

**BOOMKENS, MALI [POSTER]**

*From devolution to inclusion – Governance of community forest user groups among marginalized communities in the Middle Hills of Nepal*

Co-authors: Nico Wilms-Posen (M.Sc. Agricultural Development), Center for Rural Development (SLE), Berlin, Germany; Pushpa Raj Dhimi (ISC Forestry), Institute of Forestry, Pokhara, Nepal

Livelihood security, the sustainable use of natural resources and measures of poverty reduction are closely intertwined in the context of high dependency on natural resources in developing countries. The environmental and socio-economic outcomes of changes in resource management regimes are however difficult to assess on a global scale.

Community forestry (CF) in Nepal has emerged against the backdrop of decentralization processes in national policy and transformations in international development discourse over the past thirty years, recognizing community-level institutions as capable of sustainable natural resource management.

Even though CF has been widely acknowledged as a progressive way in reducing poverty and halting further degradation of the forests, exclusive decision-making on the level of the community forest user group (CFUG) and ineffective decentralization on a national scale are lingering key issues that constrain the CFUG to be downwards accountable, representative in local resource needs and capable of functioning autonomously.

It is crucial to understand whether and to what extent changes in the organizational structure have led to modifications in power relationships between different actors involved, in order to assess community forestry outcomes for the more disadvantaged. From a political ecology point of view, this empirical study analyses the mismatch between de jure prescriptions and de facto realities with regards to meaningful participation in decision-making processes on CFUG level as well as the overall autonomy of the user group as embedded in the wider political arena of forest management.

For this study 136 qualitative semi-structured and in-depth interviews and focus group discussions have been conducted with members from five CFUGs in the Middle Hills of Nepal and external stakeholders from related District Forest Offices and other national agencies. The findings demonstrate that socio-economic and traditionally hierarchic cultural structures on CFUG level make way for elite capture, nepotism and male dominance in leadership positions inducing inequitable benefit-sharing and exclusion of notably women from meaningfully participating in decision-making. Moreover, the prescribed facilitative role for certain stakeholders was found to be insufficient in resolving conflicts due to political bias and coercive control over the user group's decision-making. On a national level, the government's inadequate consultation with communities in the recent implementation of the President Chure Conservation Program, inducing financial paralysation of CFUGs included in the area, is a sign of recentralizing management rights over the forest resources.

Community forestry should be recognized as a process that needs continuous re-evaluation taking into account the local context and perspectives of all stakeholders involved to allow for a better understanding of the complex dynamic power structures that influence the institutional autonomy and effective functioning of community-based resource management regimes and their environmental and socio-economic outcomes.

