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How can poor and disadvantaged households get an opportunity to become a leader in community forestry in Nepal?

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Nepal established community forestry institutions to manage natural resources at a local level with the intention of improving environmental and economic outcomes. While environmental successes have been made under community forestry, economic improvements, particularly for poor and marginalised groups, have proved elusive. This study examines how personal and social attributes influence the membership of the Executive Committee of Community Forestry User Groups (CFUG) in Nepal, and whether there are factors that enable the poor and disadvantaged to gain membership of the Executive Committee of CFUGs. Statistical analysis using data from the middle hill district of Baglung, Nepal indicates that decision-making positions are dominated by the local elite, who are typically from higher castes and relatively wealthy, as measured by land holdings, livestock units, food sufficiency and off-farm income. The results also suggest that leadership experience gained through participation in NGOs provides poor and disadvantaged people the ability to overcome their lower socio-economic status and gain leadership positions within CFUGs. This is an important outcome in that it provides an opening for policy initiatives that encourage the development of leadership skills for the poor and disadvantaged, which in turn will improve representation of these groups.

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1. Introduction

A key objective of common or collective resource management policies worldwide has been to increase participation of poor and disadvantage people and communities in the decision-making process. The participatory approach has been widely used in rural development, community forestry, drinking water supply, irrigation and other community development works. Nepal's community forestry[3] programme is widely accepted as one of the most progressive examples of the devolution of control over natural resources to community based user groups with legal status as autonomous and corporate institutions.

The concept of community forestry in Nepal is used as an umbrella term standing for a broad range of activities through which rural communities manage forests, trees, and their products with the objective of increasing derived benefits associated with environmental quality and economic development.

Community forestry has had a significant and positive impact on forest cover, now approximately 5.83 million hectares (ha) representing 39.6% of the total land area of the country (MPFS, 1989). Community forestry has also decreased the rate of deforestation in Nepal (Kanel et al., 2005). The annual rates of deforestation have fallen from 1.7% of forest area per year in the hills and 8000 ha in *Terai* (Plain) during the period 1978 to 1994, to rates of only 0.5% in the hills and 800 ha per year in *Terai* (Devkota, 2005). But community forestry has been less successful in alleviating poverty within poor and disadvantaged communities (McDermott et al., 2013; Gautam, 2009; Dhakal et al., 2006; Agrawal and Gupta, 2005; Malla et al., 2005; Pokharel, 2002; Agrawal, 2001). Evidence suggests that community forestry benefits have flowed less to marginalised and disadvantaged households[4] than to elite and wealthy households (Yadav et al., 2015; Adhikari, 2005; Adhikari et al., 2004).

There are two reasons given as to what is constraining community forestry from delivering economic benefits to the poor. One thought is that government constraints on resource use, in particular those that put environmental goals ahead of forest management, is the most important limiting factor (Dhakal, 2005; Dhakal et al., 2006). Another is that Nepal's class- and caste-based social structure limits the ability of the poor to be selected into positions of

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[3] (Glasmeier and Farrigan (2005) defined that "Community forestry is precipitated by the desire to maintain or achieve community stability in an ecologically and economically sustainable manner — direct concern for the provision of livelihoods for a poverty population" p.66). Rath (2006) went further to comment that: "Community forestry is more or less equivalent and reflects with the view of Abraham Lincoln's democracy: government of the people, by the people, for the people" (p.2).

[4] Marginalised and disadvantaged groups: Dalit (lower Caste and widow women with poor social status).

leadership, which in turn means that the distribution of benefits obtained from more efficient forest management has the potential to be biased and inequitable (Pokharel and Tiwari, 2013a,b; Springate-Baginski and Blaikie, 2003, 2007; Adhikari et al., 2004, 2007a,b; Jones, 2007; Hansen, 2007; Hobley, 2007; Iversen et al., 2006; Acharya and Gentle, 2005; Dhakal, 2006). This factor may be particularly important in the Nepalese context because the institutional structure of community forest user groups (CFUGs) places a great deal of decision-making power in the hands of the few members of the executive committee (Adhikari and Di Falco, 2009; Agrawal, 2001; Andersson and Agrawal, 2011). Government authorities and local elites have been reluctant to transfer power to local poor (Hansen, 2007) and, as a result, in many cases decision-making and community forestry policy appears to be captured by a powerful elite with lower class poor and disadvantaged only participating, and benefiting, to a minor extent (Lund et al., 2014; Samantha, 2008; Chakraborty, 2001).

Much of the debate over the design and introduction of resource management institutions in the last three decades has, therefore, revolved around the question of how best to ensure that the poor receive the benefits of resource management (Baumann et al., 2003). Central to this discussion has been a consensus that decision-making based on proportionate representation across classes and castes is necessary to protect the interests of all members of society (Jones, 2007; Pokharel and Larsen, 2007; Malla et al., 2005; Aquino et al., 1992). More representative decision-making is believed to be able to bring about decisions based on need, thus contributing towards significant improvements in the livelihoods of the poor. In Nepalese community forestry the executive committee makes all decisions on behalf of the CFUG. The composition of the executive committee is thus a critical issue in terms of decisions about the use and distribution of benefits of the community forest.

