



COMMUNITY FORESTRY STRENGTHENS DEMOCRACY

Democracy and community forestry have grown in parallel in Bhutan

Community forestry in Bhutan has developed since the mid-1990s. After a slow take-up during its first decade, the community forestry programme has evolved very dynamically since the start of the transition of the country to become a constitutional monarchy and a parliamentary democracy.

Today, community forestry contributes significantly to the development of a vibrant democracy in the country, to local democratisation and to good community governance. Local communities self-responsibly organise themselves in community forest management groups to practice democratic decision making on the use of natural resources and community development. At the same time, these groups provide a platform for future community leaders to practice and develop leadership skills and thus garner experience to eventually stand for local elections.

COMMUNITY FORESTRY IS LOCAL

DEMOCRACY IN ACTION

In 2008, Bhutan became a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary democracy. Since this transition, the country has seen two rounds of elections for the national parliament and three rounds of elections for local governments. Overall, democratisation has gone smoothly and continues as a major social and political learning process that affects everybody in society.

Since the mid-2000s, community forestry (CF) has become a major movement in Bhutan. CF refers to the participatory management of forest resources by local community forest management groups (CFMGs). The forestry authority hands over delineated areas of state-owned forests to the groups for their use and management following an approved forest management plan.

The rapid raise in numbers of community forests (CFs) happened in parallel to democratisation. Reasons for this include downward accountability of elected politicians to their constituencies and the realisation by elected local leaders and members of parliament that CF can significantly benefit people in their constituencies. Moreover, capacities to implement community forestry have increased significantly since the mid-1990s. Support from political champions and an enabling legal framework equally helped to advance community forestry.

CF contributes to conservation and sustainable management of forests, local economic development and building social capital. The CFMGs organise themselves, decide on resource use and contribute to local resource governance. Thus, CF is democracy in action and has a wider impact on the evolution of democracy and devolution.

GOOD GROUP GOVERNANCE

Governance can be defined as a process in which political, economic and administrative authority is exercised to manage a country's or any other social or political system's affairs at all levels. The concept of good governance emphasises the importance of benefits for the society at large. Thus, good governance refers to the quality of the governance process.

The CFMGs constitute themselves based on their by-laws. The general assembly of the CFMG is the highest decision-making body of the group and democratically elects the members of its executive committee. The committee is responsible for the operations of the group and accountable to its membership basis. The by-laws stipulate the application of good governance principles such as inclusiveness, equity, participation, transparency of decision making and accountability of the executive committee through record keeping and sharing information in meetings.



Women drawing a map of their community forest.

Following the principles of inclusiveness and participation, it is key that marginalised and poor households can participate in community forestry and that the group also encourages the participation of women in its activities and decision making and thus also in the executive committee of the CFMGs. There is however, still a significant gender imbalance in the executive committees: In 2012, only 13% of the office holders (chairperson, secretary, treasurer) in 242 CFMGs were women. By 2016, this figure had risen to only 16% in 695 CFMGs.

Ensuring equity in decision making and sharing of resources remains another challenge and area with scope for improvement. Buffum, Lawrence and Tempel (2010) state that “equity should not be confused with equality, and refers to something fair, just or impartial.”

COMMUNITY FORESTRY

AS A BREEDING GROUND FOR

NEW LOCAL LEADERS

Local people serving their community as a member of the CFMG executive committee gain valuable exposure and experience in leadership, community development and public affairs.

CFMG executive committee members organise and lead group meetings and regularly interact with their members and representatives of local government. They manage the group applying good governance principles, organise elections, negotiate with local governments and representatives of the forestry sector, get insights into local development planning and mediate conflicts. Such experience is relevant for a future position as a local government representative who deals with even larger groups and multiple sectors to the extent that “sometimes it is like representing ten ministries at village level.” as Mr Lakey Wangchuk from Samdrup Jongkhar District put it.



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« Community forestry is a pathway to leadership development. »

Mr Kinley Dendup, head of Kumche Village, Wangdue District

In the local government elections of 2016, a number of members of executive committees of CFMGs were elected into office as heads of block (a block comprises a few villages), deputy heads of block and village heads. Table 1 gives an overview of these CFMG committee members elected into local office.

Thus, in the local elections 2016, 10% of the successful candidates for the above-listed local government positions had previously served in CFMG executive committees. The number of registered voters for these elections stood at 402,149 people. At the same time, there were approximately 3,000 people active in CFMG executive committees which is less than 1% of the total number of registered voters. This can be taken as an indication that CFMG executive committee members were more likely to get elected into a local government position than their fellow citizens who had not served in such a committee.

Local government posts for election	Number		CFMG committee members elected into local government posts			
	Total	%	Total	%	of which	
					Female	Male
Head of block	205	100%	12	6%	0	12
Deputy head of block	205	100%	17	8%	2	15
Head of village	993	100%	110	11%	14	96
Total	1,403	100%	139	10%	16	123

Table 1: CFMG executive committee members elected into local government in 2016

The statements by the elected local government representatives Mr Lakey Wangchuk, Ms Sherab Lham and Mr Kinley Dendup illustrate how much relevant experience local leaders can garner in an executive committee of a CFMG. Ms Sherub Lham, an active CFMG member, was elected as deputy head of the block as well as chairperson of the Chubjakha CFMG.

« I am very happy to be elected as deputy head of the block. Participation in community forestry activities made me confidence in public speaking, how to deal with people and exposure. Before, I was a shy person and feared to speak in public, thinking that I might say something wrong. Now, I can stand and speak confidently in public. »



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« It is so important for women to stand in local government elections to demonstrate that women can shoulder as much responsibility for their community as men. »

Ms Sherab Lham, deputy head of Hungrel Block, Paro District

« Being an executive committee member of the CFMG significantly contributes to understanding the importance of good governance practices. I have learnt how to plan developmental activities, improved public speaking, and had more chances to interact with people through meetings. Without my experience in CF, I would not be doing what I am doing now. »

Mr Lakey Wangchuk, head of block and chairperson of the development committee of Samdrup Jongkhar District

Sometimes, the same person serves as village head and member of the CFMG executive committee. Such a combination can have advantages for the CF programme in planning processes and in seeking support from local government. It can, of course, also be problematic from the point of view of concentration of power.

From experience of past local government elections, it appears that an experienced and motivated CFMG executive committee member who has served the group and the community well and thus demonstrated his or her capabilities as local leader stands ample chance of being elected into a local government post by the members of the community.

COMMUNITY FORESTRY CONTRIBUTES TO DEMOCRATISATION IN BHUTAN

In interviews, members of a district development committee, block heads, deputy block heads and village heads all observed that community forestry fosters good governance practices at the local level. In CFMGs, people get exposed to and practice democratic decision making on the use of natural resources, benefit sharing and community development.

Community forestry provides a platform to develop and train leadership skills and competences and thus nurture future leaders who are committed to work for the benefit of their communities. Amongst these, future women leaders deserve particular attention and encouragement to stand in local election, also to demonstrate their ca-



CFMG members sharing their experience on resource governance with visitors.

pabilities and abilities to shoulder responsibility for their community. Being active in a CFMG and especially in an executive committee boosts confidence in public speaking and affairs. Besides practice, targeted trainings on topics such as leadership, good governance, group management, record and book keeping have equally contributed to developing the necessary capacities for effective CF management. Thus, community forestry in Bhutan contributes in manifold ways to the development of a vibrant democracy in the country and to local democratisation.

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