

# Villages join hands to combat

**New legislation in India allows communities to take charge of degraded forest areas. One village claimed to have legal rights over a particular forest area. But users from neighbouring villages protested. An external NGO helped the communities to accept each other as legitimate forest users. Jointly, the villages are rehabilitating the area.**

Sanjay Joshie

A majority of India's tribal communities inhabit upland and forest dominated landscapes. They have little agricultural land and are limited in livelihood options. There used to be dense forests in the areas where they lived, which fulfilled a lot of their livelihood needs. But when the colonial state took away the legal rights of tribes to use their forests in 1878, traditional protection broke down and outsiders took away valuable forest products from the area. As a result, the forest cover in India dropped to 11 percent in 1990, down from 32 percent in 1900. Now, deforestation has led to widespread damage to downstream farms.

Chitravas, in the southern Aravalli ranges in India, is one of the millions of affected villages. Chitravas means "home of the leopard", and the village has always had a dense and rich forest. When in 1988 new forest policies allowed people's participation in the protection of forest, Chitravas was quick to form a committee to protect the forest. But three nearby communities protested the fact that Chitravas inhabitants were claiming the forest this way. They had been using the plot for as long as they could remember.

## Village forest committee

In 2001, the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) started its work in Chitravas, to help the committee come up with plans to manage the plot. The FES team took advice from the Divisional Forest Conservator and organised a village general body meeting, where all the communities expressed their concerns. FES then organised repeated meetings to understand the traditional forest use patterns in the area so that the real forest users could be included. Based on the evidence gathered in these meetings, the communities jointly prepared a customary user rights list. This helped in deciding the voting rights for the Village Forest Committee.

The forest turned out to be actively used by two thirds of the families in Chitravas and the three surrounding settlements. These 325 forest users agreed to protect and manage the forest plot through joint forest management. This led to a committee of 18 members in total. While this committee was bigger than usual, the inclusive distribution of leadership ensured that representatives of all the communities supported the decisions made and would not boycott activities.

## Implementing joint plans

The new committee decided on an action plan, which was approved by the forest department. First, communities rebuilt a stone wall to protect the forest land. Planting of *Jatropha curacus* along the stone-wall provided an additional vegetative barrier. The construction of loose boulder check dams, gully plugs, contour trenches and gabions ensured *in situ* conservation of soil and moisture. In addition, 50 000 saplings of various species and grasses were planted. Women's groups took up livelihood activities

such as kitchen gardening, and pasture development activities. This provided poorer families with water and healthy food.

Organising in this way led to various improvements. Local governance improved – the community has been able to establish a true form of local self governance. Now, the villagers have started accessing other programmes available with the local government, such as agricultural services. Protection has also resulted in more and better biomass: from 140 t/ha in unprotected plots to 302 t/ha in protected plots. In dense forest, soil losses are six times less than in open land. Women have been able to take part in the community decision-making process and have even assumed leadership. Lastly, the plot now provides water. The number of wells has increased from ten to forty. Flash floods used to happen regularly in the monsoon, and the banks of the stream were eroded year after year. Now the plot stores water.

## Problems to overcome

Of course, not everything went smoothly. In the process of coming to a shared plan for the use of the forest, the villagers encountered many problems. For example, farmers used to encroach on the forest. One villager planted a crop of around half a hectare inside the forest. The villagers gave him time to harvest his crop, if he then agreed to close the fence. But after the harvest, he started preparing the field for another crop, defying committee orders. The committee called for village meetings on this issue. The farmer in question did not show up, and people started holding meetings in front of his house. So the matter was taken up with the local government. Finally the community pressure was so intense that he had to vacate the area. He then started to participate in the land conservation process.

## Learning from an

**With leasehold forestry, poor households are allowed to use a plot of degraded forest for a certain amount of time. In Nepal, a project showed that this helped poor households improve their living standards, while at the same time reviving degraded forests. Implementing leasehold forestry on a larger scale was a logical next step. But in doing so, the Nepalese government ran into some obstacles.**

