

Chapter Three

Platforms for learning: Experiences with adaptive learning in Nepal's Community Forestry Programme

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Abstract

Despite the overall success of community forestry in Nepal, local forest user groups still face problems relating to accountability and responsiveness to stakeholders, intra- and intergroup conflict management, and establishment of equitable relationships with outside organisations. As a result, several attempts are now being made to build stronger multistakeholder partnerships within and among forest user groups. Using case study material, I describe three different approaches to involving multiple stakeholders, ranging on a continuum from an entirely self-evolved forest user group network, to a self-monitored forest user group facilitated by an externally funded project, to an entirely outside-initiated workshop for networking stakeholders. Case material is drawn from my experience of working with the Nepal/United Kingdom Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP). I analyse the opportunities and limitations of each approach and suggest which factors are most important for building effective platforms for institutional learning that will lead to improved multistakeholder participation and empowerment in community forestry.

INTRODUCTION

Academics and resource managers frequently cite community forestry in Nepal as a programme that successfully empowers local communities to manage forest resources sustainably. The success of community forestry in Nepal, however, has resulted in a multitude of second-generation problems associated with the constantly changing context and complexities of community-based resource management. These problems also require appropriate responses. One such problem is that when local communities successfully increase their control over nearby natural resources, organisations and local institutions beyond the community become increasingly interested in influencing the setting and the dynamics of resource management (Ramírez 1999). More equitable relations with outside organisations would help communities retain their control. Intra- and intergroup conflict management and the accountability and responsiveness of forest user groups (FUGs)¹ to stakeholders have also emerged as key areas for improvement of FUGs.

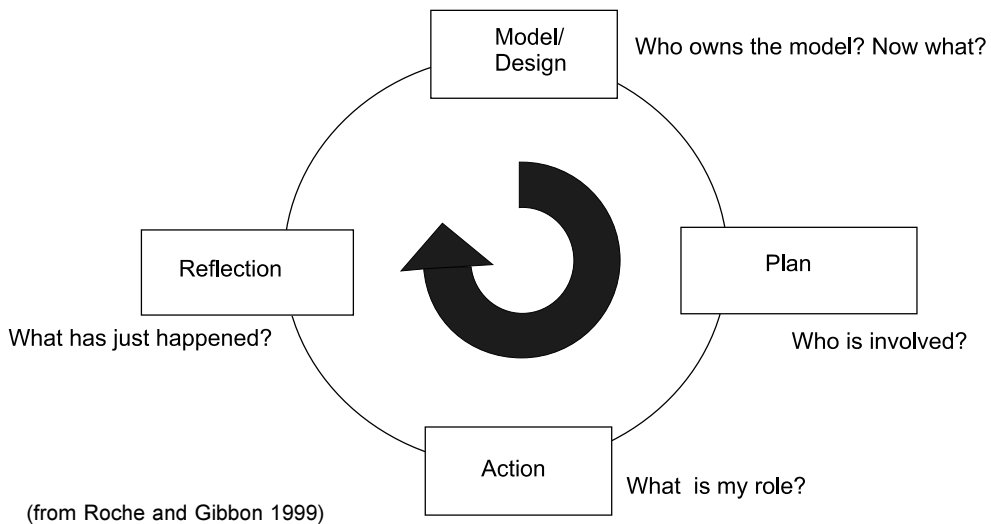
In Nepal, we have attempted to address these problems through the establishment of partnerships among multiple stakeholders. Partnership and collaboration among multiple stakeholders have become a broader issue of contemporary concern not only within projects, but throughout the country. Many approaches for involving multiple stakeholders are being tried by external agencies supporting the community forestry programme, as well as by local communities themselves.

Röling 1996 (cited in Röling and Jiggins 1998: 301) suggests that stakeholders using the same natural resource for various purposes are discovering that they are interdependent. They argue that this requires ‘scaling up human agency to a level of social aggregation which is commensurate with the level of the ecosystem perceived to be in need of interactive management.’ Röling and Jiggins refer to these aggregations of human agencies as platforms, which can be in the form of ‘one-time meetings, elected committees, formally appointed boards or councils or even government bodies’ (Röling and Jiggins 1998: 303). An important issue is how to achieve the representation of key stakeholders and the accountability to constituencies without bringing the platform to a total impasse of immobile positions. These authors also state that collective learning is an essential element in platform building. While the focus of platforms is often on social processes such as conflict mediation, institutional development and leadership, experience also makes clear that the stakeholders need to construct a shared understanding of the resource and its complex dynamics (Röling and Jiggins 1998: 304).

