

Learning to Govern: How to Improve Monitoring System in Community Forestry in Nepal?

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Abstract

Forest governance is now recognized as a critical factor for effective resource management and enhancing livelihood outcomes. This paper recognizes the need for having learning element in the governing process, for which there has to be a continuous monitoring process in place. Based on recent studies, the current monitoring system at different layers in Nepal's community forestry is reviewed, and opportunities for improved micro-macro linkages and forest governance are identified.

Key words: learning, governance, monitoring, micro-macro linkage, community forestry, Nepal

INTRODUCTION

Forest governance is now recognized as a very critical factor for effective resource management and enhancing livelihood outcomes. The term 'governance' basically refers to how people, groups and institutions relate to each other in terms of sharing power and responsibility. Specifically, many people refer to governance as including several key factors such as transparency of organizational procedures, democratic decision-making systems, and accountability¹. A key area of forest governance debate relates to defining roles and responsibilities of government, the private sector and civil society (FAO 2001).

We suggest, furthermore, that governance needs to have a clear 'learning' element to it, i.e., in which stakeholders not only participate in joint decision-making processes, but also jointly learn together to improve various facets of governance from their experiences. Learning from experience requires that a continuous monitoring should be in place to allow systematic comparisons of the assumptions and expectations with the actual.

This paper presents an overview of status and opportunities in relation to learning oriented governance in Nepal's community forestry, with a focus on effectively linking micro (local), meso (range post and district) and macro (national) levels of decision-making. The lessons and ideas are drawn from the recently completed Adaptive and Collaborative Management Research Project of the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) and Nepal Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (MOFSC).

MONITORING AND MICRO-MACRO LINKAGES - THE BACKBONE OF LEARNING-ORIENTED GOVERNANCE

In the context of community forestry in Nepal, the current policy and legislative framework has spelled out roles, rights and responsibilities of institutions at different layers of governance. Forest User Groups (FUGs) as well as different layers of MOFSC share the primary rights, roles and responsibility of forest management: FUGs are entrusted with rights to use and manage community forests; District Forest Offices (DFOs) are mandated with forming and supporting user groups, and handing over national forests to FUGs and central level of MOFSC has a mandate to shape policy. Local government has also come into the scene more prominently than ever before through recently

enforced local self-governance legislation²; they will likely be a key player in resource governance in the future. Besides these, a number of civil society and private sector institutions, including networks, are emerging to influence priorities, processes, and power balances of stakeholders engaged in governing the forest resources. Ultimately, this governance context determines the ways forests are managed, for whom, and with what social and environmental effects.

These stakeholders, from micro to macro levels, need to engage in an on-going process of communication, negotiation and collaboration³ so that they can craft effective governance. In particular, there needs to be linkages between the FUG, district, and national levels so that the higher levels of governance can respond to issues, concerns and opportunities emerging at the local level, and so that local levels are well-informed of, and can respond to, policy developments and opportunities from the higher levels. The middle levels particularly the districts need to play a critical role of policy interpretation, communication, implementation and support, and ideally, feedback to the other levels. However, experiences indicate that, despite breakthroughs of participatory policies, approaches and practices in community forestry, this communication⁴ and negotiation⁵ is still not adequate or effective. Community Forestry (CF) in Nepal is facing a number of challenges, including weak or uneven outcomes in livelihoods, equity and productivity of community-managed forest areas⁶. It increasingly appears that equity is rooted in part in this weaker aspect of governance and the corresponding lack of responsiveness of decision-makers at different layers of forest governance, including FUGs and MOFSC.

The need for effective monitoring within and across scales (and stakeholders) in CF to create the responsive and conducive governance is begun to be recognized. We use the term 'monitoring' to refer to a process of gathering and analyzing information with a goal of comparing 'actuality' against the 'anticipation' so that corrective adjustment measures can be identified⁷. Underlying monitoring is the notion that since human understanding of natural ecosystems is imperfect, human interactions with nature should be understood as 'experimental'⁸. In other words, human actions – such as policies and management activities - are opportunities to learn about the ecosystems, and about the outcomes of our management policies and activities. The same can be said of human understanding of policy influence on human (socio-economic and cultural) systems - understanding of these human systems, and the outcomes of policy on people, is (and always will be) imperfect. If we approach forest policy (including implementation) as an 'experiment', then the role of monitoring is crucial to identify and assess different types of policy-induced changes. And, since forest policies are shaped, created, decided and implemented at different governance levels, monitoring (including analysis of information) also needs to happen at each of these different levels.

