

Community Forestry in Bhutan – Exploring Opportunities and Facing Challenges

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Abstract

In Bhutan, Community Forestry (CF) began to emerge as a definitive programme around the year 2000, with rapid expansion after 2007. Over the years since the nationalisation of forests in 1969, Bhutanese policy-makers and foresters came to realise that participation of local communities is key to conservation and sustainable management of forest resources. While in the beginning, CF was primarily promoted to ensure forest protection, it is now increasingly viewed as a means to improve rural livelihoods and contribute to poverty reduction, which is consistent with the 10th Five Year Plan (2008-2013) of the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGoB) which has poverty reduction as its primary goal..

CF is still relatively new to Bhutan. This gives the Bhutanese a unique opportunity to learn from the successes and difficulties that their neighbours have experienced and to create an approach most appropriate to the local context. As of July 2009, there were 173 community forests covering an area of 21,025 ha and involving approx. 8,650 households. This constitutes still less than 1% of the national forest land, but is - given the growing interest in CF amongst rural communities - likely to expand substantially in future.

This paper shows that the decentralisation of forestry extension to the district level and the stepwise development of a legal framework for CF have been essential for the successful evolution of the state-community partnership in CF. Adapting the legal framework to take the experience gained and upcoming new issues into account, liberalising the rules in place and simplifying planning procedures and technical provisions for CF are important current challenges for the programme.

Over the coming years, the CF programme will increasingly explore opportunities to generate economic and social benefits from active resource management. With the change of emphasis towards more social and economic questions the programme faces challenges on how to address, in an operational way, issues such as governance, equity and gender, income generation and poverty reduction.

1 Bhutan

Bhutan lies in the Eastern Himalaya between China and India. It covers a total area of 38,394 sq. km with rugged mountains. The country is endowed with rich renewable natural resources. About 69% of Bhutan's population lives in rural areas and agriculture and forests are a major source of their

livelihoods. According to the Bhutan Living Standard Survey (National Statistics Bureau, 2007), about 23% of the population lives below poverty level.

The country has an approximate area of 26,826 sq. km (72.7%) under forest cover (including scrub forest) (FAO, 2005). About 14% of the forest area is allocated to Forest Management Units with a primary objective of commercial timber production (Chhetri, in press). Almost 50% of the forest area is contained within the Protected Areas system and Biological Corridors.

In 1952, recognising the rapid growth of population and increasing pressure on the country's forests, the Government established the Department of Forest (DoF) with a mandate to control and manage natural resources. With the Forest Act of 1969, all forests, with the exception of land under shifting cultivation, were nationalised and declared to be Government Reserved Forests (GRF) (Chhetri, in press).

2 Evolution of Community Forestry in Bhutan

The concept of Social Forestry emerged in Bhutan following a Royal Decree in 1979 stating that "*peoples' participation is key to conservation and utilization of forest resources*". This opened the door for a gradual, albeit in the beginning slow change of emphasis in the management of forests. Over the last decade, there has been a clear shift from a primary focus on protection of forests towards a focus on balancing conservation with sustainable management. At the same time, there has been a move towards a more decentralised and people-centred approach to forestry.

The legal basis for CF and private forestry was laid in 1995 with the Forest and Nature Conservation Act of Bhutan. It also recognised traditional and cultural rights of local people to access and use forest resources. In conformity with the 1995 Act, the Forest and Nature Conservation Rules were framed in 2003 and revised in 2006 to include a chapter for Social and Community Forestry programs (Gilmour, 2009, Chhetri, in press)

At present, a new Forest Policy is under elaboration and the Forest and Nature Conservation Rules 2006 are again under revision in order to incorporate recent changes in policy of the Government aimed at using participatory forestry approaches to contribute to poverty reduction and socio-economic development. The revised rules concerning CF are recommended to be liberalised and simplified so that the CF programme can benefit even more local communities.

At first, CF was explored only cautiously (Carter et al, 2009, p. 40) with the establishment of the first CFs in Eastern Bhutan in the late 1990s. At the time, there was no strong legal framework supporting the CF programme, and there were several restrictions and limitations in the regulatory framework for people's participation in forest management. The main reasons for the slow start of the CF programme were i) the initial scepticism of communities whether the Department of Forest (DoF) would actually handover Government Reserved Forest for their management, and ii) severe reservations amongst government staff about the ability of communities to manage forests sustainably (Temphel and Beukeboom, 2006). Also, in the early years there were limitations in the capacity of forestry field staff to conceptualise the dimensions of decentralised and devolved forest management and to provide the necessary support to communities (Gilmour, 2009).

