

Armed Conflict and its Impact on Community Forestry in Nepal

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The day I arrived in Nepal was the last of the historic 19 days of anti-monarchy protest by the general public, civil society, political parties, Maoists and the international development workers throughout the nation. The same night, around midnight, the king stepped down and announced that he would hand over the power to the people, which eventually ended a decade-long bloody conflict. The political transformation was a great help to this research project, for I could meet the rebels and the army and safely travel to my study districts. I owe my greatest gratitude to the people of Nepal who made the change happen.

Background

This paper focuses on the impact of the armed conflict between the Maoist rebels and the Government of Nepal, which took place from 1996 to 2006, on the community forestry sector in Nepal. Armed conflict in any form affects resource governance, directly and indirectly. In Nepal the conflict impacted community forestry in several ways, mostly indirectly. This impact can be negative, positive or both, depending on the conflict's causes, actors involved, geographic location, duration and objectives.

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Researching the environmental impacts during the conflict was challenging due to security issues and the volatile political condition. Unlike most other studies of the impact of the war which have focused on economic impact, loss of lives and violation of human rights, my research examines the impact of the conflict on community forest user groups.

Conflict in Nepal started in February 1996 as an outcome of decades of dissatisfaction and frustration with the political system (Ghimire 2003). Social disparities based on caste, education, geography and economy created fertile ground for the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) to recruit the disadvantaged and marginalized population into the revolution. Over the 10-year period of insurgency more than 13,000 people died with a million rupees worth of infrastructure destroyed, resulting in a major economic setback for the nation.

By 2000, Maoists controlled all the rural areas of the nation, and the government was limited to its district headquarters in urban areas. In the later years the Maoists focused on toppling the monarchy. The conflict ended in April 2006 after King Gyanendra stepped down from power. After nine months, the Maoists joined the interim government in conducting a Constituent Assembly election to frame a new constitution.

Community forestry is one of the major forest managing systems in Nepal. The 1988 Forestry Sector Master Plan created the concept, which was legalized by the 1993 Forest Act and the subsequent 1995 Forest Regulation. The Forest Act of 1993 recognized Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs)¹ as autonomous bodies of citizens capable of man-

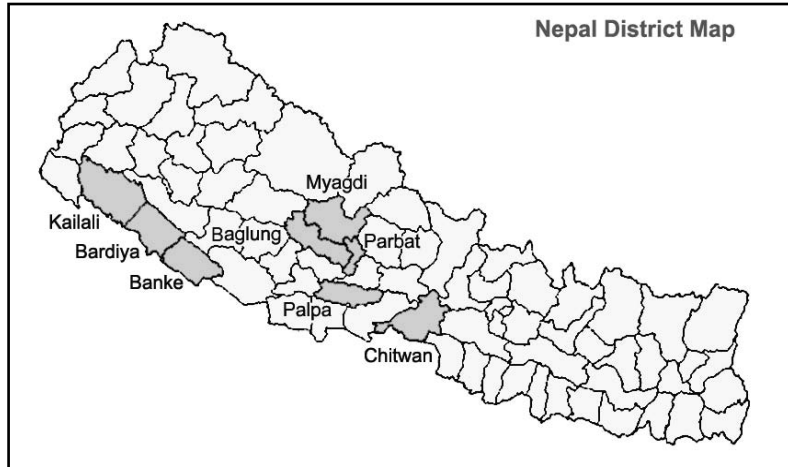


Figure 1. Map of Nepal with study districts highlighted

Source: ICIMOD, Kathmandu.

aging the forest. Income from the forest is used by the communities for conservation and development at the local level. The committee is formed democratically at the local level and is inclusive of all groups. So far, more than 14,000 CFUGs have been formed involving more than 35% of the population.

Federation of Community Forest Users Nepal (FECOFUN) is an umbrella body of the CFUGs and advocates for user group rights locally, nationally and regionally. During this period CFUGs were the only democratic institutions representing local people in the rural areas of Nepal (Pokhrel 2006, pers. comm.). In recent years, community forestry in Nepal has been recognized as the most effective natural resource management system due to its role in restoring degraded forest lands, conservation and empowering local people to manage and use the forest resources sustainably.