The definition above conceptualizes monitoring as a means of 'organizational learning', which has the potential to contribute to improved governance of forest at different levels. From this perspective, it is a periodic and on-going process (rather than a one-off event) that generates information, insights and lessons for enhancing the quality of decisions and speed of improving understanding and actions. This approach to monitoring, however, is only one of several uses of the term. Frequently in CF, the term 'monitoring' is applied to a range of activities, most of which have relatively little to do with learning or improvement. Box 1 presents three different approaches or threads of monitoring that have emerged in different stages of the history of natural resource and development (including CF policy) interventions.

Box 1. Monitoring: single word, multiple perceptions

Monitoring has different meanings to different people⁹. The term has been used extensively in the discourses and practices of development over the past three decades or so, yet it has no agreed, coherent, conceptual definition. At least three different approaches to or 'conceptual threads' of monitoring have evolved over time: a) control-oriented monitoring, b) monitoring designed to meet project requirements, and c) learning-oriented monitoring (for more detail see Paudel and Ojha 2002).

The first thread, or *control-oriented monitoring*, has historically been an integral element of management within bureaucracies, in which it is used primarily as a tool of top-down checking for failure¹⁰. This punishment-related connotation of monitoring is still prevalent within many traditional organizations, as well as some newly evolving organizations such as NGOs. This has been a means to achieve 'upward accountability' and control in centrally-driven organizations.

The second thread, or *project-oriented monitoring*, refers to all forms of structured monitoring practices that are a part of development projects. They are usually linked with project log frames, and involve the collection of large amounts of data. This type of monitoring was initially often 'ex poste' (i.e. carried out at the conclusion of the project), but later has increasingly been also carried out 'ex ante' (i.e. during the project). Especially in the latter case, which may partially be used to provide feedback to planning and decision-making, and where the monitoring has included participatory methods, this thread has paved the way for the third thread, learning-oriented approach to monitoring.

The third thread of monitoring, or *learning-oriented monitoring*, has shifted monitoring more towards enhancing learning within organizations. In this sense, monitoring is fundamentally a way of learning to improve by consciously linking reflection with action¹¹. This is based on the premise that: a) what we plan to achieve through some action is in fact an *assumption* (i.e., we cannot know it to be certain) regarding the relationship amongst a complex set of factors and variables; and b) there is a great scope for learning if such assumptions are made explicit and tested during the course of actions. Learning-oriented monitoring is at the heart of adaptive approaches to resource management.

We suggest that at present the weak two way communication and very limited effective monitoring (as a means of organizational learning) among Micro (mainly FUGs), Meso (mainly DFO) and Macro level (mainly Regional Directors, Department of Forest and MOFSC) institutions has been one of the reasons for limited responsiveness and accountability of the different layers of governance to people's needs, as well as the emerging challenges and opportunities at the local level. The sections below outline the current status and experiences in macro-micro level monitoring in Nepal¹², and some suggestions for future directions.

CURRENT MONITORING SYSTEMS IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN NEPAL

Two recent studies¹³ of the Adaptive and Collaborative Management Research Project concluded that there is a low level of learning oriented monitoring in CF currently. In this section we highlight a range of interconnected underlying factors in relation to this.

Lack of Clarity About Monitoring

The studies found that although there are some official monitoring mechanisms (See Box 2 for examples of existing mechanisms across different levels and institutions) in place from the national to the local level within the formal CF framework, there was significant lack of clarity relating to monitoring amongst the associated staff, as well as a preponderance to approach all monitoring as 'control oriented'. There is a perception amongst various organizations that 'forms' (or 'formats') are synonyms of monitoring.

