

CHAPTER 8

Using Monitoring as Leverage for Equal Opportunity in Nepal

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IN MARCH 2002, “MS. B,” a low-caste and impoverished member of the Bamdibhir Community Forest User Group in Nepal, secured a position in a promising local bamboo enterprise. Previously, this kind of opportunity would likely have been inaccessible to her. However, a shift in the group’s decision-making process toward adaptive and collaborative management (ACM) had created an opportunity that Ms. B was able to seize. Part of the shift had entailed active monitoring to hold the group accountable to its own equity-related goals.

In this chapter, we outline the monitoring-driven shift. Ms. B’s ability to use information as leverage to hold her group accountable to its decision illustrates the potential for monitoring to support local governance that benefits the poor. Her experience is a concrete example of the power of improved social process to change access to forest benefits—and yet it is only one small part of the spectrum of changes we witnessed in relation to social, human, and other forms of capital as the ideas of ACM took hold in the forest user group.

Context

Ms. B’s story took place within the context of a three-year action research process in Nepal, from 1999 to 2002. The research, a formal collaboration of the Ministry of Forest and Soil Conservation and CIFOR, was carried out in partnership with two local research partners—the organizations New ERA and ForestAction—and several independent consultants. As a research team, we sought insights into the conditions, processes, and institutional arrangements for improving collaboration and conscious social learning (Maarleveld and Dangbégnon, 1999; McDougall et al. 2002a) in community forest management. Could forest managers, especially communities, who based their management in collaboration and social learning

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increase their effectiveness in sustaining and improving local people's livelihoods while maintaining or enhancing the resource base?

The research team combined traditional and participatory action research (PAR) in their approach to this challenge. By participatory action research, we refer to a process through which a group of people identify a problem, collect and analyze information, and act upon the problem to find solutions and promote social and political transformation (Selener 1997). Its foundation is a cycle of iterative learning: reflection, planning, action, observation, reflection. We distinguish PAR from research based on data collection and analysis conducted largely by researchers and oriented toward questions and variables identified by the researchers.

Our work at the local level focused on four case studies, including the Bamdibhir Forest User Group in Kaski District, discussed below (see Figure 8-1). The research teams in each site undertook background studies in 2000, followed by participatory action research in 2001 and 2002. We used traditional research in the background studies and final reassessments as a basis for assessing changes in each site over time (i.e., from 2000 to 2002) as well as for making cross-site comparisons. PAR was initiated to catalyze or enhance approaches focusing on adaptation and collaboration appropriate to the local situation, such as strengthening local institutions, addressing boundary negotiations, or increasing income-generating activities.

The nature of participatory action research implies that the research and action are designed around the social and biophysical context and oriented to address particular challenges. The section below highlights some of the contextual issues and challenges that shaped the research project framework and process in Nepal.

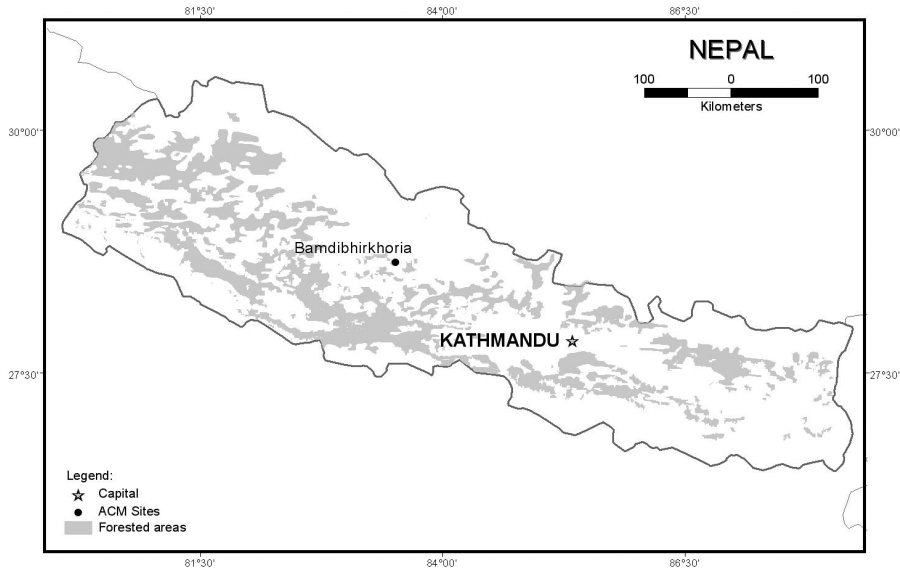


Figure 8-1. *Chanpakot Village, Kaski District, Nepal*

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Nepalese Social Diversity

Even in the present time, caste shapes Nepalese society and influences social interaction, especially in rural areas (Bennett 1983). Power is distributed primarily along the lines of Hindu frameworks, in which caste and gender are driving forces. Consequently, participatory organization is difficult with regard to including the “excluded,” such as lower castes, tribal peoples, women, and youth (Ojha et al. 2002).

