

Grass Root Women's Voices

Forest's are our life; Help us manage it for our livelihood

It was on 18 November 2003 at the big auditorium of Nepal Administrative Staff College in Lalitpur district, Nepal amidst an audience full of high level senior government officials including the then Minister of Forest, Mr Sarvendra Nath Shukla, Secretary, Ministry of Forests Mr Chandi Prasad Shrestha, Director General of the Department of Forest Mr Jamuna Krishna Tamrakar, District Forest Officers, Forest Rangers, District Livestock Officers, Junior Agricultural Technicians, leasehold forestry user groups, journalists, donors and the NGO representatives, when the audience was captivated by Suntali's plead for the right to access and control by resource poor rural women on leased certificates and government owned forest land.

The special event was a workshop on the "Role of Leasehold Forestry in Poverty Alleviation", organized by Society for Partners in Development (SPD), a NGO partner of International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD). The NGO wanted to inform the policy makers that "leasing forest land to the poor" is the most effective approach to alleviate poverty and empower the poorest of the poor and therefore the leasehold forestry program deserved the special attention of the government and to appeal to the donor to revive and continue the phased out HLFFDP urgently.

Grassroots women's voices

Following the inauguration ceremony a rural young woman expressed herself, "I am Suntali Maya Praja, from Raksirang village-ward number 8 of Makwanpur district. I want to tell you about the wonderful impact of HLFFDP in the lives of the indigenous women living in remote rural areas and fighting hard for household food management. I was a common rural woman of the indigenous Chepang community relying on slash and burn system of land utilization for basic livelihood prior to becoming leasehold forestry member. None of my community families has registered agricultural land. Wild roots, vegetables and herbs from the forest and fish from the river are the basic sources of our livelihood. Now as we have access to leased forest land, we grow grass, fodder, fruits and raise goats. Our livelihood depends on the leased forest land which we can use for 40 years. We feel our forests which are our lifeline have been given back to us. But we still feel scared at the thought that the government might change the forest policies and take it back from us even before we become capable of settling as agriculture farmers.

I have taken the lead initiative to educate my community about forestry development for our livelihood improvement. I have been trained to acquire various skills and abilities by the HLFFDP and today my villagers are keen that I should be the next Chairperson for our Village Development Committee. It might be a normal fact for you. But in our community, it is a magic that they regard me eligible for the kind of position. Nobody could even dream about the fact that today I can speak in front of this distinguished gathering in this big hall and can explain to policy makers about the critical changes that have been brought by leasehold forestry project in our rural poor households. Today our women have come out of their homes to participate in community debates; they fight for their rights on use of minor forest products. They look upon me as a forest ranger. I have

studied only up to standard 3(three). Today I am in this capacity and position due to the intervention of the project and also due to the love, training and sisterhood support provided by the group of gender experts through SPD. The forest and livestock development officials encourage me to carry out even technical work, due to the conflict situation they rely on my survey report; given this ad hoc opportunity, I lead forestry planning with women and men of the village.

I have developed this capacity of a semi-ranger through encouragement and support extended by the government staff. I am now the secretary of leasehold forestry group, Chairperson of Association of Rural Women Social Mobilisers in NRM and Chairperson of Aastha, the NGO we have formed in the district among our group promoters and other social motivators working in community forestry program. We want to protect and promote our rights to the leased forest land bestowed on us by conferring leased certificates by the Ministry of Forest so that we, the resource poor women and men could reap benefit for not only sustaining but also for improving our livelihood and our socio-political position. We now know that poverty is rooted in power discrimination and so, we are directing all our efforts to gain equal status with other castes and ethnicities, in education, health, income and politics. Our communities now do not go for slash and burn practice, but enjoy a secured livelihood opportunity. I wish to make a plea to our government to create more of such opportunities for all the resource deprived poor rural women of Nepal, especially those from the indigenous communities; please do not displace them from the forestland; because forests are the source of our life, happiness and peace.”

The large audience of 210 participants present in the workshop listened patiently to her advocating for full government support for the leasehold forestry project. She was poised, confident, clear and extra ordinarily appealing in her speech. The minister engrossed by the event cancelled all his other appointments and attentively spent the full three hours taken up by the workshop.

Consensus and Support

The entire audience expressed their support and sympathy to the demands of the farmers. This was a defining moment for the projects beneficiaries as for the first time the leasehold forestry project aimed at benefiting the poor was successful in capturing the attention of a wider community adopted as an effective strategy to address social justice for poverty alleviation by responding to gender issues and social exclusion.

This was the fruition of the promising result of a gender mainstreaming process initiated in 1973 by the Department of Forest of Nepal through its Hills Leasehold Forestry and Fodder Development Project (HLFFDP) which rewarded the project with success in achieving its stated objectives.

Motivation & Enthusiasm

Since then, the grassroots women social mobilisers who come from the leasehold forest user communities continued their work through already established NGO, Aastha. The NGO is registered separately by group promoters of the concerned district in 10 mid hills

districts of Nepal, Ramechhap(+Dolakha), Sindhupalchowk, Kavre, Dhading, (Gorkha+Chitwan),Tanahu, Makwanpur and Sindhuli. IFAD supported the ongoing voluntary activities of this group through SPD who requested IFAD for continuing its support for training, coaching, monitoring and strengthening the Association, to voice for women's rights on natural resources, forest land and local employment.