Furthermore, the lacks of clarity on, and sometimes overlap between, monitoring roles and mandates of agencies such as the Department of Forest (DoF), MOFSC and National Planning Commission are significant hindrances to effective monitoring. This is particularly evident in the poorly defined roles of Regional Forest Directorate, and Ilaka Forest Offices within District Forest Offices¹⁴. This reflects some larger lack of clarity in organizational mandates in CF – this is natural in a changing stakeholder landscape, and needs further resolution.

Bureaucratic & Hierarchical Structures and Upward Accountability

Each level of CF governance has its own locus of decision-making, and at the same time is linked (at least in principle) to higher and/or lower levels through a system of upward and downward accountability. For example, forest user groups are required to furnish annual activity reports to DFOs, and DFOs are required to inform policy related changes to FUGs. The singular emphasis on upward accountability, however, has given rise to a disproportionately high flow of information from the local to the national, compared to the limited return of feedback and information to the local level. Furthermore, the information passed ‘upwards’ tends to be data rather than analysis. As such, analysis and development of analytical capacity (and in fact adaptive management capacity) is focused at the higher levels, giving limited attention to establishing and strengthening monitoring systems at the district and local levels.

Relatedly, the bureaucratic structure of MOFSC, characterized by routine work, vertical ‘lines of command’ with limited flexibility¹⁵, and lack of incentives to learn and innovate, provides very limited room for monitoring as a way of critically reflecting on what worked and what did not, and under what conditions and why, so that lessons can be drawn and communicated to different levels for future improvement.

Perceptions of Monitoring as Supervisors' Weapon

Many stakeholder groups interviewed at all levels expressed similar conceptions that monitoring implied supervisors or external evaluators checking for ‘wrong-doings’, or a one-off activity to ‘go back to see’ the implemented activities. Monitoring was primarily seen as a supervisors' weapon, and one that essentially brings fear, or at best it focused on identifying problems and their causes, rather than also identifying any best practices that could be replicated. Very few stakeholders viewed monitoring as a continuous process of collecting information to test assumptions and learn to improve.

Relatedly, the perception that they will be penalized for reporting poor progress, regardless of the cause, creates considerable incentives for ‘lower level’ stakeholders (including DFO staff) to report consistently high progress.

Limited Qualitative and Policy-oriented Feedback

In the current CF system, the MOFSC measures achievement primarily in quantitative figures (such as number of FUGs created). It does not currently encourage district level staff to report on qualitative aspects of progress, such as the nature of the FUG process and lessons learned about what worked well or poorly and why.

Furthermore, current monitoring focuses only on the implementation of activities (operational level) but not on generating feedback to policy decisions (constitutional levels)¹⁶, and this leads to an absence of feed back to forest policy even after years of implementation. This pattern is rooted in the absence of ‘learning questions’ and low -appreciation of uncertainties in the policy-making and implementation process¹⁷. This limits the scope for developing strategically useful indicators, and for the application of feedback into planning and decision-making¹⁸.

Lack of Ownership and Integrated Analysis at Multiple Levels

Monitoring formats (including indicators) are usually developed by senior officers, sometimes with the help of donor funded project staff¹⁹, but without the involvement of lower level staff. The DoF field staff and user groups were found to have little ownership, sense of relevance of, or commitment to, the applied formats. This implies that meso level stakeholders, such as DFO staff, are generally missing a critical opportunity for analysis of their influence on FUGs and forests. This could be used for rapid feedback to their own process of support and policy implementation, as well as providing the basis for strategic information to be passed 'upwards'.

Furthermore, although there are many formats, and various monitoring initiatives within the DoF, MOFSC, and other stakeholders such as bilateral projects, these are largely disconnected from one another. The information generated from various sources is not systematically collated, analyzed, compared or integrated in any way to generate answers to questions of strategic importance. As a result, much information remains unprocessed and unused at and across the various levels²⁰.

