
Access to Power or Genuine Empowerment? An Analysis of Three Community Forest Groups in Nepal

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Abstract

The introduction of community forestry in Nepal represents an attempt to decentralize control and instill democratic reform in the management of forest resources through the direct involvement of individuals in decision making and benefit sharing. Detailed analyses of community forest outcomes, specifically an understanding of the process of self-governance and the exercise of power, remains a critical gap. Using a purposive sampling methodology, we identified 38 forest users representing a diversity of interests in three communities of the middle hills of Nepal and conducted in-depth interviews focusing on perceptions of an ability to exercise power in forest management. Power in this context is defined as the ability to create rules, make decisions, enforce compliance and adjudicate disputes. Our results identify inferiority, vulnerability, and a lack of transparency as factors that keep forest users from exercising power. We conclude that while community forestry offers tremendous potential to practice self-governance, the behavior of individuals based on complex informal institutional arrangements, such as caste and gender, must be accounted for in such formalized policy initiatives. Opportunities to influence power through mandated processes alone fail to fully explain or affect the potential for community forestry. Instead, we note that genuine empowerment is related to capacities involving the skills and confidence necessary to exercise power.

Keywords: *community forestry, governance, empowerment, democracy, transparency*

Introduction

The decentralization of forest management in Nepal during the early 1990s raised expectations of greater participation in forest management by encouraging community self-governance. Nepal's community forestry policy represents an attempt to fundamentally shift the distribution of power between national and community interests, functioning on the premise that forest users will be able to exercise a degree of control in forest management and in turn receive benefits (Agrawal, Britt and Kanel 1999; Agrawal and Ostrom 2001). Such expectations are founded on democratic forms of governance through inclusive, open and free association and control over the legislative, executive, and judicial institutions guiding forest management. After centuries of one-party monarchical rule, this decentralization follows the move toward multi-party democracy and is further encouraged by governmental and non-governmental aid donors.

The goods and services derived from forests are critically important for most people in Nepal because subsistence often depends on access to and control over resources. As Malla (2001, 301) states, access to forests represents "wealth, power and prestige in society as well as a means of livelihood and resources." From its inception, community forestry has

clearly sought to promote participation and equity in management and use of forest resources through formalized policies to empower “backward, poverty stricken, and women users” (HMG 1998, 297). While the community forestry policy has resulted in an improved biophysical condition of some forested areas, particularly in the middle hills (Gautam, Webb and Eiumnoh 2002; Kollmair and Müller-Böker 2002; Varughese 2000), an understanding of how forest users exercise power remains critically inadequate. Our research explores the perceptions of individuals in several rural communities in Nepal regarding their ability to exercise power in forest management activities.

Toward a New Paradigm of Forest Management

Forest management in Nepal evolved over several centuries and is correlated with policies favoring the ruling elite (Gilmour 1988; Guthman 1997; Mahat, Griffin and Shepard 1986; Metz 1991). These policies include land grants favoring high caste, educated, or wealthy members of society and continue to affect land tenure arrangements and related socio-economic characteristics. Following the democracy movement in 1990, Nepal passed the Forest Act of 1993, legally codifying community forestry.

Representation and participation through Forest User Groups (FUGs) are fundamental tenets of the community forestry legislation.⁴ The groups prepare a constitution and operational plan describing the geographic boundary of the forest and its users, the treatments to be applied, and the patterns of protection and extraction. The FUG drafts these documents in cooperation with staff from the District Forest Office (DFO), under the Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation. The FUG meets annually in a General Assembly for several reasons. First, the meetings serve as a forum for rule creation and decision making regarding changes to the operational plan. Second, the meetings allow for the election of members to an Executive Committee responsible for carrying out various administrative duties including management of finances. In addition, opportunities exist for individuals to resolve disputes through the local DFO. Presently, nearly 11,000 recognized user groups legally manage over 847,000 hectares or some 23% of the potential forested land in Nepal (Acharya 2002).

