Advancing Equity in Community Forestry: Recognition of the Poor Matters

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Advancing equity in community forestry: recognition of the poor matters

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SUMMARY

The community forestry program in Nepal has been advancing as a successful means of improving the condition of forests. However, as in other areas around the world, Nepal's community forestry initiative continues to face unresolved equity issues. This paper seeks to explore underlying causes of inequity using contemporary theories of justice. Examining two community forest user groups in the middle hill districts, the study finds that lack of recognition in interpersonal and public spheres exacerbated the powerlessness of marginalized people, reducing their participation in decision-making. The paper argues that, while distributional rules advanced by the program are crucial, the problem of recognition remains an unaddressed but necessary pre-condition for achieving equity. This suggests that policy and practice in community forestry needs to focus on broader political questions, including representation in decision making, making space for the voice of members to influence decisions, and transforming socio-economic and political institutions and cultural practices.

Keywords: community forestry, equity, recognition, participation, Nepal

Faire progresser l'équité dans la foresterie communautaire: importance de la prise en compte des pauvres

R. K. SUNAM et J. F. MCCARTHY

Le programme de foresterie communautaire du Népal s'est révélé être un moyen positif d'améliorer la condition des forêts. Toutefois, comme dans d'autres régions du monde, l'initiative de foresterie communautaire du Népal continue à faire face à des questions d'équité non résolues. Cet article cherche à explorer les causes du manque d'équité em utillisant des théories de justice contemporaines. En examinant deux communautés d'utilisateurs de la forêt dans les districts des collines centrales, l'étude découvre que le manque de prise en compte dans les sphères interpersonnelles et publiques exacerbait la faiblesse des peuples marginalisés, en réduisant leur participation dans les prises de décisions. Cet article démontre que, bien que les règles de distribution développées par le programme soient cruciales, le problème de la prise en compte demeure une précondition ignorée mais nécessaire pour parvenir à l'équité. Cela suggère que la politique et la pratique dans dans la foresterie communautaire doit se concentrer sur les questions politiques plus larges, en incluant la représentation dans la prise de décision, un espace offert aux membres pour laisser leur voix influencer les décisions, et la transformation des institutions socio-économiques et politiques et des pratiques culturelles.

La promoción de la equidad en la silvicultura comunitaria: hay que tener en cuenta la situación de los pobres

R.K. SUNAM y J.F. MCCARTHY

Se ha propuesto el programa forestal comunitario en Nepal como una garantía del éxito en aras de mejorar la condición de los bosques. Como en otros lugares alrededor del mundo, sin embargo, la iniciativa forestal comunitaria de Nepal debe todavía hacer frente a varios asuntos no resueltos en lo que se refiere a la equidad. Este estudio tiene como objetivo explorar las causas fundamentales de la injusticia mediante el uso de teorías contemporáneas de justicia. A través de un análisis de dos grupos de usuarios de bosques comunitarios en las zonas de monte del centro del país, el estudio encuentra que la falta de reconocimiento en las esferas interpersonales y públicas aumenta la impotencia de los grupos marginados y reduce su participación en la toma de decisiones. El artículo expresa el punto de vista de que, mientras que las reglas de distribución propuestas por el programa son de una importancia fundamental, el problema del reconocimiento sigue siendo una condición previa necesaria para lograr la equidad, aunque todavía no se la ha tomado en cuenta. Esto sugiere que la política y la práctica de los programas de silvicultura comunitaria deben centrarse en cuestiones políticas de mayor alcance, incluyendo la representación en la toma de decisiones, la creación de un espacio para que los grupos interesados puedan influir en las decisiones, y la transformación de las instituciones socioeconómicas y políticas y de las prácticas culturales.

INTRODUCTION

The community-based natural resources management (CBNRM) approach has been implemented in Nepal since the late 1970s as community forestry. With the shift in property rights from the State to communities, the community forest user groups (CFUGs) have been able to exercise a bundle of property rights over national forests namely access, use, management, and exclusion rights with some restriction. This is a major shift because local communities had only limited *de jure* access and use rights although they were managing forest products *de facto*. Policy and legal instruments such as the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector 1988, the subsequent Forest Act 1993 and the Forest regulation 1995 have provided a conducive environment for the successful handover of national forests to local communities. As a result, some 25 percent of the forest area has been handed over to more than 14 439 CFUGs encompassing 35 percent of the total population of the country (DoF 2009).

Initially, the government of Nepal adopted a community forestry policy in response to the failure of the State-controlled regime to halt deforestation (Talbott and Khadka 1994). However, over the last three decades, the community forestry program has evolved incorporating two major objectives: first, improving the condition of forests and, second, improving the livelihoods of the local people. Researchers have conducted studies since the early 1990s to assess whether community forestry is contributing to meeting these objectives. The findings of the studies are contentious as some results are promising while others are disappointing**.** Some studies show that the community forestry has been successful in restoring degraded land and improving the condition of forests (Adhikari *et al*. 2007, Dev *et al*. 2003, Richards *et al.* 2003). Apart from environmental services, improved forest condition increases the availability of forest products to the local people which in turn is expected to improve their livelihoods. Nonetheless, the ability of community forestry to improve the livelihoods of the poor people has remained questionable. Rather, some studies show that the livelihoods of the disadvantaged people have deteriorated (Malla *et al.* 2003). Similar research from India and West Africa has reported that common property regimes may lead to exclusion of poorer households (Beck and Nesmith 2001).[1]

All users are supposed to benefit equally through community forestry (Hobley 1996). In many cases, the poor people in Nepal, however, have been restricted in accessing forest products even for subsistence. Most poor households are not benefiting as much as others and are not very interested in community participation (Malla *et al.* 2003). Thoms (2008) argues that the way CFUGs have been set up has been reinforcing existing power disparities and elite domination.