Box 2. Some examples of monitoring elements in community forestry at different layers of governance

Development of monitoring strategy at the MOFSC level

- Formation of monitoring units in projects and higher layers of MOFSC
- CF Databases at DFO and DOF levels (although quantitative)
- Some diversity of monitoring approaches adopted by district forest offices, such as:
 - ◆ Compilation and publication of some monitoring reports (such as by Kathmandu and Lalitpur DFOs);
 - ◆ DFO monitoring of FUGs connected to FUG support strategy (such as use of FUG categorization forms in Baglung district);
 - ◆ Some adaptation of centrally designed formats at lower levels (such as by Kathmandu DFO).
- Development and application of multiplicity of tools (mostly 'format' based) in monitoring by different institutions at different levels
- Some longitudinal studies to monitor impact of CF initiatives [such as by Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP) on the impact of community forestry on forest condition]
- Collection of very large amounts of quantitative information mostly related to project activities and targets
- Frequent workshops, meetings and interactions across the institutions at different layers of forest governance such as regional planning meetings, district level networking and planning workshops
- Increased appreciation by policy makers and project managers of the need for monitoring at all levels, along with increased concerns over the need for taking into account activity, process, outputs, inputs and impacts while designing a monitoring system
- Trials and experimentations by projects, DFOs, and Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) in CF support and implementation, including:
 - ◆ Some practices designed to facilitate internal learning of FUGs (such as by NUKCFP, Reading University/ForestAction, CIFOR/MOFSC);
 - ◆ Initiatives for assisting communities to undertake upward 'monitoring' of policies and governance contexts (such as by FECOFUN).
- Some events of self-monitoring such as meetings, retreats, team-building workshop at various institutions, including the government

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Although there is still considerable progress to be made in developing learning-oriented monitoring systems linking the macro, meso and micro levels, the already existing monitoring related experiences of a variety of stakeholders in CF in Nepal (see box 2) provides a good base upon which to build on innovations. In this section, we suggest a set of ways that can be initiated to improve micro-macro monitoring in Nepal's community forestry for improving the forest governance. Also some practical clues of improving monitoring are given in Box 3.

Clarify the Perceptions of Monitoring in Relation to Governance

Since perceptions of monitoring are very diverse and often have negative (control-oriented) connotations, decision-makers at every level of governance need the opportunity to explore and develop their understanding of the scope and potential of monitoring from the perspective of learning organizations and adaptive management. Monitoring, from this perspective, can be introduced as a topic of discourse and debate in the on-going activities such as trainings, seminars, regional and national planning workshops, FUG assemblies, and through site/organization visits to institutions that are applying this new approach to monitoring.

Review and Redefine Roles of Different Layers of Forest Governance

While there is some clarity of organizational mandate, roles and rights with respect to forest governance, this needs to be further addressed and re-assessed in relation to monitoring as the CF landscape changes over time. In particular, the monitoring roles and responsibilities are unclear between actors at and across different levels. As a result, the monitoring that does occur tends to be isolated, and much – especially analysis - is left undone. Key CF stakeholder from various levels should jointly review specific contradictions, confusions, and overlaps as well as identify monitoring needs, priorities, capacities and the roles (Pokharel et al 2002 and Paudel & Ojha et al 2002).

Identify Uncertainties, 'Learning Questions', and Key Indicators

Decision-makers at all levels in CF in Nepal face significant uncertainty – such as about the social and natural systems, and their interconnections and responses to policies and management activities. Yet, few have explicitly identified critical uncertainties (i.e., those that may most powerfully influence change) or related "learning questions"²¹ that can add leverage to their efforts to improve management or achieve CF goals. We suggest that CF monitoring would benefit from moving away from the collection of considerable amounts of broad areas of 'data', and instead focus on levels of strategic analysis related to key uncertainties. For example, we suggest that as each level of CF management prepares its strategic plan for the medium term (5-7 years), and spells out its intended impacts, it should also explicitly highlight the key uncertainties, knowledge gaps and decision-making questions. Based on these, each level of management can develop indicators that not only track 'implementation', but also specifically provide information about the key 'leverage points'.

