

Equity, Inclusion and Conflict in Community Based Forest Management: A Case of Salghari Community Forest in Nepal

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Abstract

The equity and inclusion issues are widely observed in Community Based Forest Management (CBFM) and Community Forestry (CF) is not an exception. Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) are portrayed as robust grassroots institutions for forest management and group governance. However, many contemporary researches have shown that CFUGs are still governed by some influential local elites who hardly practice equity and inclusion. In this context, objectives of this paper are: to explore how equity and inclusion issues lead CFUGs fall into internal conflicts; and to demonstrate how CFUGs are able to address such issues locally. The study was carried out in Salghari CFUG of Ratnechaur, Myagdi. Semi-structured interview and focused group discussion were key tools used for data collection. Livelihoods and Social Inclusion Framework and Equity Framework are used for data analysis. The findings of the research revealed that dalits and non-dalits of Salghari fall into internal conflict regarding the use of forest products. The conflict was then managed through amendments in CF provisions and change in CF leadership. This paper concludes that execution of equity and inclusion provisions in CF, secures access to assets for disadvantaged people from CBFM. However, this demands empowerment of these people and facilitating role of external agency.

Keywords: Community forestry, *dalits*, *non-dalits*, internal conflict

1. Introduction

Nepal has made remarkable progress in CBFM system specifically in CF. Among six types of CBFM regimes (community forestry, leasehold forestry, buffer zone forestry, religious forestry, collaborative forestry and conservation area) in Nepal, CF regime dominates all. According to Department of Forest (DoF); 1,652,654 hectare (ha) state owned forest has now given to 17,686 CFUGs for the protection, management and utilization. CFUGs can take the CF management decisions and use the forest products generated from there; however, the land tenure remains with the state. CF programme accommodates more than 35 percent of total population of the country (DoF, 2015). The DoF has claimed that CF programme has been able to bring positive impacts on restoration of degraded land, increased supply of forest products, empowered women, poor and disadvantaged groups as well as promoted income generation and community development activities (DoF, 2015).

Thoms (2008) agrees with above claims of DoF in terms of resource regeneration and increased forest products supply. But he argues that the relatively poor and socially disadvantaged (*dalits* and *janajaties*) section of the community have to bear disproportionate share of forest management cost. The CF decision making and benefit sharing processes are mostly captured by socially dominant and relatively wealthier HHs (Adhikari and Lovett, 2006 as cited Schweithelm, Kanaan, and Yonzon, 2006).

Ojha, Persha, and Chhatre (2009) have pointed that if the issues of governance particularly participation and accountability are not addressed, these can lead CFUGs fall into internal conflicts. They argued that internal conflict exists due to uneven benefit sharing and resistance of some castes groups to accept the leadership of women, *janajaties*, *dalits* or of poor. Beside that, poor and *dalits* had some limitation like lack of awareness, limited leadership skills and low confidence to claim leadership in CFUG (Paudyal, Neil and Allison, 2006). There are examples of confrontation among *dalits* and *non-dalits* over the issues of spending CFUG fund in other areas rather meeting the basic needs of poor and *dalits* (Upreti, 2006).

The scope of CF is high in terms of coverage and potential for inclusive resource governance at grassroots level. Thus, the aim of this paper is to assess whether equity and inclusion are

mainstreamed in CBFM in Nepal or not. The specific objectives are: first, to examine the CFUG internal governance specifically forest product distribution, participation and internal conflict; and second is to demonstrate how CFUGs manage internal conflicts locally and address equity and inclusion issues.