The move to a more people-centred approach to forestry is still ongoing, but considerable progress has been made since 2001. From 2007 onwards, the number of new CFs has been increasing rapidly, and CF has become an important part of the national forest policy and a significant movement in the country. As per July 2009, there were 173 CFs approved by the DoF and handed over to Community Forest Management Groups (CFMGs), comprising in total 8,650 households and managing 21,025 ha of forests, both for timber as well as for NWFPs. Thus, the CF programme has now definitively moved past its trialling and piloting stage. This rapid increase is associated with the revision of the rules making them more enabling and a change in political leadership that championed CF. It would not have been possible without the substantial improvement of capacities at the district and block level to implement the CF programme and support the CFMGs. It is projected that by mid 2013 about

4% of the forest area of Bhutan will be designated as CFs involving at least 400 CFMGs (Tempheh, 2008, Gilmour, 2009).

Since 2002, the Participatory Forest Management Project (PFMP) has been supporting the development of CF in Bhutan. The project is implemented by the Social Forestry Division (SFD) of the DoF, with technical support from Helvetas, and funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

3 Community Forestry in the National Development Planning and in the National Forest Policy

CF has a well-identified place in the country's key planning instruments and mechanisms with strategic links to (i) governance of renewable natural resources; (ii) decentralisation and devolution; (iii) commercial harvesting of NWFPs, and (iv) poverty reduction (Gilmour, 2009).

Article 5 of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan (2008) states that "*Every Bhutanese is a trustee of the Kingdom's natural resources and environment*". The Royal Government is enjoined in the Constitution to conserve and improve the environment and safeguard the country's biodiversity. It is further directed to secure sustainable development while promoting economic and social development. The Constitution further charges the Government to ensure that a minimum of 60 percent of Bhutan's total land area is maintained under forest cover for all time.

The Government's vision for Bhutan's future charted in the Document "Bhutan 2020" re-affirms the notion of Gross National Happiness (GNH) as the central development concept for the country (RGoB, 1999). This organising concept is translated into objectives of which two are of particular relevance for CF: one relating to environmentally sustainable development for which the country's rich biodiversity should be seen as a development asset, and one related to governance. The latter emphasises that development must take account of the decentralisation of new powers and responsibilities to the district and block levels (Gilmour, 2009).

The vision set out in "Bhutan 2020" is broken down in the country's Five Year Plan into sector plans, strategies and programmes. The current, 10th Five Year Plan (2008-2013) (RGoB 2008) has poverty reduction as its primary goal. RGoB indeed promotes CF as one of the means to contribute to reduce rural poverty.

A new National Forest Policy is currently under elaboration (RGoB, 2009). It's National Forest Policy Goal reads as follows: "*Bhutan's forest resources and biodiversity are managed sustainably and equitably to produce a wide range of social, economic and environmental goods and services for the benefit of all citizens and natural environment while still maintaining a minimum of 60% of the land under forest cover thereby contributing to Gross National Happiness*". The policy objective for CF is: "*Empower rural communities to manage forests sustainably for socio-economic benefits, poverty reduction and to contribute to overall sustainable forest management at the national level.*"

In April 2009, a National CF Strategy was elaborated in a participatory process. This strategy was developed to chart the way for the future of CF in Bhutan for the medium to long term (time horizon of 5 to 10 years). It includes ten specific strategies to address some of the challenges for CF, use the opportunities and to develop CF further. The strategy aims at further developing capacities of CFMGs to take up management responsibilities. It also identifies a need to build capacity of planners, policy makers and implementers to ensure that forests are managed and utilised sustainably, with greater involvement of local people, so that the Government's long term objectives of ensuring self sufficiency and contributing to poverty reduction are achieved (Chhetri, in press).

4 Present experience with Community Forestry in Bhutan

The very first CFs are old enough to give some indications of the potential wider impact and benefit of CF in the long run.

Social benefits

CF is resulting in increased “ownership” over forests and easy and secure access to forest products by local communities. In many instances, CF is a way for local communities to obtain control over forest resources, shared with the DoF, that they consider traditionally as theirs. Communities living in protected areas have managed to legalise their traditional resource use practices through the establishment of CFs. Having their own harvest rights, the member households of the CFMG do no longer have to go through a lengthy process to get timber permits from the territorial forest service.

The establishment of CFMGs with their own by-laws enables the community to better organise itself for the benefit of all its members. These groups of villagers managing their designated forest in a sustainable way build important social capital (Norbu, 2008). As an organised group, the members can better express their concerns and priorities and defend their rights in the Block and District Committees, the local parliaments. In many instances, the CFMGs also serve as platforms for discussion of issues other than CF. In this way, CF contributes to the process of democratisation, improved local governance and devolved decision making on natural resource management and beyond.

