

**WORKING PAPER ON SCALING-UP**  
**GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT**  
**NEPAL CASE-STUDY**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

***Why gender equality and women's empowerment is important to the scaling-up agenda***

IFAD aims to reach 90 million rural poor people by 2015, moving 80 million out of poverty. To achieve this goal, the Fund is putting strong emphasis on scaling up as a means to achieve greater sustainability and impact. Mainstreaming gender equality and women's empowerment concerns in IFAD scaling-up agenda is of strategic importance as it can greatly contribute to deepen impact on poverty reduction and strengthen the sustainability of IFAD-supported development initiatives across different thematic areas and sectors.

IFAD's policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2012) is central to the goal of IFAD's Strategic Framework 2011-2015<sup>1</sup> to enable poor rural women and men to improve their food security and nutrition, raise their incomes and strengthen their resilience. The policy provides IFAD with strategic guidance in systematizing, intensifying and scaling up its efforts to close gender gaps and improve the economic and social status of rural women in rapidly changing rural environments.

IFAD has achieved important results in promoting innovative gender mainstreaming and pro-poor approaches and processes in its operations, thereby representing an area of IFAD's comparative advantage.<sup>2</sup> In most cases the empowerment of rural women is promoted by building innovative institutional mechanisms which transfer resources and decision-making powers to poor rural women

Despite these important achievements, innovations in promoting ***gender equality and women's empowerment*** have not easily found their way into larger mainstream investment programmes.<sup>3</sup> Scaling-up initiatives in IFAD have been sporadic and mainly left to the initiative of committed and capable individuals, rather than systematically promoted as part of the institutional approach.

Some of the challenges that hinder the scaling-up of gender-sensitive innovations include: limited availability and poor quality of gender-disaggregated data and analysis; poor incorporation of policy-dialogue activities in loan operations; risk of diluting attention to gender issues as IFAD portfolio moves towards supporting value-chain development type of projects. Finally there is always the risk that when rural development activities are scaled-up by becoming larger in scale and thus more profitable, gendered patterns of access to, and control over resources and benefits could be altered. This can be detrimental for women as men may take over roles and resources which were traditionally controlled by them.

Despite these challenges, opportunities do exist for scaling-up gender-sensitive innovations. Successful experiences in this regard have been documented across IFAD portfolio, which can be used as valuable learning resources. This is the case for instance of leasehold forestry in Nepal, whereby a successful women-driven innovation has rapidly moved from the ground to the mainstream of the government agenda.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ifad.org/sf/>

<sup>2</sup> IFAD Independent Office of Evaluation (2010). "Corporate level evaluation of IFAD's capacity to promote innovations and its scaling up." Rome

<sup>3</sup> IFAD Independent Office of Evaluation (2010). "Corporate-level evaluation: IFAD's performance with regard to gender equality and women's empowerment". Rome

## II. SCALING-UP WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: LEASEHOLD FORESTRY IN NEPAL

### i. *Piloting an innovative pro-women model*

IFAD has been supporting **Leasehold Forestry in Nepal** as is an innovative model since the 1990ies, through the implementation of the *Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project, HLFFDP* (1993-2003). Leasehold forestry differs from standard community forestry, and focuses on transferring forest land to the poorest echelons of rural societies, with emphasis on landless households and women particularly from the lowest caste (*dalits*) and indigenous peoples (*janajatis*). The model consists of leasing blocks of degraded forest land on a 40-year renewable basis to groups of poor households, which are in charge of rehabilitating the land and entitled to use the forest products. Leasehold Forestry User Groups, LFUGs generally include from 5 to 15 households and are provided with technical assistance in different areas, including group strengthening, savings and credit schemes, livestock etc.

Differently from community forestry, Leasehold forestry is particularly attractive to the poorer and women as it involves labor intensive rehabilitation activities that better off farmers are not willing to do. In addition collecting grass, fodder and firewood is traditionally done by women, who are especially interested in strengthening their access to forests. A further factor contributing to increasing women's participation is that many areas male out-migration in many areas of rural Nepal is very high.