The transition/interim period

In 2002, SPD in collaboration with the Department of Forest officials focused on social and political empowerment of the group promoters for sustaining their rights on the leased forest land in a more organized way. The process was not an easy task. The group promoters come from very poor families, from marginalized ethnic and Indigenous groups. Some of them belong to higher caste but facing extreme form of discrimination and domestic violence, due to being isolated by husbands and in some cases, for being widow. They are identified by their own groups and further recruited by SPD in consultation with the district forest office. The process of recruitment follows a participatory and sensitive process between the SPD staff and the district forest officers. The SPD staffs orient and request the officers to ensure that the selection and recruitment meet the basic criteria as

- Woman of leasehold forest user family
- Victim of continuous domestic violence
- Dalit, female household head, discarded women, widow, single women

Majority of them are just literates. A few of them have now even acquired intermediate level of educational qualification. These women have been developed from a zero level of empowerment. At the beginning none of them was able to tell their names properly, now each one of them deals with government officials, community men and women and strangers with full confidence and tactfully explore opportunities to bring in benefits to own communities. They are very popular among own community men and women for their services. The villagers take them as role models for own daughters, wives and daughter-in-laws.

These are young women (20 to 36) working at grassroots level, even amidst the extremely difficult Maoist conflict situation and they are left in the hands of mostly male forest officials for supervision and guidance on their day to day communication during work. Naturally SPD staff has to bear with frustrations receiving complaints against some of these women because sometimes, the new officers cannot even imagine that these uneducated rural women can handle village mobilization, conduct basic level of technical forestry planning, communicate livestock development services with community, organize women and men for claiming public services, such as, clean drinking water, education, health, agriculture and cottage industry and build linkages with the local donors, organizations and the authorities to act on implementation of women's rights. They have been exposed to dialogues with the senior most members of the National Planning Commission, National Poverty Alleviation Fund and Secretaries of the concerned Ministries. They can explain about their issues systematically while advocating for their rights to productive resources for securing a sustained livelihood.

Challenges

SPD maintains a political role and relationship with the senior government officials and often describe about the logic and process of capacitating these group promoters in social and political role as the strongest instrument to organize community women for enhanced participation in forest and fodder development for improving rural livelihood, contributing to the national goal of poverty alleviation.

However in the given social atmosphere and organizational systems in the government, the group promoters have to face discouraging procedures while registering the names of forestry users from among the household heads. Formerly, it would be only the men that would be registered as the household heads and thus would gain the leased certificates in their names. But now due to the collective effort of the group promoters and the gender focal persons (*capacitated group of JTs and rangers, bankers and researchers on gender analysis and forestry development who act also as gender focal persons in the concerned offices on an ad hoc basis*), single women, widows, discarded women from the poor households are registered as household heads within the communities served by these group promoters. They offered their full assistance during group formation for leasing forest land. During this process, going beyond their written terms of reference, they exploited opportunities to influence the foresters to count on the weight of contribution of women to forest and fodder management, recognize the indigenous knowledge and skill of these women about forest resources and record the roles of these women as resource managers for livelihood management.

Livelihood impact

The poor women have found leasehold forestry to be a blessing of God whereby they can apply their knowledge and skills to preserve and manage it tactfully in order to improve their livelihood. They say that within the given timeframe of 40 years they can change their social, economic and political status by using the forest resources and growing own choice of grass and fodder trees, which can be the base for buying agricultural land for cultivation. Many such women have done this. The leased plots are very near to their homes because the families are in deed forest dwellers. They raise goats, plant fodder grass such as, stylo, molasses, napier, etc. and preserve the valuable species of fodder. They manage stall feeding to stop open grazing; most of them now have 12 to 35 goats. Fodder being available near home, they save time (previously they used to collect fodder for 3 to 5 hours, whereas now they collect fodder in 10-15 minutes; boys and men also collect fodder as it is easy to collect fodder just at the doorstep. All the family members feel proud of having a nearby fodder land. The women have time to rest, participate freely in public meetings because they do not worry now for goats or cattle grazing, organize group saving, cooperatives, group actions for personal development, rural infrastructure development like trek road, also join in other development programs such as, local governance program, rural energy development program, human rights programs, non-formal education programs and such other community development programs,. Women's access to forest resources and various training on women's empowerment has revealed their hidden potential for transforming degraded forest land into productive agro-forestry plots. The men of the communities and the public offices

now respect them as capable community resource leaders. They have proved that once women access useable forest land they can improve livelihood. Their children comfortably go to schools, due to the fodder grown nearby homestead, the children have easy access to fodder collection, offering a helping hand to their parents in managing fodder, also learning about the value of forest protection and preservation, forage management and proper utilization of it for livelihood improvement.

Market has come to their doorstep even if they are far from the town. Goats are sold at Nrs 2000 to Nrs 6000 (USD45 to 90) per goat at doorstep. Indian buyers also come to buy their goats. It is very encouraging to see how the families raise small farms of 20 to 30 goats, relying on their own fodder grown on the leased forest land. Some of them have grass and seed selling cooperatives based on the leased forest land.

These groups have been relieved of receiving loans from the private landlord instead they offer loans from the group saving to shop keepers and others at an interest rate of 24%. The group saving amount ranges from Nrs 60,000 (USD900) to Nrs 200,000 (USD 2816) per group. A total of Nrs 8,371, 815 (USD1,20,000) has been raised by September 2004 by 1100+groups in 10 districts. Mobilization of group saving has enabled them to start new entrepreneurship for livelihood improvement by buying buffaloes, agricultural land and opening retail shops.

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