Many previous studies related to equity have focussed on benefits received in community forestry and the contributions made by users (Adhikari *et al.* 2004, Malla *et al.* 2003). Some studies have looked at underlying causes and procedures underpinning equity (Maharjan *et al.* 2009, Nightingale 2003). However, these studies have not paid attention to recognition as an important precondition for equity. This study, therefore, aims to contribute to the forestry literature by explicitly bringing in the insights from contemporary theories of justice. It uses these theories to look at inequity within CFUGs, investigating distributional outcomes, procedures and underlying causes. Specifically, the study aims to address the following questions:

- To what extent are the costs and benefits borne by different users (rich, medium and poor)?
- How do formal rules in CBNRM shape distributional outcomes?
- What role does recognition play in CBNRM procedures and outcomes?

This study is based on a case study of two CFUGs in the middle hills of Nepal. The outcome from community forestry is not solely dependent on formal rules; it also relies on participation and recognition of individuals conditioned by embedded social, economic and political relationships. The key argument of this paper is that while distribution rules are crucial, recognition – encompassing representation in decision making, providing space for the voice of members in marginalized communities in decisions and addressing psychological, socio-cultural and institutional processes where disadvantage is embedded – is an important pre-condition for advancing equity. By bringing the question of recognition into focus, this paper aims to contribute to CBNRM scholarship, helping policy makers think through what might be required for improved pro-poor outcomes.

The remaining part of the paper has been structured as follows. The next section presents a theoretical review. Section three includes research methodology including study sites, survey methods and data analysis. Section four reports findings and discussion. The paper ends with the conclusions and policy implications.

THEORETICAL REVIEW: CBNRM, EQUITY AND JUSTICE

CBNRM is one of several approaches that has been increasingly accepted and recognised as suitable for the sustainable management and utilisation of forest resources, mainly in developing countries (Agrawal 2001, FAO 1978). The disappointing outcomes that followed decades of State-led natural resource management strategies have forced policy makers and scholars to reconsider the role of communities in resource management. Empirical evidence has been put forward to support the proposal that local people are capable of managing natural resources through collective action (Hobley 1996, Ostrom 1990).

Collective action in CBNRM is pivotal in formulating rules for allocation of the benefits and costs among local people. Given the collective action is possible for common pool resources management under the right conditions (Ostrom 1999), CBNRM has become an important approach

[1] For a discussion of similar issues elsewhere, see Cooke and Kothari (2001). *Participation: the new tyranny?.* Zed Books.

to empower local people in managing natural resources particularly in developing countries. This approach relies on the assumption that people have more interest in conserving natural resources that are close to them than do the government or private institutions. The approach recognises that local people have a greater understanding of resources in their area and can adopt indigenous techniques to adapt in local settings more effectively than the central government.

Theoretically, with the CBNRM approach communities can manage natural resources in an equitable, efficient and sustainable way (Ostrom 1990). Agrawal (2001), building on the work of Wade (1988), Ostrom (1990) and Baland and Platteau (1996), has listed thirty two 'enabling conditions' for successful CBNRM which are broadly categorized under characteristics of community, resource systems, institutional arrangements and external environments. One of the enabling conditions outlined by Agrawal (2001) is low level of poverty. This implies that a high level of poverty hinders smooth functioning of CBNRM. A high degree of poverty can result in more pressure being placed on forest resources for earning livelihoods. The trade offs between the twin goals of conservation and livelihoods improvement can lead to the violation of rules which in turn creates conflict among forest resource users. In addition, equity in benefit allocation from common resources, another 'enabling condition', is expected to reduce the level of poverty. In Agrawal's widely cited formulation of the 'enabling conditions' for CBNRM, however, there is no explicit explanation of the role that the recognition of the users of resources in their personal and public spheres plays in outcomes. Noticeably, Miller (2003), Fraser (2000) and Schlosberg (2007) consider recognition as a precondition for equity.

Concern over equity, one of the fundamental principles of community participation forest management, is increasingly considered as a legitimate basis for CBNRM (Li 1996). In this research, equity refers to getting a fair share, not necessarily an equal share while justice is usually understood as equal treatment to all. Equity here is understood as fairness in the decision-making processes (procedural justice), and fair outcomes of such decisions (distributive justice). The important point remains that an equitable system should not further marginalize the poor (Gilmour and Fisher 1991).

Contemporary theories of justice are important in understanding equity issues. Traditionally, justice has been narrowly understood as a concept that focuses on the distributional consequences of decisions. One of the influential contributions to the theory of justice is Rawls (1971)'s notion of justice as fairness which includes just distribution of social, political and economic goods and bads. Although justice does emphasize equality, Rawls (1971) gives due importance to equity as well. He illustrates:

"All social primary goods – liberty and opportunity, income and wealth, and the bases of self-respect – are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution of any or all of these goods is to the advantage of the least favoured" (Rawls 1971: 303).

This Rawls's notion indicates that rules of equality can be breached to favour the least well off which has also been taken as a standard for equity in this research. Most theories of justice, including that of Rawls (1971), have been criticized as being focussed on ideal schemes and processes for distribution (Schlosberg 2007). In other words, liberal theories of justice have focused on the morally proper distribution of benefits and burdens, in other words, distributional justice (Young 1990). While justice should be concerned with issues of distribution, Young (1990) and Fraser (1998) argue that it should also deal with the processes that create maldistribution, focusing on individual and social recognition as key elements of attaining justice. They believe that the lack of recognition in the political and social realms manifests in different forms of insults, disparagement, degradation, and devaluation that in turn impair marginalized individuals and communities.