Furthermore, as noted by Ojha et al. (2002) in the ACM project’s comparative case studies, “although caste and ethnic differences do not necessarily determine matters such as the distribution of land ownership, income, consumption patterns and access to resources (Blaikie et al. 1980), almost all ‘untouchables’ are poor, and there is a high correlation between caste and wealth.” Roles, responsibilities, and gender relations vary considerably with caste and ethnicity, making generalizations difficult; nevertheless, the overall pattern indicates that women bear greater labor burdens and have far less access to resources and decision-making processes.

The Need for Ongoing Innovation in Community Forestry¹

The impressive record of the Nepalese government and civil society in establishing more than 12,700 formal community-based forest user groups in Nepal (Community Forestry Division 2003) is well known. However, although the Nepal Community Forestry Programme is reported to have improved forest cover in many cases, it has not yet clearly and consistently enhanced the livelihoods of all people dependent on forests in the community forest areas (Malla 2000, 2001; Springate-Baginski et al. 1999; Winrock International 2002; Kanel and Pokharel 2002). It is widely acknowledged that inequity in decision making within the forest user groups is common (Malla 2000, 2001; Springate-Baginski et al. 1999; Paudel and Ojha 2002; Winrock International 2002). As a result, relative to their needs, economically and socially marginalized peoples, such as women and low-caste groups, receive disproportionately small shares of any benefits that do emerge. Kanel and Pokharel (2002) even suggest that “in worst cases . . . the implementation of [community forest] policy has inflicted added costs to the poor, such as reduced access to forest products and forced allocation of household resources for communal forest management with insecurity over the benefits.”

In summary, our work identified several obstacles to generating benefits and achieving equity (see McDougall et al. 2002c). Specifically, we noted the following trends among forest user groups:

- Local elite tend to dominate internal decision making and benefit sharing while low-income and low-caste people and women tend to be marginalized.
- Decision-making processes and structures tend to reinforce existing patterns of marginalization.
- Planning processes tend to be linear and ad hoc in nature.
- Communication and information flow are weak.
- Management is often passive or narrowly focused on subsistence timber and fuelwood, with little emphasis on nontimber forest products.

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- Legitimate users of community forests are sometimes excluded from the groups, and unresolved conflicts, such as over boundaries and benefits, are common.

Those trends occur in a very complex and dynamic context. Forests are an essential element of many rural livelihoods, and their use is intertwined with the use of other natural resources. Within forestry, there are overlaps, potential complementarities, and tensions between community forest and private forest use, as well as between forest user group members and nonmembers. Furthermore, the past 20 years has seen more stakeholders involved in all levels of community forestry, with shifting roles and policies regarding responsibilities and benefit sharing. The challenges of the situation are compounded by the limited human and financial resources for management. Kanel and Pokharel (2002) note in summary:

This has meant a change in power and expectations of forest users and stakeholders, and that a new equation of social relationships among stakeholders has been started to establish [sic]. This has given rise to a need for strengthening collaboration among stakeholders so that they can negotiate, co-operate and devise appropriate institutional arrangements for resource conservation, management and use . . . A need has emerged over the last few years for strategies that can add value to [community forest] processes and relationships so that equity and benefits can be enhanced.

The social and decision-making patterns we have described as challenges were evident in all the ACM research sites, including Bamdibhir Forest User Group.

Bamdibhir Forest User Group

Bamdibhir is located in Chanpakot VDC, Wards 3, 5, and 6, in Kaski District, in the Western Development Region of Nepal. At the time of the research, the forest user group had 134 households (722 people) as members. The members included a mix of ethnic and caste groups, with approximately 40 percent Brahmin households, 23 percent Magar, 21 percent Biswokarma, 9 percent Damai, 3 percent Chhetri, 1 percent Sarki, 1.5 percent Bhujel, and 1.5 percent Rai.