Because of this significance, I chose to study the impact of the conflict on that system. My objective is to study the effects from three major parties involved in the conflict—the Royal Nepal Army, the Government of Nepal and the Maoists. The separation between Army and Government is important, because the first was under the direct control of the King, while the latter is formed by political parties.

Statement of the problem

Nepal's Maoist rebellion is cited as being socio-political in origin, as a result of disparities across the social system. A few authors indicate environmental roots to the conflict (Bhurteel and Ali 2006), pointing to environmental degradation and agricultural production decline as the major cause of social unrest. However, the debate exists as to the exact cause of the conflict. Regardless of its foundations, the conflict affected the community forestry sector in multiple ways, like forest occupation by armed groups, restricting access, imposing taxes, arresting and abducting members of CFUGs and many more.

Study Site

I selected four districts (Baglung, Parbat, Myagdi, and Palpa) in the hilly region of Nepal and four in the terai² (Kailali, Banke, Bardiya, and Chitwan) of Nepal (Figure 1). The districts were selected on the basis of scale of Maoists activities, forest resources and accessibility during research.

Methodology

This research was conducted using three different methods:

1) Unstructured interviews with target groups such as forest users; district forest officials; army personnel stationed in the field and at the central level; Maoists leaders/activists, both local and national; NGO and international nongovernmental organization (INGO) staff involved in conservation; political analysts; officials of Federation of Community Forest Users Nepal (FECOFUN) at the district and national level; government forest officials and local villagers.

2) Secondary data were collected from sources such as media reports, program reports, books and other sources.

3) Field visits were conducted in the eight districts across the country, which included transect walks of the accessible forests, observation of the environmental impact, conducting interviews with government forest department staff and collecting data at the district forest offices and CFUGs regarding the community forestry program.

Results and discussion

This research found that community forestry was seriously affected during the conflict. The major impact was in their efforts in managing the forests and in the formation of

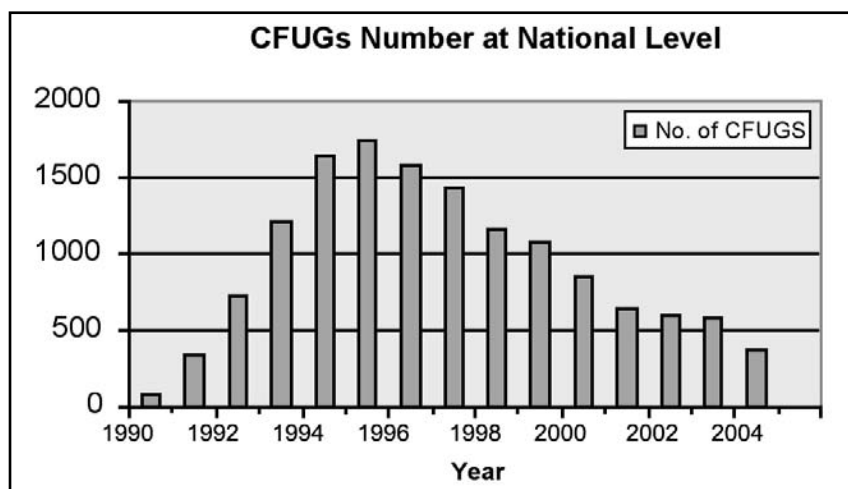
new CFUGs. Moreover, as Figure 2 shows, the number of Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) fell drastically as a result of the ongoing conflict, which resulted in reduced income to the communities. The Maoists, the Royal Nepal Army (now Nepal Army) and the Government played equal roles in the imposing changes that reduced the CFUG numbers during that period. Income from community forests declined due to the various restrictions that prohibited forest users from collecting forest products during the conflict (Figure 3).

