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# “hariyo ban Nepalko dhan” (“Nepal’s Wealth is the Green Forest”): The People’s Participation in Structuring Sustainable Development through Community Forestry

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***“hariyo ban Nepalko dhan”* (“Nepal’s Wealth is the Green Forest”):  
The People’s Participation in Structuring Sustainable Development through  
Community Forestry**

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## **Abstract**

Community forestry has a long history in Nepal, and despite the nationalization of the country's forests in the mid-twentieth century, current legislation determines that rights and execution of community forest management lies largely with community forest user groups (CFUGs). This research questions to what extent CFUGs truly represent autonomous bodies with the full power and ability to manage and utilize community forests and forest resources. This research also seeks to determine the impact and distribution of CFUG operations and benefits on CFUG members, and the ways in which CFUG management practices have impacted how group members perceive and interact with concepts of "land," "environment," and "sustainability". In attempting to answer these questions, this investigation employs a case study approach of the Godavari Kunda CFUG in the Lalitpur District of Nepal and utilizes methodologies of interviews, focus group meetings, and participant observation.

**Keywords:** community forestry, sustainable development, conservation

## Dedication

This research is dedicated to my wonderful Nepali *pariwaar*, whose warm welcome made me comfortable in a country of strangers, whose affection and kindness created a home for me halfway around the world, and whose familiarity and fond teasing gave me the confidence to take risks and laugh at myself, and the ability to let others do so, also.

To *bua*, Anish, Manga-*didi*, Gita-*didi*, Rita-*didi*, Bunty-*didi*, Asu-*didi*, and, of course, *aamaa*: *tapaaiharulaai dherai maayaa garchhu*.

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## **Introduction**

Community use and management of forests in Nepal is a historic and well-documented process (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). However, in recent decades perceptions of which communities have the right to management authority over these all-important resources have largely shifted within Nepal to support nominally, if not in practice, a “development from below” approach to forest management. As a result, the formation of community forest user groups (CFUGs), partnerships between the Nepali state and “local” communities, have become prevalent throughout Nepal. Although community forestry as a practice was first implemented in Nepal through the Decentralization Acts of 1982 and 1984 (IUCN Nepal 1995, 32), the Forest Act of 1993 essentially placed “all the accessible hill forests” under the authority and management of local communities, and today the concept of “community forestry” is often understood to be centered on “the idea of increasing the direct benefits of forest resources” to local CFUGs in a sustainable manner (Gilmour and Fisher 1991, 7).

## **History of Forest Legislation in Nepal**

Forested area within Nepal approximates 3.9 million hectares (ha), constituting roughly 27.3% of the country’s total geographic area (FAO 2005). Of this forested land, 48% is classified as “mid-hills,” 25% is categorized as “plains” (Terai), and 27% is considered to be distributed among the “high mountains” (DFRS 1999).

Community forestry and use has a history that predates any legislation of Nepal’s forests, with communities throughout the country dependent on forest resources both for subsistence and for economic growth. In the mid-hills, where a majority of Nepal’s forested land is concentrated, communities have traditionally

have relied upon forests as sources of fuel wood, housing materials, livestock fodder, “agricultural inputs,” and, in some cases, the sale of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) (Gauli 2011, 2). Until the mid-twentieth century, forest resources were used and managed according to the needs and knowledge of the communities who depended on them; however, in 1957 the nationalization of Nepal’s forests brought these lands and their resources under government control. Recognition of the difficulties encountered with conserving such large tracts of land led the Nepali Government in 1974 to propose a new mechanism of forest protection through the “active participation of local people” (Gauli 2011, 2): in other words, community-based forest management (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). The logic of using local communities as a means of forest conservation is largely in line with Olson’s (1965, 1) assessment of group theory, that “if the members of some group have a common interest or object... would all be better off if that objective were satisfied,” then those individuals “would voluntarily act so as to try to further those interests” (Ostrom 1990, 5). Operating under this paradigm, communities which were traditionally reliant upon forest resources could be granted the management of their local forests, and could be counted upon to effectively manage and conserve those lands since – being dependent on continual access to forest resources – the preservation of those resources would be in their best interests, both as individuals and as a group.

The legislative answer for how the management power of community forests should be structured was found in the Panchayat Forest Rules and the Panchayat Protected Forest Rules 1978, products of a 1976 National Forestry Plan that laid the foundation for implementing community forestry through localized governing bodies known as “Panchayat,” the smallest political and



administrative units in Nepal at the time. Although people's participation in forestry management was nominally emphasized within this legislation, the Panchayat system "tended to be dominated by the traditional elite in rural society" (Adhikari 2011). Additionally, the Panchayat was considered to be too large of a governing body to effectively manage and protect the forested areas under their administration.

Shankar Adhikari of the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation of Nepal claims that the 1990s saw an awakening to "deficiencies in the legislative framework under which the community forestry model was being implemented" and a questioning of the effectiveness of the Panchayat (Adhikari 2011).

According to Shankar, community forestry shifted towards the establishment of CFUGs as a means of allowing "those people most directly affected" by forest management – in other words, those individuals dependent on the use of forest resources, or forest "users" – to make management decisions. Thus, the Forest Act 1993 was enacted, in which CFUGs were granted "full power, authority, and responsibility to protect, manage, and utilize" the resources of the majority of Nepal's hill forests (Adhikari 2011)

Since the implementation of the Forest Act 1993 and the subsequent Forest Regulation 1995, a Community Forest Development Guideline was passed in 2002 to "[direct] the representation of individuals from marginalized sections of society in management committees to make the committees more accountable to users" (Gauli 2011, 3). Another development in community forestry trends in more recent decades has been the presence of donor agencies within the program. The influence of international and non-governmental "donor" agencies and organizations has long been felt within Nepal's community forestry program,

although the phenomenon's origin is disputed and the effects of this influence are in some cases controversial. Gutman asserts that in the early 1980s, a growing global environmental movement sparked concern over degradation of Nepal's Himalayan region and led to an in-pouring of "technical and financial support...from international agencies" (1991); this support was then used to "establish forest plantations" within the Himalayan zones "as a quick fix" (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). Later, the government of Nepal concluded that forest management was an important conservation goal for the country and that "active involvement of local people in forest management was essential" to accomplish this task (Chhatre et. al. 2009, 1). Others assert that community forestry was launched by the Nepali government, independent of international aid, in order to address problems within forestry legislation and management that were perpetuating deforestation, and that international aid became prevalent after the Forestry Act of 1993. Regardless of the true nature of the origin of community forestry-related donor aid in Nepal, donor organizations have undeniably played a part in influencing the formation and management strategies of CFUGs since the early 1990s.

