

Globalization, Community Forest and Women Empowerment in Nepal

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ABSTRACT: Globalization has had a powerful impact on individuals and societies. Some have argued that Nepal entered the age of globalization only in the 1980 – after Nepal began to liberalize rules of international trade. Globalization however, also began to impact on individuals and societies in Nepal because of expanding presence of international development agencies there. One such expansion of international agencies was in the community forestry sector. This paper explores how the internationally shaped community forestry program in the Gorkha District of Nepal and the associated Community Forest User Group (CFUG) there, is empowering local women. Although forest conservation programs started during the 1960s, the initiation of community forestry program in 1993 helped convert number of the nationalized forests into community forests that were handed over to and managed by local communities. The transformation of the ownership and management regime shifted the privilege and responsibility of managing local forests to the local community and the members of the CFUG. The initial intent of the program was to protect forest and wildlife and mitigate the hazards caused by deforestation. In time, however, the program was expanded to the holistic development of the community, including the empowerment of women.

INTRODUCTION

After Nepal entered in the age of globalization i.e. in 1980, number of development agencies started bubbling up around the country holding different development theme and agendas. One of them was forest conservation theme nevertheless, Nepalese government had already started this theme in 1950's but due to lack of layers monitoring system, stakeholders and ownership among the local people, the forest conservation program was crawling with insignificant growth rate. Later in 1993, the government endorsed forest act and implemented forest program robustly converting national forest to

community forest. These forests were handed over to local communities in order to make local communities more responsible and accountable towards the forest. The early intent of this forestry program was only to protect forest, wild life and to mitigate possible hazards due to earlier deforestation but later, such program started to cover software programs such as rights awareness and empowerment.

The term globalization is multi-dimensional and it has multi definitions in an academic arena however, in general, it can be understood as the process of transformation touching every aspect of social, political and economic changes around the globe. Picking few scholarly definitions here, Giddens ('91) writes globalization '...as the intensification of

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worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happening are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice-versa'. Similarly, Castells ('96) and Held *et al.* ('99) writes that, 'globalization involves both capitalist markets and sets of social relations and; flows of commodities, capital, technology, ideas, forms of culture, and people across national boundaries via a global networked society'.

Globalization is more than just a spatial diffusion of social and cultural aspects. It is equally an ongoing climate change and challenges it has brought to human societies. Since the trade, industries, urban cities, transportation has scaled up and scaled out, its negative consequences has started visibly emerging up around human societies. These consequences ranges from increasing temperature to droughts, wilder weather, changing pattern in rain and snow, melting glaciers, shrinking sea ice and rising sea level. Further, this has increased complexities in human health including challenges in local livelihood and so on. Beside all these, Nepal is highly vulnerable to climate change and its associated impacts due to its distinct topography. These vulnerability has been accelerated even by high poverty, slow economic growth and lack of sufficient resources to mitigate such associated hazards. In particular, communities living in different ecological zones of Nepal are at high risk from climatic adversities. The people living in mountains and hills have high landslide risk whereas Terai lands are much vulnerable to flood related climatic adversities. There are range of factors that contributes the severity of this situation such as fragile mountainous ecosystems, prevailing poverty coupled with slow economic growth and lack of both the financial and technical resources necessary to adapt the climate change. In addition, climate change has lately mainstreamed into the national development planning process. Other than this conflicting social and political priorities in the country, low or lack of awareness and expertise are making climate change a difficult national agenda.

The climate change is considered as one of the greatest threat posed to conservation and livelihood initiatives worldwide including Nepal. The situation is becoming worse as we release more and more greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. On the other

hand, Nepal contributes '...only around 0.027 per cent...' (Ministry of Population and Environment, 2016; MoPE, 2016) of greenhouse gases of the total global share, which is very insignificant percentage. However, the people living in Nepal has to face all the negative waves of climate change equally as the other developed countries. The impacts of climate change are already observable in the Himalayan ecosystem. Glacier lake outburst floods (GLOF) caused by rapidly retreating glaciers and the hasty formation of glacier lakes is just an example of risks due to climate change in Nepal. Other observable impacts of climate change such as changing rain pattern, snowfall pattern, and loss of biodiversity, scarcity of water, decreasing food productivity and increased frequency of landslides and flooding. All these impacts lead a significant threat to people's livelihoods, safety, security and ultimately the national GDP. Notwithstanding, the frontline to face these impacts are, as always, mostly the poor and marginalized people living in hilly and mountainous terrain.

In order to mitigate all these direct and associated hazards, the government took a bold movement and adopted forest protection strategy which started '...officially in late 1970s...' (Kanel and Kandel, 2004). Later, enactment of Forest Act in 1993 (MoFSC,'95) and Forest Regulation in 1995 (MoFSC,'95) provided sufficient space to significant increase in the number of community forest users group. In between, nationalized forest were handed over to local communities — Community Forest Users Group (CFUGs) hoping '...this would be an incentive for the communities to conserve and restore...' (Pandey and Paudyal, 2015) the transferred forest to local communities. This brought a deep sense of ownership and responsibility to local community upon the transferred forest however, the intent of community forest program was also '...to meet the basic forest products required by the communities through active participation in forest development and management... mobilization and empowerment of the members of community forest user groups...' (Kanel and Kandel, 2004).

