Sustainable Forestry Management in Nepal: Terai Forests

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1. Context

Problem statement
Millions of people depend for their livelihoods on the Terai forests in the southern plains of Nepal, which are also an important source of national income. These forests are rapidly disappearing. Driven by poverty and corruption, people clear them to make way for agriculture or to sell precious timber. Outside national parks, wildlife is struggling for survival in a few patches of remaining jungle. Meanwhile, down stream, people live in fear the monsoon floods have become much more severe with the forest gone. Without any change there will be no trees left to harvest, no more firewood, no more forest products and no more nature to attract tourists.

Stakeholder description
All sorts of groups have a stake in the forests. For local villagers they are source of firewood, building materials, forest products and cash income. There are the legal and illegal logging interests. Allocation of forest land and logging rights is closely linked with local politics and electioneering. European logging companies are interested in joint ventures. The environmentalists are concerned for the protection of the diverse and exotic biodiversity. To further complicate the situation the Maoist rebels were active in the area. In the centre of all these interests is the forestry department with the legal mandate to manage interests around these forests, and which is often powerless to ensure their sustainable management.

History
The Department of forests has developed large forest management plans for particular areas. For example in one of the central districts, none of the six forest management plans developed in the last thirty years have ever been carried out. Every time a stakeholder would protest against a plan, even if it was technically outstanding. Different interests would let the status quo move on, without any sustainable solution.

2. MSP Process

Initiative
In the late-1990s, donors started realising that project approaches were not going to provide for the institutional development to get developing countries out of the poverty cycle. Some

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Donors adopted the Sector-Wide Approaches (SWAPs) and supported the formulation of an environment programme with the Government in the Driver’s seat.

Objectives
The goal of the programme was to carry out sustainable forest management. Earlier projects had figured out that you could carve forests into 20-hectare compartments that are harvested with an 80-year cycle. Such management would provide livelihood to local people, ensure the conservation of forests, and provide the Nepali state considerable income for general development. Such management could only be carried out if a governance system for such forest management was developed. The intermediate goal of the programme was to develop ways by which people could co-operate to manage the forests. At local level this included the development of a Collaborative Forest Management modality; at district level it included the development of co-operative structures where stakeholders could plan forest management, and at national level it included development of supportive legislation.

Steps and structure

The programme took off after a joint field visit, in which the Ministry and donor decided to start a Joint Working Group of Ministry and Donor officials to formulate a new Ministry’s programme. This group visited District Forest Officers (DFOs) in the Terai, who maintained that without involving multi-stakeholders, the programme was bound to fail. They suggested to work with the locally elected representatives, who in their turn called for a big meeting in their district to discuss possible forest management programmes. Such open discussion meetings – with typically 50-80 opinion leaders, and press – took off with speeches and hard words toward each other. Then, people were asked the question, what programme would this district need? "We need forests to stay..."
green for soil conservation” landowners’ representatives would say. “We need fuel wood and timber at affordable price” said people-oriented politicians. “We need a stable source for raw materials” said sawmill owners. Women wanted a source for fodder and housing material.

In most districts all people agreed to form local District Forestry Co-ordination Committees (DFCCs) to formulate a district forestry programme. They fulfilled an institutional gap.

The Joint Working Group sought to officially regulate the DFCCs had policy approved let Terai Forests be managed collaboratively, like in India. The DFCCs suggested for pilot sites, where Ministry officials met with local people and developed official local structures and procedures. After long negotiation, Collaborative Management was approved for piloting.

Interventions, methods
In the spirit of Sector-Wide-Approaches, a core group from the Ministry of Forests gave shape to the programme. Officials originating from the Terai and who also knew the bureaucratic culture were instrumental in bringing meetings to workable conclusions. They used tools such as visioning (what would ideal forest management look like?) and actor mapping (who can stop this sector reform programme?). Then, during more or less formal meetings, people with a certain standing in the district (all political parties, chamber of commerce, NGOs, women representative) were invited. They selected stakeholders that were acceptable partners for the forest bureaucracy, such as the elected representatives or local NGOs. This meant that they also limited the influence of certain parties, such as NGOs from hilly areas who promoted forestry modalities poorly adapted to the Terai setting. The Ministry carefully orchestrated the process to ensure that its relative say over the forests would not be eroded. “We exist over 50 years, NGOs only five years, who do they represent and why would we talk with them?” one Government official once stated proposing to limit the influence of certain partners.

