Is Community Forest Management Good for the Environment and the Poor? – A Review

Over the last two decades, community-based forest management has graduated from being an experimental strategy to becoming a much more mainstream approach. In developing countries, an estimated 22 percent of forest estate is owned by or reserved for community and indigenous groups. Now a SANDEE review paper looks at the literature to assess whether community-based forest management in countries such as India and Nepal can reduce forest loss and benefit local communities.

This review by Priya Shyamsundar and Rucha Ghate suggests mixed outcomes related to community forestry. However, there are many lessons that can contribute to better practices. The paper recommends that policy makers focus on improving forest ownership and use rights, strengthen local monitoring, and recognize the tensions and trade-offs that lead to inter-community disagreements.

Forest Management in South Asia

In South Asia there have been large-scale experiments in the decentralization of forest management – in particular Joint Forest Management in India and Community Forestry in Nepal. (For more on these developments, see the side bar.) These experiments have transformed the relationship between forests, forest departments and rural households. This has happened through the strengthening of local rights over forests, power-sharing agreements with the state, increased legal access, and decentralization within national agencies.

Understanding the impact of community forest management on local people and forest sustainability is vital. The rural poor depend heavily on forests and good management can play a vital role in poverty reduction. What's more, fuelwood and fodder meet daily subsistence needs for many poor people and non-timber forest products (NTFPs) are a source of cash as well as food. Ensuring the sustainable extraction of the forest resources is therefore a key priority. From an environmental point of view, poor forest management can have a significant negative impact on natural capital assets, biodiversity and ecosystem services. It also has significant implications for climate change: some 12 to 20% of annual greenhouse gas emissions are attributable to land cover changes, including forest loss.

To shed some light on the impact of the decentralization of forest management, this study reviews recent research literature to see whether the change towards community-based forest management has led to a reduction in forest degradation and to assess whether it has empowered households and contributed to household wellbeing. The study focuses on research carried out in India and Nepal.

Does Community Management Help Conservation?

When it comes to forest conservation and community forest management, the consensus within the research and policy communities is generally positive. For example, a comparative study of 74 forest patches in Nepal, found that community-based Forest User Groups contribute to forest regeneration and also result in a decline in fuelwood collection. In places where there were no such user groups, few regulations were imposed on the use of forests. When forests were managed by user groups, there was a steady increase in the number of regulations.

Two large and carefully done studies from the Indian Himalayas also have

Community forestry in South Asia

Forest policy in India has changed significantly over the past 100 years or so. At the end of the 19th century, 80 percent of India's land was under 'common' management. But land rights were eased out of the hands of the communities first by the British and later by the Indian government. The trend towards national control over forests continued in post-independence India, with few major changes until the 1980s. However, in 1988, a new National Forest Policy brought about a paradigm shift. The policy sought to involve "tribal people closely in the protection, regeneration and development of forests as well as provide employment to people living in and around forests".

Although a major emphasis remained on the ecological role of forests, community requirements for fuel-wood, fodder, minor forest produce and construction timber were recognized. A new form of governance, referred to as Joint Forest Management (JFM), developed from this policy. JFM builds village-level institutions, popularly known as Forest Protection Committees (FPCs), to engage communities in forest management. These committees are expected to partner with the forest department and to make forest management plans, create rules related to forest use and monitor and sanction illegal activities.

JFM spread rapidly in India with support from multiple international donors. This development has varied from state to state and has also evolved over the years. By 2001, 62,890 committees had been set up in 27 Indian states covering an area of 14 million hectares of forests. In addition, there are hundreds of endogenous forest institutions that exist throughout India.

Nepal entered the decentralization era under similar conditions. However, while recent forest policies in India emerged from a tussle between pro-forest and pro-community groups, decentralization in Nepal was largely a reaction to high rates of deforestation.

In 1974, high levels of forest destruction raised alarm bells at the Ninth Forestry Conference held in Kathmandu. This resulted in a pro-community national forestry plan that assigned responsibilities and rights over forests to local Panchayats. However a final decision to hand over forests to traditional users was only made after the preparation of the 25 year Forestry Master Plan in 1986-88.

Community Forestry User Groups (CFUGs) were set up for managing, protecting and sustainably using Nepal's forests. The Forest Act of 1993 and forest regulations of 1995 re-categorized forests into community, leasehold, government, religious and protected forests. CFUGs were thus institutionalized as legal self-governing entities with utilization and management rights over village forests. This was a turning point in the history of forest policy in Nepal.

Currently, there are some 14,572 CFUGs scattered throughout Nepal covering a total area of 1.2 million hectares (25%) of forest land. These have some 163,567 elected members (41,933 women) who make day-to-day decisions on forests. The CFUGs in Nepal are not very different from the FPCs in India in terms of their organization, structure and functions.

a positive message about the role of community management in forest conservation: One of these studies concludes that community-based forest management has been successful in regulating firewood and fodder extraction by locals. The other study finds that forests under community management are now no more degraded than state forests and suggests that communities are able to manage forests at least as well as the state forest department. The results from the Himalayan studies offer a degree of confidence about the long-term positive impacts of community forest management on the environment.