#### **Aims and Objectives of Community Forestry**

According to the Department of Forests (DoF), by 2011, more than 16,900 CFUGs had been created in Nepal, "covering 1.57 million ha of forest land and involving 2,075,944 households, i.e. 35.6% of the total households of Nepal" (CFD 2011). Each of Nepal's 75 districts is involved with community forestry operations in some way, and more than 25% of Nepal's total forest area is under CFUG management. The "community forests" which these groups manage are officially defined in the Forest Act of 1993 as "National Forest[s]"

handed over to a users' group...for its development, conservation and utilization for collective interest" (Forest Development Project 1993, 1). This act made provision for establishing community forestry in Nepal in order "to meet the basic needs of the public in general, to attain social and economic development and to promote a healthy environment and to ensure the development and conservation of forest and the proper utilization of forest products" (Forest Development Project 1993, 1).

Summarily, the main aim of community forestry is establish CFUGs, which "are legal, autonomous, and corporate bodies having full power, authority, and responsibility to protect, manage, and utilize forest and other resources as per the decisions taken by their assemblies and according to their self-prepared constitutions and operational plans" (Adhikari 2011). These groups represent partnerships between local communities and the Nepali government, wherein ownership of forested land remains with the state, but land-use rights of these areas are granted to CFUGs. Several different, though interwoven, motivating objectives exist within this over-arching goal of user group creation, including environmental conservation and – in some cases – restoration, improved socioeconomic conditions for local communities, and the creation of "local democracy" (Adhikari 2011) through the cooperation of District Offices and local communities in managing the forests (Gilmour and Fisher 1991, 6).

Gauli suggests that the primary incentive for the creation of Nepal's community forestry program was "to protect the environment," focusing initially on regeneration of degraded forests and bare areas and on the practice of "sustainable" forest management (2011, 4). Indeed, Gilmour suggests that the basis for the decision to establish CFUGs was initially born less of a desire to

improve the access of forest users to resources or increased socio-economic benefits than of a recognition that the Nepali government could not “exercise effective control over the forests, particularly in the hills, without the active involvement of local communities” (1988, 3). The incorporation of local communities within forest management and “ownership” (in sentiment though not in deed) therefore became necessary. Even after the establishment of CFUGs in 1993, the program consisted primarily of a “protection-oriented, conservation-focused agenda” which did not truly account for “forest use, enterprise development, and livelihood improvement” until much later in the program’s development (Chhatre et. al. 2009, v).

This shift in the program’s goals occurred in the early 2000s, when “recognition of the importance of forestry for people’s livelihoods and its potential for poverty reduction” (Gauli 2011, 4) led to increased policy emphasis on the socioeconomic effects of community forestry. As a result, “pro-poor” and “community development” activities have become prevalent within CFUGs throughout Nepal, ranging from endeavors such as infrastructure development and drinking water system installation to scholarship provision and income generation unrelated to the sale of timber. Such programs, in conjunction with the increased collaboration between local and state knowledge, are said to not only “substantially [affect] household livelihoods” (Chhatre et. al. 2011, 2), but also to be “nurturing democracy at the grassroots despite a prolonged insurgency and political upheavals,” providing a model for democratic governance (Chhatre et. al. 2011, 1).

## **Responses to the Community Forestry Program**

Nepal's community forestry program "is now widely perceived as having real capacity for making an effective contribution" towards addressing environmental, socioeconomic, and political problems within the country (Adhikari 2011), and for empowering forest users (Nepal-Swiss Community Forestry Project 2011, 1). It has been labeled "a global innovation in participatory environmental governance that encompasses well-defined policies, institutions, and practices" (Chhatre et. al. 2009, 1) (Kumar 2002), and Nepal is often considered at the forefront of community forestry world-wide.

Although the goals of community forestry are often simplified into two distinct categories (either "forest conservation" or "poverty reduction"), this binary approach fails to take into account the complex web of social relationships, cultural practices, and economic considerations which serve as the basis for understanding "development" within a Nepali context and which are therefore indistinguishable from concepts of environmental sustainability and protection. Nightingale asserts that the success of community forestry in Nepal is attributable to an understanding of the interwoven nature of these factors, and that, as a result of this understanding, Nepal's community forestry program "in many ways...exemplifies the best in participatory development" (2010, 224-6). Furthermore, Chhatre et. al. claim that the political changes which have continually occurred within the Nepali government since the community forestry program was initiated has made local people "increasingly...able to claim rights over forests as active political agents rather than as passive recipients of government service" (2009, 2)(Paudel et. al. 2009). Despite the assertions, however, that "the discourse and practice of community forestry in Nepal is now

shared equally by the government and civil society” (Chhatre et. al. 2009, 2) and that the dissolution of the Panchayat and the establishment of CFUGs did away with much of the domination of elitism within the community forestry (Adhikari 2011), this conclusion fails to take into account that unequal representation in the form of traditional elitism of “high caste” individuals may still exist within CFUG communities, perpetuated by the prevalence of the caste system’s influence within Nepalese society. Although this elitism may not be based directly on caste discrimination, it may result from the greater range of opportunities afforded to individuals of “higher” castes, such as access to education, which could potentially result in an unequal distribution of leadership opportunities and benefits within CFUGs, contradicting the concept of egalitarian distribution among differing socio-economic groups for which community forestry is so noted (Gauli 2011, 5).