Obstacles to Effective Community Forestry

Analyses of obstacles associated with achieving the goals of community forestry in Nepal, in particular its emphasis on participation and equity, are becoming more common and detailed (Chakraborty 2001; Chhetri 1999;

Maharjan 1998; Malla 1997, 2001; Olsen and Helles 1997). Several studies describe FUG membership and related benefits favoring economically advantaged groups (Graner 1999; Kanel and Varughese 2000; Malla 2000; Malla, Neupane and Branney 2003). Others document inequity and a lack of participation resulting from political domination by “elites” (Brown et al. 2002; Harper and Tarnowski 2003; Pandey 1999). Several authors find gender or caste contributing to conflict in forest management (Dahal 1993; Lama and Buchy 2002; Nightingale 2001). More broadly, Gilmour and Fisher recognize the term “community” can be based on multiple definitions including residence, kinship and religion, explaining:

a community of residence does not, necessarily, share common interests in terms of forest use-rights. ...The interests of poor and wealthy people are likely to be divergent... [and consequently] the word ‘community’ can obscure a variety of group affiliations. (1992, 69)

Similarly, Brosius, Tsing and Zerner (1998, 159) identify concerns regarding the term “community” since the label “can be used coercively to create local resource management plans in ways that may or may not empower local people.” Thus, failure to properly define community can lead to a lack of access or control.

These authors and others point out obstacles to the redistribution of power that was mandated, at least implicitly, through the decentralization and democratic reforms in the Forest Act. Specifically, these studies identify questions about the design of community forestry and the impacts of structural characteristics of Nepali society on the effectiveness of policy implementation. Does community forestry represent an effective, equitable approach to dealing with conflict? How does the formalized policy of community forestry interact with the informal social norms established in Nepali society? To what extent do these interactions serve as obstacles to achieving the goals of community forestry? These are significant questions requiring a more basic understanding of a core concept of decentralization and democracy, the notion of power.

Power and Community Forestry

Community forestry in Nepal seeks to promote a decentralized and democratic approach to governing forest resources stressing checks and balances and equal access to participate in processes that govern individuals. Agrawal, Britt and Kanel (1999, 2) describe this type of decentralization as a “highly political process since it seeks to redistribute power and resources within the territorial confines of a

given nation-state.” The Forest Act and related forest regulations, administered by the DFO, define and operationalize the methods of exercising power and serve to prescribe necessary checks and balances.

While the decentralized role of the national government allows for and encourages democratic self-governance, the methods of executing the checks and balances are often presented in ambiguous terms and without specificity or the necessary infrastructure to guide or administer the policy.⁵ In this sense, the state imposes a type of consolidation of power since the DFO can withdraw the rights of the FUG if the group violates the Forest Act or regulations. Forest “ownership” therefore is held by the national government with community rights being usufruct. Furthermore, political domination by elites operating within the community can consolidate power by collaborating with the state.

Community forestry is posited on the notion that both access to and control over processes that govern individuals is fundamental for its long-term success. Checks and balances and equal access to participate are essential characteristics of a functioning democracy (Barber 1998; Dahl 1998) and according to Bowles and Gintis (1986, 92), “promise the collective accountability of power.”

Defining Power

The use of power as a methodological or theoretical framework is elusive and based on multiple suppositions (Bowles and Gintis 1986; Knight 1992; Kopelman, Weber and Messick 2002; Parsons 1999). As Dahl (1957, 201) notes, “the concept of power is as ancient and ubiquitous as any that social theory can boast.” Using a more Hobbesian conceptualization of power, Barber (1998), Forester (1989), and Ostrom (1997) define power broadly as a way of influencing the means to obtain some future apparent good. The work of Foucault explores the link between power relations and their capacity to “produce” truth (McHoul and Grace 1993). Central to this thesis is the supposition that “power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth” (Foucault 1980, 98) with a need for historical investigation of the lowest level of society regarding “how mechanisms of power have been able to function” (Foucault 1980, 100). Others have deconstructed the meaning of power to more broadly involve “social boundaries” related to the norms, institutional arrangements, and social identities that constrain and enable actors (Hayward 1998, 1). The recent proliferation of literature examining political ecology has, as its foundation, concepts of power and a multitude of spatial and temporal issues related to access to and control over resources (Peet and Watts 1996; Watts 2000).

While all of these concepts provide a theoretical foundation from which to analyze power, Agrawal and Ribot (1999)

offer a more tangible definition of power: the ability to influence processes by which individuals create rules, make decisions, implement and ensure compliance, and adjudicate disputes. We chose this framework of power since it is associated with the legislative (rule creation and decision making), executive (implementing and enforcing decisions), and judicial (adjudication of disputes) means of governance directly addressed through recent community forestry legislation. Furthermore, we feel that this definition of power will lead, through our qualitative methodology detailed below, to the discovery of other nascent issues within the study sites that many of the aforementioned authors evoke.

