



COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN BHUTAN – PUTTING THE PEOPLE BACK IN CHARGE

EDITORIAL

The Asia Briefing Paper Series aims to inform development practitioners and the public about innovations, results and impacts of Swiss development cooperation in Asia. It highlights past and present efforts to achieve aid effectiveness through partnerships between Swiss agencies and local partners.

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SUSTAINABLE NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT REQUIRES THE PAR- TICIPATION OF LOCAL PEOPLE

Community forestry is a new approach to the management of forests in Bhutan. It has evolved dynamically over the past few years and brought significant changes to

the lives of local people and to the way forests are managed. In 1969, the central government of Bhutan nationalised all forests in the country and assumed full control in managing them. This centralised, top-down approach effectively disenfranchised local communities of their traditional rights to forest resources. The communities had little control and benefit from the forests and few incentives to contribute to their management.

The government came to realise that sustainable forest management could only be achieved with the local people: "People's participation is key to conservation and the utilisation of forest resources", stated a royal decree in 1979. This recognition prepared the ground for a step-wise, albeit slow, paradigm shift towards a more decentralised and people-centred approach to forestry, and the government started developing approaches to involve local people in forest management again. One of these approaches is community forestry.



Community forestry offers growing livelihoods and market opportunities for local people.

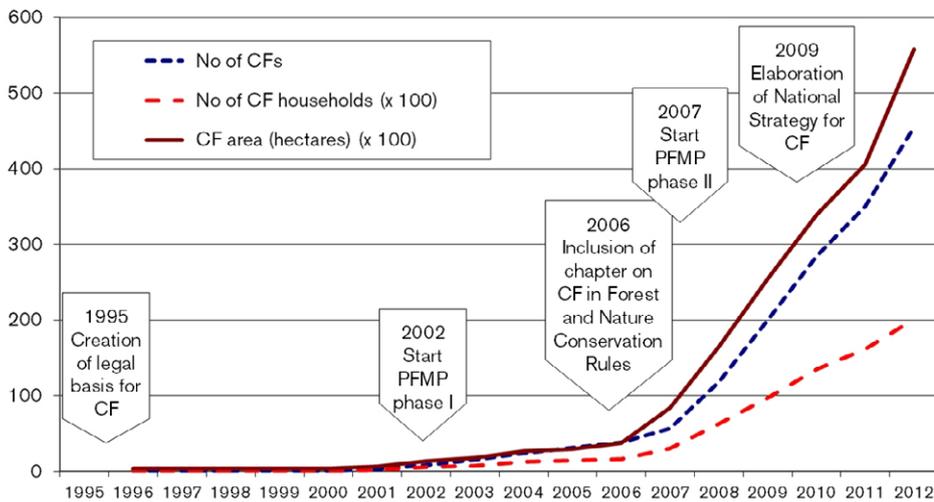
OVER 20,000 HOUSEHOLDS HAVE SECURED FOREST USE RIGHTS

Every Fourth Rural Household in Bhutan Participates

Today, community forestry in Bhutan is developing in an encouraging way and in a generally favourable environment. The uptake was initially slow. Since 2007, however, community forestry has gained strong momentum both in quantitative as well as qualitative terms. By early 2013, the 500th forest had been handed over to a community and about one fourth of all rural households in Bhutan had become members of a so-called CFMG – a Community Forestry Management Group. These groups are responsible for planning, managing, monitoring, and improving their community forests (CFs). In some districts, more than half of all rural households participate. This illustrates that community forestry has become effectively a broad-based movement and without doubt the most inclusive community-based civil society organisation of the country. The establishment of CFs is now demand-led and fuelled by the high interest of rural communities to take over responsibility for the management of their surrounding forests. Increasingly, CFMGs take decisions on the use of nat-



A typical rural community in Bhutan embedded in its community forest (Shingyer Village in Bumthang District).



Community forestry has gained very strong momentum.

ural resources, actively manage their forests and market forest products.

The management of CFMGs aims at putting into practice the principles of transparency in decision-making, accountability, inclusiveness and gender equality. This mirrors Bhutan’s recent transition to democratic governance. Community forestry also reinforces Bhutan’s decentralisation policies that have introduced the principle of subsidiarity.

TANGIBLE BENEFITS FOR THE COMMUNITIES

Community Forestry Enhances Social Capital

The majority of CFMGs in Bhutan are young. Most groups have just started the process of developing into local institutions empowered to manage their forests for both biophysical and socio-economic outcomes. Furthermore, the nature and quality of community forests across the country vary greatly. As a result, the benefits for the communities and costs of their management also vary.

Community Forestry has resulted in increased “ownership” over forests and in easy and secure access to forest products for local communities. In many instances, it is a way for communities to regain rights over forest resources that they traditionally consider theirs. Having their own management rights, member households of a CFMG no longer have to go through a lengthy process to get timber permits.

The establishment of a CFMG with its own by-laws enables the community to organise itself more effectively. As a group, the members can better express their concerns and defend their rights. The CFMGs also serve as platforms for discussing other issues. In this way, community forestry contributes to the ongoing process of democratisation, and cultivates an inclusive mode of decision-making.

Members of the executive committees of the CFMGs gain useful experience in community leadership. Mr Ugyen from the western district of Haa says: “Being a member of the executive committee of the CFMG boosted my confidence to deal with people and provided me with

an opportunity to demonstrate that I can take responsibility for the community”. In 2011, Mr Ugyen was elected head of his village.

CFMGs also serve as a platform for developing social cohesion by bringing together people with different ethnic backgrounds, languages, customs and beliefs to talk about issues of common interest.