Impact from the armed forces

The government of Nepal mobilized armed forces to control Maoist rebels in rural areas. In the process many posts were established in remote areas, which had been mostly forested. One senior army officer reported that, even though the posts were established near the forests, the forces never used wood for fuel, and cut timber only with the permission from the local management groups. But field observation and CFUG statements indicated this was not the case. The army officer made sure to add that during war safety and security are the primary concerns, so sometimes the forests surrounding the camps had to be cleared to

Figure 2. Number of CFUGs at national level

Source: Department of Forest, 2006



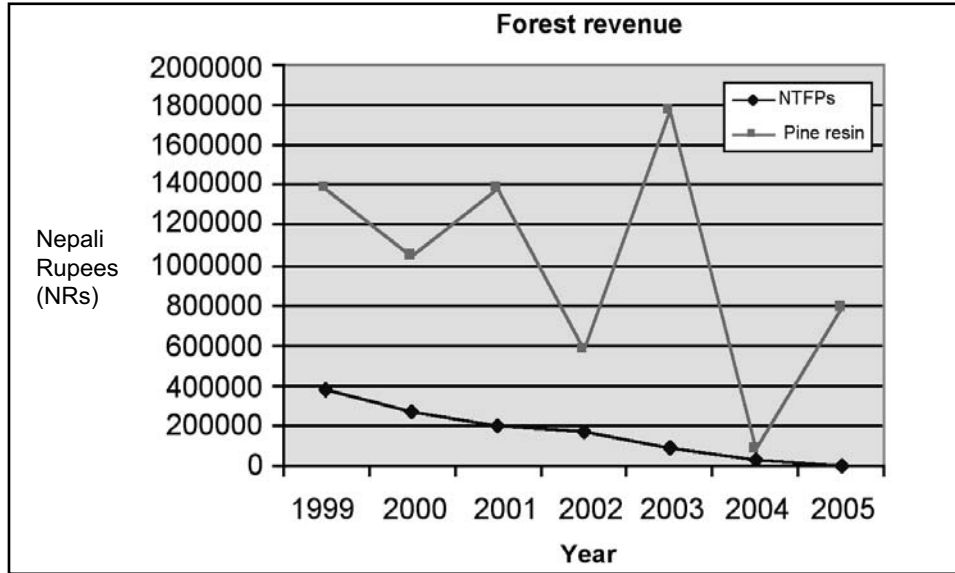


Figure 3. Revenue from community forests in Kailali district

Source: District Forest Office, Kailali, 2006

protect from Maoist attacks (Photograph 1) (interview with Army general, 2006).

Community forest users and local villagers interviewed expressed a different perspective regarding the army’s activities. They claimed that the army excessively used its power during the conflict and cut the best trees from community forests without notifying the forest com-

mittee (Table 1). A CFUG member claimed that the army and police regularly cut trees from the forests, but the army denied these allegations. The forest users also said they were impacted by the army’s declaration of restricted zones in forests surrounding the district headquarters and army camps. Such restrictions were imposed on numerous occasions,



Photograph 1. Security camp in community forest, Parbat district.

Photo by K. Roka

Table 1. Impact of the Royal Nepal Army on community forestry from the perspective of local community members

Positive Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decrease in hunting in forest after the weapons were collected by the armed forces • Illegal cutting decreased due to fear of getting killed during army operations • Increase in wildlife and forests due to restrictions to access to forests
Negative Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cutting of trees from community forests for bunkers, poles, fuel, construction projects, etc. • Forest clearing near the camps and training in community forests. A report found this to be the case in 40 districts (Kharel 2005) • Restricted access to forests in many districts • Harassment, beating and insulting of CFUG members who were accused by the army of being Maoist sympathizers • Freezing of financial activities of CFUGs intended to stop leakage of funds to rebels • Mistreating locals who entered forests near camps, some cases of rape were reported • Restrictions on meetings and gatherings of users groups • Subordinating forest officials and capturing district forest offices and vehicles • Army collaboration with timber smugglers in terai • Army involved in wildlife hunting during patrolling

Information collected through interviews of user group members and forest officials in the study districts between May-August 2006.

sometimes three to four times a year and for months at a time (CFUGs members in Palpa, Parbat, Kailali, and Myagdi, pers. comm., 2006).