The level of families' dependence on community forest products in Bamdibhir is higher in the lower-income groups than in the wealthier groups. In a participatory wealth-ranking exercise that was part of the research process, the user group members developed categories. Of the total "poor" households in the forest user group, 30 percent are completely dependent on the community forest, whereas only 6.7 percent of the "wealthy" families fit this description (Khadka et al. 2003).

The 48.5-hectare forest area is a subtropical combination of natural and replanted forests. Its dominant tree species are katus (*Castanopsis indica*), mahuwa (*Engelhardia spicata*), and chilaune (*Schima wallichii*), with uttis (*Alnus nepalensis*) in the planted area. This forest is a source of firewood, ground grass, fodder, and timber for building houses, shelters, and agricultural tools, as well as plants for domestic purposes, including medicinals.

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Governance and Management at the Onset

The decision-making and governance processes in Bamdibhir Forest User Group were similar to those of many such groups in Nepal. The basic institutional structure consisted of an executive committee, including a chairperson, as the main decision-making body and an annual general assembly that was meant to be a forum for wider information sharing, discussion, and passing decisions.

Like many forest user groups, the Bamdibhir group operated in a fairly passive manner. The chairperson dominated the decision-making process, the committee and general assembly met irregularly, and members—especially the poor and low-caste people—had very little information about or input into the overall running of the group. Some conflict existed within the group between hamlets and ethnic groups and between the chairperson and other members. There were few activities and few successes, other than the effective protection and regeneration of some areas previously subject to landslides. See Table 8-1 for more information on institutions at the onset.

The Participatory Action Research Process

Our initial role as participatory action researchers was to offer facilitation of processes to enhance the members' capacity to adapt and collaborate within the group. For us, the starting point, and anchor, of the adaptive and collaborative approach was self-monitoring by the group. Thus we started the PAR by facilitating the development of an effective self-monitoring system. In all the four case studies, this process began with a local self-monitoring workshop.

In Bamdibhir, the workshop took place over three and a half days and involved 56 participants. The workshop focused on drawing out and integrating the perspectives of group members—visions of their ideal community and community forest, and assessments of the group's strengths and weaknesses. As well as joint visioning and developing and assessing indicators developed about and by the group, the workshop also included experiential exercises that highlighted the significance of learning and collaboration in forest user group management. The self-monitoring process during this workshop identified weaknesses that formed the basis for planning specific activities—income generation, forest protection, and reshaping of institutional aspects, such as distribution of forest products.

Participants (sometimes joined by researchers) then presented the workshop ideas, including the self-assessment and initial action plans, to Bamdibhir's four hamlets for further discussion and development with members who had not attended the workshop. The initial ideas for action were refined, and members formed "action groups" to lead them. This, in itself, already constituted a change in practice: in the past, the executive committee had led most if not all forest user group activities.

Several months after the implementation of the action plans, the self-monitoring process was revisited, thus beginning a pattern of iterative cycles of reflection and action (adjustments) in governance and management.

Table 8-1. Comparing Institutional Structures and Processes for ACM Project in Bamdibhir Forest User Group

	Pre-ACM project	Post-ACM project
<i>Institutions and fora</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General assembly, supposed to be held every six months, had not been held for three years. Forest user group committee meetings often failed to meet quorum. <i>Tole</i> (hamlet) meetings for forestry issues were not held regularly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Tole</i> meetings became major decision-making, planning, and conflict resolution fora. Each <i>tole</i> elected a subcommittee, whose monthly meetings fed into the executive committee's decision-making process.
<i>Mechanisms for information sharing and input in decision making</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Members of forest user group had no mechanism to give committee input on community forestry management systems. General users knew little about committee decisions. • Monthly committee meetings and annual assembly provided theoretical mechanism for information flow. Information was also exchanged informally among members in tea-shops, gatherings, and workplaces. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main mechanism for input in decision making is the <i>tole</i> committee and <i>tole</i> representatives, who inform electorate of committee decisions and present <i>tole</i> decisions in committee meetings. Committee meetings are open. • Prior to decision making, <i>tole</i> users and committee members list agenda items and explain importance, discuss and prioritize issues, and set agenda. Most issues for discussion come from <i>tole</i> meetings. The goal is common understanding and consensus. <i>Tole</i> representatives now participate actively.
<i>Mechanisms for conflict resolution</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee made some effort to manage conflicts over breaking of forest user group rules by members. Conflict between user group and chairperson was not addressed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mechanisms to resolve conflict exist. Conflicts within committee and between it and <i>tole</i> members can be discussed in <i>tole</i> meetings and resolved.
<i>Mechanisms for distribution of resources</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions about distribution of resources were made by committee or chairperson with little input from, or consideration of, marginalized groups. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee bases decisions about distribution on agreed criteria developed through its discussion, through discussions in <i>toles</i>, and through heterogeneity analysis system.
<i>Access to training and sharing of experiences and learning</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information about workshops and study tours was not shared, denying group members the opportunity to participate. The first person to hear about the chance would grab it (or push forward a close relative). Chairperson dominated decisions about access to training, which only committee members attended. No formal system for sharing experiences and learning after participation existed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committee formally selects participants for training, workshops, and study tours after seeking information and decisions from <i>tole</i> members. • Committee has criteria for membership that include gender, caste/ethnicity/class, and <i>tole</i>.