Agrawal and Ribot (1999) further suggest that the interaction of actors, power, and accountability defines decentralization. Effective decentralization depends not only on opportunities to access power but also on the context, including the social situation and related institutional arrangements in which this power is exercised. The distribution of power can be considered asymmetrical if one group of actors control the context in which power is exercised or if access to information and knowledge is distorted (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Knight 1992; Ostrom 1997). Moreover, exploitation of power asymmetry can produce distributional advantages that involve acts of domination and complicity (Bowles and Gintis 1986). The community forestry policy focuses on formalized opportunities to influence power through guidelines that prescribe methods of association and decision making (e.g., mandated General Assembly meetings and periodic elections of Executive Committee members). However, these prescriptions may fail to address informal modes of power which can subvert the formal process. While the legislation and related regulations impose constraints and dictate actions on the types of processes that must be followed, the policy does not dictate *how* forest users should *behave* in terms of the sharing of power. In Nepal, as Agrawal and Gibson (2001, 16) explain, “the shifting of power to community actors can have the pernicious effect of allowing powerful elite within a community to consolidate their own positions.” Similarly, Gilmour and Fisher (1992, xv) suggest, “reinforcing positions of authority and influence, can, in fact, make the poor worse off.” Community forestry is designed to prevent this consolidation of power and provide opportunities for distributional advantages, but has it?

Research Objectives

The research reported here examines the perception of individuals regarding their ability to exercise power and identifies factors contributing to or reinforcing power asymmetries. We use Agrawal and Ribot’s (1999) framework that defines power as the ability to influence processes by which

individuals create rules, make decisions, implement and ensure compliance, and adjudicate disputes. While our study examines the perceptions of individual forest users, we also recognize the importance of understanding the multiplicity of actors and interests and the inherent patterns of difference within a community. In research on governance of common pool resources, McCay (2002, 388) stresses the importance of understanding the “multiple and indeterminate interactions among stakeholders, involving dynamics of power, conflict, and competition as well as collaboration and institutional innovation.” To identify and explain those interactions, we seek to understand how “institutions have been specified within historical, ecological, and cultural situations” (McCay 2002, 393). We feel that an exploration of the perception of power by individuals through transcribed narratives allows for a multifaceted and in-depth understanding of these situations and the multiple and indeterminate interactions they contain.

Methodology

In this study, we used a qualitative approach with an emphasis on interpreting narratives in order to understand perceptions of the ability to exercise power by individuals. Local DFO staff identified three study sites (Sano Pandey, Bause, and Gosainkunda) in Kabhre Palanchok District of the middle hills of Nepal experiencing varying levels of conflict over forest management. The majority of individuals in this area are subsistence agriculturists who depend on forest resources including fodder, fuelwood, and timber. Identification of individual forest users in these sites was based on a purposive method rather than random sampling technique to gain an in-depth understanding of individuals. Sampled individuals lived in close proximity to or were members of three formally recognized FUGs. We selected 38 individuals (25 hours of interview data) from across these study sites including Executive Committee members, general FUG members, and non-members. These individuals represent a diversity of interests and backgrounds (based on caste, sex, age, land tenure, etc.). We stopped sampling individuals after 38 interviews because it was clear we were no longer receiving new information related to the research objectives.

Primary data were generated through a semi-structured interview process with the interview approached more as a guided conversation than a rigid set of standardized questions. Individuals were asked to comment on their ability to participate in and influence processes of rule creation, decision-making, compliance enforcement and dispute adjudication. In addition, forest users were asked to discuss the obstacles that impeded their exercise of power. Interviews were conducted by the first author with the help of an interpreter

and were tape recorded. The tapes were transcribed verbatim and translated from Nepali to English. These interview transcripts form the empirical basis of the project. The actual analysis began with the identification of sentences or groups of sentences within the transcripts (termed meaning units) describing or conveying a coherent concept or belief. Themes crossing user groups were developed and served to organize the meaning units. We analyzed the themes on three levels: the individual (to understand the narrative of a particular interview), the forest user group (to identify case historical contexts), and across forest user groups (to identify shared themes across the three study sites). The software program QSR N-Vivo 1.2 was used to facilitate the analysis by coding segments of the interview text and organizing and summarizing the data.