Now it has been over two decades that government owned forests have been transferred to the local community groups. In the recent

development, 'all the forest user groups are voluntarily united under the umbrella of the 'Federation of Community Forestry Users of Nepal' (FECOFUN) to ensure their rights are protected...' (Dahal and Chapagain, 2008). The main intent to develop and operationalize FECOFUN is to advocate the rights of forest users as well as strengthen the role of CFUGs in policy making process, to ensure inclusiveness, social justice, good governance and deepen democracy in CFUGs and providing various supports and services. In addition, several international NGOs are closely working with government, CFUGs and locals in different community forests and protected areas (PA) in order to protect forest, to diversify local livelihood and to mitigate possible impacts of climate change.

Research Gap and Rationale

Currently there are 19,361 CFUGs (MoFSC, 2017)⁶ in Nepal and out of them 1072 are women managed CFUGs. In most CFUGs, men has more domination on decision making role, forest related assembly, meeting and visits in different locations and; all these indicates unequal gender participation in CFUGs notwithstanding, the community forest is participatory approach loaded program. Almost all women in rural settings are involved in livestock farming and agriculture which means their direct dependency upon forest resources on daily basis but despite this, women are still not being actively involved in participatory role such as in CFUGs (Winrock International, 2002). Indeed, less participation of women in FUGs means less chance of women empowerment in days ahead.

Despite the number of women are more than half of total population in Nepal, they have always remained under the most impacted group as compared to men due to different social practicalities and cultural hurdles. According to Gilmour and Fisher ('91), local elites with high social status, wealthier and educated are influential in local decision-making processes of CFUGs and to date, '...women, poor, marginalized and Dalit groups were less benefited from Community Forest than the wealthier and influential household (Maharjan,'88). Kafle (2008) also writes that '...rich class households are getting more net and gross income from the use of community

forest products than poor and middle class households'.

On the contrary, few research shows women empowerment since an enactment of forest policy in Nepal along with decreasing '...trend of forest degradation...' (Kanel and Kandel, 2004). Indeed, in order to reduce differential vulnerabilities and impacts on women, their empowerment is necessary in different part of the country. Other than this, to overcome unequal opportunity for women, to make them capable to earn living through education and skills, to reduce domestic violence and poverty, positioning them in decision making level and finally to make them participate in national development, women empowerment is essential.

There has been different programs throughout the decades to empower women in various rural parts of the country and one of the salient program is community forest program whose standing agenda is women empowerment. The temporary working plan of CFUG also evidently states that community forest aims to empower women, gender awareness and reduce gender inequality. However, the document does not explain how forest program shall empower the women of users group. This study explores if community forest are empowering women in different aspects (indicators) and if such empowerment have any correlation with community forest program.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

To find out how and in what scale community forest has been empowering women (of users group), Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) method has been incorporated in this study. The rationale for applying this method is to include local people/groups in full engagement and ownership in the process and; at all levels. Further with this method, information relating local knowledge, practices, the goals and values of local community can be extracted easily.

The universe of this research has three districts – Chitwan, Dolakha and Gorkha; and with random-lottery method, Gorkha district was selected as a research area. The community forest programme in Gorkha, was initiated during 1990-91 in order to fulfill the daily need of locals from forest and also to improve the condition of the existing forest. Now there are a total of 447 CFUGs in Gorkha district.

Out of total CFUGs in the district, '*Didi Bahini Mahila Community Forest*' from Ajirkot Rural Municipality – 4 was selected with purposive basis so that sufficient women respondents can be selected from the group. This community forest covers total 3.25 hector of land with an involvement of 112 households. Out of total members involved in this user group, 30 women were selected with purposive sampling method i.e. on the basis of marital status (married only) and those who are in this users group since 2007. The rationale for this selection is to observe change in certain indicators such as health, mobility, decision making power and property ownership of sample women within 10 years of period.

Selected 30 women members were interviewed during the field visit however, before visiting the research site, an open ended questionnaire was prepared, pre-tested and corrected as required. During the field visit, probing questions were also included along with the scheduled questionnaire list. The interviews were conducted considering the free time of respondents (morning and evening).

Different indicators were observed to find out how community forests have been implementing various women empowering programs. The first indicator was women's economic contribution where their market participation and productivity contributions were observed. Second indicator was education in which number of primary education attainment and number of informal elder education were compared. Thirdly, in health indicator, presence of skilled attendant at birth, decision on using contraceptive, access to sanitation and clean water, reproductive rights were observed. Similarly, in decision making indicator, women's decision making level has been observed in two sectors i.e. informal (household level) and formal sector (community user group). In household level, respondents' decisions such as in mobility, income-expenditure, children's education and reproduction were observed. In community user group (formal sector), respondents were asked if their voices are being addressed.