Furthermore, although the practice of community forestry following the dissolution of the Panchayat system is widely perceived as “decentralized and community-based” (Chhatre et. al. 2009, 2), questions remain over whether CFUGs retain the right to determine the type of management strategy to implement within their associated forests, or simply the right to oversee the execution of a management strategy. Nightingale (2005) suggests that although CFUG projects allow group members to gain control over the forests their livelihoods are tied to, these projects simultaneously devalue local knowledge of forest sustainability while emphasizing the “expert” status of (non-local) professional knowledge. Community forestry projects are thus implemented on the basis that CFUG members have little or no “correct” prior knowledge of forest management and must be trained in “proper” management strategies. This

assessment is similar to that of Gilmour and Fisher (1991, 2), which argues that “we often forget that people in the past frequently developed very sensible and sustainable working arrangements to manage their natural resources.” The eagerness, however, of workers in government or non-government organizations for “people’s participation – getting local populations to plan and execute their own projects on a self-help basis” (Gilmour and Fisher 1991, 7) has led to the establishment of a stereotype which overlooks the capacity for local people’s prior knowledge and suggests that “they must be educated, motivated, informed, ‘convinced’” about the desirability of sustainable forestry development (Fisher 1988, 35).

### **Research Objectives**

This research seeks to question to what extent CFUGs actually represent autonomous bodies with the “full power, authority, and responsibility to protect, manage, and utilize” forest resources (Adhikari 2011). I question in what ways CFUG operations, including interactions with donor and government organizations, impact relationships and interactions within CFUG member communities; to what degree “indigenous” (Gilmour and Fisher 1991, 46) knowledge and methods are used within CFUG forest management practices; and what impacts the distribution of CFUG operations and benefits has on CFUG members. Specifically, this project explores how the formation of CFUGs have impacted the ways in which group members perceive and interact with concepts of “land,” “environment,” and “sustainability” within their daily lives.

### **Methodology**

In attempting to determine the impacts of the community forestry program in terms of distribution of management authority, participation, and

benefits, a case study approach of the forestry program in one district was utilized. Multiple methodologies were used to collect information, including structured and semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and collective focus group meetings. Research was carried out in the Lalitpur District, although interviews were conducted primarily in Hattiban and Godavari. The Lalitpur District was selected as an area of study for its location within Kathmandu Valley and for the high density of CFUGs within the district (see Appendix A) (Sharma 2005), many of which are found in relatively close proximity to the District Forest Office (DFO).

Information was collected from among four levels of the community forestry program: the Lalitpur District Forest Official, a Lalitpur District Forest Ranger, the Executive Committee of the Godavari Kunda Community Forest User Group, and community members of the Godavari Kunda Community Forest User Group. This format was utilized as a means of determining the impact of the community forestry program infrastructure on the successful implementation of the program's goals. Furthermore, this format facilitated a comparison across multiple levels of the information provided by participants regarding forest management plans and techniques, trainings, member participation, benefit and leadership distribution, and community impacts. The Godavari Kunda CFUG was used as a case study user group throughout this research, and semi-structured interviews were conducted among four members of the group's Executive Committee, and among three members of the group's community members.

These interviews were used to gain a better understanding of the functionings of the group's structure, operation, and forest management plan, and to collect representative accounts of the group members' perspectives of the



CFUG's influence on their community, their ecosystem, and their personal lives. The semi-structured nature of these interviews also allowed group members the ability to provide any information in addition to the questions which they felt was important to include, with the result that some of the interviews became modified "life history" accounts of the CFUG.

In planning this research, I intended to use Participatory Rural Appraisal methodologies such as resource mapping, "well-being" mapping, and social mapping to determine – through the CFUG members' own input – how the community at Godavari Kunda was physically and figuratively structured in terms of physical formation, economics, household characteristics, interpersonal interactions, and natural resource distribution and access within the community. However, the large size of the CFUG and the nature of my meetings with the members of Godavari Kunda were not conducive to this type of research methodology, as all of my visits to the CFUG and my interactions with the community members were facilitated through the CFUG's Executive Committee. Meetings were generally conducted at the CFUG's Committee Office at the edge of the Godavari Kunda Community Forest, while the majority of the community members themselves lived approximately two kilometers away from the site. The absence of these various physical and figurative mapping methodologies meant that my findings of community structure were in many ways reliant upon the general information provided to me by community and Executive Committee members during various interviews and focus group meetings, and that topics like management opportunity and benefit distribution – though still representative of the community, according to the community members – could not be effectively

analyzed in comparison to demographic markers (eg. gender, household size, economic circumstances, caste group, etc.) except in broad terms.

Throughout the course of my research, I attempted as much as possible to ensure that my meetings with community members remained separate from my interactions with the Executive Committee. This distinction was intended to ensure that the community members did not feel compelled by the Executive Committee members' presence to participate, and to attempt to provide them with the ability to speak freely about their perceptions of the CFUG, should they choose to participate. However, my interactions with the Godavari Kunda CFUG were facilitated by members of the Executive Committee and at least one committee member was present at each of my meetings with the community members, my findings may reflect some bias regarding who was available to speak with me during the days, times of day, and places that I was told that I could visit the community forest.

Structured interviews were conducted with forestry officials of the Lalitpur District, including the District Forest Official and the Forest Ranger who works with the Godavari Kunda CFUG. These interviews were used to address not only the District Office's interactions with the Godavari Kunda CFUG and the management of the Godavari Community Forest, but also as a means of contextualizing the CFUG within a larger scheme of community forestry in the Lalitpur District and in Nepal as a whole.

Participant observation was used to better understand the functioning of and interactions within the structural hierarchy of the community forestry program in the Lalitpur District, in order to compare the nominal versus actual circumstances of these interactions. Throughout the course of fieldwork,

participant observation also proved useful in gauging the awareness and knowledge of the community forestry program within the mindset of the general public, helping to establish a context for consideration of how community forestry factors into the idea of Nepali “development.”

### **Research Findings**

#### **“No Community and No Support”: Management Autonomy of the Forest**

Prior to the CFUG’s formation eighteen years ago, the Godavari Kunda Forest was still managed by the Nepali state, and was at that time, according to the Vice-President of the Godavari Kunda CFUG, Rama Chhetri, “empty as a desert.” When some of the residents of the village of Godavari were approached by a Lalitpur Forest Ranger in 1995 and asked why the condition of the forest was so degraded, the villagers replied that there was “no community and no support” to care for that land, and that they didn’t know how to do so. Rama states that the Forest Ranger in turn told the community members, “Make a community and we’ll teach you how to preserve it.”