Salghari CFUG of Ratnechaur, Myagdi District was selected purposively. This CFUG provides unique socio-economic and environmental context to carry out the research. Before conflict, *dalits* were in majority but CFUG was governed by *non-dalits*; more than 90 percent *dalits* were poor but CF provisions and CF decisions were in favour of non-poor. Though CF looked united, it was divided into two parts and managed by *dalits* and *non-dalits*. The ambition of *non-dalits* to capture more benefits from CF resources on one side and feeling of exclusion and inequity among *dalits* on the other side dragged them into conflict. It took four years to manage the conflict. The conflict fixed the new balance in local power relation by establishment of *dalit* leadership, made necessary amendments in contesting CF provisions and smooth settlement of conflict. Thus, the thrust of this paper lies on capacity of CFUGs to address the issues of equity and inclusion locally and further strengthening CF governance in close support from District Forest Office (DFO) and local Non Government Organization (NGO).

The qualitative research methodology was used for this study. The Case Study research design (Yin, 2003) was adopted for primary data collection and data analysis. Semi-structured Interview and focus group discussion were key tools for primary data collection. Beside community members; primary data were collected from DFO and local NGO who were directly connected with this CFUG. The Livelihood and Social Inclusion (LSI) framework (DFID, 2005b as cited Paudyal, Neil and Allison, 2006) and Equity framework (McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg, 2012) were used in data analysis.

2. Conceptualizing Equity and Inclusion in CBFM

2.1 The Social Inclusion Framework

The analytical frameworks used in the paper are Livelihood and Social Inclusion (LSI) framework (DFID, 2005b as cited Paudyal, Neil and Allison, 2006) and Equity Framework. The LSI framework

focus on three interrelated domains of change: a) assets and access to services; b) voice, influence and agency; and c) rules of the game. The three domains of change are interlocking and change in one domain leads to change in other domains. This framework believes change in all domains only could impact on the livelihoods of poor and disadvantaged.

According to Bennet (2005), social inclusion approach seeks to bring about system-level institutional reform and policy change to remove inequities. Bennet considered social inclusion as a dimension of the social change process that is possible from pressure from below, that is created through empowerment. The pressure from below will be strong through the formation of coalitions between different social and economic groups who share at least some common change objectives.

2.2 The Equity Framework

This paper considers ‘equity’ as getting a fair share, not necessarily an equal share. Equity keeps poor and disadvantaged people in the centre as receivers of social and economic benefits. In an equitable system poor and disadvantaged people should not further marginalized (Gilmour and Fisher, 1991, as cited Sunam and McCarthy, 2010). The equity framework comprises three dimensions of equity: distributive, procedural and contextual (McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg, 2012). Distributive equity is about distribution of costs and benefits; procedural equity denotes representation in decision making; and contextual equity refers to pre-existing conditions that limit or facilitate people’s access to decision making procedures, resources and, thereby, benefits. The distributive equity is achieved through procedural equity. But contextual equity is difficult to achieve because playing field is created as uneven by the pre-existing political, economic and social conditions which limit or enable people’s capacity (McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg, 2012).

The equity and justice are close concepts. According to Rawls (2003), a just society takes care of the least advantaged members of society through fair allocation of share of benefits while assuring equal access and opportunities. In a just society, human welfare and social equity are put in centre of any efforts that are directed to protect nature (Warner and DeDcosse, 2009). In the development

field, justice is an evolving concept to ensure secure access to natural resources in a fair and equitable way (UNDP, 2014).

Maharjan et. al, (2009) claimed that equity is practiced in CF in Nepal (as cited from McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg, 2012). The CFUGs who used to distribute equal share of forest products to all members later started to sale forest products and practiced equal distribution of received benefits. This is evolved from the realization that all members in CFUGs do not have equal interest in the forest products. They have further claimed that the current CF guidelines are specifically designed to improve the welfare of the least advantaged, most marginalized members of the community (Maharjan et. al, 2009; as cited McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg, 2012).

