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A Grassroots Organizer with a Commitment to Gender-Balanced Participation

An Interview with Hari Prasad Neupane, Chairperson, Federation of Community Forestry Users in Nepal



FIGURE 1 Hari Prasad Neupane gives the inaugural address at a regional workshop on the role of elected institutions in community forestry management in the Hindu Kush–Himalayas (March 1998, Kathmandu, Nepal). (Photo courtesy of ICIMOD)

Pallav Ranjan (MRD): How did you become involved in community forestry and with FECOFUN?

Hari Prasad Neupane: After 19 years in government service, I returned to Ahale, my village in eastern Nepal, and found that the village had lost its forests. People were planting corn and millet where there had been dense wild vegetation. My friends Krishna Bahadur Yonzon, Bhakta Prasad, and others were concerned. So 17 of us got together and contributed Rs. 5 each to start an informal committee. We planted and cared for many saplings that we collected from the fields. When we attempted to establish a community forest, there was much opposition. We decided that we could not force others to do what we wanted, so we planted the saplings on land under our jurisdiction. We established the Ahale Community Forest in 1990. One year after planting trees, there was a noticeable difference in the area. The saplings grew tall and provided shade and fodder for animals, birds came to the new forest, and the whole village looked more beautiful. This brought about a change in people's attitudes: women formed a Fresh Vegetable Production Group, men started the Buffalo Keeping Group, and the community forest became an example to others. Soon there were community forests throughout the district and great demand for information on how to establish them. Altogether, 360 such community forests were established. We organized a 3-day workshop with the help of the Koshi Hill Area Rural Development Project and an organization of community forest user groups was formally established at Bhojpur District. The Department of Forests organized a national workshop of such groups in Dhankuta, eastern Nepal. Forty-one groups from 38 districts participated. There was talk of establishing a national association and, in 1995, the International Center for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), and the Forestry and People's Program (FTTP) organized an interactive program. At follow-up meetings, I was made a part

of the ad hoc committee responsible for creating an association. We provided for participation of women, deciding that at least 50% of the organization's members would have to be women. The organization was called the Federation of Community Forestry Users in Nepal (FECOFUN) and was inaugurated by the Minister of Forest Resources. I was appointed chairperson by popular vote. We have a membership of 3200 formally registered groups, and I estimate that altogether we work with 5000 such groups.

How did community forestry develop in Nepal?

Most forests were owned by landlords such as *Mukhiyas*, *Birtawals*, and *Jemindars* before 1956. People could cut trees and grass and collect leaves provided that they received permission from the landlords or their agents; in exchange, they often had to contribute free labor. In 1956, the government announced that forests would be nationalized. Before the law was enacted, landlords cleared thousands of acres of forest cover. They turned forests into planting fields, stocked wood, and gave permission to contractors to cut trees arbitrarily in exchange for little money. Once the government took over the forests, people felt alienated, as if the forests belonged to someone else. Trees were cut extensively wherever the government could not police the forest. In 1967, the government warned that trespassers in forested areas could be shot below the knee. This did not stop rich people from exploiting the forest; they simply paid poorer people to cut trees; these poor laborers were the ones who were shot and beaten up. After district forestry officers declared in 1976 that the forests could not be saved, the government in 1978 gave the head of the village *Panchayat* (governing body) equal rights with the Department of Forests to control the misuse of forests. This made matters worse. Previously, people who needed grass and fuelwood had to appease only forestry officials, but now village *Panchayats* also had to be appeased. Moreover, during times of political

upheaval, the *pradhan panchas* (elected representatives) were involved in the felling of trees. Mass clearance of forest cover occurred in 1979, when there was a referendum on multiparty democracy. These were the dark years. In 1989, debate on a policy of decentralization was initiated and 5 years later a master plan was prepared. The plan made it clear that people's basic needs for fuelwood, grass, coal, and beams for construction had to be fulfilled if forest cover was to be saved. A sustainable forest management plan was needed. Decision-making had to involve popular participation to ensure that people's economic and social requirements were met. A law passed in 1992 became the foundation for community forests and transferred forest ownership to the people.

What are the latest policy changes and trends?

The law enacted in 1992 was a good one. Unfortunately, the sections and subsections that have been added to it since then have deprived it of much of its effectiveness. Despite our lobbying members of parliament, international NGOs and professionals in the field, the law still favors the bureaucracy rather than increasing the scope for control by the people.