There is ample evidence that the acquisition of leasehold land has enabled women not only to save a significant amount of time and energy in collecting fodder and firewood but also to start engaging in a variety of income generating activities such as cultivating vegetables and selling medicinal plants<sup>4</sup>. The income they gain is largely spent on household needs and group savings. Participation in group meetings is also a powerful driver of social and political empowerment within the households and the community. Over the years some of these women groups have further matured into federations and larger cooperatives, thereby acquiring an important institutional role within their communities.

**Women's empowerment is a key aspect of the programme**, and has come to be recognized as an important driver of leasehold forestry. During implementation of HLFDP the gender dimension was further strengthened through the inclusion of a Technical Assistance (TA) component, funded by the Dutch, which had not been envisaged in the original design. As part of this component, which was implemented by FAO, a successful model for mobilizing and empowering poor women was piloted in 1999 through the formation of a cadre of 46 **Women Group Promoters** (GPs), who play a catalytic role in promoting the project, organizing women-only groups and giving them ad-hoc training.

Surprisingly, the adoption of the GPs model was driven by the **leadership of strategic male actors**<sup>5</sup>. Two male project leaders (respectively from DOF and FAO) had the vision to promote sustainable changes in gender relations starting from the ground up to higher institutional and policy levels. A team of highly committed **gender advisors** was also hired as part of the TA component to provide support to female Group Promoters, who over the time acquired solid technical and leadership skills including the ability to interact with project and government staff.

To achieve these results the women promoters had to challenge **the masculine culture of the implementing partner**, the Department of Forest (DOF). Initially many DOF staff found it difficult to understand the role and added value of the women promoters. They believed that women could not contribute to project's implementation, as they were unable to walk in

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<sup>4</sup> International Land Coalition, 2001 "Voices from the Field: Nepal", Women Resource Access Programme, WRAP. Rome.

<sup>5</sup> See Gurung, J and Lama K.. 2005 "Empowered women and the men behind them: a study of change within the Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project in Nepal" <http://www.ifad.org/gender/thematic/nepal/>

difficult areas, work after marriage and interact with people outside their communities. Forest officers, the majority of whom are male, have a paternalistic attitude and tend to see *women as collectors and users rather than as managers and decision-makers of forest resources*<sup>6</sup>. Traditional social norms at the community level also contribute to sustain these patriarchal values, whereby women in rural Nepal find it difficult to exert control over forest and other resources.

Lack of genuine organizational commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in implementing partner endangered the continuity of the model<sup>7</sup>. For instance, in 2001, when the project entered its second phase, the contracts of GPs were not renewed. Despite this, the GPs continued to engage in social mobilization activities on a voluntary basis as they themselves were members of leasehold forestry groups and thus highly motivated to continue their activity. On the initiative of the Interim Support Mission (2002), around half of the GPs were re-employed, funded by a special IFAD grant.

**ii. Scaling-up the gender strategy of the leasehold forestry programme**

Over the time the model of GPs has gained increased recognition among government officers. Once overcome the initial biases, they started seeing the importance of their work not only for women's empowerment but for overall grassroots mobilization. Therefore, they requested project management to provide and train more and more women group promoters<sup>8</sup>. The most successful achievement is that such pro-women model came to be seen not as an external add-on but rather as an integral part of the leasehold forestry approach and thus it was fully mainstreamed in the scaling-up process.

*The IFAD-funded Leasehold Forestry and Livestock Programme LFLP (2005-2014)* is currently assisting the Government in scaling up leasehold forestry to the national level. The model has progressively gained support within DOF, and associated line agencies and it is now recognized as a priority in the government agenda, given its potential to effectively reach out to and benefit marginalized rural communities and groups, address forest degradation and contribute significantly to poverty reduction efforts. Commitment to the scaling-up of leasehold forestry is reflected by the fact that some of the leasehold forestry activities during the two-year gap between HLFFDP and LFLP, have been supported by the Government itself.

Today, all social mobilizers across the 27 target districts are women. The construction of a women-led peer learning structure is indeed very effective as it ensures outreach to the most vulnerable communities and segments. These are often geographically scattered and located in areas, which have also been affected by armed conflict<sup>9</sup>, which are extremely hard to reach by government staff. The women act as role models and are highly motivated to perform their technical and leadership roles.

