2.4 A national umbrella organization in Nepal for community forestry

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Introduction

The Federation of Community Forest Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) emerged as a national umbrella organization in 1995. Since then, it has made a crucial contribution to community forestry through policy advocacy and extension campaigns. It has helped establish more than 18,334 community forestry user groups that together manage more than 1.7 million hectares for the benefit of 2.2 million households. These community forestry user groups contribute to the sustainable management of forests and the development of forest enterprises, and can improve the livelihoods of rural forest-dependent peoples.

FECOFUN is the largest peoples’ organization in Nepal. It maintains gender balance, democratic and inclusive principles, represents all parts of the country, and includes indigenous peoples and minority groups.

In the past two decades FECOFUN’s initiatives in generating community income through small-scale enterprises in the forestry sector have helped significantly to reduce rural poverty. Its work has promoted changes in land cover through forest restoration and biodiversity conservation. It also provides a bridge between local people and governments through supporting discussions and negotiations with policy makers to secure community forestry rights.

Government continues to own the land where community forestry is carried out, and this remains the biggest challenge for community forestry in developing forest enterprises and improving livelihoods. FECOFUN advocates for the constitutional and legal recognition of community forest land rights.

Umbrella organizations such as FECOFUN help forest-dependent communities become involved in income-generating activities and contribute significantly to poverty reduction.

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Origins

FEcoFUN has been successful in channeling the power of local people to influence public policy decisions at the local, national and international levels. Network members have gained a variety of positions concerning forest governance, community-forest-based enterprises and biodiversity conservation. Community federations such as FEcoFUN have worked to secure community rights and remove forest land from government control and to establish inclusiveness and participation throughout the country. Despite many challenges, FEcoFUN has managed to become stronger and has secured community rights to resources.


Before the 1970s there was a lack of inclusive participation among communities. Only elite groups had influence in decision-making processes at both the local and policy level, although community members were the real forest users who actually managed the forests for their livelihoods. The forests were under government control and were prone to deforestation due to poor management. In contrast, communities were conserving forests in order to regulate ecosystems. FEcoFUN was established in July 1995 to involve these communities in the policy-making process and to organize the forest user groups from various provinces of Nepal within an umbrella organization. The group is dedicated to promoting and protecting the rights of forest users.

Membership and function

People who depend on forests to fulfill their basic needs, such as collecting fodder and fuel, are organized into community forest user groups (CFUGs). To date, 18,334 CFUGs have registered their community forests with FEcoFUN. These CFUGs are registered with the District Forest Office (DFO) as perpetually self-governing bodies according to the Forest Act of 1993 and the Forest Regulations of 1995 (GON and MFSC 1995a and b). They are entitled to manage and utilize parts of accessible national forests as community forests according to their operational plan, which must be approved by the DFO (Ojha et al. 2007).

There are two types of members in FEcoFUN; they are categorized according to their involvement in natural resource management and use rights. Forest User Groups (FUGs) organized under the country’s Forest Act of 1993 are eligible to become general members of FEcoFUN. Any other user group based on forest resources at the grassroots level is qualified to become an elementary member. Of the more than 15,000 CFUGs and other community-based forest management groups in Nepal, such as leasehold forestry groups, religious forestry groups, buffer zone and traditional forest management groups, approximately 13,000 — the vast majority — are affiliated with FEcoFUN.
The organizational structure of FECOFUN includes one national body, 75 district bodies and 1,101 local bodies. The executive committee’s tenure period lasts for four years. Every district committee of FECOFUN has to conduct a meeting of district executive committees in the presence of 60% of other committee members.

In preparation for a general assembly, FECOFUN at the national level provides guidelines to district FECOFUN members on the selection of representatives. It encourages them to select representatives from dalits (“untouchables” under the Hindu caste system), indigenous/ethnic communities and other disadvantaged groups (FECOFUN 2001).

There have been five general assemblies to date. More than 613 community forestry representatives from all over the country attended the Fifth General Assembly in 2014. FECOFUN’s constitution states that 50% of its members must be women or from marginalized communities, which makes the process inclusive and participatory. At every level, including the central level, women must be nominated as either chairperson or general secretary, and vice-chair person or treasurer, in executive committees (FECOFUN 2014).