CFMGs can 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 and about doing something that would benefit their children and grandchildren (Gilmour 2009).

Environmental benefits

Many foresters report an increase in vegetation cover in CF areas (Temphel et al, 2005). CFMG members observe improvements in forest conditions since they gained the rights to regulate harvesting of forest resources and grazing in CF areas. Foresters also report a decrease in the number of forest fires thanks to increased “ownership” and protection by CFMGs for their forests. There are indications that CFMG tend to harvest timber conservatively and usually below the annual harvest limit prescribed in the CF management plan (Buffum et al, 2005, Tshering, in press).

The CFMGs also invest labour in the CF to improve forest quality. So far, more than 346 ha of plantations have been established in CFs, mainly with native species, to protect water sources and to rehabilitate degraded land and areas prone to landslides.

Economic benefits

In many CFs, economic benefits have started flowing to the members of the CFMGs. A still small, but growing number of CFMGs generates income from the sale mainly of NWFPs, but increasingly also of timber. In all CFs, community funds are established. These funds often start as saving funds, but with the time, the proceeds from fees for the use of forest products, sale, fines for illegal activities and donations by visitors contribute to the funds. Through the sale of timber and NWFPs and the establishment of CFMG funds, the CF programme has the potential to contribute to the improvement of rural livelihoods.

5 Main Opportunities and Challenges for Community Forestry in Bhutan¹

The current positive dynamic of CF in Bhutan and the experience gained so far are encouraging. However, CF is still a relatively recent approach in Bhutan, and it will take several years before the gains can be consolidated and the full potential of CF and the impact of its application analysed. The majority of CFMGs are still not more than two years old. Hence, most of the CFMGs have just started the process of - hopefully - evolving into mature and strong local institutions that are able and empowered to manage their forests for both biophysical and socio-economic outcomes (Gilmour, 2009). The following major opportunities and challenges for CF have emerged in the process of developing and implementing the CF programme since its inception:

¹ This section draws largely on the challenges identified during the elaboration process of the National CF Strategy (Gilmour, 2009)

Political will for change and political support

The support for CF from the Government, senior politicians and civil servants in the country represents an important political opportunity for CF. It is important to continue translating this into supporting policies for CF for the benefit of rural communities. The recent elaboration of the National CF Strategy and the importance given to CF in the draft National Forest Policy are significant milestones in this regard. These documents provide orientation for ongoing and further policy work, such as the revision of the Forest and Nature Conservation Rules or the framing of new rules for the marketing of timber.

The long term vision for sustainable management of CFs is to build a strong institutional, political, and social path for a future that makes a significant contribution to rural livelihoods, poverty reduction, and improved forest condition and is resilient to climate change. The revision of policy and legislation shall address the emerging need of people to manage forest resources in a responsible manner. The revised policies will support the transfer of the primary authority and responsibility for the management of forest resources near settlements to CFMGs to the extent that they are able and willing to accept the mandate.

Raising interest in CF and awareness about CF

More and more communities are coming forward with their intention to establish a CF. CF also receives significant attention in Bhutanese mass media. But despite slowly rising levels of awareness about CF, there is still limited understanding of CF, its purpose, functioning and how it can contribute to improving rural livelihoods and poverty reduction with the general public, rural communities, government agencies, including some staff of the Department of Forests (DoF), and representatives of local and district governments. This points to information needs to be satisfied and further awareness to be promoted in all of the above mentioned groups.

A more enabling regulatory framework and a more “natural” approach to CF

While the overall framework is largely enabling, there are still a few regulations rather restricting the wider application of CF in Bhutan. These include a maximal area of 2.5 ha per household or the minimum requirement of 10 households to form a CFMG. The participants of the National CF Workshop held in April 2009 and the National CF Strategy (Gilmour, 2009) recommend removing the cap on the area of CF per household for CF allocation, allowing also smaller communities than 10 households to found a CFMG, and using, where ever possible, traditional and natural boundaries for the CF. The Strategy suggests determining the CF areas by a set of criteria including customary rights and practices, availability and productivity of forests, and the willingness and ability of the CFMG to manage its forests.

This liberalisation of rules will allow the allocation of larger forest areas to encourage CFMGs to manage their CFs for commercial as well as subsistence goods. The inclusion of substantial areas of productive forests in CF is a precondition for the generation of income (see below) by the communities. These changes will also lead to clearer boundaries of the CF area rendering the monitoring of CF activities by forestry staff easier and reducing the risks of conflicts over unclear boundaries.