Conduct Monitoring of Policy Impact in an On-going Basis

Related to the above, the focus of monitoring at multiple levels could also usefully expand (selectively) from input-focused (e.g., the number of FUG formed, number of trainings carried out), to include monitoring of implementation processes, governance at different levels and impacts of policy. For example, MOFSC had recently made a decision²² to charge 40% tax on the sale of forest products in Terai by FUGs outside their group. This is an example of a policy that may potentially have a variety of unintended side effects, such as detrimental effects on local livelihoods, demotivation of FUGs, or increase in unregistered sales. Monitoring impacts of this policy change, through tracking with some key indicators and cases, with clear and timely feedback to MOFSC would allow for efficient policy adjustment as needed.

Box 3. Some specific clues for the improvement of monitoring system in community forestry

1. There should be baseline information of forests and people's condition
2. Monitoring should be practiced as a means of feedback to decision making
3. Monitoring should be a priority component of the project
4. There should be adequate budget, staff, expertise and organizational unit in place specifically focusing on monitoring
5. Self and participatory monitoring should be the working policy of the organization
6. There should be clear indicators in place to assess success of the policy, program or the project
7. There should be user friendly and manageable formats that are developed in consultation with all related stakeholders and actors of all levels
8. Regular collection, processing and summarizing of information should be institutionalized in the organization
9. There should be a balance of qualitative and quantitative data in monitoring reports
10. There should be two way information flow horizontally and vertically at all levels
11. Sharing of information among team members and partners and publications of relevant materials should be regular and institutionalized
12. Access to information among staff and concerned stakeholders should be easy and simple
13. Information briefs and publications targeted to illiterate should also be the priority of the organizations
14. Monitoring should be embedded in day-to-day practice, procedures and reporting. Monitoring is a continuous process therefore it should not be one off events only
15. There should be unified monitoring system in which activities, process, impact, finance and staff's performance should be come together
16. Documentation, library management, summary writing, sharing and communication mechanism should be the important component and priority activities of the project
17. There should be adequate analytical reports that are produced by staff concerned and monitoring data produced by concerned staff should also be the basis to see the project's impact
18. Monitoring and evaluation of community forestry should be focused on both people and resources. The impact on people's livelihoods at household level, forest's regeneration, density, biodiversity, soil nutrients, water source and change in forest landscape.
19. Change in various aspects of forest governance at all levels of organizations including organizational culture of government, service providers and community based organizations should be given more emphasis to see the impact of the intervention

Allow Flexibility and Scope for Experimentation

Active and effective monitoring is a means of enhancing and speeding up the learning and feedback of learning to management (including policy) decisions. In order for this to be effective, this necessitates decision makers, such as DFO staff, to have the flexibility to test new ideas and apply new learning for improvement relatively quickly. Currently, neither regulations nor forest bureaucracy's organizational culture are adequately conducive to this kind of innovation. Testing new

ideas requires some 'space' for experimentation in policy, for example, a provision for pilot scale innovations in DFO's annual work plan. This also requires the development of an institutional culture in which 'failures' – for example in 'pilots' - are viewed as opportunities for learning and improvement in policies or policy implementation. Although there are several examples of innovations at pilot scales (see Box 2), there is still a need to create a flexible environment in which such innovations can further be promoted. Attempts should also be made to facilitate speedy uptake and application of new knowledge that arise through some of the existing pilot level innovations in the monitoring systems.

Integrate Monitoring at Different Levels, with Pyramid-like Flow of Information from Bottom to Top

Currently, the upward flow of information in CF channels strongly dominates the downward flow, and (as described above) the various monitoring initiatives that do exist are not well-integrated. These linkages should be strengthened and balanced through enhanced emphasis on "downward accountability"²³ in the monitoring system, integration of the different initiatives (including by better defined monitoring roles and responsibilities to avoid duplication and gaps, and monitoring communication mechanisms, as described above). The essence of such a change is to create the opportunity for decision-makers to undertake analysis and adjustment at their own level. (In a sense, this is 'self monitoring' by institutions at each level). This would require strengthening monitoring and analysis especially at the lower levels, and a shift away from extractive monitoring approaches (i.e. by the 'higher' levels of the 'lower' levels, including of FUGs by rangers). It may also likely involve an increase in collaborative monitoring (for example, where different actors, such as DFO staff, FUG members and networks and federation members, and others might jointly assess the status of some indicators of common interest to them)²⁴. Relatedly, the higher the level of governance, the more strategic is the information needed; in other words, higher levels of governance deal more effectively with 'information' and 'knowledge' generated from processing of data, rather than with an abundance of site specific data itself. This also reinforces the need for processing and analysis of information at every level, and the upward flow should look like a pyramid in terms of the extent of information flow.