Initially, FECOFUN bore the costs associated with organizational activities through membership fees. Since then, many national and international donors have funded the activities of FECOFUN; through their support the organization is planning programmes more effectively.

**Key actions and achievements**

According to the chairperson of the organization, “FECOFUN has made tremendous achievements for community forestry, though we have to continuously struggle to ensure community forestry rights and community land rights” (Ganesh Bahadur Karki, pers. comm.). Another FECOFUN leader said: “Community forestry and the FECOFUN movement have made a great contribution to strengthening grassroots democracy and contributing to biodiversity conservation, inclusive local leadership development and women’s empowerment” (Manju Malasi, pers. comm.).

FECOFUN works for the rights of community forest user groups. It advocates for policy formation, amendment and implementation. It creates awareness of enterprises based on community forests. FECOFUN facilitates workshops with producer organization to share experiences, lessons learned, opportunities and challenges. In Nepal, community forestry use groups are the only institutions that ensure women’s participation in decision-making processes.

Communities regard the forest as both asset and property, and manage it as if it were their child. They have successfully overcome challenges and converted the forest into a healthy resource where a maximum level of output can be achieved. In the Namdu
community forest of Dolakha, for example, the area had few trees, with bare land and stones when management rights were transferred to the community. The community now manages the forest through their best efforts, which has inspired other communities. During this journey FECOFUN worked hand in hand with the community. It also helped to empower the women who previously were limited to household work. Box 1 describes one of FECOFUN’s achievements.

**Box 1. Chure Conservation Area**
The Government of Nepal declared the Chure Conservation Area in 2014. More than 3,000 community forests, linked to the livelihoods of more than 50,000 people, are located in the area. FECOFUN opposed the government decision and united all its community forestry user groups — from the local to the national level — to lobby the government to hand over the rights to the area to the community. FECOFUN is making the government realize that denying local communities their ownership and management rights over forests will result in forest degradation, conflicts and increased poverty. The organization submitted letters of protest to the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Forest and Soil Conservation, demanding the withdrawal of the Chure Conservation Area. FECOFUN has established itself as a strong opposition to, as well as a collaborative partner with, the Ministry. This has provided a mechanism for checks and balances in the governance of the forest resources, and at the same time has fostered awareness of social issues within the governance process. FECOFUN’s awareness-raising activities have helped to enhance the political capital of CFUGs beyond the traditional patron-client relationship with government agencies. The movement and advocacy campaigns organized by FECOFUN have inspired communities in other sectors, such as irrigation, drinking water and community electricity.

FEKOFUN also conducted a campaign throughout the country that raised interest in community forest management and provided information about it. It builds capacity at the community level in leadership development, enterprise management, entrepreneurship and marketing. It also supports policy formulation and provides financial incentives through a community/private partnership model. Nepal has strict policies on enterprise establishment. FECOFUN is carrying out discussions and consultations with government authorities to simplify policies for the harvesting and trade of forest products.
**Issues and challenges**

Recently, the main challenge for FECOFUN has been to secure community property rights in Nepal’s new constitution, which is in the drafting phase. Leaders and communities are demanding the transfer of ownership of forest land to local CFUGs. Another issue that needs to be addressed soon is how to enhance sustainable forest management and develop community forestry enterprises through public-private community partnerships, along with access to markets. Although communities have been using and conserving forests for decades, policy-making processes do not include them. The key challenges for FECOFUN are building its capacity in effective policy advocacy, sustainable forest management, access to markets and finance, and urging policy makers to consider pro-poor livelihood improvements.

**Conclusions**

People’s organizations such as FECOFUN help forest-dependent communities become involved in income-generating activities and contribute significantly to poverty reduction. FECOFUN supports sustainable forest management, promotes pro-poor policies and empowers people so they can achieve economic prosperity. The job is not yet done, however. FECOFUN still needs to work to strengthen member organizations who support forest rights holders at the local level, to help them secure the participation of forest rights holders in policy and decision-making processes, and make their voices heard.

**References**