Results

In all three of the study sites, forest users perceived an inability to exercise power. While elites within the study sites would often downplay or deny the concerns raised by those who felt they had no ability to exercise power, we chose to represent the perceptions of those who felt they were powerless and focus on the source of this perceived inability. The most common discussion surrounding the process of exercising power was the perceived inability to influence rule creation and decision-making processes. Many individuals also felt they were not able to exercise power in the execution of decisions and were unable to pursue the adjudication of disputes, either because they felt these avenues did not exist or would not be effective. These perceptions of power appeared to be linked so that a lack of power in one area (e.g., rule creation) often meant power could not be exercised in another (e.g., dispute adjudication).

This cross-group analysis of power led to the identification of three themes: inferiority, vulnerability, and lack of transparency. The narratives by forest users relating to inferiority were based on caste, gender, or literacy. The narratives relating to vulnerability were based on a lack of private resources. Narratives relating to lack of transparency were based on issues of information sharing and trust. Figure 1 presents these three themes and associated characteristics.

We note that forest users would often link these issues in their narratives and thus Figure 1 illustrates the confluence of themes affecting an exercise of power. We also recognize that not all forest users expressed similar views and we don't claim to represent all forest users as holding the same perceptions in these communities. We are simply illustrating that there exist perceptions associated with an inability to exercise power and we try to “situate” those perceptions in detail (e.g., by illustrating connections to literacy, caste, gen-

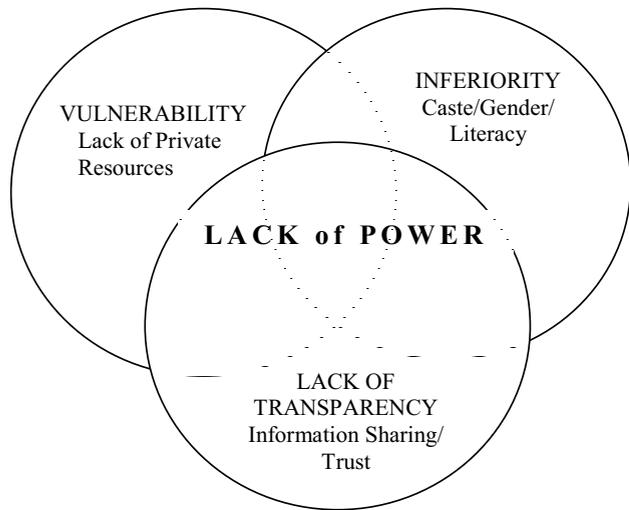


Figure 1. The three themes and associated characteristics that were common among the narratives of forest users in the three study sites.

der, etc.). While some of the forest users would describe more than one of the themes together, excerpts are presented below that best illustrate a specific theme.

Theme 1: Inferiority

The first theme described by forest users was the perception of inferiority, commonly discussed in relation to literacy skills, gender roles, or caste. In Bause, conflict existed between members of the Bause FUG and households excluded from the FUG. The Bause FUG is comprised almost entirely of higher caste Chetri households. Nearby, but separated by a small stream, are 19 low caste blacksmith households. The blacksmiths own few private forests and continue to be involved in metallurgy and the practice of traditional patron-client relationships exchanging goods for services (Hofer 1976).

Inferiority was a theme expressed by the blacksmiths regarding their inability to participate in the Bause FUG. These blacksmiths explained they had not been told of the FUG creation nor had they been invited to join after its creation, thus requiring them to travel greater distances in the search for fuelwood. Many blacksmiths explained they felt there were no avenues available to them to contest the present situation. Both men and women of the blacksmith caste described an inability to challenge the situation since the blacksmith caste is “backward.” For example, this blacksmith states:

I don't understand anything about these things. There is nobody who would come here and tell us about these things. We felt that we are also a backward class. It's natural that big men will try to suppress small men. ...It seems my lone voice or my two

or three brothers' voices cannot make any difference. ...They [Executive Members] don't care for us. [Therefore] it is unwise to show concern from our side.

Members of the Bause Executive Committee repeated the blacksmiths' self-assessment. Two Executive Committee members illustrate a perception of hierarchy based on caste:

The blacksmiths belong within the illiterate, lower caste. They don't know the benefit and what the forest provides to us. They lack such knowledge.

The people from the lower caste don't know how and what to speak in a crowd.

They don't know the meaning of the forest. ...They don't know how to use it, how to conserve it. ...They cannot contribute anything.

Perceptions of inferiority were also expressed by women in all three study sites. This Chetri woman in the Bause FUG explains that she was not able to participate in the meetings since it would interfere with the tradition of the village. As a result she characterizes women as “backward”:

...I alone cannot go [to the meeting]. If this is the tradition of the village and I go alone, then people will start talking. I have to respect the village tradition, don't I? This is why women are backward.