This chapter describes three different means or platforms that have emerged to involve multiple stakeholders in the management of community forests. I examine the processes followed and tools used in the three examples and discuss the implications of these processes for collective learning. The three approaches are: (1) a self-evolved forest user group (FUG) network; (2) the self-monitoring and participatory planning process of a forest user group facilitated by the Nepal/United Kingdom Community Forestry Project (NUKCFP) at the request of the group; and (3) a workshop for networking multiple stakeholders facilitated by the NUKCFP. This chapter also examines what the project has learned about the use of facilitation in establishing effective multiple stakeholder involvement in community-based resource management.

I work for the NUKCFP and this chapter is based on my close association with people involved in these projects, as well as my knowledge of internal project materials, field reports and related literature. The three case studies are all in districts supported by the project. One premise to understanding NUKCFP's work is that it seeks to be a learning organisation that emphasizes a learning cycle of modelling, planning, action and reflection as shown in Figure 3.1. The project therefore seeks to create learning opportunities through the platforms that it has helped facilitate.

Figure 3.1 The NUKCFP experiential learning cycle



THE CASE STUDIES

Case 1: The Bokhim Forest User Group Network

The Bokhim Forest User Group (FUG) Network is a loose, self-evolved network of 17 forest user groups in the Bokhim Village Development Committee of Bhojpur District, one of seven districts supported by the project (SAGUN 1999) (see Figure 3.2). The network evolved in late 1996 in response to conflicts faced by forest user groups. Because most of these conflicts were related to boundaries or land tenure issues, forest users were faced with difficulties in extracting forest products. In a training programme organised and facilitated by the District Forest Officer (DFO), representatives from the forest user committees of the Bokhim Village Development Committee noted a need for a mechanism for resolving these conflicts among user groups. Representatives from the 17 user groups therefore formed a committee comprised of 11 people to resolve local conflict by coordinating and interacting with stakeholders and concerned parties. Network members work on a voluntary basis.

To date, the Bokhim FUG network has mediated conflicts between groups as well as between individuals and groups. The network sometimes works as an advocate, putting pressure on parties in the conflict, or by giving information to the courts and land registration office to assist government civil services to settle disputes. This advocacy role has empowered less advantaged groups and prevented the local elite from dominating the mediation of land conflicts. One example of the network's labour is a district court case filed by an individual against the Athaise FUG. In this case the individual claimed that the forest land managed by the FUG was his personal property inherited from his family. With moral support and backstopping provided by the DFO, the Bokhim FUG network was able to provide evidence to the judge, who eventually ruled in favour of the FUG.

The network has also helped to resolve disputes outside of the formal judicial system. Their approaches have included interacting with both parties separately, as well as hosting joint meetings of the parties with network members serving as mediators. When conflicts are related to boundaries and land tenure, in addition to dispute resolution, the network assists the affected parties to fix their boundaries with the help of the District Land Survey Office, the Village Development Committee(s) and DFO staff