Take a Participatory Action Research Approach to Creating Effective Micro-macro Linkages at a Pilot Scale

Since no detailed 'prescription' can be made for an effective micro-macro monitoring system, the task of improving micro-macro linkages and learning should be considered a form of 'participatory action research'. In other words, this could be approached as a process of learning through small cycles of joint innovation and reflection, by a cross-section of institutions at all levels of forest governance. Beginning with key macro institutions and some 'pilot' institutions at meso and micro levels, these actors can jointly design 'improvements' in the monitoring system at different levels, based on assessing monitoring needs and priorities (linked to indicators developed from critical uncertainties and learning questions), capacities and the roles (including analysis and communication of monitoring outcomes). These improvements can be implemented as 'experiments' on small scales; the actors and other stakeholders can then undertake some explicit reflection on the strengths and weaknesses and outcomes of the monitoring innovations as they proceed, and then these 'innovations' can be adjusted as learning and experience is built up. Eventually the 'best practices' can be extended to larger scales. This would usefully build from and draw on the considerable (albeit disparate) experiences to date of various stakeholders in various innovations in monitoring.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This paper has presented a learning oriented perspective for improving forest governance in Nepal, particularly in the context of community forestry. Considering monitoring as a key to learning,

current status of micro-macro monitoring systems and practices have been reviewed, showing that while there exist many monitoring elements and practices, there is still a lot to be done from learning perspective. Several specific improvement opportunities have been identified, through which effective micro-macro linkages can be created.

Currently, the upward flow of information in CF channels strongly dominates the downward flow, and the various monitoring initiatives that do exist are not well-integrated. These linkages should be strengthened and balanced through enhanced emphasis on "downward accountability" in the monitoring system. The essence of such a change is to create the opportunity for decision-makers to undertake analysis and adjustment at their own level.

Decision-makers at all levels in CF in Nepal face significant challenges in relation to uncertainty. Yet, few have explicitly identified critical uncertainties or related "learning questions" that can add leverage to their efforts to improve governance or achieve CF goals. We suggest that CF monitoring would benefit from moving away from the collection of considerable amounts of broad areas of 'data', and instead focus on levels of strategic analysis related to key uncertainties and identified learning questions and indicators at all levels.

Since no detailed 'prescription' can be made for an effective micro-macro monitoring system, monitoring should be approached as a process of learning through joint innovation and reflection, by a cross-section of institutions at all levels of forest governance.

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¹ At a meeting of the proposed Asian Association on Good Forest Governance 9 elements of good governance in community forestry were suggested: equity; balancing power relationships; recognition/legitimacy of rights; transparency; decentralization; democratization; accountability; clearly defined roles, responsibilities and authority and, participation (Moving towards good forest governance in Asia and the Pacific" at the Indonesia People's Forum as part of PREPCOM IV in Bali, Indonesia from 1 - 2 June 2002). We would suggest that these would have to intersect with 'adaptive management' in order to maximize their effectiveness.

² Local Self-Governance Act 1998 and Local Self-Governance Rules 1998, His Majesty's Government, Nepal.

³ In recent years, new understanding has emerged about how collaboration, partnerships, and teamwork can be fostered. These insights on the political aspects of collaboration indicate that the question of how stakeholders in different layers of forest governance, with unequal power and authority, can engage in negotiations for equitable outcomes remains a major challenge in governance. Riley (2002) contends that collaboration requires each of the collaborating agencies to recognize the other as a legitimate actor, and that the collaborative relationship should engage all key stakeholders in defining problems and finding solutions, with shared authority.