3. Results

Change
The programme has led to a series of Institutional Innovations that form building blocks for a self-sustaining Terai forestry sector. The programme made a Private Forestry regulation. People can produce trees on their private land which will give great economic incentives and reduce pressure on the forests. Similarly, land use planning, revolving funds, lower hill forest management, NGO partnerships, local forest governance guidelines have been developed.

Stakeholders that before only met fighting in court, now are doing joint projects. At all levels, people started to experiment with new guidelines and new rights – mostly to leave experimenting again soon (for many arrangements were incomplete and difficult to work in) – and sometimes to find themselves in new, fruitful coalitions.

In relatively peaceful times, parties discussed openly over forestry issues – while when war broke out, parties again hid in the jungle and took up arms. No outsider can feel and understand how it is to be part of the process, yet, much is happening because of the local ownership and funding possibilities for joint projects if parties agree.

Sustainability, current situation
The programme was ambitious in that it tried to work in a sector that had been ridden with conflict for decades, with few signs of improvement. First, after a series of emergency periods, the elected local government was winded up. This made that the foreseen power dynamics between the local Government and the forest line Ministry was stopped and that the foreseen reforms were slow to realise. The donor started off with institutional reform mind, but as the support from The Netherlands for sector-wide approaches dwindled, it wanted more direct poverty reduction results, which was difficult to realise in the political turmoil of the time. The DFCCs – that were initiated to take decisions for the entire sector, including Government-funded components – were isolated to look at the donor-funded parts only.
By the end of 2008, the programme is still on-going, experiments still take place, but the foreseen influence as a sector reform programme is weak. During the programme, powerful driving actors (forest bureaucracy and elected local government) have been replaced by weaker actors (donor and donor-minded NGOs) with little formal means to enforce sector reforms.

4. Learning

Successes and challenges
The initial institutional changes have been the biggest success in the process. Stakeholders that did not want to collaborate in the past, found each other more often.

Preparation and building of capacity for management plans was difficult. Local NGOs could do this but bureaucracy prevented them to be effectively involved. Sometimes structures for implementation were difficult to establish, especially due to the vested interests, for instance the existing incentives for government officials. ‘Temporary solutions’ for topping up of salaries were created.

Much of the failed results on the ground can be attributed to the Maoist uprising and the way the Royal Government reacted. “If the conflict had not disturbed our programme, we would now have a complete legal framework and functioning Terai forestry sector in place’ says Mr Sah, Regional Programme Officer of the programme.

Lessons learned
This Multi-Stakeholder Process is in fact a collection of many nested and intertwined MSPs – at national, regional, district and local level. It happened in an environment with high personal and institutional stakes, with a history of conflict. The programme’s slow progress, its messy implementation, its inability to show quick results, its many unfulfilled promises – all disappointed many people.

The process has gone very different than imagined in the beginning. The idea of designing a Collaborative Management mode, pilot it, and scale it up did not work. There was need for support for the innovations, build-up of capacity, and public-NGO partnership rules. At the same time momentum has to be maintained to prevent impatience to discourage stakeholders. A Mid-Term Review revealed: “This programme suffers from the state of being an “inverse pyramid”. There are large numbers of activities being performed at various levels (...) but there are very limited substantive works being promoted at the grassroots.” At the same time, the programme was a daring initiative that has left behind a rich collection of legal and institutional changes that are essential building blocks for future initiatives. Once a more visionary Government comes to power in Nepal, much institutional groundwork will have been done and with due political support the developed modalities can be put to work in years rather than decades.