In contrary to above claims, several researches have questioned that equity is rarely practiced in CFUGs. K.C (2009), found that only 18 percent CFUGs practiced equity in forest product distribution and only 16 percent *dalits* were represented in Community Forest User Committee (CFUC), executive body of CFUG, in five districts of Rapti Zone. Schweithelm, Kanaan, and Yonzon (2006) found that CFUGs led by *non-dalits* are more dominant and hierarchal. Poor and *dalit* are even getting less forest products than that were available before CF programme. These have been cause for internal conflicts in many CFUGs. The caste and class based discrimination reflects the deeply rooted inequality in Nepalese society.

Acharya and Yasmi (2008) revealed that *dalits* were not getting equal access to forest resources as like other caste groups though they have equally participated in CF works. They have also noted that poor were getting less forest products than relatively wealthier members in the community. Likewise, Upreti (2006) has warned that there could be physical confrontation among *dalits* and *non-dalits* in CFUGs when CFUG fund is spent in less prioritized area rather than meeting basic needs of *dalits*.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 Socio-economic context of Salghari CFUG

Salghari CFUG falls in Ratnechaur VDC-2 (now Beni Municipality -1) of Myagdi district. There are altogether 59 HHs managing

11.5 ha forest. The ethnic composition shows 33 HHs of *dalits* (56 percent) followed by 14 HHs of *chettries* (24 percent) and 12 HHs of *magars* (20 percent). This CFUG has practised relative well-being assessment among members and categorized HHs as poor and non-poor. The well-being assessment record of CFUG shows that 59 percent HHs fall in poor category. Disaggregating the poverty within caste group; 91 percent *dalits*, 21 percent *chhetries* and 16 percent *magars* fall in poor category (OP and Constitution, 2008, Salghari CFUG).

The forest area of Salghari CF comprises only 11.5 ha of pine plantation. The forest is divided into three small blocks for the management purpose. This forest has now reached to pole stage and supplies ground grass, firewood and small quantity of timber. The history of plantation dates back to thirty years. In 2040/41 B.S. local people (now CFUG members) did plantation and care of forest under the leadership of *non-dalits*. There was equal participation from *dalits* and *non-dalits* in plantation and protection works. The forest was formally handed over as CF by DFO Myagdi in 2052/53 B.S. The *non-dalits* were leading CFUG till this was fall into internal conflicts in 2058 B.S.

3.2 The Conflict

The Salghari CFUG fell into internal conflict when CFUC decided to divide CF separate for *dalits* and *non-dalits*. This was co-incidence that when the author was in meeting with DFO at later's office; some CFUC members from Salghari came up with CFUC decision on division of forest. Again on the next day, another group from the same CFUG came to DFO and urged for no division of forest. DFO cautiously responded to both groups that decision regarding division of forest should be taken in consensus through CFUG assembly. This case was reflecting the changing pattern in social systems where one group in the community is trying to boycott another group to capture more benefits.

From field visit, this was revealed that both communities (*dalits* and *non-dalits*) had grievances towards each other regarding participation and benefit sharing from CF. The *non-dalits* blamed *dalits* that they hardly participate in CF management works; they do not acknowledge social norms and come with heavy drink of alcohol in CFUC meeting, CFUG general assembly and in other CF works.

Non-dalits also claimed that they had adopted an approach of equal participation for equal benefit. They blamed that *dalits* had misused the CFUG fund given as soft loan and had not refunded. So, they decided to divide the forest which could do well for both sides.

On the other side, *dalits* had different voice. They asserted that *non-dalits* hesitate to be together with them because untouchability still exists in the community. They had perceived that *non-dalits* had ill intention to capture more benefits from the division of forest. Past *dalit* CFUC chairperson said,

we worked together for more than twenty years to develop this forest. The forest is now approaching to pole stage and non-dalits has ill intension of capturing more benefits.

Regarding use of CF fund, *dalits* said that CFUG fund was controlled and mobilized by *non-dalits*. They were the decision makers and cheque signatories. However, they realized that some *dalits* had not participated in CF works. The reason for that was time and poverty. They had boycotted to participate in CF works, meetings and assemblies at the time of high wage labour demand, or otherwise that would be difficult for them to feed. For them, this was more exaggeration by *non-dalits*. One *dalit* response with anger,

How could we participate as per their time as we have to go for daily wages? When the meeting, assembly or other works were fixed at suitable time, we always participated.