District Forest Official Ajeet Kumar Karn explains that the process of CFUG formation begins when “a community organizes to be handed an area of forest.” Generally, groups are created when the DoF and its associated district offices recognize a need for localized management where a forest is not being protected, and approach a nearby community. Sometimes, however, communities organize and determine independently that they would like to form a user group. Although Karn suggests that the former is the more prevalent trend in group organization, “Sometimes committees approach us and we go to the community; sometimes we go to them.”

At Godavari Kunda in 1995, thirteen villagers initially expressed an interest in becoming a part of a CFUG after being approached by the Forest Ranger, and the DFO trained these thirteen members in how to preserve and manage the forest. After these trainings, an official management plan for the forest had to be developed, submitted, approved, and thereafter followed. This plan was formulated by the user group with the support the forest's associated Forest Ranger; thereafter, the forest was divided into blocks and the plan established how each block should be managed. Karn stressed the fact that the management plan, developed and updated on an annual basis, is a product of the CFUG members' input, with the help of a Forest Ranger or the Assistant Forest Officer, who also provide assistance in taking the annual inventory of the forest, which is "the prescription to decide how to manage the forest blocs." Executive Committee member Thomas Dulal characterized the entirety of the process as "co-organization," describing a joint partnership in which the community members and the DFO work together in order to establish the CFUG and effectively manage the forest.

The Godavari Kunda Community Forest, which encompasses 147 hectares within four blocks, is actively managed for three months out of each year. This "active" management refers to the work the group members do within the forest itself every January, February, and March, weeding, pruning and thinning the trees, and "cleaning" the land. Within this process of "bush cleaning," or "*jaarisaphai*," group members clear unwanted bushes, climbing vines, and "undesirable" species from the forest floor, working within one block each year. The process leads to the regeneration promotion of desired species, and within four years, each of the forest's four blocks is thus "cleaned." This

management strategy also serves as a significant method for forest fire control through the removal of flammable materials, which is an important consideration for Godavari Kunda. Rama asserts that the villagers used to have to contend with fires everywhere, which presented a substantial problem for the individuals who rely upon the forest resources; thus, fire prevention has become a crucial aspect of the management plan of the Godavari Kunda CFUG over the years.

The Godavari Kunda CFUG itself is structured to include both general community members, who comprise the bulk of the group's membership, and the Executive Committee, which is currently composed of eleven group members. The Executive Committee members meet once each month to discuss management of the forest among themselves and with the forest's associated Forest Ranger, Sumitra K.C. Says Ranger Sumitra: "In a broad sense the roles of Executive Board Members of the Godavari Kunda CFUG is to lead the CFUG but in particular their role is to solve the problem of general members regarding the forest product needs, carrying out activities according to their OP and Constitution, punishing the users if they do [something] against their OP and Constitution, [and] communicating information from the DFO to the general members." These committee members are selected at the group's annual public community meeting, wherein all community members gather to discuss the year's progress in terms of forest management, budget, and programs implemented through the group's fund. At this time, leaders are nominated from among the group, and according to Thomas, are chosen based on considerations such as skill sets, educational level, free time, and knowledge about the forest. Community members seem to find these considerations indications of an individual's merit to serve on the Executive Committee, rather than limitations establishing barriers of

exclusivity for leadership opportunities. One community member, Asta, explained the process of leadership nomination and selection, and when asked about the impacts of this process, said that it was successful and resulted in good leadership: “The people choose their leaders.”

The internal management of the Godavari Kunda CFUG also plays into a larger scheme of district forestry management, which in Lalitpur District encompasses three levels of DoF offices: the DFO, located in Hattiban and headed by the District Forest Official; two Ilaka Forest Offices; and twelve Range Posts, which represent the lowest level of the DoF. At each Range Post at least one ranger with a required minimum of an Intermediate Degree in Forestry is stationed, although Karn states that many rangers today have achieved Bachelor’s Degrees in forestry. Although some Range Posts have also hired research officials to research the local forests and help develop strong management practices for the areas, the rangers stationed at these Range Posts are the individuals primarily responsible for the management trainings provided to CFUGs by the DFO.

#### **“At the Site, In the Field”: Trainings as Shaping Forest Management**

After a CFUG is organized and registered, trainings represent a significant part of the DoF’s involvement with group members. Karn states that the main source of these trainings is the Community Forest Development Program, which is funded by the Nepali government and which provides trainings to the user groups. The District Forest Official also went on to explain that there is a training center in the village of Godavari, the Central Regional Forestry Training Center, which provides trainings for DoF and DFO personnel regarding the development

of new research related to management practices, enabling forestry officials to better train user group members.

The user groups, in turn, are thus able to train their own members in the ways of forest management and to teach them, as Rama states, “the rules of the forest.” When a large enough group (usually approximately thirty members, according to Asta) is unaware of CFUG regulations or doesn’t understand how to manage the forest, the CFUG will arrange for a training session through the Range Post and will also, Asta says, “provide assistance to attend that training.”

Regarding whether or not a distribution of power is created as a result of these training sessions between Executive Committee members and community members, Karn asserts that the DoF does not “discriminate between the committee users and the other users.” Trainings are provided “in the field, at the site,” in order to best fit the context of the individual forest, and to ensure that all community members who need or want to be a part of the experience have access to the information provided in the session. This goal of increasing access also extends to encourage gender equality within CFUG management in the Lalitpur District, as well: according to Karn, the DFO intends to have at least fifty percent of training attendees be women, although this goal, he said, is proving “difficult.” When asked why, he replied that he was unsure, but thought that perhaps it had something to do with the demands on women within the household, or the burdens imposed by childcare or work in the home.

