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Forests for the Community: The Social and Environmental Impacts of Community Forestry

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Abstract

Community forests (CF) are widely regarded as the primary mechanism for strengthening community-management capacity in communal areas and promoting local economic development in an environmentally friendly way. The primary objective of this mechanism of forest management is to create an environment where residents can work cooperatively to sustainably extract the forest's resources while preserving the area's biodiversity and environment. Assessments of CF have been hindered by a lack of research connecting CF to socioeconomic or biological sustainability and a lack of measures for achieving good governance. Forests are not only a vital component of the Earth's ecosystems, but they are also home to millions of people worldwide. Forests provide critical ecosystem services, such as carbon sequestration, water regulation, and biodiversity conservation. However, forests are often threatened by unsustainable practices, including deforestation, degradation, and illegal logging. These threats have led to widespread social and environmental problems, including poverty, land degradation, and climate change.

Keywords: Forests, Environmental Impacts, Community Forestry, Social Sustainability.

Introduction

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One solution to these challenges is the establishment of community forestry programs, which involve the management and use of forest resources by local communities. Community forestry programs have gained significant attention in recent years as a means of promoting social and environmental sustainability. These programs offer numerous benefits, including the provision of forest products, such as timber and non-timber forest products, and the generation of income for local communities.

Although CF management normally occurs at the local level, a national legal and institutional framework provides monitoring and governance of the forests and facilitates the formulation of sustainable forest-management plans. CFUGs, according to the Third Revised Guidelines for the Community Forestry Development Program, should invest at least 25% of their income in forest conservation and sustainable use and another 40% in community development. Numerous studies that examined the income and spending of CFUGs for pro-poor advocacy discovered that, on average, they did spend a sizeable portion (40–80%) of their funds on neighborhood improvement initiatives and that the objectives for rural development derived from CFUG governance were being achieved. Nevertheless, studies have highlighted social disparities, inequities, and biases against poorer CFUG members from benefiting from CFs, despite the evidence that suggests that poverty-reduction strategies also reduce dependency on the environment. Redistribution of CFUG income is contentious and poorly documented due to a lack of research on income and expenditure patterns.

Communities do not always perceive CF regulations as a coherent national policy and view them through the lens of the provincial policies that regulate the sustainable management of each CF. This perceived lack of coherence can be an obstacle to implementing government policies at the local level because they make it difficult for the stakeholders to understand the objectives of the policies and the benefits that they can provide to the community. The buffer-zone community forests (BZCFs) are part of protected areas that receive a portion of the National Park revenues for distribution to local communities. For BZCFs, there is a lack of specific policy or regulatory guidelines, followed by a mismatch between the practices and rules of the buffer zone, the BZCFs, and the protected areas, where management and authority are frequently viewed as discretionary among several institutions.

Community Forest Income and Social Sustainability

The social sustainability of community forestry programs is often linked to their ability to provide income and livelihoods for local communities. By generating income from the forest, communities are able to improve their living standards, access education, and healthcare, and invest in social and economic development. Community forestry programs can also promote social cohesion and community

empowerment, as local communities are actively involved in the management and decision-making processes related to the forest.

Studies have shown that community forestry programs can be successful in promoting social sustainability by providing income and livelihoods for local communities. For example, a study in Nepal found that community forestry programs generated significant income for local communities, which was used to invest in education, healthcare, and other social services. Another study in Mexico found that community forestry programs reduced poverty and improved social welfare in local communities.

Numerous scientific studies have demonstrated that CFs can enhance forest conditions through sustainable forest management and have found that household-level income from CFs is sustainable. Recently, there have been sustainability assessments conducted among CFUGS in Nepal, including the 3L causative-benchmarking model that can help assess how well the CFs can meet performance targets by evaluating how three layers of public-policy goals, socioeconomic theories, and criteria and indicators interact. Several studies have employed social cost–benefit analysis to calculate the long-term financial effects of forestry policies among diverse CFUG members. Internationally, forestry-management sustainability assessments have been conducted, such as forest certifications that aim to improve governance. The local ecological and social contexts make it hard to evaluate sustainable forest-management indicators in Nepal because of specific issues like inequitable benefit sharing, cultural diversity, and income inequality that are often not considered in evaluations.

Research on the relationship between forest income and costs of forest regeneration is scant, and there is little evidence documenting how much CFUG income is reinvested in forest products. In this context, the goal of this research is to understand the sustainability of CFs; specifically, we aim to examine whether there are links between CF finance and perceptions of biological and socioeconomic sustainability. To fill this research gap, we conducted expert elicitation interviews with CF administrators responsible for implementing the rules and managing finances. We used the Standardized Protocol for Evaluating Community Conservation Success (SPECC) to evaluate the CF's ability to meet biological and socioeconomic objectives. SPECC surveys may shed light on the benefits and resilience of CFs between varying levels of timber income and forest-restoration expenditures. We analyzed data from three forest-management zones in the district of Chitwan, timber income (low, medium, high), and forest-regeneration income (low, medium, high) on perceptions of biological and socioeconomic factors influencing CFs. We sought to understand whether there were significant differences in socioecological perceptions among CFUGs with different levels of income and expenditures.