Globalization and market-oriented policies are playing an increasingly important role in policy-making today. Private companies hope to use forests for profit and the government hopes to generate revenue from them. For example, the forests in 6 districts of the Terai (lowland areas to the south of Nepal) were to be handed over to a Finnish company and 3 Nepalese companies for management. The law clearly states that user groups should be consulted before such moves are made. With the help of the Nepal Forum for Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ), Women Acting Together for Change (WATCH), and other groups, FECOFUN went to the areas in question and discovered that the people had not participated in the decision-making process. We prepared a handout, called a

national-level meeting, and organized a 22-day fact-finding mission. In some areas, people had been told that an international airport would be opened and roads would be built, etc., if the forest was taken over by private companies. However, these were empty promises not backed by concrete plans. We lobbied against this plan. We gathered 122 persons, including Village Development Committee chairpersons, and prepared an action plan. We went to Finland and Sweden to discuss the issue. In the end, a survey team sent by Finland to look into the matter recommended that the plan be abandoned. The whole idea was dropped.

Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhatrarai recently announced that trees could not be cut for a period of 10 years. As a result, forest user groups have received instructions ordering us to halt the felling of trees in community forests. This clearly contradicts provisions set forth in the law. The law provides for meeting people's basic needs. Such actions by the government hamper the development of community forests. People need many things from the forest. This is why they are planting forests and practicing sustainable forest management.

What are the current issues in community forestry policy in the hills and the Terai plains?

The ban on harvesting in community forests is a major issue. The government needs to understand that decisions related to community forests must be made by forest users. According to Nepalese law, community forests should be autonomous and self-governing; the government cannot dictate policy. If people are forbidden to do certain things, they will become discouraged and stop investing money and effort in community forests. I also find that bureaucrats are trying to blame user groups for forest mismanagement, and I get a clear feeling that they want the law to be changed to give them more power so they can interfere in community forests. I question the results achieved by the gov-



FIGURE 2 FECOFUN recognizes the key role of mountain women in natural resources management. (Photo courtesy of ICIMOD)

“People need many things from the forest. This is why they are planting forests and practicing sustainable forest management....If people are forbidden to do certain things, they will become discouraged and stop investing money and effort in community forests.”

“Forests are a source of natural beauty, medicinal plants, and water. Yet we have not been able to make use of these resources....Community forests have already brought people together. Now when other community issues such as water, savings, and income generation are debated, we have a platform to build on because the groundwork is already complete.”

The Federation of Community Forestry Users in Nepal was founded in 1995 as a national networking organization and now involves over 3000 user groups from more than 60 of Nepal's 75 districts. Its mission is to support self-reliance and increase independent decision-making capacity among forest user groups. It is funded through membership fees, remuneration for consultancy services, and partnerships.

ernment after it gained control of the forests in 1956. There was massive destruction. I am prepared to challenge the government and to show that the best they achieved does not match our poorest achievement. Already, there is a provision that forest rangers have to oversee the creation of community forests. They check the area and oversee the formation of committees and examine their constitutions and their activities before approving their registration. If officials find problems, they can ask local groups to rectify deficiencies so there is little danger of problems later.

What major changes have taken place in the forestry sector in Nepal since the advent of democracy and the multiparty system in 1990, and what are the major challenges ahead?

Democracy has largely benefited the richer and more powerful people. Departmental secretaries and those who hold important positions in government were associated with the former system of governance and act as they did prior to the advent of democracy. If a forestry officer speaks out against such activities, he is sent to a far-off place and is not promoted. This prevents government employees from standing up to their superiors. The government has turned the country into a police state and most discussions are one-sided. If an organization such as FECOFUN has support, it can do a lot and make fundamental changes. Since the institution of democracy, the situation has improved in Kathmandu and larger cities like Biratnagar, but in most places, change has not come about. People are unaware of their rights and the chairpersons of user groups do not know what the law says. The major challenge is thus to educate people about their rights under Nepalese law. Government bureaucrats claim that foreigners and people with vested interests formed FECOFUN. But bureaucrats are not in a position to dominate us easily. We are in the forests and work in the villages among the people.

What is the role of community forestry in mountain development and livelihood strategies?