The trend of CFUG trainings within the Lalitpur District has progressed a great deal since the inception of the community forest program. Initially, when the Godavari Kunda CFUG was registered, there were several donor organizations and programs that worked with the DFO and the Executive

Committee to support the user group, including the National Resource Assistance Program and the Baghwati Management Program. These groups, according to the DoF, supported “the technical parts” of establishing a CFUG, including providing different types of trainings and assistance to Executive Committee members. However, although Rama stated that the Godavari Kunda works in cooperation with certain organizations, such as the Federation of Community Forest Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) and the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Karn attested that these organizations do not provide the kind of aid that similarly associated organizations had afforded in the past, and that currently there is no “donor support” in Lalitpur District, with government programs offering the only assistance to CFUGs in the area.

**“This Is Your Forest”: Community Mobilization and Strengthening**

According to Karn, the main role of the DFO in forming a CFUG revolves around community mobilization: “We have to mobilize the forest and sensitize them [referring to user group members]: ‘This is your forest, you must protect it.’ Community mobilization is a big part of what we do.” Members of the Godavari Kunda CFUG, however, suggest that this DFO mobilization is relegated more to the initial formation of the group, and that community mobilization in building group membership has rested primarily with the group members themselves. The primary means of achieving this membership growth has been, according to Tejas, who is currently the Treasurer at Godavari Kunda and has served on the group’s Executive Committee for seventeen years, has simply been to make the announcements calling for group members public. Initially when the CFUG was formed, he said, the committee members would simply put up notices in public places within Godavari where they could be easily



seen, such as shops or markets. Sometimes they were able to make announcements about the CFUG during public gatherings, and in this manner, through word of mouth, knowledge about the CFUG spread throughout the village. Today, when an individual or household wants to join the CFUG, he or she is required to make a formal request and submit an application to the CFUG office. Thomas explained that the Executive Committee reviews these applications and “maybe” accepts them; however, potential community members must know about forest rules and regulation before joining the group, because if they are unaware of these practices, how can they care for the forest? If, however, individuals are uninformed about the regulations governing the CFUG, their introduction to the group is still possible, since these new members will, according to the Executive Committee, be taught in the field about forest management. Through this process, group membership has gradually grown to include 600 families, all of whom live within approximately two kilometers of the Godavari Kunda Forest.

Community members tend to feel that the annual membership fee for the user group of 100 rupees per household is well worth the expenditure, given the nature of the benefits they receive in return. When questioned about the benefits they received as members of the CFUG, all members cited benefits which could be classified as either “tangible” or “social.” The more tangible benefits tended to be the first listed when group members discussed the advantages of being part of the CFUG. For instance, on the first day of each month, each member household is provided with one *bari*, or mass unit, of firewood which can then be used throughout the month at the discretion of the household. The trees and timber are in many cases also available to group members: when a member wants to cut a

tree, he or she must submit an application to the Executive Committee, which then determines whether or not the cutting can occur and how timber may be distributed. Timber in the Godavari Kunda CFUG is generally used in the construction or repair of members' houses, or in the construction and subsequent sale of furniture, the profits from which are deposited into the CFUG's account fund. 25% of the annual income to this fund must be used for forest development activities and programs, according to DoF guidelines regarding community forestry. Members also generally categorized trainings organized through this fund allotment as an additional service provided to them, although the benefit was considered primarily indirect and was always listed after other benefits, including the 100 rupee per year salary received by each of the eleven Executive Committee members.

Benefits which were less tangible in nature were generally mentioned after the benefits of access to tangible forest resources were explained, but group members were able to expand far more on the impacts of these types of "social" assets than on their access to firewood and timber. One of the more significant programs described was the group's poverty alleviation effort, which comprises scholarships and start-up funding for business ventures, such as pig farming. The scholarships enable the children of impoverished families in the community to attend school, while the start-up funding for endeavors like farming provide poverty-stricken individuals the opportunity to earn money. Suri, a woman who was the recipient of some of these funds one year ago, now runs a small pig farm which she says is doing well. The poverty alleviation program is a government-implemented measure, which requires that 35% of the CFUG's annual income be used for this goal; however, the CFUG members are able to identify the

individuals within their community who will be the recipients of these funds, and what kind of program or activities will be implemented within their group to fulfill this requirement. The Godavari Kunda CFUG also chooses to provide four monetary prizes annually – to two girls and two boys – who have achieved good marks on their School Leaving Certificates (SLC), thereby creating an incentive for children to not only go to school and do well, but also for families to send their children to school and encourage them to do well.

The sale of timber – an income-generating benefit for a CFUG – is also being converted into a community strengthening effort in Lalitpur District. DoF guidelines allow a CFUG to sell timber if there is an excess of the group's demand in a given year. However, before they are able to sell outside of the district (at which point they are not allowed to sell directly to the market but must instead sell the timber through an auction), the CFUG must first supply their excess timber to nearby user groups who have need of it (due to a shortage that year, etc.), and then to user groups in other parts of the district who are unable to meet their members' own needs. The concept behind this mandate is to ensure that user groups in need of them benefit from the forest resources before the general market does, and in doing so, to build a localized network of resource distribution among neighboring CFUGs. In Lalitpur District, however, and in the Godavari Kunda CFUG, particularly, there is not usually an excess of timber during any given year. Karn claims that many user groups are reluctant to give their timber to their neighboring CFUGs due to the potential loss in profit from not being able to sell the wood outside the district; therefore, most groups only harvest what their own members need (within the constraints allowed by their management plan) in order to conserve their timber for themselves. The Godavari

Kunda CFUG, however, pointed out that much of its saleable timber was currently only 7-8 years old, and was therefore as yet too small to merit sale and not worth cutting.

The Godavari Kunda CFUG has brought substantial benefits to one group within the community in particular: women. Before the formation of the CFUG, Shakunta and Asta explained, there were not many opportunities available to women. They were not often allowed to leave the area surrounding Godavari, Asta said, and neither were they allowed nor did they have the ability to work outside the home or to take on public roles. Now, however, many of the CFUGs members are women who are actively involved in forest management, and several women serve on the Executive Committee, as well, so in many ways the opportunities afforded to women have increased as a result of the CFUG's establishment.

All of the community members and Executive Committee members interviewed asserted that the community which the Godavari Kunda CFUG is composed of is "very good, very strong. If we were not so strong," Rama stated, "maybe other people [would have given] us trouble many times." The living standards of community members have increased as the members have received the benefits of the forest resources and fund, according to Asta, who shyly but smilingly claimed that, "Among all the community forests in the area, Godavari Kunda is one of the best. I actually feel proud to live here."