⁴ The extent to which communication and information flows between the levels in both the directions vertically and horizontally is a crucial factor in determining the effectiveness of decision makers' responses to these challenges. While other factors, such as attitude, commitment, and capacity are also fundamental to positive policy response, access to relevant, timely, reliable and optimal levels of information is the hub of effective planning and decision-making, especially in complex and dynamic contexts such as community forestry. This implies not only that the information must exist and/or be generated, but also - since forest governance is shaped by actors at micro, meso and macro levels - that appropriate and effective communication is central to 'vertical' (ie between local, district and national levels) collaborations and to creating enabling conditions for effective forest management at the local level.

⁵ Edmund and Wollenberg (2002) suggest that negotiations are useful to disadvantaged stakeholders only when the uneven power relations are taken into account and addressed; otherwise a so-called 'consensus' may likely be just an imposition of views by powerful groups.

⁶ Refer to the Joint Technical Review Report of Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation (2001) for a review of current issues in community forestry in Nepal. One of the biggest challenges in the management of community forestry is enhancing equity; a glimpse of this challenge can also be seen in ICIMOD's annotated bibliography on equity and common property resources 2002.

⁷ This concept of monitoring is drawn from 'adaptive management', as described by Lee (1993), Lee (1999), and Walters (1986). Adaptive management is an approach to management (NRM or other) that policies as 'experiments'. It suggests that by explicitly comparing expectations and assumptions with actuality, institutions can learn to correct errors, improve their understanding, and effectively and efficiently change action and plans. Adaptive management does not postpone action until "enough" is known but acknowledges that management decisions and actions have to be made in conditions of uncertainty, complexity and dynamism. 'Adaptive managers' go beyond the concern to solve only immediate problems, and rather seek to combine experiments that will enhance learning for future options with their actions. They understand managed systems in terms of dynamic linkages, and tend to see these as (and/or develop) models as a means of spelling out their assumptions (about the way the system works, and outcomes of actions) as basis for future learning. In this sense, monitoring is a key component of adaptive management, and a fundamental way of incorporating reflection into actions. This is based on the premise that what we plan to achieve through some actions is actually an assumption regarding the relationship among a complex set of factors and variables. Policies (and their implementation) are needed to address management problems while simultaneously helping to develop better understanding of the challenges and opportunities that exist. Adaptive management can also be a means of conflict management by developing an agenda of questions, rather than solutions, agreed by disputing parties to be answered through the experience.

⁷ Mayers and Bass (1999) emphasizes that in order to achieve a desirable policy processes, there is a need for 'making spaces' to disagree and experiment while developing policy arrangements, and this requires that stakeholders are engaged in collaborative learning through experience.

⁹ See Abbot and Guijt (1998) for different meanings and purposes of monitoring.

¹⁰ See Pokharel and Grosen (2000).

¹¹ See Salafsky (1998) and Lee (1993).

¹² Lessons from the Adaptive and Collaborative Management (ACM) Research Project relating specifically to self-monitoring within FUGs can be found in a preliminary summary report (McDougall et al 2002) or in the forthcoming CIFOR publication 'Experiences in Adaptive and Collaborative Management at the FUG Level: A synthesis'.

¹³ Pokharel et al (2002), Paudel and Ojha (2002). For more information on the micro level participatory action research on adaptive and collaborative management see McDougall et al (2002).

¹⁴ DFOs, in a further example, are mandated with a dual role of policy enforcing and service provisioning, which is often contradictory and can be counter-productive. See Ojha (2002) for an example of how this conflicting role of DFOs is creating tensions in relation to inventories in community forests in Nepal.

¹⁵ One example of policy constraint to adoption of rapid learning is that the government (Minister level) order dated April 2001 (Nepali date: 2057-12-17) does not permit an FUG to revise its operational plans until two years after its preparation, even though it generates significant learning (although a lengthy and discouraging option to review even within two years, involving the Regional Forest Directorate is there). Likewise, bureaucratic constraint is evident from the fact that people working within bureaucracy openly share the rigid working environment in which they usually choose not to risk failures, and/or challenge the status quo but to comply with routine procedures.