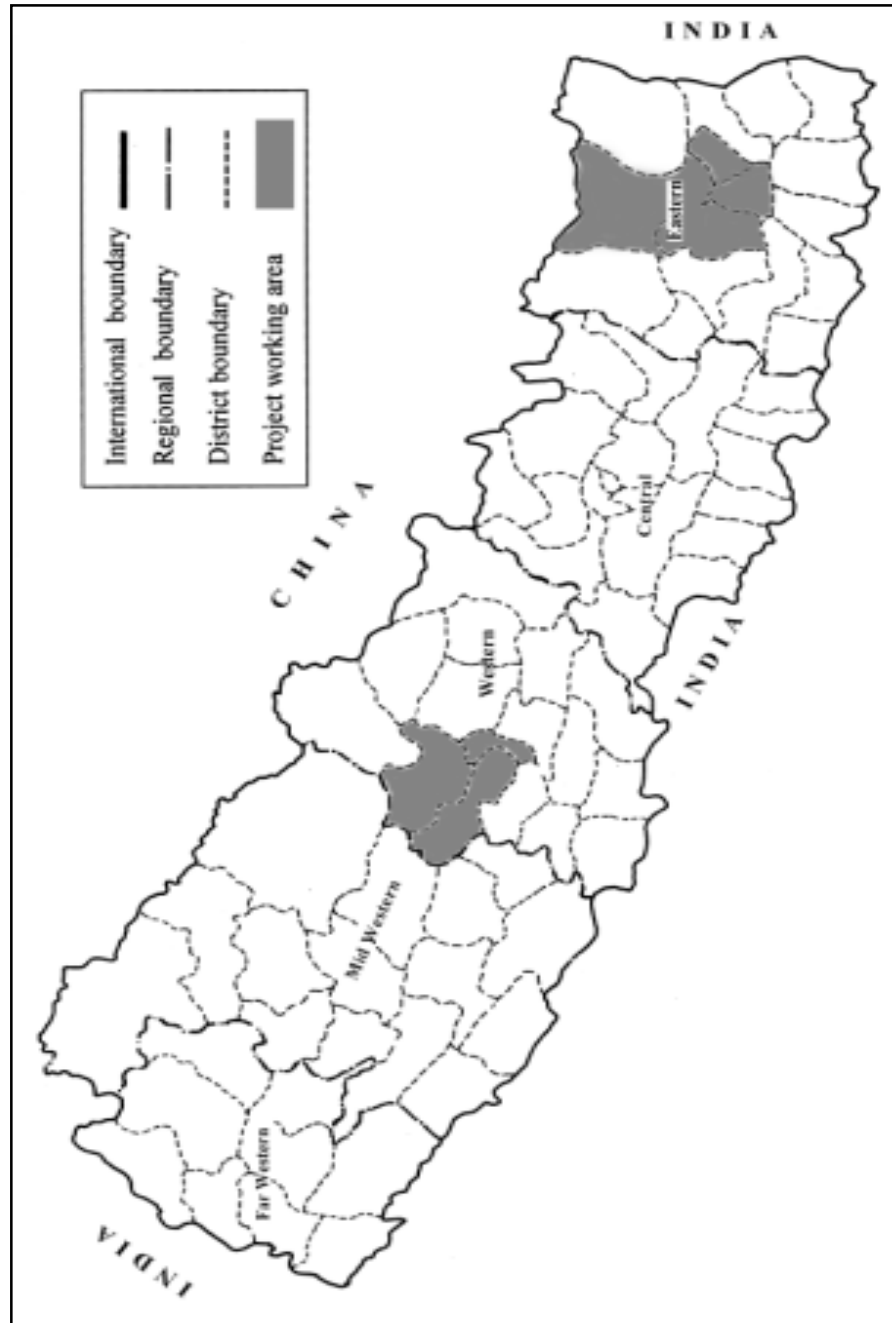


Figure 3.2. Project sites

PLATFORMS FOR LEARNING

members. Although the Bokhim FUG network was self-initiated, the collaboration with these other organisations has been key to their effectiveness in resolving conflicts.

Aside from their conflict resolution work, the Bokhim FUG network is also attempting to assist individual forest user groups to strengthen the institutional structure, accountability and responsiveness of their organisations. The network assists groups in improving their methods for financial accounting, increasing participation in decision making and institutionalising interactions among users and committee members. It also coaches committee members on how to facilitate meetings, raises issues for discussion in meetings and assemblies and shares learning with other network members. In one case, the network assisted a FUG in overcoming the problem of its executive committee misusing the group's funds by helping the FUG to institutionalise an auditing system. The network provided the pressure for transparency and change that made this development possible. Another achievement of the Bokhim network includes the creation of new platforms for stakeholders to interact and learn through the sharing of experiences, and to undertake coordinated and collaborative activities. The network, in collaboration with the Bokhim Village Development Committee, recently organised a three-day interactive workshop to raise the awareness of private and public organisations interested in community-based forest management. These organisations include groups such as the Small Farmers Development Program, vegetable growing groups, seed development groups, mothers' Groups, Village Development Committee representatives and representatives from the Soil Conservation and District Forest Offices. The members of some of these groups are already forest user group members. The network used the workshop to share experiences among these groups and to gain their support in resolving outstanding issues related to community forestry. Through activities such as this the network is gaining recognition in the district.

According to its chairperson, the network intends to conduct an interactive workshop, in collaboration with the local Village Development Committee, for district-level stakeholders, including non-governmental and community-based organisations. The workshop will seek to share experiences and issues on community forestry and to develop new ideas for partnership with the NUKCFP. To date, the partnership with NUKCFP has taken the form of an NUKCFP-hired animator, who acts as a change agent or facilitator in the community and has been assigned to work with the network.