The blacksmiths stated they were willing to pay the required fees, yet literacy skills were perceived to be integral to influencing power:

They [FUG members] told us “this forest does not belong to you.” We said we are willing to pay 50 or 100 [rupees] or two pathi [4.5 liters] of corn but they said the Bause forest does not belong to the people across the river and so they did not give us permission. ...I don't know anything about this [forest management]. I cannot read and write, so I don't know anything.

In Sano Pandey, the theme of inferiority emerged with forest users discussing a lack of literacy skills as an impediment to forest management activities. In these examples, two older men explain certain skills are necessary to carry out forest management activities:

Most of the people are out of the village [for work]. What is needed are literate and clever persons. Not like us, old and illiterate, because we cannot read and write and don't know how to speak with big people. ...Such people are lacking in the village.

Only clever people can [manage community forests]. We can't. Neither can we read nor write.

Theme 2: Vulnerability

A perception of vulnerability involved descriptions of lack of access to the community forest or ultimately to their own private resources. In Sano Pandey, community members complained that the forest was closed for both subsistence and commercial purposes because the FUG was unable to meet and revise their operational plan. These community members explained that heated debates and conflict have been common since multi-party democracy came to Nepal in 1990. Individuals in the community became associated with two opposing political parties, yet this association was based on past debts, usury situations, or kinship, and not political ideology. An inability to access forest resources was discussed by numerous forest users in Sano Pandey. Comments from two members who do not have access to private resources illustrate the acute need for forest products and the resulting vulnerability:

How much can one harvest from one ropany [0.03 hectares] of land? Just one muri [90.1 liters] of corn. From one muri of corn, how can you feed the family for a year? ...They [Executive Committee members] are all relatives. We've said, "you bastards have your own private trees, you are rich but we have to bring wood from the forest. What should we burn? Kerosene?! While living next to the forest!?"

I think that those who have trees planted in their private fields have no problem but those who don't have access to trees for two to three years like me face a big problem.

In Gosainkunda, vulnerability was also discussed in relation to access to private resources or the community forest. The forest was closed to fuelwood collection (except for specific celebrations or ceremonies), even though many households objected to the closure policy and do not have private resources. As a result, these households use other means of meeting energy needs that are often less efficient and less healthy.⁶ The following forest user does not have access to private resources and states that the Executive Committee did not listen to his request to open the forest:

[We inquired with the Executive Committee] "Why can't we use forest products? Why is the forest not open for members?" ...The discussion should not be limited within the executive committee members. They should also take advice from us too, but they are not behaving themselves so. ...Most of the people [in this part of the community] are not literate and are poor. People from the other side are clever, just like political leaders. Whoever goes into power will rule the poor.

Several forest users felt the government policy prior to the Forest Act of 1993 is preferable. This blacksmith from the Bause area explains his preference for the Panchayat system associated with the one-party monarchial government preceding multi-party democracy.

Government [Panchayat] forest is better. ...During Panchayat era, we went to Phulchowki forest and we were able to manage our life. Now Panchayat has disappeared and multi-party [democracy] has come, but still we haven't gotten access to the Phulchowki or to the Bause forest. We are having more problems now than before.

Theme 3: Lack of Transparency

The third theme discussed by forest users involved a lack of transparency in relation to trust and information-sharing about funds generated through membership, funds from the sale of forest products or notification of community forest meetings. In Bause, the blacksmiths explained that they were not informed of the creation of the FUG. In the case of Gosainkunda FUG, some FUG members described deliberate efforts on the part of Executive Committee members to misinform or withhold information. This Executive Committee member discusses the indiscretions of previous Executive Committee members regarding the concealment of revenue from the sale of timber:

How had that auditor cleared that old account, even I am surprised. Some things were hidden even from us in the old committee.

Transparency was also discussed in relation to indiscretions of Executive Committee members and the funds from past membership fees. The notion of trust in this excerpt is referred to specifically:

How can we trust such a committee? ...We inquired about our 50 rupees. We asked, "where did our 50 rupees go? Where is it deposited?" ...After that, accounts were not shown to us and the whole thing was dismissed.

Another forest user in Gosainkunda explains that information regarding common funds and general assembly meetings was deliberately withheld by certain Executive Committee members or only provided to particular members of the community. He explains that by restricting necessary information regarding meetings and elections, members of the same family remain in the Executive Committee.