Simplified and streamlined application and planning procedures

The processes of applying and planning for a CF tend to be lengthy and constitute an important bottleneck for the expansion of CF (Tshering, in press). Bureaucratic procedures should be shortened and the application and the CF planning process and the technical guidelines (CF manuals) simplified. While doing so and when developing new rules and guidelines, a distinction should be made between requirements of the Government and the information and planning needs of the communities to manage their forests to keep all rules and guidelines as simple as possible.

A simple, but solid approach ensuring sustainable forest management

The application of the principles of sustainable forest management is key for the achievement of the CF development and conservation goals. Forest management should be based on the application of good scientific knowledge about the ecology and silviculture of the main forest types of the country. At the moment, the annual harvest limit for timber is calculated in a rather formulaic manner, and there are some concerns about the validity of its calculation. What is needed are simplified guidelines and utilisation procedures which make sense to CFMG members and extension staff so that they can apply them in an adaptive manner to suite the particular local circumstances. The sustainable management of NWFPs requires approaches adapted to the nature and characteristics of the particular product to be harvested (see also paper by Meijboom and Peldon presented at the Workshop). The recently published Interim Framework for Collection and Management of NWFPs (DoF 2009) will contribute significantly to the sustainable management of a range of important NWFPs.

Income generation

There is significant scope for local people to generate substantial benefits from the sustainable management of CFs through the sale of timber, firewood, NWFPs, enterprise development and marketing. To realise this potential, it is key to have simple procedures for communities to sell timber, other forest products and services.

Some CFs were set up explicitly to provide the institutional framework for the commercial use of NWFPs. Significant efforts are made throughout the country, supported by a variety of institutions and organisations, to promote NWFPs to generate income (see the paper by Meijboom and Peldon presented at the Workshop). There are many encouraging examples, such as the harvesting and sale of lemon grass for the extraction of lemon grass oil in Eastern Bhutan. Income generation from NWFPs also offers considerable potential for partnerships between CFMGs and private sector companies. In the longer run, there is also potential for income generation from payments for ecosystem services (PES), an approach for which a framework has yet to be developed in Bhutan.

Substantial potential for income generation lies in the sale of timber by CFMGs. So far, the marketing of timber has been in the hand of a Government-owned Corporation and highly regulated. In rural areas, all households are entitled to get a defined subsidised volume of timber for their own construction for at a nominal royalty rate. This policy however distorts the market and acts as a disincentive for rural people to manage CFs and private forests for timber production. The RGoB is currently reviewing its policy with regard to the marketing of timber. In the mid-run, it intends to phase out the supply of subsidised rural timber and to satisfy the demand for rural timber from CFs. Thus, there is a promising potential for CFMGs to generate significant income from the sale of timber. To date, only a few CFMGs have started commercial use of timber. Some CFMGs have also expressed an interest in timber processing activities (eg sawing, carpentry) to add value to their products. Marketing and pricing and developing a viable timber business are new areas for the CFMGs, in which they need support from forestry extension staff (Beck, 2009).

Poverty reduction

Considering that 69% of the population of Bhutan is rural based and knowing that poverty is generally a rural phenomenon, CF has a great potential to contribute towards reducing rural poverty. To realise the potential, it is important to make sure that i) poorer local households participate in CF following the principle of inclusiveness and ii) benefits are shared in an equitable way amongst the members of the CFMGs. Also, transaction costs (eg time spent at meetings, contributing labour) for rural poor should be minimised so that they can become active and effective participants in CF.

A number of CFMGs have included specific pro-poor provisions in their by-laws. There is a need to further sensitise forestry extension staff, who support the CFMGs in the elaboration of their by-laws, and local communities for the need for special provisions for equitable benefit sharing in favour of marginalised households. The DoF will revise and develop its policy, rules and strategies and simplify the CF guidelines and manuals to contribute to this poverty reduction agenda.

The generation of income, the creation of more livelihood options and improved well-being in rural areas, to which CF can contribute, are hoped to curb rural-urban migration and growing youth unemployment, two problems with which Bhutan is increasingly confronted. Higher educational levels amongst rural youth and the prospect of greater job and business opportunities in urban leads to a continuous drain of the younger generation from rural communities which considerably reduces labour capacities and negatively affects rural development.

Good governance and CF

To achieve its expected development outcomes, the management of CFs and CFMGs should be based on principles of good governance, such as transparency in decision making, accountability, inclusiveness and equity. Also, CF should be in line and with current decentralisation and devolution policies providing more decision making authority and responsibility to local communities and to district and block level government bodies following the principle of subsidiarity.