#### **"Shifting Their Practices": Land Use Interactions in Godavari**

Within the Kathmandu Valley today, lifestyles and daily practices are shifting, and this trend is apparent, according to Karn, within local community forestry, as well. In other parts of Nepal, the District Forest Official stated, people

are very much dependent on the forests for timber and firewood. “In the Kathmandu Valley, people are still dependent on the forest, but are shifting their practices.” The time that forest users can actually spend in the forest collecting resources is decreasing, due to other outside work and job opportunities. As a result, Karn suggested, there is a general movement away from firewood within the region, leading people to become more dependent on gas as a primary fuel source. However, in the Godavari Kunda CFUG, firewood is still a prominent – if not growing – fuel source, and is used not only in a practical sense to carry out day-to-day work, but also as an efficient money-saver which facilitates improvements in the lives of community members. Shakunta and Rama explained that not many community members use gas for daily activities because it is very costly. Rather, Asta said, they used firewood, which created a small type of “*saasto* [“cheap”] development” within the community. As a result of, community members were able to take the money they had saved by not purchasing gas and use those funds to send their children to school.

Within the Godavari Kunda CFUG, a transition from reliance solely upon forest resources to other work opportunities – some of which are found in the village, some in the more urban areas of Kathmandu Valley, and some of which are facilitated by the CFUG itself through its poverty alleviation program – has community members looking elsewhere for sources of income. Within Godavari Kunda, nearly every member has some job outside of forest management, according to the Executive Committee, whether it involves farming, working in an office or shop, or working near the home. One community member, for instance, a man named Bashu, explained that he was a handy-man of sorts, doing vehicle and house repair work, among other various things, because he was

unable to support his family based on the benefits from his CFUG membership alone. In a similar vein, CFUGs themselves are beginning to branch out and seek other potential sources of income, especially in areas like Lalitpur District, where the types of timber that can be found (namely pine) are not considered particularly valuable. The Godavari Kunda CFUG has established a designated “picnic area” and charges a small fee for the use of the site. This method of income generation not only raises money for the group fund, but has also increases the incentive for group members to care for the land in order to keep tourists visiting the area.

#### **“Desert” to “Dense”: Sensitivity to Environment and Changing Landscapes**

Despite the state of the Godavari Kunda Forest – which Rama described as a “desert” – prior to the 1995 formation of the CFUG, members of the group’s Executive Committee attested that the forest’s degradation was not a result of the ignorance of the Godavari community members about the importance of the environment. Thomas explained that, “We knew already about the environment and we are really interested in the environment; that’s why we have to preserve our forest.”

Karn in the DFO agreed with this assessment, and expressed his opinion that, “The people are doing good regarding conservation particularly,” which has led to the regeneration of some areas which had become barren before the implementation of community forestry, and which has proven vital to allowing the Lalitpur DFO achieve some of its larger conservation goals. CFUGs are sometimes so concerned with the issue of forest conservation, he suggested, that they do not always strictly follow their management plans, and even if their OPs suggest thinning a lot of trees from the forests during a certain year, “user groups

are more conservation-minded. Most community forests will cut less [timber].” This trend may be a result of Lalitpur District’s proximity to the urban areas of Kathmandu Valley: according to Karn, “Here [in Kathmandu Valley] people are very much aware of the environment. They are educated also; education levels are high here. People are sensitive of the environment and know the value of the forest.”

One of the main problems currently existing in community forestry in Nepal, however, is the disparity between the way in which forests are treated given the presence or absence of a sense of ownership for the land. Karn shared that in some parts of the country, user group members would protect their own forests, instead (over)harvesting in a forest that was still managed by the government and hadn’t yet been handed over to a community user group. The frequent response to this phenomenon has been to employ armed guards and forest guards to protect the forest, but the DoF simply cannot afford to employ enough of these guards to effectively protect the lands; moreover, Karn opined that this system of guarding was often ineffectual and was not the answer to the problem.

Members of the Godavari Kunda CFUG do, however, at least nominally recognize the importance of the environment in their daily lives. One indirect benefit which Thomas described from the maintenance of the Godavri Kunda Forest’s biodiversity is the support of the CFUG on the part of the DFO and pro-conservation NGOs working in Nepal. Since there are 300 kinds of birds that frequently visit the forest, some of which are considered important species to conserve, these programs will “fully support” the Godavari Kunda CFUG because their management of the forest helps to protect the kinds of birds and

wildlife encountered there. Executive Committee member Shakunta Silwaal offered another example of instances where community members recognize the importance of the environment within their communities. The Godavari Kunda Forest, she explained, contains many water sources which not only distribute water to urban areas, such as Jawalakhel, but which also provide clean water to nearby rural areas, including Godavari itself. If the jungle is not preserved, she questioned, how can this water be preserved?

In addition to understanding these more tangible implications of adopting a pro-environmental stance to forest management, members also appreciate some degree of intrinsic value within the concept of “environment,” as well. When asked what she thought about the environment, Asta replied: “It is important... When we go to city areas and come back here, it’s really good. We feel good after returning back from the city areas.” Simply seeing the lush, green landscape that today surrounds the village of Godavari, it is clear that these perceptions of “environment” and the influence they have over how the forest is managed are having a significant impact, and the “desert” which Rama described is no longer visible in the Godavari Kunda Forest. What’s more, multiple levels of the community forestry hierarchy in Lalitpur District agree that this result has been achieved largely through the efforts of the CFUG itself, without outside influence. Said Karn, “I heard that the forest [in Godavari] was degraded, but after the user group, they imposed very strict rules – themselves, within their group – and now the forest is dense, very dense in some places.”

### **Discussion/Analysis**

For all that CFUGs are intended to be – and are marketed as – autonomous bodies with full authority and power to manage and utilize the



forested areas they are granted, the claim is in fact exaggerated by definition alone. As with many programs and institutions in Nepal, community forestry is woven into a web of complex social, political, and cultural factors which furthermore play into a bureaucratic hierarchy of forestry offices at multiple levels.