A further element of the gender strategy which has been scaled-up under LFPL include the promotion of greater gender equality in resource distribution and decision-making from the household up to the community and group levels. The strategy starts with the formulation of a Livelihood Improvement Plan (LIP), which is prepared with the active contribution of women and men of the family. Gender equity in the allocation of forest resources is explicitly addressed in the implementation manual, which makes provision for assuring land titling to both male and female household members<sup>10</sup>. This successful gender mainstreaming experience was presented as a 'best practice' at the 12th World Forestry Congress held in Quebec, Canada, from 21 to 28 September 2003.

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<sup>6</sup> ibidem

<sup>7</sup> ibidem

<sup>8</sup> IFAD, 2004. "Case-study: providing the poor with secure access to land in the hills of Nepal", Shanghai Poverty Conference.

<sup>9</sup> Nepalese Civil War between government forces and Maoist fighters in Nepal lasted from 1996 until 2006

<sup>10</sup> Sthapit, L. Undated. "Leasehold Forestry and Livestock Programme: SWOT analysis from gender and social inclusion perspective".

### **Box 1: Drivers of change<sup>11</sup>**

The main drivers of the scaling-up of leasehold forestry in Nepal are:

- A successful institutional model for women's empowerment and poverty reduction
- Women leadership at the grassroots level
- Strategic male support within the government and project management
- Flexibility in design and openness to women's demand
- Grant-funded activities and other donors' support

### **iii. Mobilizing and upgrading women's groups**

Today there are more than 6800 LFUGs that have been formed since 1992. Women's engagement in these groups has dramatically increased over the time. Their active presence across all activities, including the formation of women-only groups, which are amongst the most dynamic<sup>12</sup>, has characterized LFLP and overall the leasehold experience<sup>13</sup>. A study of LFUG<sup>14</sup> found that 39 per cent of registered members are women (against 15 per cent in 2006) and about 36 per cent of key positions in the LFUGs are held by women. The model is clearly responsive to women's specific needs and interests. Female field promoters are the main driver of the actual demand and adoption of the innovation by poor rural women.

Both HLFFDP and LFLP have also promoted the upgrade of leasehold groups into larger cooperatives and federations in order to enhance access to formal credit and more profitable markets and thus achieve greater sustainability. This was a very significant initiative, surprisingly unforeseen in the original project design, which contributed to make the leasehold forestry movement more vibrant by gaining greater visibility in the public arena. As part of this process of organizational strengthening, women group members have received training in financial literacy and accountability, group management and leadership, which have enabled them to access higher positions and leadership roles within cooperatives. FAO is currently supporting the capacity development and graduation of groups through Finnish funds<sup>15</sup>.

Larger cooperatives provide a forum for decision-making in which women often play a central role<sup>16</sup>. So far, this process has led to increased women's empowerment both at the community and household level, including the ability to counteract domestic violence. This has in turn generated a variety of important development outcomes<sup>17</sup>. The most notable include: facilitating the storage and marketing of products; pioneering new forms of partnership between villages and district level institutions; stimulating intra-community cohesion by challenging traditional cast barriers; contributing to improved NRM;

<sup>11</sup> Drivers are the forces pushing the scaling-up forward.<sup>11</sup> For more information see Linn, Johannes, Arntraud Hartmann, Homi Kharas, Richard Kohl, and Barbara Massler (2010), "Scaling Up the Fight Against Rural Poverty, An Institutional Review of IFAD's Approach", Global Working Paper No. 39, Brookings

<sup>12</sup> IFAD, 2003. "Kingdom of Nepal Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project. Interim Evaluation"

<sup>13</sup> IFAD Independent Office of Evaluation, 2013. "Nepal: Country Programme Evaluation", Rome.

<sup>14</sup> FAO, March 2012: Leasehold Forest User Group Categorization – An Analysis of the Group Status.