The network's committee holds regular monthly meetings to reflect upon the progress the network has made and the learning gained. The committee also prepares work plans for the coming month in response to the demands put forth from forest user group members.

Case 2: Self-monitoring and participatory planning by the Dhungedhara Thulopakha FUG

This case study refers to a process of self-monitoring and participatory evaluation in the Dhungedhara forest user group, Sankhuwasabha District (see MAP). The process was initiated and facilitated by NUKCFP staff in January 1998, together with staff members from the DFO and Range Post (Raya 1998). The project aimed to establish monitoring and evaluation systems starting with top-down, non-participatory approaches that gradually become more bottom-up, user-initiated and participatory. This change has gradually empowered users to manage the FUG better by bringing them together around a common learning platform.

One key turning point for bottom-up monitoring and evaluation occurred when DFO staff and the project staff members worked together to develop criteria for assessing the health of a FUG. A Dhungedhara Thulopakha committee member of the FUG² explained: 'the committee was being blamed by many users for our inability and inefficiency to communicate with them and to undertake things properly. Despite our good intentions and enthusiasm, we were not able to satisfy the users' expectations and interests. One day we asked DFO staff members the criteria on which they evaluated the FUGs for the annual award. This was the start of a dialogue for developing the pictorial self-monitoring and participatory planning process used by the group.' Project and DFO staff members, at the request of the committee, had a series of meetings with committee members that clarified and identified concepts, processes and methods of facilitation, and envisaged possible impacts of self-monitoring and participatory planning.

A jointly planned exercise was subsequently carried out to develop indicators for self-monitoring with the Dhungedhara Thulopakha FUG. The committee divided group members into ten small subgroups according to caste or household size with a view to involving at least one member from each household in small group discussions. Realizing a need to develop understanding of the process of self-

monitoring, small group discussions used role plays and exercises to clarify concepts. For example, the game of looking in a mirror gave a clear picture of what self-monitoring is.

A second exercise encouraged participants to think about the group and its forest situation in the coming ten years. This exercise led to setting indicators for monitoring. For example, the group envisioned the ideal future situation as sufficient timber and fuelwood for users, construction of a user group's office and equal participation by disadvantaged users in decision-making processes. Suggestions that were not forestry-related included the construction of a water pipeline for kitchen gardens, loans for undertaking income generating activities and skill development opportunities. The users' committee considered it important to use the group's fund for such activities, provided the users' assembly accepted the proposal.

Users were then asked to draw pictures of indicators that could show that these objectives were being successfully achieved. Despite some initial reluctance and hesitation, especially by illiterate people, they did draw. This session was very interactive and participatory, irrespective of class, gender and educational background. Each group then confirmed whether the drawing conveyed the intended meaning. Even illiterate people found the pictures easy to understand (Figure 3.3).

The next step was to assess the current situation against the indicators of the desired situation the groups had previously set. Symbols of the four phases of the moon were used in this exercise. Indicators were arranged in a vertical column and symbols of the phases of the moon were placed in a horizontal row. A full moon symbolized the desired state, a black or new moon meant the work had not yet started, a one-third or crescent moon meant activities were just getting started, and an image of a two-thirds moon meant that 60% of the work had been completed. This exercise was also done in a participatory manner. After completing the exercise, participants started to say, 'Oh, we have a lot to do to bring the indicators to the full moon.'

Finally, committee members and representatives from each small group, with the support of project and DFO staff members, compiled the indicators. Committee members presented the results to the users' assembly. The assembly endorsed the indicators with a few amendments. As a result of this process, the user group developed a forest management plan that focused more attention on poorer women and disadvantaged

Figure 3.3 Women engaged in discussion about future forest needs and indicators



households within the group. The user group used this exercise as a benchmark and has recently completed its second annual assessment and planning exercise on its own.

Some committee members from the Dhungedhara Thulopakha user group are now sharing their learning with the nearby Archale FUG. These members have facilitated a similar process for the Archale group on request. Thus, new resource people are also being produced at the local level.