Do Local People Benefit from Community Management?

When it comes to the impact of community-based forest management on local people, there are a number of studies which show its economic effects. For example, one study from Beharoonguda in Andhra Pradesh, India, shows that income from forest-related employment schemes (coppicing, singling etc.) accounts for nearly 43 percent of household income. However, the impact of the change to community forestry on the poor is not necessarily positive. For example, research from Nepal shows that poorer households, who are more dependent on forest products than the relatively better off, are more restricted by access and conservation rules imposed by Community Forestry User Groups (CFUGs). This is often because of deeply entrenched inequities in the country's social structure.

The impact of community forestry on the poor is not straightforward, particularly with respect to the income they receive from timber and non-timber forest products. Even though timber values can be significant, because of the long time period between harvests, the returns to the poor from timber may be small. There are also distributional issues that are relevant. In Nepal, CFUGs

sell timber at a less-than-market rate to local users. Since the poor mostly do not buy timber for building houses, large timber subsidies accrue mainly to wealthier households.

In India, the state does not give communities rights over major commercial NTFPs. Lucrative products such as Sal seeds and Tendu leaves are still controlled by the forest department and private contractors. Often, there are also restrictions on how communities can sell their products or who they can sell them to – these can lower the returns the poor receive from community forestry projects.

Women in forest

The Challenge of Poverty Reduction

Because the impact of community-based forest management on the poor can be negative, the Indian and Nepal governments increasingly recognize the importance of linking poverty reduction more directly with forestry reforms. Consequently, the government of India has created federations of Forest Protection Committees (FPCs). These groups tie forest access rules in with employment generation schemes, value addition activities and rural development. This is not an easy approach to get right – it requires coordination across ministries and departments, which is always challenging.

Nepal has also started a pro-poor program that promotes the use of community forestry funds to directly improve the lives of the poorest. A percent of forestry funds is set aside to help the poor through micro-credit and training scholarships. The program's impact has, however, may not be totally positive – some recent research suggests that the benefits to the non-poor can be greater than those to the poor. Thus, while decentralized forestry in India and Nepal has taken on some of the challenges of poverty reduction, they have a long way to go to really benefit the very poor.

Not a Panacea for Forest Management

Overall, the research literature shows that community-based natural resource management is not a panacea for managing forests in developing countries. It is also not a homogenous solution. Rather, community forestry comes in multiple forms, some of which work better than others.

The failure of some community-based forestry management can be traced to a number of underlying problems: Researchers have found that decentralization reforms can be flawed in design or become ineffective because of strong resistance from a variety of actors. A key problem has been an inability to truly devolve power to local levels. This happens when local communities are given the illusion of power but

are expected to rubber stamp decisions that are made by forestry and other officials. For example, communities in many parts of South Asia have the responsibility to protect forests, but not the rights to sanction encroachers or to use the revenues earned from forests; they are also insecure over their rights of access to forests. In addition, inter-community conflicts are frequent because of new rules or changed boundaries.

These challenges are highlighted when community-based forest management in Nepal is compared with that in India. A good part of the success of community forestry in Nepal can be attributed to local foresters banding together around the concept and receiving training that allowed them to see forest management differently. In Nepal, relevant community institutions are more accountable locally than those in India. Communities have more secure rights over their forests and are able to use funds raised from forest-related activities with less interference from the state. In comparison, FPCs have spread rapidly across India, and this has led to the creation of institutions without a strong foundation within communities.

Use of expensive timber for fencing

Building Institutions and Promoting Equity

While the meaningful devolution of power is vital, it is also critical to build up strong forest-management institutions. These need to be equipped with resources, training and rights that make them downwardly accountable. Leadership needs to be provided where it is missing or strengthened where it is present. It is clear that government, NGOs and donors will continue to be important in providing the required technical and monetary support.

One other challenge facing community-based forest management is inequality in the way that the benefits from forests are distributed. Given the nature of society in South Asia – which is very segregated along caste and class lines – leaving these issues to communities to settle is not an adequate response. A conscious effort is required by implementing agencies to ensure fair support to the poorest and most under-privileged groups. Micro Plans need to become more inclusive – they can be used to identify the specific needs of women and the landless poor. Both recognition of differential needs and promotion of democratic participation are important for equitable rule making.

Finally, there is also a challenge that relates to meeting the twin goals of environmental sustainability and poverty reduction: decentralization can lead to a mismatch between what is required from an ecosystem services perspective and what is needed from a social management perspective. This challenge needs to be acknowledged and accommodated in any community-based forestry management plan.