<sup>15</sup> Technical Assistance for Leasehold Forestry and Livestock Development Programme

<sup>16</sup> IFAD, 2004. *Evaluation Profile. Breaking new ground: leasehold forestry in Nepal*, n. 18

<sup>17</sup> PROCASUR, 2013, *Women's Empowerment, New businesses, and Sustainable Natural Resource Management in Nepal. PROCASUR Learning routes in Nepal 2013.*

Some of these women-led groups have achieved a high maturity level and are often visited by farmers and LFGs from other community and districts, as part of peer-to-peer learning. To date the Milli Julli Chulli Women's group in the district of Chitwan has been receiving more than 100 visits from other districts to their village. Some of these outstanding experiences<sup>18</sup> have recently been selected to be part of an international "learning route"<sup>19</sup> *Women Empowerment, New Businesses and Sustainable Natural Resource Management in Nepal* financed through an IFAD grant<sup>20</sup>. Representative from IFAD-funded projects, farmers organizations and government bodies from different African and Asia countries have come to Nepal to learn from the women themselves about the changes that the leasehold forestry movement has brought about in their life.

iv. **Promoting a more gender-sensitive institutional and policy environment**

Both the 2000 and 2006 IFAD Results-based Country Strategic Opportunities Programme (RB-COSOP) for Nepal highlight policy-dialogue as an important pillar of the Fund's activities in the country. In particular, the 2006 COSOP identifies policy dialogue for removing legal and regulatory barriers to social inclusion of the poorest and women as a priority action. Since the 90ies the concept of leasehold forestry has been scaled up significantly at higher institutional and policy levels. As a direct result of the HLFFDP, the approach was adopted as a national policy in 2002, with the introduction of the 'leasehold forestry policy'. The Ministry of Forests and soil Conservation, MFSC also supported The establishment of a new leasehold forestry division within the DOF.

Despite these positive premises the Leasehold Forestry Policy has not yet become effective. In addition, gender equity concerns have only partially been mainstreamed into the policy document. Nevertheless, the Policy explicitly makes provision for promoting equitable participation of women and men in leasehold forestry activities.

Important results have also been achieved within the broader donors community in the country, whereby IFAD has managed to create a more gender-sensitive and pro-poor institutional environment. Initially the donors community was in fact supporting the more standard community forestry, thereby paying limited attention to addressing the more difficult areas of women's empowerment and pro-poor targeting. As a result of IFAD's efforts to mainstream poverty and gender issues in the forestry sector, interest of the donor community to cross-cutting themes and to leasehold forestry has increased.

v. **Main obstacles and challenges**

Despite formal and institutional commitment to gender equality through the recognition of women as a special target in its anti-poverty agenda and the creation of a *Gender and Equity Working Group* under the Ministry of Forests and soil Conservation, the DOF, as other department of forests in many developing countries still embeds a culture of hierarchy and masculinity<sup>21</sup>. The number of female staff at different levels of implementation, from district up to the central level, is very limited, let alone considerations for the degree of gender awareness. This threaten the sustainability of women's empowerment gains<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> The Kalpasriksha Co- operative and the Leasehold Forest Users Inter-Groups in Rayale V.D.C., Kavre district; the Devitar Leasehold Forest User Groups cluster in Shaktikhor, Chitwan district and the Pragatishil Agriculture Cooperative Ltd, of Bijuwa village in district of Kapilvastu.

<sup>19</sup> The *Learning Route* is a capacity building tool developed by the PROCASUR Corporation, which draws upon the local knowledge and experiences to disseminate and scale up field tested innovations and best practices in rural development. Through a continuous process of "training in the field" composed by a sequence of interrelated educational activities (workshop, case analysis, field visits, group discussions etc.) the LR provides an opportunity for individual and collective learning both for visitors and their local hosts.

<sup>20</sup> "Strengthening Knowledge Sharing on Innovative Solutions using the Learning Route Methodology in Asia and the Pacific".

<sup>21</sup> See Gurung, J and Lama K.. 2005 "Empowered women and the men behind them: a study of change within the Hills Leasehold Forestry and Forage Development Project in Nepal" <http://www.ifad.org/gender/thematic/nepal/>

<sup>22</sup> Sthapit, L. Undated. "Leasehold Forestry and Livestock Programme: SWOT analysis from gender and social inclusion perspective".

According to the recent Country Programme Evaluation, IFAD engagement at the policy level has been unsystematic.<sup>23</sup> Limited resources have been allocated to pursue the ambitious policy-dialogue agenda, which was envisaged by the COSOP and to maintain an appropriate level of knowledge management, policy dialogue and participation in donor coordination. This limits the possibility to effectively move gender equality issues from the field to a central level concern.

