Women farmers learning how to measure trees. Photo: Hukum Singh

Community forest management and FFS

Hukum Singh

Sharada Devi forest has been protected and used by local communities under community forestry arrangements since the 1980s. Here, as in many other parts of Nepal, the rights and responsibilities for forest resource management have been successfully transferred to the local Forest User Group (FUG). However, although the condition of both forest and water resources have visibly improved under these arrangements, the flow of products from the community forest is far below its capacity for sustainable production. Community forestry has succeeded in protecting the forest, but has failed to provide the expected benefits to users. The main reasons for this are a tendency to over protect community forests, and a lack of forest management support to the FUGs. Recent initiatives to set up Farmers Forest Management Schools (FFMSs) have attempted to address these issues.

What are Farmers Forest Management Schools?

Farmers Forest Management Schools (FFMS) are fora for group learning. The FFMS aim to add value to community forestry practices by developing ways of managing the forest to ensure that it yields substantial benefits to its users. FFMSs bring farmer users and forest management practitioners together to explore ways of combining the principals of formal forestry science and technical forest management with local community experience and knowledge. Together, they are able to develop methodologies for active management of community forest areas. Through training and joint action, the formal science of the facilitator and the knowledge of local farmers interface to become a new body of knowledge. With these insights, FFMS can facilitate a process of negotiation that can result in new plans and principals for forest management (see table p. 14).

Sharada Devi Forest User Group

The case of the Sharada Devi Forest User Group illustrates one set of experiences in integrating FFMS into community forest practices. The Sharada Devi FUG is located in the middle hill district of Kabhre Palanchok, about 25 km east of Kathmandu, at an elevation of 1500m. The FUG had been registered with the District Forest Office since 1993 and has been granted authority to manage the forest. Prior to this, community forestry practice was based on traditional institutional arrangements.

The Sharada Devi community forest covers about 44 hectares. It lies above the village and consists mainly of *Schima castanopsis* (Katus-Chilaune) forest. The principal tree species are *Schima wallichii* (Chilaune), *Castanopsis tribuloides* (Musure Katus) and *Myrica esculenta* (Kafal). The forest is mostly at a young stage with vigorously growing saplings. However, in terms of stocking levels and volume of timber, it is in a moderate to poor condition.

Most of the 152 households affiliated to the Sharada Devi FUG are farm households but some farmers also have off-farm employment and businesses. Most households depend directly on drinking water sources found in the forest area. Local people have observed that both the forest and the water sources have improved since they were formally handed over to the community.

The FUG in Sharada Devi is represented by an elected executive committee consisting of 13 members, including two women. Negotiations and compromise among village-level political parties has resulted in all major political parties being represented on the committee. The only group without representation are the lowest caste, the Dalits.

Piloting FFMS in Sharada Devi

The idea of using the FFMS approach originated during a national level training workshop for forest rangers and project staff organised by the Regional Community Forestry Training Centre (RECOFTC).

Good training is an important aspect of FFMS, and therefore capacity-building for facilitators and selected users from the FUGs was the first step. A training workshop was organised for 16 men and women from the FUG who were interested in taking part. Facilitation training for the FFMS was carried out through a process of questioning, brainstorming and field practice, and included the development of action plans.

Consultations then took place with the FUG committee, and an informal FFMS group was established.

With help from the Nepal-Australia Community Resource Management Project (NACRMP) and RECOFTC, the FFMS began to experiment with different silviculture options. Three trial plots were established and the way the forest regenerated under various thinning intensities was observed and analysed. The trials had three specific objectives. First, to establish an appropriate cutting regime and determine how frequently, when and with what intensity *Schima-Castanopsis* forest should be harvested in order to maximise fuel wood production. Second, to demonstrate the effects of different forestry management practices to FUG households and third, to introduce FUG members to innovative forest management practices.

As data became available, project staff helped those involved in the experiment to record their results in a register (see box). Although this way of recording data and assessing results was foreign to most households in the FUG, they were also able to observe directly the effects of different treatments on the experimental plots.

Some findings of the FFMS trials in the Sharada Devi Forest

- Farmers observed that tree growth in the coppice system (vegetative re-growth from tree stumps) was many times better than in control (protection only) systems.
- Kali Mayal had the fastest growth rate, followed by Musure Katus, Chilaune, Kafal and Phalaat.
- Musure Katus had the highest vigour in terms of capacity to produce the maximum number of shoots.
- Musure Katus grew better in a coppice under a standard system than in a coppice with clear felling. Chilaune performed well in a coppice where there was a clear felling system. Phalaat performed equally in both systems.
- The shorter the stump height, the better the health and growth of coppice shoots.
- The appropriate girth size (or circumference) of the stump was between 25 cm and 50 cm for all species.

Positive impact

The men and women taking part in the FFMS reported that the most successful part of the programme had been the collection of data on forest growth. Working closely together, they observed the rate of growth of different species of trees, analysed the data and verbally presented the results of what they had learned to the members of the FUG Committee. The group assemblies were used to inform other members of the FUG how experiments were progressing.

During the trials, many non-FFMS members passed by the experimental plots to see what was going on. Some of those who had initially criticised FFMS participants for destroying the forest in the name of their experiments later made it clear they valued the results, and suggested that other trial plots should be established to investigate other aspects of forest management. During the trials, the FFMS participants carried out most of the activities. Project staff provided support during the application of different treatments, and when measurements and data analysis were being carried out.

The results of the Sharada Devi FUG FFMS trials provided the group with information relevant to the development of appropriate community forest management practices for their region.