In mobility indicator, women's mobility within village, VDC, district and other part of country were observed with the help of mobility cycle tool and; finally, their ownership on various properties such as household asset, house and farm land were observed.

To inquire how women have been empowered through community forest program in last decades, different personalities were interviewed as key informant. In the beginning, on the base of in-depth conversation with local community, one key informant was selected and later with snowball method, other key informants were selected which included head of the CFUG, head of mother group, local teachers, and NGO staff working closely in community forest program.

The FGD session was also conducted on Saturday at local school ground. The total FGD size was eight. The participants of focused group were selected on the basis of their in-depth knowledge in these particular issues. In this session, women members of CFUG, head of CFUG, staff from development agency specifically working on women empowerment and forest program and; local teachers were included. The rationale behind selecting this tool is because of '...effective way to get the reactions of a small group of people to a focused issue' (Baker, 2014). Also, this tool '...can dig more deeply into an interest area (ibid) and '...participants get opportunities to interact, discuss and provide common response' (Kitzinger, '94). During FGD, the participants were asked how community forest program have been empowering women within a user group.

The overall research design is descriptive as well as explorative and acquired information were analyzed with mixed method (qualitative-quantitative i.e. qual-quan) approach. Mixed methods research is '...relatively new in the social and human science as a distinct research approach...which includes both open-ended and closed-ended questions and analysis of both forms of data (Creswell, 2014).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings are presented in Table 1 which evidently elucidates that there is positive result in different indicators examined.

In economic contribution indicator, number of female respondents has increased in 10 years period. According to head of CFUG (key informant), the sum collected by selling forest products, levies and fines are loaned to female member of user group so that they can start cash crop or increase market

TABLE 1
Number of respondents under different indicators and categories of responses

Indicators	Categories	Respondents	
		2007	2017
Economic contribution	Market participation	11	18
	Productivity contribution (Cash crop & subsistence)	16	27
Education	Number of primary education completed	11	18
	Informal elder education	2	11
Health	Received skilled attendant at birth	11	12
	Using contraceptive by own will	1	5
	Access to sanitation and clean water	10	24
Decision making power	Reproductive rights	11	23
	Decision in household level	2	12
	Decision in community user group	5	9
Mobility	Within village	27	30
	Within VDC	8	21
	Within District	2	13
	Within Nepal	2	6
Ownership on	HH asset	11	17
	House	9	13
	Farm land	5	6

Source: Field Survey, 2017.

participation (petty business). It must be why female members' contribution on productivity, both in cash crop and subsistence farming, as well as market participation has increased.

The number of female, primary educated and informal elder educated, has increased by 2017 but according to focus group discussion (FGD), it came to know that community forest program never implemented or brought an education program (formal primary education or informal elder education) within the community. This indicates that increase in the number of educated women is due to other factors such as government education programs. Nonetheless, respondents during FGD session, at least admits that the periodic program of community forest (monthly meeting/gathering) has increased awareness and confidence among the women member, due to which women's involvement in getting primary education or informal education is increasing. Similarly, access to health has increased but this change is due to various actors/agencies working in the area such as health related International organizations/NGOs and

government health programs, not due to forestry program. As informed by couple of key informants, forest program has never brought health program or mobile health camp in their community.

As mentioned earlier, user group holds a monthly meeting and this has provided women members a space and understanding on power dynamics within them due to which number of women having household decision power increased. On the other hand, the users group collects fund (equal levies) from all the members on monthly basis which provides a sense of equality (equal power and ownership) among the women from different economic background and caste group (Dalit and ethnic). However, surprisingly, the position of head of user group had always apprehended by high caste female members. This illustrates that although the decision making power of women has increased in user group, Dalit and ethnic women are yet to reach at the core of power circle.

Another indicator was women's mobility which has increased within the village and districts. This increase in mobility is due to various meeting or training that member of user group ought to attend in a periodic basis. Notwithstanding, the development of road and increasing transportation access are undeniable because these are also one of the factor that has increased the mobility of women. Lastly, an increase in ownership in terms of house and land also indicates empowerment but in ground reality, community forest program has never implemented software or hardware program still date in order to increase the ownership of women on different assets.

CONCLUSION

All the above information suggests partial women empowerment in this user group and believed to be due to implementation of community forest program but globalization and its extended roots such as market expansion, construction of road, increasing transportation facilities, increasing number of International organizations/NGOs and their activities and; finally government programs found to be more influential for this increase. This study was conducted within finite area and group. Hence, though the women of this community user group are empowered, which is good, it is unwise to confirm and generalize that

forestry program has sole credit on it but also the globalization.

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