The concept of recognition is somewhat contested. Taylor (1994) and Honneth (1995), key proponents of the concept of recognition as an element of justice, focus on the individual psychological aspects of the need for recognition. The principal idea is self-worth comes from the recognition given by others. Taylor insists that misrecognition can inflict harm, can also be a form of oppression, distorted and reduced mode of being and imprisoning someone in a false (Taylor 1994). Honneth (1995: 132) identifies three key forms of misrecognition: the violation of the body (torture), the denial of rights, and the denigration of ways of life. It implies that recognition is much broader than simple respect; individuals must be fully free of physical threats, offered equal and complete political rights and have their distinguishing cultural traditions free from various forms of disparagement.

Acknowledging a psychological dimension of recognition, Fraser (2000) pays more attention to the social status of misrecognition more as an institutional practice that an individual practice. For Fraser, misrecognition is an 'institutionalized relation of social subordination' (Fraser 2000: 113). Misrecognition is cultural and institutionalized form of injustice tied to structural, social and symbolic indicators. So it can be understood that misrecognition may be both individually experienced and socially constructed shaped by gender, socio-economic status, caste/ethnicity, religion and culture. Inequity comes out of recognition and distribution which are mediated by social structures, institutions, and cultural beliefs. Thus, misecognition should be addressed to reach equitable processes or outcomes for the distribution of goods (Schlosberg 2007).

Thus the key to recognizational injustice lies in understanding the social structures, practices, rules, norms, language, and symbols that mediate social relations. For promoting equity, recognizational justice focuses on the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression particularly that of those communities who represent and remain misrecognized. A state may recognize a socially excluded group and validate difference in the political realm (through giving veto rights in decision making) (Schlosberg 2007). Moreover, the state can adopt positive discrimination but still social recognition for

misrecognised groups is a broader issue. Recognition should happen as much in the institutional realm as in social, symbolic and cultural realms (*ibid*).

The term 'recognition' in this study refers to different dimensions –psychological, socio-cultural and institutional suggested by Taylor (1994), Honneth (1995) and Fraser (2000). Recognition here also entails providing a broader political space – representation in decision making, and space for the voice of members in communities to influence decisions.

There appears to be a link between recognition and participation. Lack of recognition witnesses a decline in participation, and increased participation can also address issues of misrecognition (Schlosberg 2007). So Shrader-Frenchette (2002) has placed particular emphasis on the importance of procedural justice and participation. Procedures are seen to be fair when people are given opportunity to voice their concerns, and when procedures seem fair it is likely to result in fair distributive outcomes.

Formal procedures formulated in the constitution of CFUGs are supposed to work in a rational way and benefit users accordingly. However, embedded processes (social, political and economical) more often (than formal procedures) shape equity outcomes which have received little attention in CFUGs (Shrestha 2007). This is related to procedural injustice, participation and recognition which are likely to result in asymmetric distributive outcomes. The implication of this study is that, if CBNRM wishes to improve the livelihoods of the poor, policy needs to more explicitly address the question of how it can affect the socially embedded processes that lead to poor equity outcomes.

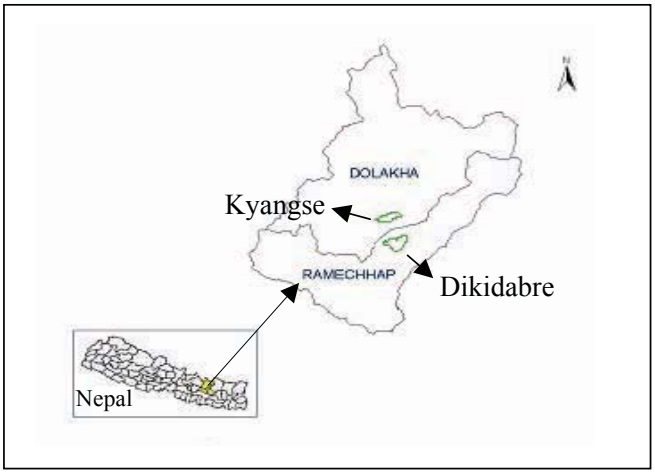
STUDY SITES AND METHODS

The study sites

This study was undertaken in two CFUGs located in two districts in Nepal, one in Dolakha and the other in the Ramechhap district, but they were spatially close and socio-culturally similar (see Figure 1). These districts lie in the middle mountain region of Nepal where the community forestry program has been in operation for more than two decades. Some donor-funded projects including the Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP) have also been working to support the program.

Two CFUGs were purposively selected based mainly on two criteria. First, a CFUG with at least five years of registration as community forest was selected, assuming this period was long enough to practise their group constitutions and implement different activities as per their forest management plan. Second, heterogeneous CFUGs were selected since the purpose of the study was to analyse equity issues through caste, class, and gender dimensions. Key attributes of the CFUGs are presented in Table 1.