Table 1 shows that the user groups statements contradict the claims made by the army officials, which claimed the army did not adversely affect the forests. Despite all the impediments, the user groups continued their management tasks even during this period of intense tension by adopting various mechanisms to escape punishment by the army, such as: meeting at night, limiting mobility, and protesting against the army and administrative restrictions.

Impact by the government of Nepal

The political instability in Nepal between 1996 and 2006 had a profound effect on the community forestry sector. In addition to the on-the-ground impact caused by the presence of armed government and Maoist forces using

forests as their bases, in 2000 the government passed a new Forestry Sector Policy which further controlled the forests and the CFUGs. Below key aspects of the new forest policy are highlighted:

—A 40% tax was imposed on the income from the community forests (from 10%).

—Large forested areas were not to be transferred to communities, but managed in collaboration with local leaders and government.

—Out of this collaborative management, local leaders would receive 25% and the government 75% of the revenue from the forest (Kanel et. al, 2005).

The new policy gave extra power to the local government and locally appointed rulers (regional and district). This power was used by many local political leaders to control the forest users through various means: freezing financial activities (bank accounts) of user groups claiming they leaked funds to the Maoists, giving

timber cutting concessions to their supporters or loyalists, and using income from the forests for personal purposes. At times the government officials, Maoists and forest contractors colluded during cutting of trees from community forests, by giving only the minimum price to the CFUG. One such extreme case was reported from the Sindhuli district (Karki 2006).

Impact by the Maoists

Of the three parties, this research reveals that the Maoists' actions caused the most substantial detrimental impacts to the community forestry sector. The Maoists lived in and around rural communities and forests, and therefore influenced resource governance. The Maoist leaders interviewed, both national and local,

claimed they were not against forest conservation and expressed their preference for community forestry, saying they considered the system more inclusive, accountable and transparent. They also strongly urged that their people's government should be recognized by all institutions, including international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) working in their control areas and all CFUGs must be registered with them by severing connection with the government.

As a result of rebel pressure and demands, four major donor agencies including DANIDA, GTZ, DFID and USAID withdrew their programs from rural areas. When questioned about the withdrawal of international organizations that supported community forestry in various districts, the Maoist officials responded

Table 2. Impact of Maoists on community forestry

Positive Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Management became more inclusive and transparent. • Participation of women increased • Wildlife hunting decreased • Illegal cutting in the hills decreased • Change in attitudes of CFUGs towards minorities and poor members • Donor agencies became more transparent and address issues of concern to local people • CFUGs learned new measures to adapt during insurgency period: hiding financial transactions, remaining neutral, and protesting restrictions to access and tree cuttings • Empowerment of indigenous communities on resource rights • Eviction of forest encroachers from community forests in terai (Kailali district)
Negative Impacts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taxation of forest income in the range of 25-50% • Extortion from user groups or members • Abduction of members • Forceful renaming of community forests to Maoist martyr's name • Collaborating with timber traders in the terai • Forced registration in the Maoist government formed at local level • Forceful membership in the party and participation in Maoist gatherings • Obstruction of community gatherings and discussions • Remain silent if money is paid regularly even for illegal activities (timber cutting or harvesting of forest products) • Displacement of people from the hills into the forests in the terai • Maoists supporters occupying forest areas under the authority of the party

Based on interviews of CFUGs between May-August 2006.

that organizations that recognize their government and address genuine issues of the poor are welcome. However, they did not support organizations from nations that supported the autocratic regime that was the Nepalese government—especially those from the United States.

A number of the claims by the Maoists contradict those of the CFUGs. Maoist leaders acknowledged that they collect taxes from the community forests, but strongly rejected that they had any involvement in an illegal timber trade, as claimed by CFUGs. Table 2 delineates the impacts the CFUGs attributed to the Maoists. One Maoist leader said that the party has its own forest experts working on conservation in areas under its control (in the Rolpa district). He further added that Maoists did not clear forests for training, camping or living, but used natural clearings in the forest and lived in the villages. Leaders admitted to cutting trees during major attacks or for blocking roadways during strikes, but blamed all poaching and illegal wildlife trade on the Nepalese army.