Under HLFFDP an attempt was made to create an association of women promoters and upgrade it at the national level so as to be recognized as a legitimate stakeholder by policy makers and engage in advocacy and policy-dialogue on gender issues. Initially funded through a grant, the association did not take off and funding for supporting this activity was discontinued. Therefore, it seems that the potential of grant funding to contribute to pro-women policy-dialogue has not been exploited.

On the ground despite the high degree of women's involvement in leasehold forestry, women's subordination is still prevailing<sup>24</sup>. There is evidence that in actual decision-making, allocation of more productive lands, labour burden related to leasehold area improvements, and access to essential services such as water and basic literacy, women are still in an unfavorable position compared to that of men.

A further problem which hampers the implementation of the gender and social inclusion strategy relates to the heavy workload that the women promoters are facing. These women provide support to a large numbers of people and groups which are generally scattered over a wide area. They work long hours and usually have very limited facilities as compared to their duties.

### III. LESSONS LEARNED

- ***Pro-women innovations to be successful and scalable, have to be driven by the participation and demand of poor rural women***  
The leasehold forestry model has proven to be truly responsive to women's practical and strategic needs in several ways: by facilitating and securing access to resources; alleviating their workload; enhancing their agency and capacity to undertake collective action.
- ***When gender-sensitive innovations have a clear impact on poverty reduction and environmental conservation, thereby contributing to broader development goals they become of interest to the government and the donor community***
- It was only when the leasehold forestry concept was recognized as effective in reducing poverty and restoring environmental balance, that the Government designated leasehold forestry as a national programme.
- ***Visionary and committed male leaders, both at the project and government levels are key drivers in the piloting and institutionalization of gender-sensitive innovations***  
When male leaders are genuinely committed to gender equality and women's empowerment, they can effectively contribute to open up a space for women to challenge the status quo and drive gender-sensitive organizational change.
- ***Promoting broader institutional and policy change for the institutionalization of women's empowerment gains through policy-dialogue and partnership-building should be an integral part of projects' and country programme objectives.*** Continuous and systematic engagement in policy-dialogue and partnership-building is key for deepening the sustainability and impact of empowerment gains. This requires resources and commitment over the years.
- ***Grants are key instruments for piloting gender-sensitive innovations and supporting the scaling-up process and should complement loan-funded***

<sup>23</sup> IFAD Independent Office of Evaluation, 2013. "Nepal: Country Programme Evaluation", Rome

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication by Milan Adhikary, FAO consultant on Gender and Social Inclusion

**operations.** Grant resources are fundamental for piloting new approaches to women's empowerment that the government is reluctant to support as well as for promoting areas of activities, such as knowledge dissemination and policy-dialogue, which can facilitate the scaling-up process.

- **Female leaders and champions are fundamental drivers of the scaling-up as they mobilize a critical mass of women in favor of the innovation that IFAD is promoting.** The services of the women GPs at the grassroots level have been invaluable. These women have been essential in strengthening the operation of the leasehold groups and catalyzing changes across geographical areas. Thus major investments are needed in alleviating their *workload and facilitating their duties*. **Documenting and sharing the results achieved through the implementation of innovative gender-sensitive models is important for disseminating and scaling-up the innovations across communities, projects and countries as well as for exerting greater policy influence**

The need for continual documentation and knowledge sharing initiatives must be stressed. Initiatives such as the learning route are powerful tools to build capacities through peer to peer exchange as well as to facilitate the adoption of good practices for rural livelihoods improvement. When the development outcomes of pro-women innovations are documented these also become an important tool for policy-dialogue.

- **Sustained investments in women's human and social capital are fundamental to strengthen women's agency and create a more vibrant civil society**

Investments in literacy, leadership skills training, group strengthening as well as access to basic services and facilities are key to building the social infrastructure which is needed to make women's groups graduate. Organized rural women can drive the scaling-up process by developing into a critical mass of supporters and exert greater political and social influence in their communities and beyond.

DRAFT – ONLY FOR USE IN THE LEARNING ROUTE IN NEPAL; DEC 2014

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