FIGURE 1 *Map of the studied CFUGs*



METHODS

Case study as a research strategy

A case study approach has been adopted to answer the aforementioned research questions, concentrating on two cases of community forestry. Further, the research intended

TABLE 1 *Key attributes of the studied CFUGs*

Name of CFUG	Key attributes
Kyangse Setep (Located in Jiri VDC of Dolakha District)	180 hectares of forest managed by 236 households since 2001, main forest uses for fuelwood, timber, fodder, bedding materials and hand-made paper, heterogeneity in terms of economic class, education, caste, religion and cultures, major castes include *Jirel, Shrestha* and *Sherpa* (so-called higher castes) and *Bishwokarma* (the so-called lower caste, called *Dalit)*, Nepal Swiss Community Forestry Project (NSCFP/SDC) supported
Dikidabre (Located in Rasnalu VDC of Ramechhap District)	149 hectares of forest managed by 298 households since 2003, de facto community management before community forest, main forest uses for fuelwood, timber, fodder, grazing, bedding materials and hand-made paper, heterogeneity prevails, NSCFP/SDC supported, major castes comprise of *Chhetri*, *Sherpa* and *Sunuwar* (so-called higher castes, most of them considered as elites) and *Pariyar* and *Bishwokarma* (so-called lower castes, considered as marginalized section of communities)

to provide thick description and analysis of CFUGs for the purpose of expanding understanding of distributive and procedural justice embedded in social, economic and political relationships. Employing the explanatory-causal case study, this study tries to interpret phenomena to the point of answering questions of 'why' on a theoretical basis (Kyburz-Graber 2004). To ensure reliability and validity of the study, some basic criteria for case studies suggested by Yin (1994) have been followed. First, the research questions have been developed on a theoretical basis. Second, methods for triangulation have been followed using multiple sources of information and multiple perspectives for interpretation.

The case study was administered using a mixed approach for data collection.

Quantitative data were collected through household interviews to analyse distributional outcomes of costs and benefits borne by different households. A stratified random sampling approach was employed to select households for interviews using well-being categories as strata. Existing well-being categories were used that had been obtained by CFUGs themselves through a participatory well-being ranking exercise, with the support of NSCFP. A combination of criteria was used during the ranking exercise such as landholding, food security, livestock holding, income sources, remittances and social status. Households were ranked relatively into rich, medium and poor based on the holdings of these assets. Thirty-two households from each stratum (rich, medium and poor) were selected randomly for household interviews.

Qualitative methods were used to capture the procedural aspects, underlying causes of inequity, and information concerning recognition of different users in CFUGs. This was achieved using focus group discussions, key informant interviews and participant observation. Separate focus group discussions with poor people, women and executive committee members were conducted in each CFUG. The participant size was from 6 to 11 with the average time for discussion being 40 minutes, thus falling within the limits suggested by Greenbaum (1998) to make discussions effective. According to Punch (2005), participant observation can be useful to crosscheck or verify information for the purpose of triangulation. Besides, this technique was also used to observe meetings of CFUGs to collect information on what sorts of procedures were followed to conduct meetings, how people expressed their views in meetings and how people showed respect to each other. Secondary data were gathered through CFUGs' documents, project reports, and research papers to complement data collected through other methods.

Quantitatively, data on costs and benefits across different users (rich, medium and poor) were analysed through coding and feeding them into SPSS 16.0 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Results are presented in tables and in text. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and mean are used to present a summary of the data. Qualitative data were analysed through a coding system. The data were coded according to themes such as distributive outcome, procedures for benefit sharing, and recognition. The information was then presented in a descriptive way.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Distributive outcomes and underlying procedures

Through household interviews the amount of major forest products such as timber, firewood, tree fodder and grasses and leaf litter collected by households from community forests were identified. Table 2 shows that the flow of forest products is skewed towards better off households. Households in the rich category have harvested timber (a relatively expensive forest product) by over three times more than poorer households. Although the price has been reduced for poorer households in both CFUGs, they have received less timber. It was found that poor people's primary needs were neither new house construction nor furniture rather they were desperate for daily subsistence. Even if they need timber, the quantity will be less because they build small huts which don't require a large quantity of timber. During the focus group discussion with the poor, most of them pointed out that they could harvest more timber if they were allowed to sell. This is, however, restricted by the CFUG rules that users, regardless of their well-being categories, cannot sell timber.

Table 3 shows the formal rules for distributing timber stated in the forest management plans. It seems attractive, at least theoretically, that CFUGs have made provision to reduce the price of timber or to provide timber free of charge to the poor people for their domestic use. As timber is neither a subsistence need of the poor nor are they allowed to sell it, the poor are not benefiting from these rules. The major concern here appears to be a question of power: -powerful elites dominate the decision-making process and formulate rules which may not reflect the needs of the poor people.

TABLE 2 *Annual collection of forest products by households (n=90)*

Forest products	Unit	Well-being category		
		Poor	Medium	Rich
Timber	Cubic feet (in a five year)	95	180	340
Fire wood	Bhari*	21	18	13
Grass and tree fodder	Bhari**	10	33	31
Leaf litter	Bhari**	11	42	45

*1 bhari firewood = 30 kg; **1 bhari grass and fodder= 25 kg; ***1 bhari leaf litter = 20 kg.

This is consistent with the insights provided by a theory of access (Ribot and Peluso 2003, Sikor and Lund 2009). This suggests that access – the ability of particular actors to benefit from resources – depends upon the dynamics within a resource-controlling group. Thus, although actors may have institutionalized rights that provide for access (such as in these cases), power relations working through social relations may shape patterns of access and distributional outcomes in a contrary fashion. Thus, where marginalized actors are unable to make use of legal and extra-legal mechanisms to maintain access, their access to benefits is likely to be restricted.

Adhikari *et al.* (2004) argue that a transferable use right scheme might work to benefit the poor by allowing them to sell their timber permit. In this scheme, poor people are entitled to access a certain quantity of timber (timber permit) which they are allowed to sell to other users when they don't need it for domestic purpose.