The CFUGs adopted various measures to give continuity to the management activities. They postponed timber harvesting under extreme conditions, or invested the income from timber and non-timber plant sales at the local level (among villagers or in different projects) rather than in banks, limited mobility of the members, united to oppose rebel's demands or bargain for compromise, and organized rallies against the Maoists' activities. These measures gave organizational strength to the CFUGs to oppose the fighting groups' demands and actions in an effective manner, resulting in the withdrawal of the restrictive orders and the new Forest Act of 2000.

Conclusion

The insurgency had mixed impacts on community forestry in Nepal: they were mostly negative but there were a few positive effects. Even though the fighting parties claimed they

supported conservation, their actions had an overall negative effect on the community forest management process. None of the forest users interviewed were positive regarding the actions of the state or the rebels, and they strongly accused both groups of using excessive force to meet their demands and utilizing various coercive means to control local people.

Faced with such challenges, community forestry grew stronger with the insurgency, adopting newer strategies and becoming resilient to different types of pressure in its commitment towards forest management. Nepal's conflict is a lesson for policy makers as it shows there is no substitute for local communities in managing resources and without collaboration with those communities all efforts towards conservation and development will not achieve the goals.

Endnotes

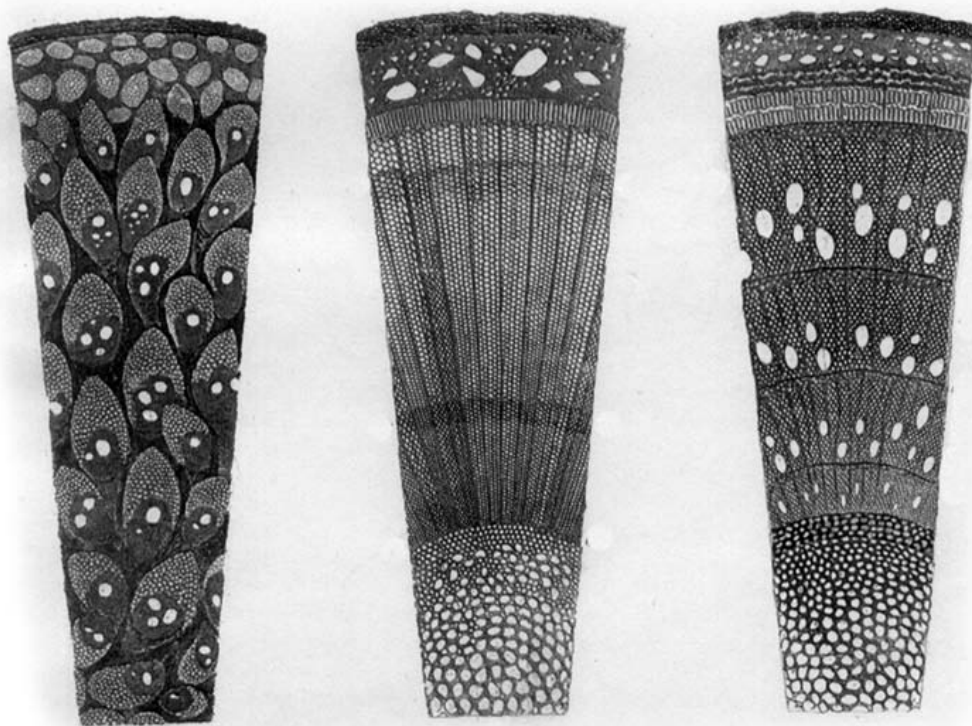
- 1 A CFUG is formed at the village level (all households using forests are included) to manage and use the forest. There is only one group for one forest. The group then formulates operation and management proposals and submits to the district forest office. After verification and approval by the district forest office, CFUG is legally recognized as autonomous body, and assisted in the management process. Each CFUG then forms one committee inclusive to different groups and gender as a governing body and representative of the whole group.
- 2 Terai is a plain in southern Nepal bordering India; it was forested until after the 1970s, when malaria was controlled and migration from the hills began.

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Source: Rhind, William. 2004. *The Vegetable Kingdom. Fine Rare Prints*. Available at: www.finerareprints.com