I would [have gone to the meeting] if they had informed me. Whenever they [Executive Committee] need to take money, they will let us know. Once we

give them money, then they don't inform us of anything. ...How can we take part when we don't know [about the meeting]. They do elections within their family circle. ...It is their strategy to elect their own people.

In Sano Pandey, various forest users discussed issues of the transparency of funds or the withholding of information related to participation in non-government organization-sponsored seminars and workshops. This forest user explains how indiscretions over transparency erupted at one meeting to a point of near violence:

There was a strong and loud argument and the situation went so bad that people almost hit each other. That situation was going out of control. ...The old Executive Committee thought "we are powerful and rich in this village, and whatever we say, people must agree."

Discussion

The theme of inferiority was present in all three study sites focusing on caste, gender, or literacy skills. In Nepal, caste has historically been a prominent determinant of access to power and is described by Scott (1990, 75) as "the ultimate in ideologies of hegemony." Caste, enforced through rules that maintain ritual purity, legitimizes the power of the higher castes, and reinforces a sense of fatalism in lower castes so they are less likely to challenge unequal power distribution. While a legal code to remove discriminatory acts associated with the caste system has been in place in Nepal for more than a generation, caste within Hindu society is still "the unique and dominant form of social organization" (Dundes 1997, ix). In Nepal, the caste system continues to be "an extremely salient feature of personal identity, social relationships and access to opportunities" with low castes ranking lowest in terms of literacy, infant mortality, life expectancy, and absolute poverty (Nepal South Asia Centre 1999, 175). As Routledge (1997, 72) infers, "social, economic and political inequalities are compounded by the caste system." This is a view shared by many others (K.C., Parajuli and K.C. 2001; Kraemer 2000; Vishwakarma 2002).

Women in all three study sites described issues associated with inferiority. These results are similar to others who have found gender affects the ability to exercise power in formalized systems of forest management (Gurung 2002; Lama and Buchy 2002; Nightingale 2001). Women in Nepal continue to fall far short in many areas (e.g. literacy, division of labor, access to land tenure, etc.) although certain legal challenges have attained success, specifically most recently,

access to reproductive rights. Gender issues continue to pervade community forestry literature, not only in South Asia but also globally (Agarwal 1997; Locke 1999; Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997).

The ability to read and write was perceived as a constraint affecting the ability to exercise power. Although there is little empirical research regarding the role of formal education to promote the exercise of power in community forest management in Nepal, literacy skills provide opportunities and competitive advantages in the increasingly market-oriented structure of rural Nepali life (Acharya 1998; Robinson-Pant 2000).

The narratives from forest users also illustrate a perception of vulnerability among individuals from the Sano Pandey and Gosainkunda FUGs and the blacksmiths near the Bause forest since they were either denied access to the community forest or were unable to meet their needs through private resources. While there are likely many other issues related to vulnerability (including situations involving credit and labor), forest users primarily discussed the exercise of power and the corresponding decisions affecting access to the community forest. Forest users who require goods and services from community forests are vulnerable because of what Chambers (1989, 1) describes as "exposure to contingencies and stress, and the difficulty in coping with them." Vulnerability can lead to individuals or groups of individuals being easily exploited, coerced, or simply acquiescing to decisions, ultimately affecting the ability to challenge existing management arrangements. Conditions of vulnerability can alter the ability to exercise power since as Chambers notes:

The household is an easy victim of predation by the powerful ...The household avoids political activity which might endanger future employment, tenancy, loans, favours, or protection. It knows that in the short term accepting powerlessness pays.

(1983, 110)

While many forest users explained that they felt vulnerable because they could not access the community forest, ultimately, their vulnerability lies in their lack of private forest resources.

The excerpts from forest users reveal deep concerns related to transparency. The topic of transparency is increasingly cited as an essential component of good governance (UNESCAP 2002). Transparency entails active reciprocity of information and knowledge constituted through candid interaction free from guile (Ostrom 1997). Unfettered access to information is a necessary component of democratic governance because the intentional withholding of information can reinforce domination and complicity. This reciprocity in

turn builds and maintains trust. Trust is an essential element of social capital, a topic that has received considerable analysis in similar situations (Falk and Kilpatrick 1999; Ostrom 1994, 1998, 2000; Yadama and DeWeese-Boyd 2001). Trust involves expectations of “regular, honest, and cooperative behavior, based on commonly shared norms” (Fukuyama 1995, 26), and is an essential condition for crafting and promoting self-governance (Ostrom 1997).