The trainings provided to CFUG members by the DFO can be interpreted in different – and potentially conflicting – ways. On the one hand, the concept that trainings for the “proper” way to manage forested areas are necessary at all presupposes the ignorance of community members in matters of conservation strategies, and establishes a hierarchy of value for knowledge of forest management, where local knowledge may be underwritten while the “approved” forestry knowledge distributed by the DoF is accepted as the only “correct” approach to forestry. On the other hand, however, members of the Godavari Kunda CFUG have indicated that they felt their knowledge of forestry prior to the establishment of the group and the trainings they subsequently received was inadequate to effectively manage the forest. In consideration of this insight, establishing and training forest user groups in forest management is likely a more efficient and practical strategy than allowing groups to create an entirely self-developed management plan without providing those groups any support or background knowledge.

The question is also raised of what types of forestry knowledge the Forest Rangers and DFO personnel who conduct the trainings have learned and are subsequently distributing to CFUGs. Although allegedly no donor organizations, other than government-funded programs, are today in operation in the Lalitpur District, it is not unreasonable to suppose that some of the international

organizations which initially were influential within the community forestry program have left vestiges of their own brands of development within Nepal's program. The term "block," for example, refers to a unit area of land use or management, and is used widely in Australia and New Zealand, a region of the world which has sponsored several programs relating to community Nepali forestry, most notably the bilateral aid effort, the Nepal-Australia Community Forest Project (Collett et. al. 1996). The term "block" is still used today within the development of CFUG management strategies, and in many cases – as with the Godavari Kunda CFUG – is the entire basis around which forest management is designed and implemented, potentially reflecting the presence and continued influence of these formerly operating organizations.

Finally – and perhaps most significantly – to what extent can a body truly be considered autonomous if the group is required either to answer to or work in conjunction with another institution (ie. the DoF) throughout every step of the community forestry process, from the initial group trainings, to the development and approval of an OP and Constitution, to the implementation of the management strategies outlined in that OP, to the amount of forest resources the group is allowed to access during a given year? Logistically speaking, the degree of the bureaucratic checks-and-balances encountered within the community forestry program might logically make sense, given that ownership of the forests does still reside with the Nepali state; however, it proves something of a hindrance to establishing true autonomy of CFUGs. Interestingly enough, however, this consideration does not truly seem to prevent the CFUG members from feeling a significant degree of ownership for the forest that they manage. All accounts pertaining to the management of the forest given by user members

very liberally use the term “we,” referring to the collective forest community, and the tone of a majority of these accounts are not passive, but rather remarkably active. Although group members do sometimes refer to attending the trainings and developing the management plan in a passive tone (“trainings are held”), when speaking of the actual management of the forest, the forest resources which group members are able to access, or the changes which have been implemented within the community through the use of the CFUG fund, group members frequently employ phrases such as “we manage,” or “we get benefits.”

The distribution of benefits within the Godavari Kunda CFUG is an interesting concept: in terms of the physical forest resources received by the community members, each member household receives the same amount of firewood, and all members must undergo the same process to receive the right to harvest timber; furthermore, all members have the same access to undertake that application process. Yet a great deal of the benefits provided by the CFUG’s account fund are not only mandated by the DFO as per the guidelines established by the DoF, but are also received by only a small portion of the CFUG members. For example, the Godavari Kunda CFUG’s poverty alleviation effort is targeted only toward the most impoverished members of the group. Theoretically, this idea is not a negative one; however, in implementation, it creates a socioeconomic barrier by which community members characterize and ultimately categorize themselves. During one focus group meeting, for example, three women were discussing the poverty alleviation effort and describing the recipients of the program as “poor people,” even though one of the women who had recently received money for pig farming from the program was sitting next to them during the entirety of the conversation. Since impoverished individuals in

Nepal are also generally more likely to belong to a “low caste,” these self-imposed social barriers established within the community in conjunction with similar benefit programs may ultimately create power dynamics of inclusivity and exclusivity within a group that is meant to characterize social inclusion and participation.

Similarly subtle power dynamics may be seen in the interactions between the DFO and the CFUGs they work with, and between the Godavari Kunda CFUG’s Executive Committee and the group’s general community members. For instance, in describing the approval process for the forest’s management plan, District Forest Official Karn used the word “permitted” to explain how a CFUG’s management plan had to be approved by the DFO. Perhaps this phrasing was simply the result of translation issues between Nepali and English; however, it is intriguing to consider that although the DFO and local CFUGs may work together to effectively protect and utilize the forests and although CFUGs allegedly represent autonomous management bodies, a perceived hierarchy of power still exists within the current infrastructure of community forestry on a district level. General CFUG community members may not have any direct interaction with the DFO personnel at all, however, given the degree to which interactions with the Forest Ranger and outsiders (such as researchers, for example) are managed and facilitated by the members of the Executive Committee. This management by the Executive Committee establishes a degree of inaccessibility by which all inter-organizational encounters are controlled by the eleven members who serve on the board, making general community members reliant upon those individuals for information about effective management and resource distribution. In many of the interactions between

community members and Executive Committee members, moreover, the community members seemed content to let the Committee members answer for them, or to reaffirm much of the same information the Committee member had provided without contributing their own additional insight.

The overlap between the notoriously binary goals of forest conservation and community socioeconomic improvement adopts an interesting dynamic within the interactions between the Lalitpur DFO and the Godavari Kunda CFUG. Forest officials and the DFO, although aware of the importance of community involvement within Nepal's forestry program, seem more preoccupied with the environmental benefits which can result from this involvement, rather than the implications for socioeconomic change which community forestry represent. CFUG members, conversely, seem to perceive the environmental state of the forest primarily as a necessity for achieving the types of livelihood improvements, benefits, and community changes that they desire. This observation does not intend to suggest that DFO officials are unconcerned with the livelihoods of the forest user groups they work with; not does this commentary seek to portray community members as unaware of the value of conservation and environmental health as issues in and of themselves. However, these associated benefits are considered secondary to the more tangible benefits – such as timber for housing, clean drinking water, and monthly firewood – which may be directly used to improve their livelihoods and living conditions. Group members thus seem to be aware of not only the benefits available to them directly as a result of maintaining the health of the forest (ie. firewood that may be used presently while still being conserved for the future), but also of the more indirect socioeconomic implications of a pro-conservationist stance within forest

management. Similarly, the DFO and its associated offices seem to primarily be focused upon forest conservation; any benefits to the communities which manage those forests are almost perceived as fortunate but incidental side-effects, rather than true goals. On the whole, however, both the Lalitpur DFO and the members of the Godavari Kunda CFUG are in agreement that although there are problems within Nepali community forestry, the program is, on the whole, successful, and the majority of the members of the Godavari Kunda CFUG seem satisfied with the management of their forest, and the community established by the CFUG.