The important point to note in the above statement is that, CFUC decisions do not match with the time of *dalits*. This seems that CFUC is not sensitive towards the basic livelihood need of *dalits* and poor. This is obvious that for poor, to solve hand to mouth problem comes first than to participate in community works. This also questions that wel-being assessment done by CFUG was to meet the requirement before taking approval from DFO on CF OP. This is the mandatory provision of Community Forest Development (CFD).

3.3 The Root Cause of the conflict

This took considerable time to find the root cause of the conflict. The root cause was explored as: the *non-dalits* were reluctant from selling of forage to CFUG non-members by *dalits*. *Dalits* did not possess cattle so they used to sell the forage of their share. But unlike previous years, they sold forage to the farmers of neighbouring

Malika VDC of Baglung district for better price. They had got price more than three times than selling in same CFUG. But in the views of *non-dalits*, this was against the CFUG provision. CFUG in its constitution has mentioned that forest products should first sell within CFUG members; only then that can be sold to non-members. But the CFUG fixes the minimum price which *dalits* perceived as unjust to them. They said that they need firewood from CF rather than timber or forage. Their blame was CFUG deliberately sets such provisions to grab the products of *dalit's* share. But in contrary to *dalit* argument, one *non-dalit* member claimed that he surprised why CFUG was distributing forages to *dalits* who do not possess cattle! The decisions in CFUC were made mostly in the absence of *dalit* member. The representation of *dalit* in CFUC was only one in nine member committee. The CFUC decides the dates for meeting, assembly and other CF works. While taking such decisions, appropriate time for *dalits* was rarely considered. That had hurt *dalits* deeply but could not put their voice. The decision of dividing the forest was also taken by CFUC in the absence of *dalit* member. The *dalits* had a fear of getting less forest area because CFUC has decided to allocate only one block of forest out of three; and that part was less productive. Though forest was not formally divided, both communities were managing two patches of forests separately. Not only forest products, but also the income from forest was used separately. Despite their strong dissatisfaction, *dalits* did not come to protest in public because they had to go to *non-dalits* door for wage labour to solve the problem of hands to mouth. On the other hand, *non-dalits* were looking for the right time to divide the forest and enjoy more benefits.

3.4 Addressing the Cause

The conflict remained in dormant stage in Salghari for almost four years. MILAN, local NGO working in forestry sector in Myagdi first facilitated to manage conflict. They facilitated both sides to come into compromise. MILAN had informed about existing CF provisions, role of DFO and forest policies. *Dalits* empowered from MILAN facilitation because CF provisions are in favour to them but *non-dalits* stood on their position. In the mean time, DFO, the regulatory authority intervene the case. DFO was well-informed that division of forest was an injustice to *dalits* and will set negative example for other CFUGs in the district to copy. DFO was aware that *non-dalits* hold powerful position in district politics and could

create pressure. However, DFO stated that if *non-dalits* resist rather than solving the problem, he could take back CF. The Forest Act (1993) and Forest Regulation (1995) have given that authority to DFO.

The position of DFO compelled *non-dalits* to step back. Further, *non-dalits* knew that *dalits* were organized and backed by political force. *Non-dalit* leaders feared that if the case reaches to the district headquarter, their social and political image will go down. On the other hand, *dalits* realized their weaknesses particularly in misuse of fund and participation in CF works. Then both groups came to realize their mistakes that finally, brought both groups to compromise.

The understanding among *dalits* and *non-dalits* was formalized through CFUG assembly. The assembly made necessary amendments in provisions in CF OP and Constitution that are in favour *dalits*. The CFUG assembly elected new leadership under the chairmanship of *dalits*. This was a breakthrough in history of Salghari. For the first time, *dalits* were in key positions in CFUC along with majority members. This was indicating the changing local power relation in the community. The positive side of this change was adoption of democratic process. *Non-dalits* accepted the CFUG assembly decision and extended their co-operation to new CFUC. The forest was not divided, group was again united.