¹⁶ Agrawal and Ostrum (1999) have distinguished at least three analytical distinctions in the level of rules or rights relating to resource use. These are: a) operational choice (which is related to actual work on forest or the physical world), b) collective choice (which structures operational rules – who, how, when to use or interact with the resource), and c) constitutional choice (higher order rules, legislations that affect who,

how of collective choice decisions). The three types of rights may rest with a single social entity or with combinations of different institutions in the administrative /political system. Forest governance can be considered to go beyond operational decisions, and incorporate all three types (levels) of decision-making systems. Monitoring and learning is required not only in the operational choice level (e.g., how trees can be cultivated better), but also in relation to choices of institutional rules for sustainable resource management, as well as choices regarding higher order political/legal institutional arrangements. This scheme of decision-making also parallels with single loop and double loop learning distinguished by Argyris (1993) and others management theorists.

¹⁷ Dr Keshav Kanel, formerly Chief of Monitoring Division in MOFSC, summarized the existing MOFSC monitoring system as 'Bhotojatra'. In Bhotojatra, which is a popular festival in Kathmandu valley, a piece of cloth is demonstrated in front of a large mass of people as a holy and sacred symbol. People fight with each other to see the holy piece in the crowd, which has virtually no meaning at all (although it has a religious value)- what you can see is just a piece of cloth and nothing more than that. Dr Kanel's interpretation was that the compilation of monitoring-generated information at the Ministry was often a ritual- using obsolete and meaningless indicators (such as 'weighted progress'). More importantly, what he noticed was that compilation of progress reports as a form of monitoring was largely a mechanical process, as the Ministry level decision makers generally lack learning and/or decision-making questions at their respective spheres of decision-making, around which monitoring system could have been designed.

¹⁸ An analogy is presented here. If you have decided to construct a house, and you know your main needs, and identify the main questions you have about how to go about it, then your observations of different models, designs and patterns of other houses that you pass by can be very useful. If you do not have a plan and some key questions, then you can hardly notice any patterns in your observations, and drawn little from them. Likewise, if decision makers do not have a clear vision of where they want to go, and some clear questions (uncertainties) to be addressed through monitoring, then monitoring is of relatively little benefit. This being said, it is also important to be open to learning from monitoring that is outside the main questions, ie 'surprises' that you did not anticipate, but emerge as important through the monitoring experience. Thus the 'learning questions' should be 'guideposts', but not 'blindlers'.

¹⁹ Nepal's community forestry has been heavily supported by bilateral projects of donors. Chief among them include: DFID's Livelihood and Forestry Program, Nepal-Swiss Community Forestry Project, DANNIDA-funded Natural Resource Management Sector Assistance Program, and Australian funded Nepal-Australia Community Resource Management Project. They work primarily with Department of Forest, and one of their objectives has always been strengthening the institutional capacity of the Department to plan, implement and monitor community forestry program in Nepal.

²⁰ See Pokharel et al 2002 for detail.

²¹ A learning question is a question that is rooted in recognition of the key uncertainties, and our 'hypotheses' about what we think 'should' happen based on the policy or intervention. It makes explicit what needs to be learned about the system or the intervention (e.g., policy or implementation) in order to improve understanding and actions.

²² This is stated in a Ministerial decision of April 1999 (Nepali date: 2056-12-21).

²³ Our definition of downward accountability largely resonates with the spirit of decentralization and devolution. The forest bureaucracy still remains to be accountable to the political decision makers at the top. While the recent initiatives in the form of Local Self-Governance Legislation has demanded greater local accountability from the district offices of the national government, there is still limited tendencies for locally based forest offices to be responsive and accountable to local people.

²⁴ But collaborative monitoring is not without its risks. For example, there is a risk that 'collaborative monitoring' may negatively influence the integrity and value of the associated self-monitoring. Specifically, a FUG may benefit from very honest self-monitoring of its progress, because it feels 'safe' from repercussions of exposing weakness or 'failures'. If its self-monitoring process becomes closely linked to collaborative monitoring with a DFO, the FUG may feel pressured to 'inflate' its progress.

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