

BISHWOKARMA, DIPAK [S23-P96]

Reshaping Chure landscape management policy in Nepal: Rejuvenating decentralisation or aggravating decentralisation?

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Despite agriculture-forests based rural livelihood, the trajectory of forest resources management policies have been governing by the ecological narratives. Evidences of biophysical changes have become even more dominating rationale while those policies are developed to manage fragile and young landscape like Chure - hotspot for biodiversity, water resources and other environmental services - undermining socio-economical aspects of resource governance. The Nepal government has recently declared Chure landscape as an 'Environmental Conservation Area' vindicating its continuous degradation due to over pressure on natural resources and formulated a powerful 'President Chure-Terai Madesh Conservation Development Board' to plan and implement conservation interventions. This government-controlled conservation centric policy response has created controversy among stakeholders and boosted skepticism on recentralisation of forests resources management curtailing community access to forests resources.

This paper scrutinises government's recent policy attempt to Chure management and stakeholders' responses to it. We examine implications of such policy change on community access to the forests resources, community response on managing common forests resources, and potential repercussion on Chure conservation. Findings of this research are the outcome of literature review, analysis of national and regional dialogues held around Chure issues, public and policy discourse mapping, discussion with district and local level stakeholders, focus group discussions, and field observation.

We found that the Chure region is considered as the politically strategic zone for different stakeholders including the government bureaucracy, political parties, and even to some civil society organisations who have either been anticipating to expand or to maintain their legacy on the forestry sector. Community forest user groups (CFUGs) an autonomous community institution managing by local communities have been compelled to compromise their existing rights on forests resource as the major implication of government's decision. The forests resources utilisation in community forests (CF) has been restrained within CFUGs by suspending annual allowable cut (AAC) and imposing conservation centered management approaches. Findings revealed that CFUGs are not allowed to sell any forest products out of their group and hence failed to contribute on local economic development, livelihood improvement, and community development. It has demotivated local communities to manage their common forest resources. We argue that the recent change on Chure management policy instrument aggravates recentralisation and could be counterproductive on achieving conservation objective due to less ownership of local communities on resource management. We further argue that Nepal, along with addressing prevailing issues of Chure management, could offer the demonstrating model for sustainable landscape management if employed participatory, democratic, and bottom-up policy and program development approach acknowledging crucial role of local communities and other stakeholders.