3.5 The Post Conflict

Salghari CFUG was found functioning smoothly when author visited after seven years of conflict management. The CFUC meeting and general assembly were regular. The more important point to note was *dalits* participation in CFUC, assembly in other CF works has increased. *Dalit* led CFUC fixes the date and time for CF works that is suitable to most HHs. *Dalits* have realized that their participation in decision making forums are important to influence CF decisions in favour of them. The CFUG fund was mobilized in the priority activities set by the CFUG assembly. This was found that *dalits* have increased confidence level.

The *non-dalits* who had accepted the change with heavy heart before have now joined hands for CF development. The unhappy and aggressive *non-dalits* did not co-operate at the beginning and charged for misuse of CFUG fund. The charges were baseless. This

incident lifted the height of *dalit* leadership as well as demoralized those who were actively involved in blaming. *Dalits* did not take the feeling of revenge rather widened their arms for the benefit of entire community. The CFUG has institutionalized periodic change in leadership, adopted participatory decision making and set CF provisions as need based. This case presents how much it is difficult to practice equity and inclusion in the real field in a traditional hierarchical society of Nepal.

4. Discussion

The findings of the research are here discussed as per the LSI framework (DFID, 2005b as cited Paudyal, Neil and Allison, 2006). This framework believes in change in all three domains is essential for sustainable livelihoods and inclusion. Again, the findings are analysed against the three dimensions of equity framework (McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg, 2012). Equity framework comprises three dimensions for analysis. This paper finds both frameworks as complementing to each other. This discussion surrounds in the periphery of root cause of conflict: *dalits* were not given to sell forage of their share to the members outside of CF by *non-dalits* saying that that was against CF provision.

The forest product distribution system in Salghari was equality based not need based. CFUG did well-being assessment but did not practice. *Dalits* (poor as well) need more firewood than equal share and less forage and timber. This was vice versa for *non-dalits*. Likewise, CFUG fund spent in areas where *dalits* were least benefited. In Salghari, if *dalits* were allowed to sell forage to outsiders or provisioned market price, conflict would not be surfaced. The CF provisions were set in favour of minority *non-dalits* because they influence CF decision making processes. The influential caste or class take advantage over subordinate groups in the society (McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg, 2012). This is the issue related to access to assets and services (Paudyal, Neil and Allison, 2006) and issue of distributional equity.

Similar issues were observed by KC (2009) where only 18 percent CFUGs have applied one or some of equity and inclusion provisions in Rapti. Poor and *dalits* have to bear the disproportionate cost of forest management (Sunam and McCarthy, 2010; Thoms, 2008; Schweithelm, Kanaan, and Yonzon, 2006) when CFUGs did not

practice equity. Though there is major shift in forest resource governance system from state controlled approach to participatory approach (Schweithelm, Kanaan, and Yonzon, 2006), CF rules regarding distribution and participation are set by those who hold decision making positions. In Salghari, though CFUG had practiced equality, *dalits* could not enjoy that because there was another provision to limit.

Despite their majority in CFUG, *dalits* was only eleven percent in CFUC. They rarely participate in CFUG assembly. But they participated in CF works equally where physical labour is needed. Because they were less aware on how CF rules are formed and they are executed. If they had known this, they could not be victim of own CF provisions. Similar case of participation was observed in CFUGs of Rapti zone where only 16 percent *dalits* were represented in CFUC (KC, 2009), and only nine percent *dalits* in Ramechhap district (Sapkota, Ghimire and Shrestha, 2014).