Better Forest Conditions and Growing Economic Benefits

CFMG members have observed improvements in forest conditions since they gained the rights to regulate harvesting of forest resources and grazing. Foresters are reporting a decrease in the number of forest fires. Mr Akey Dorji, district forester in Paro, observes that “forests and the environment are much better protected since people have taken over responsibility”.

Economic benefits have also started flowing to community members. Communities use forest products for their own use and are entitled to market products after their own demand is satisfied. One of the many beneficiaries of community forestry in Bhutan is Ms Dorji Wangmo. Her family is a member of the group managing the 45-hectare community forest of Choekhor north of Thimphu, the capital of Bhutan.

The member households of Ms. Dorji Wangmo’s group get timber, firewood, leaf litter and flagpoles for the tradition-



Community forestry provides a platform for women leaders (photo taken in Samtse District).



Ms. Dorji Wangmo, CFMG member, with family and friends.

al prayer flags from their forest. “We easily got the timber for the construction of our new house”, Ms. Dorji explains. “Our children will benefit a lot from our forest and will bring in new ideas for its management”. In 2009, Ms Dorji’s family of seven moved from their old, small house of two rooms to their spacious new house. In 2012, 142 CFMGs have harvested forest products for use by their members.

A growing number of CFMGs generates income from the sale of timber and non-wood forest products (NWFPs). In 2012, the 38 member households of Dorib Yarkyel CFMG in Haa generated revenues of approximately USD 33,000 from the sale of timber from their well-stocked forest. In 2012, 64 CFMGs engaged in the commercial sale of forest produce and generated approximately USD 130,000 in revenues.

Community funds are established in all CFMGs which are nourished by the revenues of the groups. The group members decide on how to re-invest these funds for the development of their community. In the course of 2012, 246 CFMGs managed to nearly double their community funds from a total of USD 144,000 to USD 265,000. Groups with significant funds have started operating small credit groups which give loans to their members at favourable interest rates.

Encouragingly, an increasing number of CFMGs are adopting provisions in their by-laws in favour of their poorer members. Examples of such provisions include giving priority to poorer households in the allocation of construction timber or providing interest-free loans to disadvantaged members.

Large Untapped Potential

The challenges for community forestry revolve around quality and sustainability. The communities need to manage their forests and groups, ensure gender equality, generate income and share the benefits in an equitable way.

Bhutan has received international recognition for the exemplary protection of its forests. However, this conservation legacy presents a considerable challenge to the sustainable management of forests and timber extraction. Foresters as well as members of CFMGs tend to be hesitant when it comes to felling and extracting trees. Timber harvest is usually well below the annual harvest limit set in the community forest management plans. A considerable part of the economic potential from the sustainable harvest and sale of timber has thus not yet been realised. Using the renewable potential will require a commitment to a more active and people-oriented forest management.

Challenges at the policy level include replacing restrictive regulations with positive incentives for sustainable forest management and building trust in market mechanisms, particularly for marketing timber.

As a movement, community forestry contributes to local democratisation and the development of civil society in Bhutan. CFMGs have, as they mature, the potential to develop their voices as stakeholders in governance of natural resources at the local level and to develop into platforms for negotiations between the people and the state on questions of natural resources management and possibly beyond. However, this and the underlying social learning processes that are new for Bhutan require space for the groups, increased collaboration amongst groups and time.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

- Community forestry is a key component of the National Forest Policy 2011 and is recognised as one of the main approaches to forest management;
- Development of the National Strategy for Community Forestry;
- By end of 2012, 485 community groups consisting of 21,723 rural households manage a forest area of 55,730 hectares (equal to 2% of Bhutan's forests).

Lessons Learnt

Key lessons from the experience of Bhutan are:

- Political will to change forest management paradigms needs to be accompanied by enabling regulatory frameworks, tenure reforms and supportive governance arrangements (along with the necessary capacity building of key actors);
- Legislation to mandate changes is necessary but not sufficient – it needs to be accompanied by subordinate instruments, including rules and regulations and practical implementation guidelines; ongoing adaptations to these should be informed by feedback from field experience to make them more enabling;
- Political will for change and high-level champions can substantially catalyse the process;
- Policy changes in non-forest sectors (e.g. to mandate decentralisation) can have a major influence on attempts to adopt community forestry;
- Capacity building of community groups and local officials is essential, particularly to embrace participatory approaches to forest management and to accept effective devolution of power to community groups.

A LONG-LASTING BILATERAL COOPERATION BEARS FRUIT

Swiss Support to Community Forestry in Bhutan

The Bhutanese-Swiss partnership in the forestry sector has a long history and has contributed significantly to the successful community forestry programme. The Third Forestry Development Project (1994-2002), co-funded by the World Bank and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), introduced the concept of community forestry to Bhutan and supported the establishment of the very first CFMGs. Since 2002, the Participatory Forest Management Project (PFMP) has made a key contribution to the development of community forestry. The project is funded by the SDC and implemented by the Royal Government of Bhutan with support of HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation (budget phase I: CHF 4.5 million, phase II: CHF 4.2 million).

The PFMP's overall goal has been to contribute to improving the livelihoods of rural poor through empowering local communities and strengthening their capacity to manage forests resources on a sustainable basis. In its first phase, the PFMP played an important role in preparing the ground for the eventual take-off of community forestry. During the second phase, the PFMP has accompanied and supported the scaling-up of community forestry in Bhutan.

A third and final phase of the project is currently under development. It aims at enhancing the benefits to livelihoods of community forestry and at contributing to improved local governance and the sustainability of community forestry in Bhutan. An important element of sustainability is the fostering of more exchanges between community groups, which could pave the way to the creation of more institutionalised networks of community forestry groups.



Two CFMG members saw planks for the renovation of a house in their community (Tsirang District)

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