase the supply of forest products from the community forests and also to increase the forest productivity.

Multiple use forestry

In Ram Nagar CFUG, Bardia, women members influenced group decisions to plant and manage fodder trees to increase fodder production. They also decided to provide fodder to poor families who are selected for a goat farming program. The new provision has enhanced the concept of multiple products' management to make the production system more equitable. Likewise, Sundari CFUG provided support to 25 ultra-poor households in the cultivation of asparagus (*Asparagus recemosus*). It has been assumed that such short rotation crops help in both the optimization of productivity of community forests and in equity in income and employment generation.

In Chautari CFUG, women leaders led campaigns against free grazing in the community forest. The campaign has increased awareness among user group members. As a

result free grazing, which hinders natural regeneration and damages plantations, has now been controlled.

Alternate energy program

Some alternative energy mechanisms are being explored to minimize the dependency upon the community forest resources. The Chandanpur CFUG decided to provide subsidy equivalent US\$ 45 to each household that installs a biogas plant. In response to this provision, eight households installed biogas plants within a year. Installing a biogas plant saves women's time in collection of fuel wood and cooking as well as contributes towards reducing smoke hazards.

Contribution to poverty reduction

The contribution of community forestry in poverty reduction is one of the most potential areas as community forestry holds and generates significant human, natural and financial resources. However, based on the national average, only a small portion, a mere 3 percent out of over US\$ 10 million annual income of CFUGs currently goes to support pro-poor programs (Kanel 2004). Community development comprises the highest proportion of CFUG expenses (36 percent), which includes community basic infrastructure development like road construction, irrigation and building community houses.

In a country where poor people receive very little attention, the SAMARPAN Program assisted CFUGs to allocate their resources to income and employment opportunities for the poor and women. The allocation of CFUG resources towards pro-poor programs has gained momentum in program districts. The momentum is very visible in the CFUGs where women leaders are in the key positions of the executive committee.

Pro-poor fund allocation

The Chandanpur CFUG has decided to invest 25 percent of the CFUG's total budget in pro-poor income generation related activities. The CFUG initiated their support to poor households in pig and goat farming. The Ram Nagar CFUG allocated about US\$ 285 to support income generation of poor women members through goat and pig farming. Likewise, Sundari CFUG identified 150 poor households through a participatory well being ranking process and 30 households among them are supported in goat farming. The CFUG also made a provision to prioritize widow women while selecting poor households for income generation programs. The poor households selected for income generation activities are also trained in advocacy and rights based approach to development.

Fund allocation in capacity building

Allocation of CFUG resources to women's awareness and empowerment related activities has been initiated. Ramnagar CFUG invested US\$ 285 to conduct a women's awareness campaign. Similarly, in Chautari CFUG widows have begun to wear red clothes, *tika* and bangles to challenge the age-old social discrimination against them.

The Chautari CFUG has organized weaving training and materials for 25 poor women members and allocated funds to support treatment and medicine costs of poor women during their delivery. The Amar and Sundari CFUGs supported three ultra-poor households for construction of their houses.

Contribution in education

The CFUG's fund is being utilized in both the formal and none formal education sector. The Chandanpur CFUG decided to provide funds and timber for a primary school for five years. In the current year, the CFUG provided support equivalent to US\$ 1430 to the

same school to upgrade it from a primary to a secondary school. Similarly, the Ramnagar CFUG made a provision to provide scholarships exclusively to poor girls attending primary and secondary schools. The groups identify poor households using the participatory well being ranking process.

Changes in CFUG expenditure

Following the priority in women's empowerment and pro-poor income generation activities, the pattern of CFUG expenditure has been varied. The expenditure of Chautari CFUG in the last three years was analyzed to examine the priority of fund allocation by the CFUG (Table 4). The information revealed that a major proportion of CFUG annual expenditure goes to administrative costs including both operating costs of CFUGs and costs of harvesting and collecting forest products. However, it has been observed that the administrative costs of the CFUG have been gradually reduced, and the allocation of funds in pro-poor and empowerment related activity has been significantly increased. The allocation of funds in community development has decreased in 2005 as some of the funds are now being allocated to pro-poor income generation activities. The results demonstrate that the role of women leaders and critical mass effectively influenced CFUG decisions in fund allocation.

Table 4- Changes in expenditure in Chautari CFUG (Expenditure in US\$)

	Administration	Community development	Forest development	Pro -poor activities	Empowerment
2003	9,881	2,130	316	156	159
2004	9,669	4,567	1,271	716	405
2005	8,428	3,794	1,183	1,713	1,394
Total	27,978	10,491	2,770	2,585	1,958

Source: CFUG records, 2005

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In the case of the six CFUGs studied, the women leaders have demonstrated their commitment to produce promising results in terms of organizing and mobilizing women and marginalized communities to advocate their needs, concerns and rights, and to increase their access to and control over community forestry resources. The effectiveness of the participation of women in decision-making processes has revealed that participation of women in key positions of users' committee is more effective than forming women-only CFUGs and allocating them a small patch of forests. The observation also supports the recommendations of some previous studies (Agarwal 2001; Gentle 2003; Rai and Buchy 2004).

