



# The relative distribution: An alternative approach to evaluate the impact of community level forestry organisations on households



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## ABSTRACT

Community forest management in Nepal has shifted from protection to distribution due to a failure of community forestry to have a significant impact on the level of poverty. The failure to have a positive impact on poverty is often attributed to governance issues, which in Nepal are typically associated with differences in the social status of those holding positions of decision-making power and those who have the most need. Using a modified elite theory that characterises decision-making in terms of relative wealth and caste of decision-makers, the study looks at the effect of community structure on governance and on distribution of forest products. The results show that when the poor and disadvantaged households participate in decision-making, either as members of the executive committee or in public assemblies, the relative distribution of firewood, timber and fodder from community forests to poor and disadvantaged households increases. The results provide empirical evidence of the commonly held belief that participation of poor and disadvantaged households in decision-making is a key element of poverty reduction through community management of resources. Based on these results, efforts to increase participation of poor and disadvantaged households in decision-making should be a critical part of planning community forest governance.

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## Introduction

Local institutions play a significant role in meeting the basic needs of people in developing countries where land resources are institutionally and geographically limited (FAO, 2002). They are particularly important in Nepal, where community forest (CF) resources are critical for complementing private resources to sustain the livelihoods of rural households (Pollini, 2009; Thoms, 2008; Malla et al., 2005; Rao et al., 2003 and Malla, 2000). Institutions are the structures and mechanisms that constrain, restrict or enable human behaviour in social and economic exchanges and, in turn, determine the distribution of goods, services and powers (Campbell and Shackleton, 2005; North, 1991). Maddox and Esposito (2013) and Campbell and Shackleton (2005) identify social stratification, such as race, status, caste, class and gender, as being key influences on institutions determining distributive outcomes.

The CF programme in Nepal was designed to address the dual problems of environmental degradation and poverty by enhancing the livelihood opportunities of rural households. Although the CF approach has been effective in re-establishing forest resources, the incidence of poverty remains high. Disadvantaged and underprivileged households are poor in terms of income and land. They are often also lower caste and usually work as daily labours. Poor and disadvantaged households typically have a higher reliance on the CF for forest products than the higher caste and wealthier households that have greater private resources.

The Decentralisation Act 1987, the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector MPFS (1989), the Forest Act 1993 and the Forest Regulations 1995 introduced the concept of the Community Forestry User Group (CFUG) in Nepal. CFUGs function as autonomous organisations to organise executive committee meetings and assemblies, select leadership of the group, and plan for benefit distribution gained from CFs. The CFUG is a local level organisation and its interaction network exists at the local level for the exchange of ideas with local communities, local government, District Forest Office (DFO) and local NGOs. A key aspect of the CF programme is that it is intended to work on the basis of a participatory approach that in particular is meant to provide access to leadership positions by all households in the CFUG. But the continued persistence of poverty is often attributed to failures in the participatory approach

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to enable the poor and disadvantaged households to influence decisions about the supply of forest products to meet the basic needs (Gautam, 2009; Iversen et al., 2006).

Adhikari et al. (2004) found that the recent policy shift towards CF resource management in Nepal had increased households' access to resources. Maskey et al. (2006) studied the amount of household participation in the decision-making of a forest user group that was then analysed for benefit distribution. Bajracharya (2008) studied the institutional factors that influenced access by the poor to forest benefits, legal customary rights and the network of lower castes. Her findings were based on a case study of some CF and Leasehold Forestry regimes that emphasised the development of networks and the active participation of the poor and lower castes in CF and leasehold forestry programmes. This study standardised the quantity or monetary value received by a particular household into relative value by dividing by the average household value in the group. Based on our knowledge of related literature to date, no study has applied the relative value approach. Therefore our study makes a new contribution on both the knowledge and the method of explaining benefit distribution problem in CFUGs.

Of particular concern is the observation that social stratification may lead to elite capture in forest user group decisions (Lund et al., 2014; Dhakal and Bhatta, 2010; Mahanty et al., 2009). This is often argued as the main reason for the persistence of inadequate forest benefit distribution to poor and disadvantaged households (Jones, 2007; Malla et al., 2005). Common themes derived by Higley (2010), Farazmand (1999), Putnam (1971), Dahl (1958), Mills (1956), and Pareto (1896) are that the elite comprise a small group of people from the larger society. The dimensions of their decisions are based on their interests and preferences, and they influence the decisions that affect outcomes. Elite models are based on two dimensions: inclusiveness of personal interaction among the elite; and the structure of the interactions that enable contact between the elite and other groups. This leads to a number of elite models characterised by Higley (2010), Hazán (2001), Farazmand (1999) and Higley and Moore (1981).