The participation of women, *janajaties* and *dalits* in decision making has been always challenged in a caste based hierarchical society (Sapkota, Ghimire and Shrestha, 2014; Sunam and McCarthy, 2010; Thoms, 2008). These groups could not raise their voice because they feel humiliation in the ground of income, education, social network and linkage with power (Acharya and Yasmi, 2008; Upreti, 2006). This shows the field is uneven for which is mentioned as contextual inequity by McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg (2012).

The change in Salghari CF after settlement of conflict was again reviewed through the lens of LSI framework and equity framework. The conflict was settled when *dalits* organized into group and they were empowered for collective voice. This made *dalits* able to voice against the unequal provisions and force for already set equity provisions. The awareness on CF rules and regulations and empowerment lead *dalits* to claim rights and learned own role and responsibilities (Benett, 2005).

The problem lies not only with absence of provisions but also with problem of execution. Salghari CFUG had done well-being assessment and mentioned about equality in forest product distribution, expenditure of CF fund in the area of prioritization. CFUG fund mobilization for community development. After conflict, *dalits* leadership implemented these provisions and added

new provisions to ensure equity and inclusion.

The policy documents for forestry sector, Forest Policy (2014), Forest Sector Strategy (2015, draft) has considered Gender and Social Inclusion (GESI) as one important pillar. Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MoFSC, 2008) has been implementing GESI Strategy. More recently amended CFD Guidelines (2013) is more progressive towards equity and inclusion. DFO has given responsibility to DFO to ensure the policy provisions are incorporated in CF OP and constitution.

However, role of external agency is important to empower disadvantaged people for equity and inclusion provisions and their implementation (Bennet, 2005). Similarly, external agency is equally important to manage the conflict locally (HELVETAS, n.d.). In the case of Salghari role of NGO was in creating awareness and empowerment; and strengthening CFUG governance. Similarly, role of DFO was facilitator as well as adjudicator to settle the conflict. HELVETAS (n.d.) argues that conflicts around natural resources that start at a local level, have to be dealt at the same level or otherwise they could spread wider.

Despite above, Salghari CFUG presents the successful case in social change process. From participation in CF decision making forums, *dalits* knew how CF rules are set and implemented. They also understood the value of their participation in setting CF rules and their enforcement. The equitable and inclusive provisions *dalits* and *non-dalits* both were equally benefitted. *Dalits* leadership was accepted by CFUG members. Thus, the case of Salghari strengthens the claims of researchers (Kandel and Dahal, 2008; and KC 2009) that leadership can be developed irrespective of caste, gender or well-being status. Salghari has also strengthened the argument of Schweithelm, Kanaan, Yonzon (2006) that CFUGs are robust grassroots institutions, capable to manage internal problems and practice good governance.

5. Conclusion

The equity and inclusion issues with respect to CBFM are discussed by taking the case of Salghari CFUG. The LSI framework (DFID, 2005b as cited Paudyal, Neil and Allison, 2006) and Equity framework (McDermott, Mahanty and Schrecenberg, 2012) are used to derive

this conclusion. From the case of Salghari, this can be argued that provision of equal participation for equal share CBFM could not do justice to poor and disadvantaged members. *Dalits* in Salghari were given equal share of forage but they could not enjoy benefits by selling in their own price because CFUG has fixed the price and set provision of selling within CFUG. In such context, the practice of equity and inclusion is possible in CBFM when the disadvantaged community are able to raise their voice. In the due process, there can be established a new balance in local power relation which can be sustained through mutual respect and cooperation.

This paper claims that conflicts in managing CBFM can be addressed through provisioning fair distribution of benefits and equal participation in decision making. The influential members in the community create barrier on this process. But such barriers can be broken through awareness and empowerment to the poor and disadvantaged people. The role of external agency as facilitator and/or regulator, that is either state or non-state or both, is important in conflict and post conflict phase of CBFM. Thus, this paper argues that conflicts embedded with equity and inclusion in CBFM can be addressed through execution/amendments in existing provisions, empowerment of local people in facilitation of external agencies.

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