The collaborative approaches utilized, which brought different stakeholders together in the advocacy process, has been successful at making the decision-making process inclusive and representative with minimum resistance from local power holders. As a result of the inclusive decision-making process, marginalized communities have influenced CFUG decisions on their own behalf. The inclusion and empowerment process has also enhanced

women's and marginalized communities' ownership and ensured the accountability of users' committees towards general users.

The critical mass theory originally evolved in Scandinavian countries and practiced in Europe to measure the effectiveness of the size of critical mass in European parliament (Dahlerup 2001; Grey 2001; Lovenduski 2001; Studlar and Mcallister 2002) remains applicable to assess the effectiveness of critical mass in the functioning of civil society organizations in developing countries. However, the "size", or threshold at which change occurs, may be more relevant in a relatively homogeneous and educated society than in a heterogeneous, patriarchal and gender-biased society like Nepal. The theory of critical acts, which considers both men and women as actors in attempts to improve the position of women (Dahlerup 2001), remains instrumental in Nepal in bringing the desired change. Moreover, the formation and mobilization of a constituency of likeminded individuals and institutions played a key role in providing solidarity and backstopping to the marginalized communities to enhance their courage and confidence to challenge and influence power relations.

Governance informed by a gender perspective is another critical dimension of development. Some researchers have stated that women's participation in public life is associated with lower levels of corruption, that women are less prone than men to accepting bribes and more averse to giving them (Manadhar 2005). Manandhar argues that most of the studies have not confirmed whether these differences are due to gender roles or other factors like biology, access to networks of corruption, knowledge of corrupt practices, or others. Our findings on governance and community forestry in the case studies suggest that the inclusion of women in decision-making process minimizes bad governance practices. The

demonstrated role of women in conducting public audits and hearings and in recovering misused group funds supports this statement. However, an in-depth study is needed to confirm the relationship between gender and governance in general, and corruption in particular.

The election of women in the key positions of CFUGs is itself a challenge for women and marginalized communities. CFUGs have been recognized as one of the most resourceful and reputed institutions at the local level in Nepal. Continuation of their tenure after election is a big challenge for women leaders. The Lakhana CFUG of Bardia and Sundari CFUG of Nawalparasi are examples where women elected to treasurer and vice chairperson positions of CFUG respectively, unfortunately quit their tenure within a year. The reasons behind their terminations provide lessons for practitioners. Personal reasons include: limited experience and knowledge on legal, administrative and procedural matters of community forestry and inadequate experience and confidence in their leadership roles. External factors include lack of adequate time to make a balance between household and community roles, inadequate support from family and colleagues, as well as the risks and threats associated with their job. These social and political barriers, as well as the pre-existing advantages that men as a gender enjoy in terms of greater access to economic resources and public decision-making (Agarwal 1997) need to be addressed through policy in order for women to become effective agents of change.

In Lakhana CFUG, the elected treasurer initiated procedures for making CFUG funds transparent to all users, conducting public audits and hearings, and recovering funds misused by former executive committee members. These activities, in the short run, remained successful, but could not gain momentum due to resistance from local power holders. The

constituency of the like-minded individuals and institutions in this case was not strong enough to support and continue the activities challenging the power structure. However, in the case of Sundari CFUG, the constituency of like-minded organizations was very strong. Although the elected vice chairperson quit her tenure, the momentum was continued and demonstrated very good results.

One of the major lessons realized by the program is that the project contributed towards the capacity building of women and other stakeholders to provide an enabling environment for bringing more women into leadership positions, but it did not provide adequate attention to the capacity building of elected and potential women leaders to enhance their knowledge, skills, courage and confidence. It has been realized that providing opportunity for the representation of women on committees is a prerequisite, but not necessarily a sufficient condition to ensure the desired results. Unless efforts are made to enable marginal voices to be raised and heard, claims to inclusiveness made on behalf of participatory development will appear rather empty (Cornwall 2003).

In summary, it can be concluded that women in key positions contribute towards more equitable governance and poverty alleviation. Representation of women on committees is not enough and needs a supporting mass of like-minded individuals acting as a constituency of critical mass in a positive environment. The inclusive approach and collaborative tools of advocacy contributes towards respectful negotiation among the different interest groups within the community. The findings indicate that in the context of rural Nepal, the implementation of a collective action program which concentrates only on participation without focusing on empowerment and capacity building is insufficient.

Providing an opportunity is pre-requisite for enhancing women's decision-making role, but it is only successful if it can be linked with capacity building and empowerment.

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