Unlike timber, the wealthier households have collected a lesser quantity of firewood than the poorer households. Two reasons were responsible for this difference in the firewood collection, pointed out during focus group discussion with the executive committee. First, well off households mostly own the private forests from which they can fulfil their demand for firewood. Second, users can collect firewood (dried twigs and branches) throughout the year according to their rules which enhances access of even the poor, giving an opportunity to collect more firewood. Despite the fact that firewood is the only affordable source of energy for the poor in Dikidabre CFUG, this was not a huge concern because, given the free access over the whole year, most respondents were not worried about firewood.

However, the story was different in Kyangse Setep CFUG in the case of firewood collection. By the CFUG's rules the forest is open to collect firewood for one week annually. Respondents from poor households reported that their firewood requirements are hardly met. Sometimes they miss their share of firewood due to lack of consideration of their unavoidable circumstances such as sickness. For instance, usually the chairperson and the secretary set their own convenient time for firewood collection, but the poor people more often cannot find a suitable time as they depend on wage labour. Even if they made use of the opportunity, firewood collected in a week hardly suffices to meet their

TABLE 3 *Rules for distributing forest products*

Type of forest products	Rules for distribution	
	Dikidabre	Kyangse Setep
Timber	• Annual demand for timber will be collected (someone who needs timber should apply specifying quantity of timber and its expected uses). • Committee shall make decisions on who will be provided timber based on annual allowable cut (stated in forest management plan) • Poor people will be provided timber at half price for their household purpose. However, they are not allowed to sell to other users.	• Same rules as that of Dikidabre • Poor people will be provided timber free of charge for their household purpose. However, they are not allowed to sell to other users.
Firewood	• Forests shall be kept open throughout the year to collect firewood (in case of dry wood, twigs and branches). • The committee shall set time for thinning and pruning. Household contributing to conducting these activities are entitled to share green branches and twigs equally.	• Forests shall be kept open for one week annually as decided by the committee and one person from each household is allowed to collect firewood during the period. • Same rule as that of Dikidabre in case of green branches.
Fodder, grass and leaf litter	• Forests shall be kept open for one week in rainy season and two weeks in winter season. One person from each household is permitted to collect fodder, grass and leaf litter during the period. • The committee shall decide the date for opening up forests for collection.	• Same rule as that of Dikidabre.

Source: Forest management plans of CFUGs

demands for the whole year. Further, most poor don't have an alternative like most rich people who have their private forests. Thoms (2008), therefore, argues that community forestry is more egalitarian lacking socially differentiated rules of use. Formal CFUGs rules have given authority to the committee to set times for opening up forests for firewood collection (see Table 5). Well off people, who are powerful in the committee, set the time for firewood collection to suit themselves, and urge other users to act accordingly.

In case of tree fodder, grass and leaf litter (used for livestock bedding and as compost fertiliser), poorer households have collected lesser amounts than wealthier households despite the equal access to all households. Adhikari *et al.* (2004) also found that the collection of fodder, grass and leaf litter is wealth sensitive indicating the more well-to-do households collect higher amounts of these products. It implies that the lesser land and livestock endowments of poor households preclude them from benefiting equally as their wealthier counterparts.

In contrast to benefits, costs of community forestry are skewed more towards poorer households although all users are supposed to share costs equally. Analysis of time spent in different forest management activities such as forest protection, pruning and thinning reveals that poor people are spending seven days annually on average while wealthier households spend approximately about three days (Table 4). The reason is that the committee, supposed to implement CFUG rules, is composed of local elites. They hesitate to take action against other elites who shirk for either they have a good relationship (family relationship, political, and other forms of clan-based relationship) with each other or the former seek to win the good will of other elites who are powerful and often play a pivotal role to elect and re-elect them to the committee (Poudyal 2008). In the case of the poor, usually they do not have a close relationship with committee members and they are not well organised or powerful enough to influence an election.

No wonder, the days spent by all users have opportunity costs of engaging in other activities which could generate more benefits. This cost hits the poor people hard as they mostly rely on wage labour to earn their living. Conversely, better off households appear to be involved more in decision-making activities like assembly. As seen in Table 4 rich households allocated 11 hours for assemblies whereas poor households spent only 5 hours.

This is similar to the findings of Adhikari and Lovett (2006) that wealthier households share a bulk of decision-making costs in terms of time spent in meetings and assembly than their poor counterparts due to possible gains through social reputation and future benefits.

Decision-making procedures and equity

Procedures often determine the outcomes (Schlosberg 2007). Looking at the procedures and the practice of the CFUGs, electing committee members and decision-making processes seem to account for inequitable outcomes. The constitutions of both CFUGs do not account for the importance of heterogeneity in terms of caste, class (poor, rich, medium), and culture not only in benefit sharing, but also in representation of all users in the executive committee. As Table 6 shows, the rich (40%) dominate committee composition in both CFUGs. In terms of gender, 66 percent of the committee members are men. Unlike in Dikidabre CFUG, Khyagnse Setep CFUG has, however, provisioned at least one-third female representation in the committee. Surprisingly, representation of the *Dalit* in the committee is null. This lack of representation of *Dalit* is due to the lack of positive discrimination policies in CFUGs. The *Dalit*, historically an oppressed and marginalized community, are less powerful, so there appears to be a very meagre chance for any *Dalit* to be elected through the existing procedures (through consensus or voting). Forging consensus for electing *Dalit* is socially challenging due to their lower hierarchical social status and powerlessness. Likewise, securing a majority vote by the *Dalit* seems beyond their political capability, constrained by their poor social and economic status. In addition, in the key positions (namely the chairperson, the secretary and the treasurer), the representation of women and the poor is worse.