Community forestry increases people's determination to work together and shows them that the village and the community can make a huge difference. It increases income and promotes networking and social bonds. Sources of water that dried up have come back, trees have helped people save time and energy, and the villagers now know that they have power. People need forests throughout their lifetimes. Forests are a source of natural beauty, medicinal plants, and water. Yet we have not been able to make use of these resources. A strategy must be prepared and people need to decide how they are going to utilize the natural resources at their disposal. Community forests have already brought people together. Now when other community issues such as water, savings, and income generation are debated, we have a platform to build on because the groundwork is already complete.

What are the links between community forestry and other development sectors such as agriculture and water resource management?

We have no formal plans or links. However, as I mentioned earlier, women in Ahale opened a Fresh Vegetable Production Group and men started the Buffalo Keeping Group under the umbrella of the Ahale Community Forest Users' Group. There is a lot of potential for linkages and further use of the platform that has already been established.

What are the advantages of community forests?

Community forest users' groups have many positive attributes. Their activities enhance

natural scenery and beauty. Wild animals and birds return to reforested areas. Women have more time for themselves and their children because they need less time to collect fuelwood and fodder. Domestic animals are healthier with plenty of fodder and grass. Yields increase, thus improving incomes, nutrition, and the overall health of the village population. Since domestic animals stay closer to homesteads when forest cover needs to be protected, there is less waste of natural fertilizer, so agricultural output increases. Moreover, people are encouraged and their attitudes change. They are less dependent on others, and social bonds and the willingness to work together are strengthened. Users get together for the general assembly every 6 months to discuss problems and seek solutions, talk and decide about development, create savings groups, etc. There is a sense of responsibility; people are willing to work as volunteers. These are the major changes, and there are many minor changes as well.

How would you characterize existing conflicts?

There are many sources of conflict, as when people think, "you give, I'll take." This prevents long-term benefits and accountability. Conflicts also exist when a chairperson makes decisions without involving the committee or the users. Lack of transparency also results in serious problems. Some problems are minor irritants, while in other cases, egoism may even break up a forestry user group.

How are funds generated from community forestry utilized for mountain development?

User groups generate their own funds and decide how much to spend and where to spend it. Groups run by chairpersons alone have more problems because people feel left out and are hesitant when asked to contribute. This top-down approach

must become a bottom-up process. User groups raise money by household in many cases. Sometimes labor is needed rather than money. People can plant trees, build bridges and roads, start savings groups, begin animal husbandry projects, plant nurseries, or open schools. You can do a lot with money raised from the community. All of these activities have already been successfully tried and tested.

What are the major challenges of the future?

Users are unfamiliar with laws, policies, and rules, and nothing has been done to alleviate this "need to know" situation. I feel that development projects should be implemented by users and not by the government. When I meet government- and development-project appointed staff and ask them about the government's ongoing 5-year plan, most of them don't know about it. They don't know the laws that govern them even though they have attended training sessions. If they don't know the laws and the rights of the community, how can they protect local communities? I think Nepalese are depressed; most of us believe that Nepal will not develop. We are not in a positive frame of mind. "Do it for us" is the attitude, not "let us do it." I believe there are 4 kinds of Nepalese: some understand, some pretend they don't understand, some don't care, and some are guided by misinformation and rumors. We have to get all these people interested in what is really going on. Attitudes must change. Bureaucrats and rulers must stop trampling on villagers. Of course there are financial problems and this is a major difficulty. People have basic needs such as food and shelter. Laws that protect these needs must be enforced without restriction. But as the chairperson of FECOFUN, I feel encouraged. I have been in this position for 4 years now, and we have given a clear direction to community forestry. We have been able to stop a multinational company, and we have been able to demonstrate the power of the people to bureaucrats. We still have many challenges to meet, but we will succeed because we work among the people.



FIGURE 3 Local women at a FECOFUN planting ceremony. (Photo courtesy of ICIMOD)

Hari Prasad Neupane was born in Ahale Village in Bhojpur District of eastern Nepal. He has a School Leaving Certificate and worked for the Malaria Eradication Center for 19 years. He has traveled extensively in Nepal and was involved in community forestry for about 10 years. He has been instrumental in planning FECOFUN, preparing its constitution, and fostering its growth.

Pallav Ranjan is a journalist and media specialist who works for Spiny Babbler's communication services unit in Kathmandu, Nepal. Mr. Ranjan interviewed Hari Prasad Neupane in March 2000. The interview was conducted in Nepali and translated into English by Mr. Ranjan. MRD is grateful to Regional Editor T. S. Papola of ICIMOD for arranging the interview and to Anupam Bhatia, also of ICIMOD, for helping prepare the final version. *Ed.*