Note: McDougall et al. 2002b.

Innovation in Governance and Management

As described above, based on the action plans that emerged from the initial self-monitoring workshop and discussions, the forest user group members and committee gradually implemented shifts and innovations in the institutional arrangements and planning processes. Table 8-1 outlines five related areas of innovation: institutions and fora; mechanisms for information sharing and input in decision making; mechanisms for conflict resolution; mechanisms for distribution of resources; and access to training and learning. These shifts were enabled by group members' improved facilitation and participatory process skills, supported by both formal training and informal support from the research team.

In this section, we focus on the changes in decision making and planning because we see these as major building blocks for increasing marginalized members' access to opportunity. Initially, although the forest user group had decision-making bodies (the executive committee and general assembly), the process of decision making and planning was far from systematic. Annual plans and activities were generally made and carried out at the discretion of the chairperson of the executive committee. In the rarely held general assemblies, the committee (mainly the chairperson) would present the proposed plans, but only the more vocal members participated in discussions, which tended to focus on current problems.

During the PAR process, Bamdibhir Forest User Group planning became more systematic and more inclusive through three intertwined developments. First, self-monitoring became the basis for planning, including for annual work plans, and the renewed constitution and operational plan. Thus decisions and plans were clearly linked to future visions and based on critical reflections of past progress.

Second, heterogeneity analysis—looking at differences in well-being, occupation, institutional role, forest dependence, and demographic factors—helped the forest user group “track and assess who was participating, contributing, and benefiting . . . and trends in participation, contributions, and benefits for marginalized versus non-marginalized members proved critical . . .” Thus quantitative data enabled both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis of equity. The executive committee, with the help of members and researchers, developed a system for this analysis based on current information about group members, including *tole* (hamlet), ethnicity and caste, education levels, and wealth ranking. Heterogeneity analysis proved critical for Ms. B.

Third, based on critical reflection on weaknesses in governance during the self-monitoring process, the forest user group implemented strategies to make the decision-making process more transparent and inclusive. Specifically, major decisions started to be made through the participatory self-monitoring process, *tole* discussions, and committee discussions with *tole* representatives. For example, the *tole* committees and the executive committee jointly began to develop the agendas for committee discussions and general assemblies, and the committee and *tole* representatives together started finalizing agreed-upon action plans for implementation based on *tole*-level decisions. The general assembly became more of a forum for final approval of plans rather than the main opportunity for members' input.

The Bamboo Craft Enterprise

In Bamdibhir, the initial self-monitoring process undertaken by the forest user group illuminated weaknesses in several areas, especially income-generating activities and equitable distribution of information and benefits. One result was the development of a bamboo craft enterprise. The agreed-upon goal of the enterprise was the “economic upliftment” of marginalized group members, and especially women. With the help of a nongovernmental organization called Bamboo Secret, training was organized for 16 members.

After the training course, the Monitoring and Evaluation Team of the Bamboo Craft Training, which consisted of committee members and Bamboo Secret representatives, selected five trainees to become paid staff in the enterprise. The Monitoring and Evaluation Team stated that its recommendation of the five had been based on the goals of the enterprise and an agreed criterion—that each had earned a passing grade in the course. The recommended list of paid craftworkers was accepted and was about to be approved when one participant, Ms. B, spoke out.

As a lower-caste, poor woman, Ms. B would not have had much, if any, leverage to influence committee decision making in the past. In this case, however, by explicitly referring the group to the monitoring-based decisions and tools, she was able to make her point effectively. Ms. B pointed out that the recommendations did not meet the previously defined and agreed-upon goal of the bamboo craft enterprise—to provide opportunity to marginalized members, especially women. She referred to the forest user group’s heterogeneity analysis, the self-monitoring tool that had been used to identify which families fell into the target group. Based on the records, she fit the criteria of “marginalized” better than others who had been selected. They fell into the “lower middle” and “poor” categories, whereas she was “very poor.” Furthermore, she had received a B grade in the training course.