However, despite farmer enthusiasm for the trials, there are very real challenges when it comes to translating the results into practice. Although RECOFTC and some of its collaborators have clear objectives as far as FFMS are concerned, the continuation of the FFMS process is far from certain once project staff have withdrawn their support. Although the Sharada Devi FUG trial plots indicated ways in which the availability of fuel wood could be maximised, these insights have yet to be incorporated into the formally approved forest management operational plan for the FUG.

Challenges

The value and innovative aspects of the FFMS have been acknowledged, and to some extent absorbed by some of the participants and service providers in experiments such as those conducted in Sharada Devi. In practice, however, the full

Potential added value of the FFMS to Community Forestry (CF)

Elements	Current practice of CF	Possible added value to CF
Regime type	Protection only	Sustainable production
Management Objective	Subsistence – fulfilment of basic needs	Considers both subsistence and commercial production of forest products
Management mode	Passive management, focusing on selection felling of dead, diseased and dying trees	Active management, focusing on timber and non-timber forest products
Source of knowledge and technology	Based on farmers experience and local knowledge	Both local knowledge and formal forestry knowledge
Emphasis on communication	Among community members only	Between community members and outsiders
Model of Technology Transfer	Training, publications, extension materials	Demonstration, observation, memory, verbal
Main role of facilitator	Capacity building of local institutions	Capacity building of local institutions, and also facilitators' own capacity building working together with communities
Who is involved?	Committee & local elites	Committee, user groups, facilitators & community
Who generates the technical information?	Outsider facilitators, forest technicians and professionals	Facilitators and users together
Who implements the programme?	Facilitators train the users, and users implement programme	Both facilitators and users learn together and users implement the programme
Who monitors the programme?	Service providers	Both users and service providers

potential of the approach has yet to materialise. Following are some of the challenges that can be identified from the experiences of the Sharada Devi FUG in implementing FFMS.

First, the on-site training was conducted by outsiders and little attention was given to strengthening the FUG itself. Project staff from RECOFTC were required to train under-paid and overburdened middle-level managers in the skills they needed to facilitate the FFMS process. However, creating new knowledge and developing good facilitation skills does not necessarily mean that these managers will provide the sort of support a community needs to manage its forest resources in a sustainable way. In addition, not all facilitators will be equally effective, and some will be more committed to setting up FFMS sites than others. This means that the process of developing a methodology for forest management using the FFMS approach must take into account the need to strengthen the capacity of local institutions such as the FUGs, and the need to ensure that appropriate institutional changes take place at government level.

Second, a broader uptake of the FFMS approach has been hindered by a lack of information. Currently, information and publications on the FFMS training approach, methods and process is limited and only accessible to very few people, even at the level of service providers such as the District Forestry Office. In addition, most of the literature on FFMS is published in English. Access to this type of information is therefore limited to those in donor-funded organisations who can read and write English. Equally important, no materials have been developed so far for illiterate community members.

Third, very little attention has been given to organised training, demonstrations and exposure visits on FFMS for community members. In those FUGs where FFMS are being initiated, very few people are actually involved in planning, designing and implementing FFMS. Those who are involved are usually committee members or persons selected by the committee. The majority of FUG members do not know how selections are made, what an FFMS is or what it is designed to do.

Finally, social issues including the exclusion of the Dalits and women from FUGs and FFMSs needs to be adequately addressed. The issue of social exclusion has been raised by many different development organisations, and is discussed during facilitator training. In practice, however, Dalits and women are still excluded in many cases. This implies that they are excluded from planning how forest products should be extracted, setting prices, and deciding when to harvest and how the harvest should be distributed. In defence of the FFMS, it has been argued that the FFMS in Nepal is still a pilot programme, and that marginal groups can be included later when the programme is better established.

Opportunities

Despite the challenges mentioned above, the experiences of the Sharada Devi FFMS also show that FFMS have had a positive impact, and that there are opportunities for developing the approach further.

The need for a production-oriented regime is now widely accepted among professionals and community members, and there is a consensus that the current focus on forest protection should be changed to one of active management. Some FUGs have begun to manage their forests in order to optimise their productive capacity. Visits by FUGs and professionals to FFMS sites have resulted in FFMS being facilitated in an increasing number of areas. Lessons continue to be learned from those sites where FFMS are more established.

There is considerable donor support for community forestry projects in almost every district in the hills and also in some districts in the Terai region. This means there are human and financial resources available to carry out forest management activities so that the condition of the forest resources, and the people who depend on them, can be improved. More than 11000 FUGs have been established throughout Nepal, and many of them are functioning well and are willing to adapt to active forest management. There is also an enabling policy environment. Community forestry legislation is in place and FUGs have their own operational plan that allows them to carry out harvesting operations and to market forest products themselves.

A Forest User Group harvesting their forest. Photo: Hukum Singh

Conclusion

Experience has shown that during the process of developing the concept of FFMS, a number of basic challenges must be faced. Facilitators must have enough institutional and organisational support to enable them to work consistently and effectively. Also, fundamental issues such as appropriate follow-up training, and making forestry officials in general more aware of the potential of FFMS, must be dealt with, as well as constraints of time and finance that can inhibit facilitator effectiveness. On another level, the policy and legislative environment and current practices – including procedures for drawing up and ensuring compliance with operational plans for timber production – must all be taken into account when new approaches are being negotiated.

Today, in addition to the District Forest Offices, there are many service-providing organisations, including bilateral projects, NGOs, local organisations and the FUG federation, who are willing to support the community forestry programme. Synergies between their competencies, roles and responsibilities can be utilised to convert the current protection-oriented regime of the community forests into a sustainable production regime. FFMSs have a role to play in this process, as the Sharada Devi experience has shown.

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A full version of this paper is available at www.eseap.cipotato.org/upward.