It is stated in the constitutions of both CFUGs that an inclusive committee will be formed representing all caste, class, gender, and settlements. However, due to the lack of concrete provision (proportionate or what percentage), the decision-making platform is dominated by males, wealthier, and non-*Dalit* people. Some women are included in the committee partly due to the influence of positive discrimination policies of the government and the campaign of FECOFUN (a federated body of CFUGs to advocate rights of local people over forest resources). The Community Forestry Directives 2006 has indicated that there should be at least 33 percent women in the committee. Likewise, FECOFUN advocates for the compulsory provision of 50 percent representation of women in the committee. At least a positive discrimination policy has ensured some representation of women in the committee. However, they are rarely holding key positions and less influential in decision making. The reason, as many scholars argue, is that Nepal's

TABLE 4 *Annual time spent for different activities (n=90)*

Activities	Well being category		
	Poor	Medium	Rich
Forest protection/patrolling (person days)	4	2	1
Pruning and thinning (person days)	3	2	2.5
Assembly (hours)	5	8	11

TABLE 5 *Rules for cost sharing*

Types of activities	Rules for costs sharing	
	Dikidabre CFUG	Kyangse Setep CFUG
Attendance in meeting	• All committee members shall attend meetings • Failure to attend meeting consecutively three times will cease membership	• All committee members shall attend meetings • Failure to attend meeting will result in fine of NRs 100 (Nepalese currency)
Attendance in assembly	• All users shall participate in assembly • Failure to attend assembly will result in fine NRs 100	• All users shall participate in assembly • Failure to attend assembly will result in fine NRs 50
Forest guarding/stewardship roles	• In their turn each user household shall participate in forest patrolling	• Not clear
Thinning and pruning	• One person from each user household shall take part in thinning and pruning activities as per date fixed by the committee	• Same rule as that of Dikidabre CFUG

rural setting comprises a hierarchical social structure that includes different economic and social classes, an oppressive caste system and gender discrimination (Lama and Buchy 2002, Nightingale 2003, Timsina 2002). This in turn impedes the genuine participation of disadvantaged people in the decision-making. It is apparent that only physical presence of marginalized people in decision making body does not guarantee their influence. Still, positive discrimination (under the quota system) is a means of recognition for the marginalized people to get political space in decision making and to feel privileged so that they can be able to express their concerns. Maharjan *et al.* (2009) also argue that promotion of fair representation of the marginalized people through positive discrimination is needed to ensure their access to decision making fora. Poteete (2004) suggests to couple positive discrimination and provision of special power (for instance, veto rights) to make the marginalized people influential in decision making.

The implications of this disproportionate representation are apparent in costs and benefits sharing. Formally, the general assembly is the main body of the user group that prepares and amends its constitution and forest management plans, and makes major decisions affecting the forest and the users, while the committee executes the decisions. In practice, however, most of these functions are executed by the committee. Representation on the committee is therefore important as these are the people whose voices and actions affect both the costs and benefits sharing across households.

The way the general assembly is conducted is ritualistic and more oriented to seeking public legitimacy by the committee rather than focusing on public deliberation. The chairperson of Kyangse Setep CFUG explains the reason:

"We generally finished the assembly in two or three hours. Our CFUG has many members and it takes a whole day if we let each and every person speak out in our general assembly. There might be disputes as well because the more people speak out, the more complex will be decision-making.

TABLE 6 *Representation in the executive committee of CFUGs by class, caste and gender*

	Population in CFUGs (%)	Representation in committee (%)	Representation in key positions (%)
By well being status			
Poor	33	16	10
Medium	43	35	29
Rich	24	49	61
By gender			
Female	51	34	20
Male	49	66	80
By caste			
Dalit	4	0	0
Non-*Dalit*	96	100	100

Because we need at least two-third of our members to make decisions valid according to our constitution, we encourage our members to take part in the assembly. Otherwise District Forest Officer (DFO) will take action against us characterising our decisions as illegitimate".

This indicates that the committee seeks participation of users to ensure the legitimacy of the decisions they intend to make. This also suggests the poor understanding of the importance of public deliberation among the members of the executive committee.

The programme for the assembly usually includes a welcome speech, followed by a presentation of the annual progress and a financial report, and major decisions (considered by the committee) followed by closing remarks. When asked during a group discussion about her participation in the last assembly, a woman member responded that she attended the assembly and came back after frequent yawning. That's why Agarwal (2001), metaphorically, terms 'participatory exclusion' of women, *Dalit* and the poor in community forestry. She argues that participation in community forestry is more often nominal participation (just by name, marginalized people are involved in decision-making, but do not have influence). Likewise, Nightingale (2002) also casts doubt about the participation of women and *Dalit*, as to whether they are participating or just sitting in.

Decision-making procedures in both CFUGs were largely based on consensus. It was reported that in both CFUGs no voting has been done for making decisions on any issues so far. In CBNRM literature, it is argued that both voting and consensus-based decision-making do not guarantee equity as consensus does not eliminate power inequalities. Rather consensus empowers powerful elites to get their agenda legitimised exerting pressures on the poor to assent to their agenda (Poteete 2004). During the group discussions with the poor and women, they also expressed similar views that they do not oppose the agenda put forward by elites because livelihoods strategies[2] of the poor heavily depend on the rich. It indicates that decision-making procedures also empower the powerful to enhance their access and influence rather than that of the poor.