Some consideration has been given to the theoretical foundations and empirical applications of the selection of people into leadership positions (Poudel et al, 2014; Iversen et al., 2006; Paudel et al, 2007; Thoms, 2008). But Pokharel and Tiwari (2013a,b) and Paudel et al. (2007) found that in regards to the selection of leaders, the participatory approach has been accompanied by a certain naivety about relations of power both within and between communities. They found that power has tended to be linked with both wealth and elite caste and that there has been a persistent failure to select leaders from marginalised and disadvantaged groups. The end result is that membership of the executive committee is not representative of the entire community. But if this failure to achieve representative participation in resource management is to be addressed, it is necessary to first understand what, if any, factors beyond class and caste determine executive committee membership.

Within the context of Nepalese community forestry, the purpose/ objective of this study is to examine how poor and disadvantaged households can rise to positions on executive committees. The focus of this paper is to evaluate the effect of household attributes on the likelihood of gaining a leadership position. Specifically, we seek to determine what common attributes are held by the poor and disadvantaged people that are in positions of power. We developed a conceptual framework based on elite theory that allows us to test the hypothesis that factors other than wealth and caste exist that increase the likelihood of being in a leadership position on the executive committee of CFUGs.

2. Elite theory

In order to understand how power structures form, the effect this might have on CFUG governance, and whether there are opportunities for leadership roles to emerge that might help the poor and disadvantaged we develop a framework for social power relationships based on elite theory.

2.1. Elite capture

The word elite is derived from the Latin *Eligere* that means to elect (Mosca, 1896). It refers to a relatively small, dominant group in a larger society (Higley, 2010; Fabricius and Collins, 2007; Farazmand, 1999; Higley and Moore, 1981; Aquino et al., 1992). The background of the elite reinforces their propensity to make decisions that address their own needs and interests, which may disadvantage other people (Bruins, 1999; Putnam, 1976). The emergence of elite is the result of economic and social forces within a social structure.

In a meta-analysis of World Bank funded development projects, Mansuri and Rao (2004) found that most of the projects in India and South East Asia are led and dominated by elites and that no positive causal relationship between any outcome-related measure and community participation in these countries existed. Juhar (2014) found that the income generated from the Community Based Forest Management and Conservation projects in Ethiopia was captured by the elite leaders and that this hampered social and environmental outcomes including the establishment of the governance system of the Community Based Forest Management project itself. Dahal et al. (2014) found that marginal groups who were involved in the management of local institutions in Annapurna had little influence over decisions regarding conservation and development programmes. Thoms (2008) found that local power elite have captured vital leadership and decision-making positions in community forestry in Nepal. Women, poor and households from lower castes demonstrated lower levels of representation in executive committee position in decision-making processes (Chhetri et al., 2013). Schusser (2012.p.1) found that "biodiversity is only in the interest of a few powerful actors who have used their power to achieve a positive outcome for biodiversity" in community forestry. Adhikari et al. (2014) and Ojha et al. (2009) found that community forestry resources governance has become failure due to lack of the significant participation of the socially marginalised groups in decision-making.

2.2. Caste and wealth as elite in Nepal

In South Asia, including Nepal and India, one of the most influential social institutions is the caste system. The word "caste" is derived from the Portuguese term 'casta' which means breed or race (Bistha, 1991). It is a group of people characterised by endogamy, hereditary membership and a specific style of life and is usually associated with ritual status in hierarchical systems based on purity and pollution (Dirks, 2001). According to Hindu spiritualism, the caste system is classified into four main *Varna* or groups of people; *Brahmins*[5] (primarily priests); *Kshataryias*[6] (warriors); *Vaishias*[7] (businessmen) and *Shudras*[8] (lower caste artisans and manual labourers). The untouchable people lie outside this caste system; they cannot perform ritual activities because they are considered impure or polluted. According to Dirks (2001), the division stands beyond Hinduism. Though the caste system gives a connotation of a hierarchy of a 'ritual and pollution' status, in reality it was an ethnicity-based division of hierarchical roles in society. Hence, the caste system has an important role in India and Nepal in terms of the exact nature of each caste and its relationship to others. A person's caste status impacts on his or her activities in a variety of fields. For example, Stuart (2007) found that only two of the 27 presidents in India have come from the lower caste; hence the lower caste has been significantly underrepresented at this leadership level. Bennet (2005) found

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[5] "Scholarly community," includes the gurus, priests, scholars, teachers, law specialists, ministers, and diplomats.
[6] Kshatriyas — "high and lower nobility" includes kings, noblemen, soldiers, and administrators.
[7] Vaishyas — "mercantile and artisan community" includes merchants, shopkeepers, businessmen and farm owners.
[8] Shudras — "service-providing community" those who provided other services to society including, but certainly not limited to, manual labour.
 Source: Dirks (2001).