Following Ms. B’s statements, the committee, Bamboo Secret representatives, and meeting participants reconsidered the decision and appointed Ms. B as a paid employee in the bamboo craft enterprise.

Self-Monitoring: The Key to Accessing Opportunities

Although Ms. B’s newfound ability and courage to speak up in a public forum may be related to many factors, including participatory action research in general, we view her success in obtaining a position as very likely linked to self-monitoring and the larger ACM approach (of which self-monitoring is an essential part). There are several reasons for this.

First, we note that the bamboo enterprise itself was a direct outcome (action plan) of the self-monitoring process, which identified income generation as a weak area of the forest user group. Second, the self-monitoring process identified marginalized members as being in greatest need of income-generating activities, and the group confirmed its intention to give these members priority—hence the criterion that employment in the bamboo enterprise benefit marginalized people.

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Third, the reflections in the self-monitoring process flagged the need for increased transparency, accountability, and inclusion in decision making, including regarding equity issues. The resulting heterogeneity analysis tool made explicit who was in the economically poorest category of the forest user group and triggered more explicit communication of rationale for decisions by the committee—for example, the Bamboo Enterprise Committee publicly shared the goals of the enterprise and the criteria used to select employees.

We view the two last points as especially significant in Ms. B's case. As part of the self-monitoring, the forest user group had explicitly recorded the goal of income opportunity for marginalized users and, through the related heterogeneity analysis, identified exactly who fit that category. Rather than having to argue about fairness in the abstract, Ms B. could present data generated from a planning process based on self-monitoring—and prove that a decision was inconsistent with the established criteria.

Lessons

This story resonates with the larger trends we witnessed across the four case studies in the research project in Nepal. In governance and management, we saw a shift from ad hoc and undocumented goals and decisions to explicit goals and decisions developed through iterative visioning and a self-monitoring process. Emerging from that, we also saw a shift from committee-dominated decisions to decision making and planning that involved the active input of members.

Each forest user group increasingly operated as a broad-based learning forum by developing a shared vision and indicators, undertaking self-assessment and monitoring, and basing action plans on the assessment. As this evolved, we observed not only more input from marginalized users but also the identification of more governance weaknesses, especially regarding equity of access to decision making and benefits. This recognition that governance was a weak area tended to enhance the transparency as well as the accountability of governance, helping leaders stay on the “agenda” of improvement under the increasingly watchful eye of the members. Thus the self-monitoring process created incentives and pressure on the committee to enhance its accountability.

The same can be said for equity issues. Forest user group members made equity more explicit as a goal by including it in the joint vision and in the indicators. The reference to inequity in specific action plans appears to offer marginalized group members an opportunity for leverage. In the Kaski research sites, this was heightened by the use of heterogeneity analysis as a monitoring tool.

The changes in decision making and planning were catalyzed by the PAR process. Although the forest user group members were the main actors, the research team played the important role of change agents or catalysts in several ways—by highlighting the significance of equity, collaboration, and shared learning in community forestry management; facilitating the initial monitoring and participatory decision-making processes; and training and backstopping members and community forest support agents in facilitation and self-monitoring processes.

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In sum, these innovations, based on adaptive collaborative management with self-monitoring at their center, appear to allow forest user groups to become more inclusive and begin to adjust power differences. In our experience, this created opportunities for the marginalized users to be heard, in some cases for the first time. Social capital appeared to increase with the increased satisfaction of most members regarding access to decision making and its transparency. The changes also translated to a shift in the distribution of human capital in the group, in terms of access to information and skills through training. It is too early to know for sure, but the shift toward increased access for marginalized forest users to information, influence, and opportunities may help lay the foundation for increases in well-being for the poorest of the forest-dependent poor.

Adaptive collaborative management and related self-monitoring processes are not silver bullets for development and natural resource management. Many hurdles must be jumped en route to successful implementation of such processes, and even then, policy, resource, and economic barriers remain. Nevertheless, examples like that of Ms. B offer some hope that these processes may contribute in some significant way toward more equitable and effective natural resource management and development.

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Note

1. This section is drawn from McDougall et al. (2002c) and McDougall (2003).