Case 3: Initiation of Multiple Stakeholder Collaboration through a Workshop

A workshop initiated and facilitated by the NUKCFP in western Nepal exemplifies efforts to use workshops as tools for facilitating collaborative learning among multiple stakeholders for sustainable forest management (Maskey *et al.* 1999). Twenty-five representatives from local nongovernmental organisations, the Federation of Forest Users, a district office of the South Asia Women's Organisation and DFOs participated in the workshop. The workshop sought to lay a foundation for collaboration by developing a common understanding among participants of the organisational strengths and constraints of each group and to identify potential areas for collaboration.

The workshop followed a process that logically assisted participants to see possibilities for collaboration, and to become motivated to then collaborate with one another. The approach was positive and forward looking, focusing on examples of what worked best in the past and rather than on what did not work (see Box 3.1). Based on current successes, the workshop identified possible opportunities for collaborative work.

Workshop participants first set the objectives and desired outcomes of the workshop. They then agreed to an operational definition of the conceptual terminology used to describe multiple stakeholders working together. Organisations shared their missions,

Box 3.1 Appreciative inquiry: A forward-looking approach

NUKCFP has been following an appreciative inquiry approach to facilitating community-based resource management for the last two years. Srivastva and Cooperrider (1990) explain appreciative inquiry by saying that people get what they are searching for. The questions people ask determine what they get, hence the more positive questions people ask, the greater the likelihood they will obtain positive responses.

The approach has three basic principles:

1. The Constructive Principle. Organisational development depends on constructive thinking and involving people towards constructive actions;
2. The Simultaneity Principle. Inquiry and change are interlinked. The questions we ask set the goal we want to achieve and what we discover leads to our constructed future.
3. The Positive Principle. The more positive questions people ask, the more positive responses they get and the more willing people are to come together for dialogue that ultimately leads to collective action for the benefit of all. This approach is contrary to problem solving approaches that involve searching for the root causes of problems, leading people to get stuck within the cause and effect and losing sight of innovations.

The approach emphasizes discovering good things about the present situation, understanding them, fostering innovation through collective action, and finally transforming human and social systems. The approach believes that there are life-giving factors in all organisations and these factors stimulate people or organisations to move forward to meet the visions they have developed. The process follows a cycle of '4 Ds' – discovery (the best of what is), dream (what is the world calling for?), design (what should be the ideal?), and destiny (how to empower the team and achieve sustainability?).

values and major achievements. Workshop facilitators assisted participants in identifying the features of collective action and in becoming informed about community forestry concepts and processes. The workshop then sought to identify potential roles for collaborative work among participating organisations and to develop a common understanding of the characteristics of good collaboration (see Table 3.1).

Table 3.1 Characteristics of and factors that promote good collaboration

Characteristics of good collaboration	Factors that promote good collaboration
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency, openness and honesty • Commitment • Mutual respect • Feedback • Effective communication and information • Adopt and accept the changes made as a result of moving the time and process • Participatory decision making process • Taking responsibility • Positive thinking and support of the donors • Common understanding, values and norms and common interest • Proper mobilization of the physical, financial and human resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All parties involved benefit from the collaboration • All demonstrate commitment • Division of work and responsibilities are clear and well defined • Flexibility • Use of resources in an effective way • Responsibility taken for communication, honesty, and transparency • Commitment of the staff working with organisation • Forward looking plans • Readiness for work, common understanding and mutual sharing, supportive organisation, positive thinking

The participants worked together to develop action plans for each organisation that identified the tasks to be performed, the time frame, the methods to be used and organisations to provide backup support for the work. Finally participants organised a collaboration network. The network chairperson is also a member of the Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal.

Since the close of the workshop, a task force of the collaboration network has prepared a proposal for publishing a journal on collaborative efforts in resource management and circulated it among the organisations that attended the workshop. The journal will seek to promote the sharing of experiences and information among organisations and

professionals involved in development work, as well as to improve local capacity for publication. The task force has also called for a follow-up workshop.

IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVING MULTI STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

In this section I examine these case studies in terms of what the NUKCFP has learned about the opportunities and limitations of each of the three platforms for enhancing stakeholders collaboration and learning. I also discuss what the Project has learned about facilitation in establishing effective multiple stakeholder involvement in community-based resource management.

Opportunities and Limitations of the Self-Evolved Network

The Bokhim FUG network evolved out of collaborative reflections on the problems faced by many forest-user groups, and out of a need for a common platform from which to initiate innovative ideas. The opportunities created by such self-evolved FUG networks include the ability to control their own growth and to maintain ownership of the processes affecting their destiny. As self-evolved networks, they are well positioned to more democratically assess the legitimacy of management decisions and collaboration among network members.