Power and Informal Institutions

According to forest users in these study sites, inferiority, vulnerability, and a lack of transparency limited the ability to exercise power in the management of community forests. The exercise of power was not necessarily enhanced by the formal policy changes guiding community forestry. Instead, the ability to exercise power was based on informal institutions that imbue or affect caste relations, gender roles, literacy skills, access to private resources, or a capacity to trust and share information among these forest users. Informal institutions continue to guide standards of behavior and dictate conventions of association in these study sites.

Institutions are, according to Knight (1992), sets of rules and norms shaping the interactions of individuals and exist as both formal (e.g., rules governing elections) and informal (e.g., social norms guiding gender roles) arrangements. Similarly, Peet and Watts (1996, 33) refer to informal institutions based on “kinship, neighborhood, faction, and ritual links” as the “competing foci of human identity and solidarity.” In Nepal, the history of these institutions is extensive and complex. As Routledge (1997, 72) explains, “the relations of power include pre-modern (feudal) and modern elements, and comprise an interwoven web of caste, class, patronage and kinship.” Institutions such as these serve to define and characterize the social norms guiding interactions and identities of individuals and the resulting ability to exercise power. Institutional arrangements that shape and reinforce deeply held beliefs about roles and places in society are often a result of the elite’s exercise of power and desire to exert control, or cohesion and disciplinary power as Foucault (1980) asserts, over weaker factions of society. Yet, opportunities to access power as dictated by formal policy changes designed to decentralize decision-making authority and democratize forest management practices do not necessarily address the informal institutions that position these actors in their communities and set bounds on their behavior. In a functional sense, opportunities created by one set of institutions (in this case formalized ones) are mitigated by failures to address informal institutions.

In these study sites, the ability to exercise power involves not only access to opportunities to manage forests (as mandated by the Forest Act and related forest regula-

tions), but also to empowerment involving the skills and confidence necessary to act and interact. Skills and confidence are associated with the three themes identified in this study and help to explain why certain forest users either acquiesced or were unable to challenge existing institutional arrangements. Genuine empowerment is, according to Cook (1997, 287), related to levels of competence (skills) and “subjective” power expressed through confidence. While the devolution of power, as it is promulgated under community forestry, prescribes opportunities for interaction, it does not address more fundamental issues of skills and confidence that characterize empowerment. Accordingly, Ostrom states, “power is important; but it does not provide us with the core concept for coming to terms with the constitution of order in democratic societies” (1997, 51). Several authors have established that the potential for this constitution of order is greatly dependant on prior associations and innovative institutional arrangements including a myriad of examples specifically examining forest resources and the potential for collective action (Gibson, Ostrom and McKean 2000; McKean 2000; Ostrom 1999; Varughese and Ostrom 2001).

Innovative arrangements, as Ostrom suggests, are constituted by characteristics such as self-responsibility, impartiality, dispersal of authority, and balance and depend on commitments of “common knowledge and shared communities of understanding that create a consciousness of complementary social identities” (1997, 113). The potential for realizing these complementary social identities and innovative arrangements in these study sites appears to be based on overcoming inferiority, vulnerability and a lack of transparency, and enhancing the skills and confidence that constitute empowerment. Building the empowerment necessary to support innovative institutions and complementary social identities within the context of complex power structures requires long-term and well thought out strategies.

The importance of addressing structural power relationships is exemplified by the early support of the landless, poor, and women for the Maoist uprising currently convulsing Nepal. Now, as the uprising has become increasingly bloody, much of that support is gone. No matter how the Maoist uprising is finally resolved, the underlying power structures provoking the movement remain an obstacle to empowerment. Hopefully, more constructive efforts at empowerment as proposed here will lead to gradual, non-violent societal change. Some NGOs have experimented with organizing groups of traditionally downtrodden members of society, such as the poor, women, low castes, and illiterates, to provide the means to a stronger collective voice (e.g., Kraemer 2000; Vishwakarma 2002; Nepal South Asia Centre 1999). These efforts often include literacy campaigns or advocacy programs designed to build skills and self-confidence. We

argue that this approach to empowerment is an essential component toward addressing the informal institutions that maintain and reinforce complex power structures. As collective groups become more skilled and confident, they can begin to challenge power asymmetries and subvert underlying social structures. Since issues such as caste and gender traditions on which Nepalese society function are centuries old, changes may occur very slowly. While collective organizing can generate a tremendous amount of energy, this energy must be channeled carefully so that it leads to constructive change rather than destructive violence.