Community Forest Income and Environmental Sustainability

The environmental sustainability of community forestry programs is linked to their ability to promote sustainable forest management practices. By involving local communities in forest management, community forestry programs can promote sustainable harvesting practices, reduce deforestation and degradation, and conserve biodiversity.

Studies have shown that community forestry programs can be successful in promoting environmental sustainability by improving forest management practices. For example, a study in Ghana found that community forestry programs improved forest conservation, reduced deforestation, and improved soil and water quality. Another study in Cameroon found that community forestry programs reduced forest degradation and increased biodiversity conservation.

CF projects aim to preserve biological diversity, promote sustainable forest-resource management, and create economic possibilities for rural communities. Nevertheless, standardized evaluations and assessments that link income and expenditures related to forest products to socioecological sustainability outcomes are lacking. Our analysis of the CF system in the Chitwan district, which is well known for long-term conservation successes, found significant differences in perceptions of biological and socioeconomic benefits and resilience between the three distinct zones of the Chitwan district, as well as between CFs with varying levels of timber income and forest-regeneration expenditures. In line with previous studies that have attempted to standardize the evaluation of community-based conservation, we attempted to couple the SPECC evaluation with information on funding and expenditures to learn how these views differ based on financial factors critical to the success of the programs. These surveys allowed us to establish a general relationship between diminished perceptions of financial and biological stability in local communities and decreased timber income and forest-regeneration expenditures. Overall, meeting the biological and socioeconomic goals of the CFs was often perceived to be unrealistic in situations with low timber income. Similarly, areas with low forest-regeneration spending were also found not to perceive long-term economic sustainability or forest regeneration. The results of cascading forest-management policies and regulations can have a direct impact on the sustainability of CFs in cases where their income is low and they have no external sources of income, where taxation reforms or benefit-sharing mechanisms among CFs may result in raising the sustainability standards across the CFs within the district.

Our research showed that regions with lower spending levels on forest regeneration were perceived to have significantly lower levels, on average, of economic resilience and forest-regeneration trends. The CFs, on average, were not spending a standardized amount on forest regeneration, as recommended by various governmental guidelines. Our study suggests that the inequality in annual income and, thus, forest-regeneration spending may be related to disparities in resilience and generating socioeconomic

benefits for members, although we cannot make causal claims. Previous studies have highlighted the intra-CFUG power disparities between elite members of the communities and poorer households. In our study, we found a significant disparity among CFUG organizations within the same district. Since there is no adequate taxation through district- or provincial-level pooling or redistribution of CF resources, our study revealed that can be a significant disparity in member benefits, and the perceptions of biological benefits and resilience, and socioeconomic resilience between CFUGs.

There were similar levels of NGO and governmental-organization involvement in CFs regardless of timber income and regeneration expenditures. More governmental organizations were involved in the Zone 2 area, mainly from the municipality and district forest offices. This analysis revealed CFs with revenue and expense gaps, which may encourage local governments and outside stakeholders to direct their support to CFs unable to meet their current needs. Current taxation systems may supplement the CFUGs' inability to enforce socioeconomic and biological rules or have safety nets to ensure long-term economic sustainability. In the future, researchers may look at how single community-based forest offices may be governed by more than one province, municipality, or rural municipality to learn more about how CFs set boundaries and share resources. It remains unclear how municipal, provincial, and federal governments, along with CFUGs, would divide CF resources, forest-management costs, and CF-generated benefits.

Conclusions

In conclusion, community forestry programs can play a critical role in promoting both social and environmental sustainability. By generating income and livelihoods for local communities, community forestry programs can improve social welfare and promote social cohesion. At the same time, by promoting sustainable forest management practices, community forestry programs can reduce deforestation, conserve biodiversity, and promote climate resilience. As such, community forestry programs represent a promising solution to the challenges of unsustainable forest management, poverty, and climate change.

The analysis uncovered revenue and expense gaps in CFs, which may encourage local governments and external stakeholders to direct their future efforts toward tax-reform programs. This research indicates that a lack of financial resources may prevent some CFUGs from implementing a sustainable forest-management plan. Our research indicates that disparities in timber income and, consequently, expenditures on forest regeneration may be linked to differences in members' resilience and socioeconomic benefits. In this context, governments and local communities are increasingly looking for more sustainable ways to manage the forests on their territories and maximize the economic benefits of

their forest resources while minimizing these operations' social and environmental impacts. This study demonstrates that CF timber sales and forest-regeneration spending have cascading impacts on long-term economic sustainability, the ability to meet financial objectives, and perceptions of socioeconomic and biological resilience, which requires careful consideration for implementing CF programs.

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