### **Conclusion**

There is an old saying in Nepal that “*hariyo ban Nepalko dhan,*” or “Nepal’s wealth is the green forest.” This adage, it would seem, proves true in consideration of the sheer extent of and biodiversity encountered within Nepal’s forested land area, as well as the associated economic and ecological benefits that those areas provide to the communities whose livelihoods are inextricably linked with the use of forest resources. However, this saying takes on new meaning when considered through the lens of modern environmentalism: Nepal’s wealth is also the *green*, or sustainable, forest. This “sustainable forest” may be labeled as such because of the institutional mechanisms in place which not only allow CFUG members to manage and utilize the forest, but also incentivize certain strategies and programs within this management. These incentives not only fulfill the conservation goals of the Nepali state, but also may be labeled “sustainable” in that they allow the managing communities to develop economically and socially viable lifestyles which can be maintained over time.

Though not devoid of its own problems – questions still remain regarding the power dynamics embodied within the community forestry program as a whole

and between the Executive Committees and general members within a CFUG in particular, and the extent of the true management autonomy which a CFUG enjoys could be considered dubious – Nepal’s community forestry program is providing a development model by which problems of social inclusion, economic growth, and people’s participation are being effectively addressed, if not always solved. People’s participation is desired in and considered key to shaping the path that development will take through policy creation and the execution of those policies. Moreover, within this model, CFUG members seemed to feel that not only do they benefit from utilization and management of the forest, but that they are at least in part responsible for those benefits, making them not “passive recipients” of development process, but active engagers and initiators in the endeavor.

## **List of Acronyms**

CFUG: Community Forest User Group

DoF: Department of Forests

DFO: District Forest Office

FECOFUN: Federation of Community Forest Users, Nepal

ICIMOD: International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development

NTFP: Non-Timber Forest Products

OP: Operational Plan

SLC: School Leaving Certificate



## Appendices

### Appendix A:

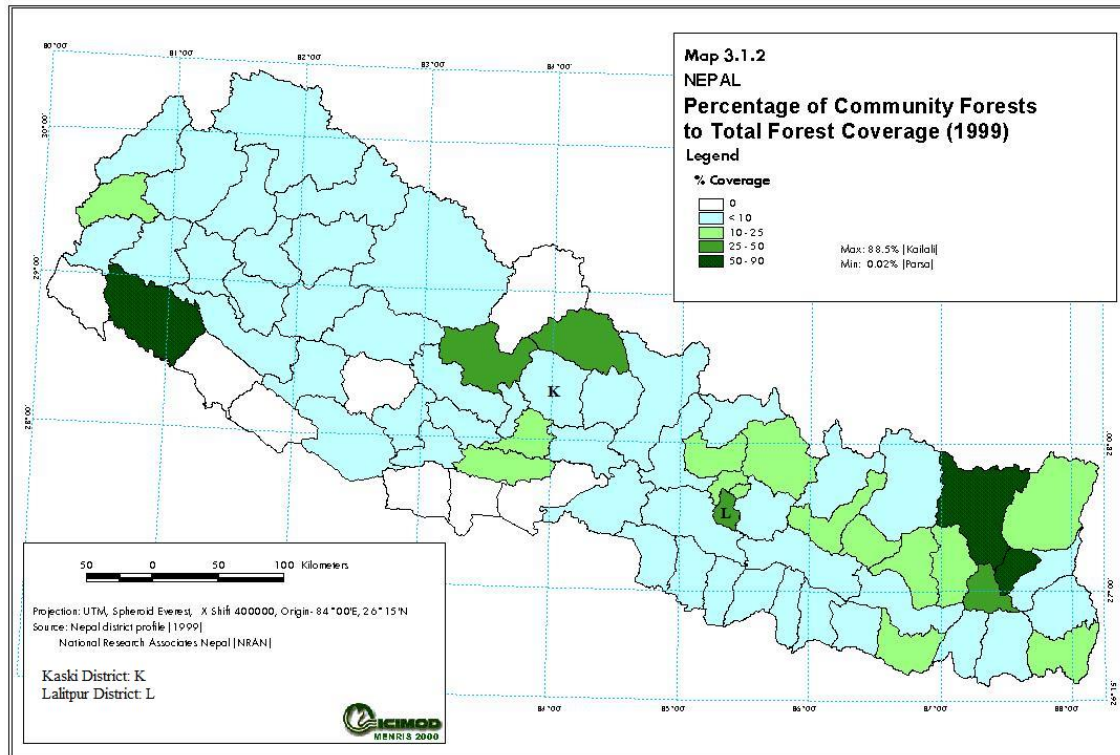


Figure 1: Percentage of Community Forest by Total Forest Coverage per District (1999). Sharma, Binod P. Report on Gateway to Land and Water Information: Nepal. 2005. MENRIS Division of the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD). Kathmandu: ICIMOD.

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Bashu. 2013. Interview with Godavari Kunda CFUG community member.  
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Chhetri, Rama. 2013. Interview with Godavari Kunda CFUG Executive  
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Treasurer. Godavari, April 29, 2013.

**Consent to Use of Independent Study Project (ISP)**

Student Name: Natasha Eulberg

Title of ISP: “*hariyo ban Nepalko dhan*” (“Nepal’s Wealth is the Green Forest”): The People’s Participation in Structuring Sustainable Development through Community Forestry

Program and Term: Nepal: Development and Social Change, Spring 2013

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