Conclusions

This study presents narratives from individuals regarding their perceived ability to exercise power in community forest management. Individuals were asked to describe their ability to exercise power, defined as the ability to create rules, make decisions, enforce compliance, and adjudicate disputes, and the obstacles they perceived as affecting this exercise of power. Analysis of narratives revealed the themes of inferiority, vulnerability and a lack of transparency and help to explain why certain forest users were either unwilling or unable to form associations, demand accountability, or challenge existing institutions.

Our results suggest that opportunities to exercise power are based on both formal (laws and regulations) and informal (social norms guiding behavior) institutions and that genuine empowerment involves the capacity to be competent regarding the skills and confidence necessary to exercise power. The three themes identified in this study are by no means the only characteristics present or influencing the ability to exercise power in these areas. Their importance lies in that they are indicative of the obstacles that characterize informal institutional arrangements and access to genuine empowerment. An exclusive focus on formalized opportunities to exercise power, whether pursuing research or furthering policies of decentralization or democracy, offers an incomplete approach toward understanding or promoting the potential for community forestry. We agree with Richerson, Boyd, and Paciotti who conclude, "dispositions to cooperate" are "best explained by the existence of complex cultural traditions of social behavior, the collective results of which we call social institutions" (2002, 432). Agrawal and Gibson also recognize that changes through external intervention often fail to address "deep-seated informal norms" (1999, 639). As other studies elsewhere have shown, formal policy changes do not necessarily influence the ability to effectively exercise power (Escobar 1995; Poffenberger 1990). Thus we conclude, the formalized policies of community forestry are a necessary, but not sufficient condition for affecting the exercise of

power. Ultimately, the potential for complementary social identities and innovative arrangements rests on many factors that may not be completely ameliorated through the workings of decentralized policy initiatives and democratic reforms inspired and implemented at the national level. While these policies were most likely created with good intent, they may also contain unexpected consequences including maintaining or reinforcing power asymmetries within communities or impeding genuine empowerment.

Community forestry in Nepal represents the potential for a significant change in access to power. Yet, as Ostrom (1997) suggests, democratic self-governance necessarily requires complementary social identities and related responsibilities. Forest users in this study perceived an inability to exercise power and influence their future. However, this inability resulted from an extensive history of social interactions and deeply held beliefs about roles and places in society. Many questions remain regarding how best to address issues of governance in community forestry arrangements: How can participation be promoted, both in terms of formal policy initiatives and informal institutional arrangements, so that systems of democratic governance incorporate and reflect a diversity of interests? To what extent are inferiority, vulnerability, and a lack of transparency important in other community forests in Nepal and elsewhere? How does caste, gender, literacy, access to private resources, and trust affect the potential for self-governance? What types of skills are necessary to promote self-governance and how can confidence among the powerless be increased? How do forest users envision overcoming the obstacles that influence the exercise of power? Policies that focus on empowerment would begin to address complex power relations that exist in communities in Nepal. Future research, as well as non-governmental intervention and the inevitable policy changes, would do well to recognize and understand the informal institutions and potential for empowerment when promoting self-governance. The result would be a realization of more robust forms of democratic governance allied to and expected from community forestry in Nepal.

Endnotes

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Email: paul.lachapelle@umontana.edu
2. Email: smithp112001@yahoo.com
3. Email: smccool@forestry.umt.edu
4. Statutes specifically state FUG membership is not to be based on boundaries of wards, villages, towns, and districts and "the DFO (District Forest Office) must take into account...the wishes...of the local users" (Chapagain, Kanel and Regmi 1999, 30). The stated responsibility of DFO staff is to "identify the households that actually obtain forest products from that area...It is essential that no one is

excluded from decision making or benefit sharing” (HMG 1995, 4). The current legislation maintains that the FUG can retain all surplus revenue from the sale of forest products for any type of community development project, can fix the price of the forestry products, and can establish forest-based industries. These provisions are currently being threatened by government changes designed to decrease local control and increase government revenues, particularly in the Terai region of southern Nepal.

5. For a more complete critique of the legal domain of the community forestry policy, see Chapagain, Kanel, and Regmi 1999 and Talbot and Khadka 1994.
6. These less efficient and unhealthy means of meeting energy needs include the use of *guintha*, a sun-dried cornstalk containing a coating of mud, cow dung, and sawdust producing significantly more smoke than firewood and greater risks of respiratory illness.

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