Limitations for self-evolved FUG networks include a lack of incentives for leadership and membership due to a lack of resources. The amount of time a leader can afford to put into network activities depends on what incentives he or she receives for his or her efforts. Commitment to work counts a lot, but where does this commitment come from? Is success sufficient to motivate members to work without other benefits? As the chairperson of the network says “It’s hard to give sufficient time for the work as all of us have to look after our own farms and other household business. We are therefore thinking to register the network as a local non-governmental organisation with the intention that we could at least get some financial profit from our work.” This raises a debate about whether such an organisation would be able to provide free services to the groups. Even if they are willing to provide free services, social problems like gender, equity and participation may receive little consideration, unless the organisation is challenged and or made aware of the gaps in its practices.

Back-up facilitation and support were critical to the success of the network. I discussed above that the Bhojpur DFO assisted the Bokhim FUG network to provide the district judge and land registration office with factual information on a land tenure case. Without this assistance, the Athaise FUG would have most likely lost its case and the community forest would have become private property. The capacity of such a network therefore needs to be assessed and developed as necessary.

Promoting and scaling up local initiatives also demands well-established vertical and horizontal communication and information-flow systems that are appropriate for the local context. These are presently limited, as in areas where most forest users are illiterate, communication systems cannot be based on the ability to read. Likewise, because of inaccessibility in areas where many people have to walk several days to get to the road head, dissemination of information at the local levels is not easy.

Solutions for easing these limitations may include locating the resources for communication through, for example, cross visits policies supportive of new initiatives. But there is always the risk that the communities will lose control over the process by seeking external support. Donors and other organisations supporting community development may seek to use self-evolved networks as vehicles for their own development and collaboration aims. Local DFO staff members may seek to use self-evolved networks to reduce their workload. Organisations supporting the communities may be tempted to take credit for the processes under their control. Yet collaborative efforts with externally-funded organisations may also be necessary to self-evolved networks for scaling up of local initiatives. The challenge will be for self-evolved networks to acquire facilitation that does not take control of the local process.

Opportunities and Limitations of FUG Self-Monitoring and Participatory Planning Facilitated by an Outside Organisation

The facilitation by NUKCFP enabled the FUG to access new information about monitoring. This realization was achieved through interactions with staff members from the Project, as well as the DFO. The facilitation by an outside group also probably made it easier to involve all users and empowered especially the disadvantaged (i.e. the poor and women). Resources were available from NUKCFP for each exercise. Role plays and games introduced by the facilitators were useful approaches for clarifying concepts and creating a participatory environment that would have

otherwise not been available. The main constraints are that the monitoring and evaluation were introduced as a priority of an outside group and that the outside group drove information flow and the process. The purposeful shift to a more bottom-up process of monitoring, however, ultimately led to capacity of the FUG to assume control over the process.

Opportunities and Limitations of the Workshop Approach

The workshop approach was different from the network and facilitated-FUG process in that it focused on creating common understanding among workshop participants about where stakeholders could work in collaboration to enhance participation of users in community forestry. The major opportunity of the workshop was that it gave groups the chance to meet who might not have otherwise done so. The support of an external body also enabled the meeting to seek collaboration at a larger scale than might be possible by a self-initiated group.

The forward-looking approach of the workshop helped reduce conflict and tension and accommodate different interests and perspectives (cf. Acharya *et al.* 1998). The workshop also helped to create an environment of togetherness, thereby also encouraging a sense of common interests. Hence the overall approach of the workshop was useful for establishing partnerships. By emphasizing positive and constructive thinking, it created a process for exploring possibilities and opportunities for collaboration where all the parties benefit. However, the key to collaboration is getting good intentions translated into reality. What we really need is a process for identifying and promoting these factors in our partner organisations, which goes beyond the scope of a single workshop.

People generally tend to react positively in a workshop environment and are quick to make commitments. In real life however, the situation may be different because organisational behavioral change does not come easily and good working relations are not established so quickly (Fowler 1997). Critical differences in the institutions in terms of their origin, their less visible agendas, the backgrounds of the founder and staff members working with the institutions, and inter-personal relations of staff members are key factors that can have a significant impact on collaboration. A longer-term process of change is necessary, that most likely will involve some form of collaboration with other facilitating organisations.

