Community Forestry Case Module Introduction

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COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Tropical deforestation rates remain the highest in the world, with severe consequences for global biodiversity, climate change, and rural livelihoods. To counter this trend, many development agencies with poverty alleviation agendas and/or forest conservation goals are promoting the devolution of forest management and use rights to local peoples and communities in community-based forestry agreements.

Community-based forest management is an excellent example of a socio-ecological system, in which feedbacks between people's objectives are reflected in forest management activities and ultimately in the structure and function of the forest. The condition of the forest then, in turn, affects the degree to which people rely on it, and the management activities they pursue.

Here's a hypothetical example of how community-based forestry might work. Consider a government-owned forest to which people have recently been granted legal access to harvest valuable timber species. Prior to receiving access, people have been 'illegally' harvesting firewood and timber when they can to supplement farming incomes. The forest condition has deteriorated as a result of expanding agriculture at the periphery, and ad-hoc harvesting in the interior. Native biodiversity is being lost, and as forests are cleared, carbon released. Although people use the forests to supplement their livelihoods, due to the risky nature of illegal harvests they are unable to rely on it as a steady income source and must continue to grow cash crops at the periphery. Unable to support themselves with the available employment options, people leave the community to work abroad in cities, or to obtain an education.

But now that forests can be harvested, people are able to develop a sustainable management plan over several years, and a governing body to enforce harvesting limits. Benefits, work, and risks are shared between all members of the community, who are able to count on a more or less stable source of income from the forests. Illegal activities decline, a buffer zone is enforced around the forest boundary to protect its integrity (and harvest capacity). As forestry activities become more robust and prove themselves profitable, more investment is made in forestry and less in cash agriculture, and forest condition and area continue to improve and expand. People are able to remain in the region rather than moving to the city for work, and the rural culture is remains more intact. The community is able to support social programs (schools, health facilities) with the shared income. Cultural, social, economic and environmental sustainability flourish.

An example of such an initiative can be found here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sIiMo8zkMqA

Thus, at its best, these community forestry initiatives can be a win-win solution for people and forests, conserving forests and maintaining carbon sinks while providing a source of income for rural peoples. But projects do not always live up to this potential – often environmental and social objectives are not met, projects are abandoned, or benefits are captured by only a few 'elite' members of the community. In this module, our objectives are to learn about community forestry objectives and potential outcomes, and use data to analyze why, where and when projects meet their objectives, and when they fail to do so.

Nepal has one of the oldest and most extensive community-based forestry programs operating today. This module will use the case of Nepal to illustrate the main points and provide a basis for analysis.

LEARNING GOALS
- Understand the principles, objectives and scope of community forestry initiatives.
- Use existing data to analyze community forestry dynamics and their livelihood and forest outcomes.
- Integrate different methods and perspectives in natural resource management decisions.
- Use and evaluate different evidence bases commonly used to make policy recommendations for a particular context.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
At the end of this case, you will be able to:

1. Describe community-based forestry and its ecological and social goals.
2. List relevant stakeholders in community based forestry, and map out their perspectives and interests, and how these are related.
3. Identify key variables that influence the performance of community-based forestry arrangements through an iterative process of reviewing the literature, discussing with peers, and statistical analyses.
4. Design testable research hypotheses and research strategies to answer them integrating qualitative and quantitative data.
5. Use qualitative data to address hypotheses.
6. Perform analyses to examine relationships between forests and people using the IFRI data set.
7. Discuss the utility of a national data set in a local context, its advantages and limitations, and what additional information/data may be needed to inform localized decisions.

8. Create recommendations for effective community-based forest management that are applicable and adaptable to different contexts.