In the power elite model, power is used by a relatively small close-knit group of people who dominate policy-making (Higley, 2010; Farazmand, 1999; Mills, 1956). In the ruling class elite model, the elite are the apex hierarchy controlled by some of the political ruling class (Cock, 2010; Scott, 2001; Higley, 1984; Higley and Moore, 1981; Domhoff, 1975; Dahl, 1958). In the consensually integrated elite model, the elite group is comprised of a larger group than in the power and ruling class models, and the elite have similar status meaning that power and influence are not as concentrated (Farazmand, 1999). This means that decision-making powers are dispersed among various elite and the elite mutually access the power centres to influence decision-making and achieve their objectives (Youn, 2013; Higley, 2010; Hazán, 2001). The plural elite model assumes that many diverse elite groups control power and join with one another to form organisations or groups for their common interests (Henderson, 2010; Hazán, 2001). Plural elite have different modes of thought integrated with different concepts of the relations between individuals and the community (Higley, 2010; Hazán, 2001; Farazmand, 1999).

Caste and wealth are inherent characteristics of the elite in Nepalese society. The Bahun/Brahmin, Chhetry, Newar and Thakuri, comprising 25% of the population, are known as the historical and traditional elite linked with high castes and wealth (Shrestha, 2009; Dirks, 2001). The characteristics of social structure in Nepal, with the presence of a caste system as well as differences in wealth in rural communities, can be studied by using the elite theoretical framework. In the CFUG context, it is the make-up of the executive committee that matters most. Since benefit distribution is believed to be associated with both CFUG organisational and household factors, a model that combines both factors is required. The purpose of

the study is to identify the impact of institutional and social structures on benefit distribution in forest user groups. In particular, the study looks at whether there are more benefits distributed from CF, and more benefits to the poor and disadvantaged when the Executive Committee has a greater representation of disadvantaged groups.

### The elite model of CFUG governance

The key dimensions of individuals who might be executive committee members can be summarised as caste (high and low) and wealth (rich and poor). The matrix of potential elite interactions in Fig. 1 forms the basis of the conceptual model that we use in this study.

In a CFUG where the executive committee comprises only rich individuals of the same caste, the decision-making will reflect the consensual elite model in that decisions would be expected to reflect a consensus approach. One would also expect to find that with only the rich dominating the executive committee, this would be reflected in distributions that did not favour the poor. In a CFUG where the executive committee is comprised of rich individuals of different castes, the decision-making will reflect the plural elite model. In this case, while committee members have a similar economic status, separate groups are likely to form across caste boundaries. One would therefore expect that decisions about distribution might reflect the interests of the rich, but not the interests of the elite caste alone.

In a community where the executive committee is comprised of both rich and poor individuals of the same caste, the decision-making would reflect the Organisational A model. In this case, individuals would be separated only by economic status, and would otherwise have the same social norms. In a community where the executive committee is comprised of both rich and poor individuals of different castes, the decision-making would reflect the Organisational B model. In this case, individuals would be separated by both economic status and social status. In both of the Organisational Elite cases, the organisation provides a platform for the poor and disadvantaged to influence decisions. It would therefore be expected that decisions about distribution would take into account the needs of the poor.

The conceptual model in Fig. 1 provides the basis for an empirical study of the effect of executive committee structure on benefit distribution. The conceptual model identifies that wealth and caste of individual executive committee members should have an effect on decision-making processes and the benefit distribution to poor and disadvantaged members of a CFUG. The benefits derived from CF are hypothesised to be positively correlated representation by the poor and disadvantaged in decision-making. Decision-making in a CFUG takes place in two ways. One is in the executive committee and the other is in assembly meetings of all CFUG members. The impact of participation by the poor and disadvantaged will be reflected in the rules, regulations and practices of the CFUG that are formulated and implemented by the executive committee and the assembly.

There are a number of ways that these decision-making factors could be measured. The setting of a meeting agenda is a roadmap

		Caste Structure	
		One caste	Many castes
Wealth Status	Rich Only	Consensually Integrated	Plural
	Rich and Poor	Organizational A	Organizational B

Fig. 1. Conceptual model of decision-making in CFUGs.

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