Unfair distribution in CFUGs is a reflection of an imbalanced power relationship embedded in the social and economic structures, and buttressed by cultural beliefs. This all has contributed to shape the recognition of individuals and groups in CFUGs. Lack of recognition due to culture, social-economic structure (including gender and caste dimension), norms, and its implications are further examined in the following section.

Lack of recognition matters: underpinning power and participation Nepalese society is patriarchal and hierarchical in terms of caste, class and gender (Gurung 2003). The so-called upper castes discriminate against lower castes; rich people repress poor people and men dominate women. These characteristics of a typical Nepalese society were also observed in the studied CFUGs. The so-called upper castes *(Chhetri, Sherpa, Sunuwar,* and *Jirel)* and the lower castes namely (*Pariyar* and *Bishwokarma,* collectively called the *Dalit*) were organised for collective action despite their different interests, and social and economic status. The discriminatory practices against *Dalits,* being treated as inferior human beings by the so-called upper castes, were similar to that of other villages elsewhere in Nepal. Patron-client relationship between the upper-caste and *Dalit* was evident. In an interview with the chairperson, an upper caste man, had used a sentence like '*gardeka chhau'* (we have done this and that for the *Dalit* people). It indicates he considers himself as a patron of the *Dalit*. During the focus group discussion with the *Dalit*, they voiced that they cannot break silence even if they know that the upper castes exploit them because they can't earn a living without the support of the wealthy households. One of the *Dalit* participants in the group discussion explains how they are dependant on the well off:

"We work on their farms and in return we receive wage – mostly grains but sometimes also cash. And we also have balighare pratha[3] in which we sew clothes for our bistas (patron upper-caste people) and in lieu we receive grains. This is how we earn our living. If we speak against our bistas, they will be unhappy and will quit our relationship".

This indicates that misrecognition of *Dalit* is tied to economic inequality. The *Dalit* are enormously dependant on wealthier households for their livelihoods because they do not own large landholdings (the primary means of securing livelihoods in the study area) nor hold paid jobs. Cornwall (2003) also points out that disadvantaged people know well that they risk retaliation when speaking out against the interests of rich people, so they are reluctant to challenge the well off people.

Similarly, lack of recognition is also apparent in patterns of representation and communication. During a field visit in Dikidabre CFUG, it was observed that the so-called upper caste people were greeting the *Dalit* as '*ta*' whenever they met. The word '*ta*[4]' is used to greet someone thought to be inferior and is considered as an insulting word. Box 1 presents the stratification of Nepali pronouns which all are equivalent in meaning to the English word 'you'. Language

[2] In the study sites, livelihoods of the poor were dependent on the well off in two ways, for accessing land to cultivate on a daily wage basis, and to be involved in sharecropping called adhiya, a common type of land tenancy with land-rich households. In this system, the poor people work on the farms of the well off households from sowing seeds to harvesting. After harvesting, the tenants (poor) and the landlords (rich people) share equal amounts of crops in general. Besides, the poor were also found to rely on the rich for access to loans to cover immediate expenditures such as the cost of medical treatment because they (village moneylender) don't need collateral and easily accessible at village.

[3] A traditional system of Dalit individuals working for so-called 'higher caste' households for fixed amounts of grain per year. Types of work might be iron work (making utensils, agricultural implements-knife, spade, and axe) or sewing dresses/cloths.

[4] The word ta has other connotations as well. For instance, it is also used to greet someone who is intimate.

is attuned to the expression of status and power in Nepalese society (Dahal 2000). The use of various words for the various classes to indicate the same meaning is one of its features.

It was also witnessed during the field visit that upper caste people were not calling poor people and *Dalit* by their proper name rather they used adjectives such as *Kale, Pudke and Langree* based on colour of their face, and height. Thus they feel, as reported in the group discussion, dominated and oppressed. They see themselves less worthy because self-worth comes from recognition by others (Taylor 1994).

"We are Dalit, hajur (respectful word to greet outsiders), who will hear our voice even if we speak out"? (Personal communication with a *Dalit* member in Kyangse Setep CFUG).

This indicates how inferior *Dalit* feel that they have no doubt that other people will not listen to their voices reflecting their relegated position in the society. Lack of recognition by other people in the public sphere renders them voiceless which also reduces their participation in decision-making.

Similarly, lack of recognition of women is related to the domination of women by men for religious, cultural, political and economic reasons. Women are typically expected to only be involved in household chores like cooking food, washing clothes, taking care of the baby, working on farms. Being involved in community work, for instance, providing leadership for community groups and involvement in decision-making was found to be men's duty in most rural areas, and the study site was not far from this reality. Economically, most land tenure has remained with the men in both CFUGs, the land is considered as valuable and most important property in rural Nepal. Only 11 women owned land titles (tenure). It was reported during the focus group discussion with women and the *Dalit* that upper caste and men dominate all local power structures - the local administrative body and political parties.

Most households in the study area were practising Hinduism. People who believe in this religion regard women as men's subordinates and their caretakers. Even men from households who believe in other religions (such as Buddhism) have suffered from their assimilation with Hinduism for a long time. In Dikidabre CFUG, it was found that some households have been following Christianity for some five years. In response to the question 'how did you feel the behaviour of your husband towards you before and following Christianity' during an informal talk, a woman (who used to practice Hinduism before) replied "*Mero budako lageko bani ka janthyo ra, paila ni ta nai bhanuhunthyo aile ni tehi bhanuhunchha"* (My husband's habit is not changing. No difference at all. He used to greet me as '*ta*', this is still the same). However, generally women respect their husbands as '*tapai*', a respectful word.