The definition of the by-laws for the group and the election of the executive committee by the members of the CFMG is an important mechanism to develop flexible and locally well-adapted rules for the functioning of the CFMG in a democratic way. But in future, more needs to be done to make sure that good governance principles are observed in the formulation and application of these rules, and in the relation between the CFMGs and other stakeholders, particularly local governments and the forest service. Hereby, inclusiveness, equity and mechanisms to reduce rural poverty deserve particular attention (see above).

A first study on economic (distribution of benefits) and political equity (participation in decision making) (Buffum et al, submitted for publication) found relatively high levels of equity, compared to reports from neighbouring countries. This was mainly explained by four factors: ethnic homogeneity, active participation of women, supportive government policy and strong extension support. However, a subsequent study (Namgay and Sonam, 2006) identified inequity in benefit sharing as an emerging issue. By-laws often contain strict rules regarding membership, such as high hurdles to join an existing CFMG some time after its establishment or high penalties for leaving and eventually rejoining a CFMG. The communities usually set such rules to prevent local households from free riding by joining a CFMG only once the other households have invested considerable effort and labour in the CF and tangible benefits start to flow. While this is undoubtedly a legitimate concern it is important not to establish rules that could potentially discriminate local households, particularly poorer households. These households are often not able to provide for example the requested volume of labour or pay fines for non-attendance in meetings. All these points related to governance deserve more attention in future (see the poster presented by Schmidt et al at the Workshop).

Capacity development

The capacities for the implementation of the CF programme have increased significantly at all levels over the last few years. The strong increase in demand for CFs leads to growing work loads for DoF staff and has, in some places, put a serious strain on foresters, especially on extension staff (Tshering, in press). This, the maturing of the CF programme and the emergence of new, so called second generation issues (eg poverty reduction, income generation, gender, governance) highlight the need for the continuation of the development of capacities for CF. To address the increased workload of foresters, the DoF should also explore possibilities to outsource part of the work to private firms.

The need for further capacity development includes capacities of the CFMGs to manage both forest resources as well as the group, and of government staff to support the CFMGs in all aspects of planning and management, and ,increasingly, in complex issues such as income generation and poverty reduction. It also comprises the need to further develop the necessary in-country training and research capacities, particularly to address second generation issues in CF and increase the understanding of social and socio-economic systems in rural communities amongst forestry officials.

Monitoring and evaluation system for the CF programme

CF has become a key programme in Bhutan raising high expectations regarding its expected biophysical and socio-economic impacts. The numbers of CFs is growing rapidly. This encouraging dynamic emphasises the need to monitor processes, activities and outcomes and to evaluate the impact of the CF programme to ensure its quality. Monitoring and evaluation should be undertaken both by the CFMGs as well as by government agencies involved in CF.

6 Conclusions

There has been a rapid expansion in the area of forests under CF during the past few years, but it is important not to become too complacent about this growth. It is more important to ensure that quality of the process is maintained and improved so that the programme meets the Government's objectives of using CFs to generate household income on a sustainable basis and contribute to poverty reduction. It is also important to continually review past successes, failures and outcomes so that improvements can be made.

The key lessons that can be drawn from the experience of Bhutan with CF are that:

- Political intent 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).
- It took several decades to move from a stated intent to adopt social forestry to a situation where all the necessary reforms (along with capacity building and awareness raising) were in place to enable CF to proceed effectively as a national programme.
- Legislation to mandate changes is necessary but not sufficient—it needs to be accompanied by appropriate subordinate legal instruments including rules and regulations and practical implementation guidelines.
- On-going adaptations to the subordinate instruments of the regulatory framework can be informed by feedback from field experience to make them more enabling.
- A government organisational structure with a mandate to support the adoption of CF can assist the process by providing a focal point for internal reform, but such a structure should not be confused with overall governance arrangements.
- Political will for change and high level champions can catalyse the process.
- Policy changes in non forest sectors (e.g. to mandate decentralisation) can have a major influence on attempts to adopt CF.
- Capacity building (of forest officials and community groups) is essential, particularly to change the mind set of government officials, to embrace participatory approaches to forest management and to accept effective devolution of power to community groups.

In Bhutan, there is currently great political support for CF and the regulatory framework for CF is generally enabling. However, many aspects of the CF programme can still be improved to simplify procedures and make the CF programme more effective and to further empower CFMGs to manage their forests resources for the production of a wide range of products and services, income generation and poverty reduction.

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