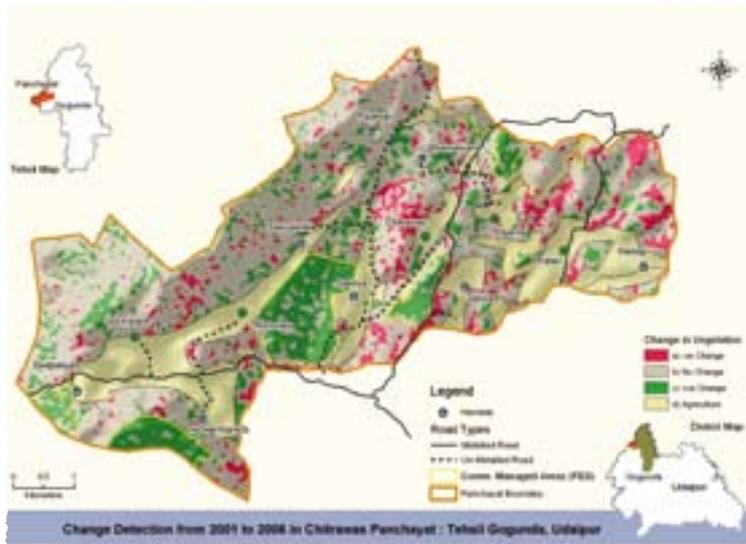
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Since 1989, authorities in Nepal can legally hand over degraded forest to poor people for agro-forestry. District forestry offices identified the poorest households, and handed over degraded forest plots to them, on a 40-year lease. From 1992 to 2003 a project funded by IFAD developed working procedures to institutionalise this leasehold forestry. Until 2003, government agencies and researchers supported almost 2000 user groups that managed some 7000 hectares in a third of the country's districts. Groups could plant annual crops and small trees. The bigger trees remained government property.

## Impressive results

With the forest plots being managed, fuel and fodder production in forests improved. Women did not have to spend so much time

# land degradation



**This land cover change map shows that the area under community management has become greener after villages agreed to jointly care for the land. (Source: FES)**

To protect the land, the committee hired guards. This did not work, and so the community devised the “stick system”: three persons from different households carry sticks as a sign that it is their duty to guard the plot. If they find any animals inside, they report this to the village committee, who imposes sanctions according to the village norms. As people from Chitravas could not participate in the stick system, they paid extra for

products harvested. In the earlier situation such concessions were unthinkable. This was because before, the inhabitants from Chitravas did not allow families from other communities to be committee members.

There are still occasional problems such as the guard on duty is not sincere or does not go to guard; cattle is found inside the plot; or families not turning up for labour contribution on the site. But now such things are resolved internally. The committee discusses such matters, refers to the byelaws, and then penalises the defaulters by fines or labour.

## Incentive

Joint Forest Management has provided a degree of tenure security, and an incentive to local communities to participate in forest protection and restoration activities. They thus link up conservation with livelihoods.

The people in Chitravas, like in other villages, initially liked project benefits such as waged labour for wall construction. But now that farmers are seeing their forests regenerating, fodder growing, and streams flowing for a longer period, it has made them see other benefits. Farmers have expressed what they see as future benefits, how they would ensure equitable sharing later, and how they would ensure protection of their forests for eternity.

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# effort to scale up local successes

collecting food and were able to take part in training and income-generating activities. Less time spent cattle grazing allowed children to attend school, while goat-keeping was a source of income for families. The forest became more dense, with more plant and animal species, and there was less soil erosion. All in all, at project scale, participating households became better off, and forests became greener. The fact that the groups were mobilised by female facilitators – a deliberate choice – also paid off: most lease certificates were issued in women’s names – quite an achievement in a male-dominated society.

Leasehold forestry, at the project scale, seemed a successful way to improve the livelihoods of poor families. The national government therefore commissioned its expansion in 2002. In theory, leasehold forestry could be scaled up, to cover a million hectares of degraded forest. A National Planning Commission aimed to establish 100 000 hectares of leasehold forestry in the tenth five-year plan (2002-2007).

## Why scaling up did not happen

Now, after the plan, this ambition seems to have largely failed. By 2007, the area under leasehold forestry increased by only a few thousand hectares rather than the planned 100 000. The government plan failed for several reasons.

First, not everybody warmheartedly supported leasehold forestry. Officials involved with wildlife management saw it as a threat. According to them, it meant turning forest into land for agriculture, and therefore they did not like it – even if it boosted biodiversity.

Second, some NGOs regarded leasehold forestry as a threat to well-established community forestry. In community forestry, forest is handed over to mixed groups of rich and poor households, based on the community around patches of forest. A review has shown that despite many initiatives aimed at poor households, community forestry benefits rich households, with poor households often ending up being worse off. Leasehold forestry could therefore be a good complementary approach. But many NGOs did not share this view.

Third, the new, decentralised district forestry co-ordination committees still needed to develop planning procedures for land use, enabling them to allocate leasehold forestry next to community forest or parks. Last but not very hard, on-going insurgency and political turmoil made it very hard for the government to address all these problems.

The failed attempt to implement leasehold forestry on a large scale shows that success at the field level alone is not enough. Specific knowledge of how to link leasehold forestry with the general forestry governance would be needed. In addition, local and mid-level policy makers, NGOs and bureaucrats must be willing to support it in the longer term.

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