Now the question of recognition in those CFUGs established in this hierarchical and patriarchal society remains daunting. The lack of recognition of the *Dalit*, the poor and women and its reflection in the decision-making process is visible in the functioning of CFUGs, be it in meetings or an assembly, or forest management activities. Recognition of all users has been poorly covered in literature. However, the findings from this study show that lack of recognition has been an obstacle to addressing equity issues. Being oppressed in society, women, the poor and *Dalit* hardly voice concerns to improve their access to resources. Their participation in the decision-making process is more cosmetic as a showcase despite the efforts of many environmental NGOs, development projects and DFO.

In the studied CFUGs, executive committee includes some females and *Dalit* but they do not put items on the agenda since they are an oppressed section of society.

"In meetings and assembly, Dalit and women cannot put 'nice agenda'. They talk about their problems and they cannot give time for our CFUG. So we do not think that they can contribute to decision-making and forest conservation". (Personal communication with chairperson of Kyangse Setep CFUG).

Women, *Dalit* and the poor are not only underrecognised by elites in CFUGs but also by DFO staff, who are supposed to empower them. DFO staff usually meets elites and live with them whenever they go to visit CFUG. One of the key informants explains the reason:

"There is mutual benefit for both parties. DFO staff are concerned more about forest conservation as they think that their jobs depend on forests for which powerful elites can support by formulating rules to restrict access to forests. Likewise, DFO staff can support elites to remain in the committee in a tacit way".

It seems that the executive committee lacks downward accountability to their members; rather they embrace upward accountability to DFO. There is a high likelihood of missing the real issues of the poor, women and *Dalit* in their reports as well (Timsina 2002). In general, the misrecognition of *Dalit*, women, and the poor discourages them when it comes to expressing their concerns. This leads to a lack of voice in the decision-making process for those disadvantaged people, increasing the likelihood that their issues and concerns may not be given adequate attention. It means there is high chance that the basic forest products needs of the poor are not met, overlooking their livelihoods issues. This is what Young (1990) also concludes that misdistribution or injustice is partly due to the lack of recognition.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

From the early1990s the community forestry program in Nepal has pursued equity concerns in policy and action. But to what extent can community forestry contribute to ensuring equity? This question has remained debatable within Nepal and outside.

The findings of this study show that poor people are

benefiting less and bearing more costs in comparison to well off households, despite the fact that all users were supposed to share costs and benefits equally. It is usually argued in the CBNRM literature that the governments transfer responsibilities to communities to reduce administrative costs. This study indicates that the cost is by and large borne by the poor within communities. Socially un-differentiated rules and socio-economically and politically embedded relationships in CFUGs accounted for restricting access to resources by the poor.

The issue of access is associated with power (Ribot and Peluso 2002, Sikor and Lund 2009). This study shows that well-off, male and upper caste people are dominant in the decision-making process due to existing procedures for electing the committee and making decisions through consensus and voting. In shaping access to resources, interests of powerful elites were reflected in rules, whereas concerns of disadvantaged people were overlooked. Poor people's dependency on well off households hindered them from speaking out against the well off even if they felt injustice. Despite inclusion of some women and the poor in the committee, their influence in decision-making remains weak since they are not adequately recognized due to embedded socio-economic and political relationships.

This study also shows that the lack of recognition in the interpersonal and public sphere accounted for inequity in CFUGs. As the lack of recognition is reflected in communication and language the study revealed that the language used to greet and talk with the *Dalit*, and women are of an insulting nature. It was also found that they don't feel worthy in participating in the decision-making process because the powerful elites have been undermining and insulting them for a long time. In his widely cited article regarding CBNRM, Agrawal (2001) does not include a lack of recognition of users in interpersonal and public spheres as one of the 'enabling conditions' for successful CBNRM. This study suggests the need to redress this oversight. In particular, further research is required into how these problems might be addressed. Here some preliminary thoughts are presented.

Community forestry policy in Nepal has placed more emphasis on setting formal rules. Instead it should focus on recognition of poor, *Dalit* and women. This necessarily would entail gradually transforming oppressive socio-economic, political, cultural, symbolic and institutional policy and practices. This requires focusing more on creating institutional environments that are structured to allow for recognition. In addition, policy and program interventions needs explicitly to focus on how they might alter the asymmetrical power relationships shaped by embedded social, economic and political dynamics. The provision of incentives for the marginalized people to attend and speak up in the decision making can make positive discrimination policy work. As other research has suggested (Hickey and Mohan 2005), if they are to have substantive content, participatory processes such as CBNRM need to be part of a broader political project that, beyond a focus on technical service delivery, needs to affect existing power relations. In other words, CBNRM in Nepal needs to engage directly with social change, focusing on how arrangements get taken up, what are the results of the engagement, and where they are taking different social groups. Hickey and Mohan (2005) have suggested that if participation is to be more than a new form of 'tyranny' as set forth by critics (Cooke and Kothari 2001), participatory processes need to focus on and pursue participation as 'citizenship' – bringing people into the political process, so as to transform and democratize the process to work against exclusion or inclusion on disadvantageous terms.

The implication then is that, to address the equity issue, this will require developing institutional contexts that facilitate the collective action that is "critical to providing leverage and voice to underrepresented people" (Fox 2007: 140). As Fox's work in Mexico suggests, this may well only be possible in instances where a mutually empowering convergence of pro-reform actors inside the donor agencies, national government and civil society are able to come together to provide the required 'enabling environment'.

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