Because implementation of the actions decided on in the workshop has not started, it is not yet possible to comment comprehensively on the effectiveness of the workshop. For the time being, the continuity of the collaborative forum depends on backstopping from the collaborators and their leadership. A workshop can therefore be a useful platform for catalysing change in collaboration patterns, but to ensure long-term change, more sustained platforms are required.

CONCLUSIONS

FUGs are a necessary unit for organising community forest management in Nepal, but with time it has become apparent that additional types of social aggregations are needed, among FUGs themselves and with other organisations, to strengthen FUG internal capacities and build stronger interdependencies between FUGs and other groups.

Different types of platforms meet different types of objectives. The self-evolved network examined in this chapter was an active body that took on the ongoing needs of the operation of the FUGs. In contrast, the participatory planning and workshop were more immediately catalytic platforms. All three platforms accommodated a diversity of audiences among which collective action and learning occurred, within FUGs, among FUGs and with other organisations.

In each example, the platform likely had an impact on collaboration and empowerment of the FUGs. The platforms had immediate impacts on heightening awareness and understanding about interdependency among stakeholders and the opportunities for collaboration. Members of FUGs were empowered through the building of capacity and pressure was created for FUGs to be more accountable and responsive to their members. From these varied experiences, we found that collaboration was best initiated in informal settings where interpersonal relationships among the stakeholders could be established. Involvement of multiple stakeholders in specific issues affecting an ongoing concern was more practical and meaningful. Use of positive and forward-looking approaches appeared to stimulate institutions to move forward in planning collaboration with positive thinking. Interestingly, all the platforms also had an impact by leading to new platforms for collective action and learning, such as new workshops, the monitoring system, the journal and the collaboration network.

PLATFORMS FOR LEARNING

The degree to which each platform involved outside facilitation seemed to affect the degree to which outside resources, knowledge and influence were brought to bear on a problem. For example, the use of games, exercises, pictures, and analogies, especially followed by discussion that help people to relate these games to their own context, were very effective tools for stimulating discussion and getting active participation. But local people did not have the capacity to use these tools by themselves. They benefited from the assistance of an outside facilitator. These advantages are gained, however, at the cost of possible loss of ownership and empowerment for the FUGs. Special measures need to be taken, such as the gradual transition to more bottom-up monitoring or the development of community facilitation skills, to ensure that ownership occurs. How to increase the capacity of local institutions as effective facilitators is therefore a major concern. The role of projects supporting community forestry (such as the NUKCFP) should not be as facilitators of FUG assemblies but as agents of growth assisting local people and institutions to grow stronger. Involving local people in these processes from the beginning and coaching them as needed can often be sufficient to achieve this goal (NUKCFP 1997, 1998a).

The sustainability of the impacts of the platform will ultimately depend on both the type of platform, the types of follow-up platforms that are generated and the dependence on a facilitator to maintain the process. Self-evolved platforms are likely to be more sustainable, whereas the sustainability of platforms introduced by outside facilitators depends on the commitment of the organisations, their objectives, leadership, relationships among collaborative organisations and with the outside sources of funding, availability of resources, and continuity of the people involved with the project. In addition, we found that continued communication and flow of information were the keys to promoting innovations, to enriching learning, to scaling up ideas, and to pressuring for policy change or support. Real learning occurred when this communication happened at the implementation level.

The three examples of platforms were initially selected to demonstrate that different types of social aggregations among FUGs and other organisations can enable collective learning that leads to greater multistakeholder collaboration. In the first case at least, collaboration led to new platforms for collective learning and vice versa. Learning can itself be empowering when it involves capacity building or building new alliances. Collaboration can itself be a learning process if it involves, among other things, developing a better understanding of each others' strengths and weaknesses. Rather

than thinking of platforms as the starting point of a causal pathway, it may be more constructive to think of and use platforms as an arena for social interaction that can simultaneously enhance learning, empowerment and collaboration among multiple stakeholders. The type of platform and degree of outside facilitation required will then depend on the types of learning, empowerment and collaboration that exist and are desired.

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ENDNOTES

¹ The Forest User Group (FUG) is an assembly of all forest users of a certain forest that is legally handed over to the group. The FUG committee is an executive body with fixed rights, authority and responsibility given to it by the group. In a group there are 60–70 households, whereas a committee usually comprises 7–11 members from those user households. The main role of the committee is to carry out the day-to-day work to implement the group's plan.

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