



6.5 Conflict management and sustainable forest management in the Himalayas

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Introduction

Conflicts in the context of forest management are common. In the future both climatic and non-climatic factors (e.g., insecure tenure rights, demands for ecosystem services) will exacerbate these conflicts. An analysis of global examples, such as water sharing or forest use (Kotru 2006), endorses this hypothesis.

Demands for a sustainable supply of forest goods and services from a variety of stakeholders are increasing. This puts pressure on forestry institutions and governance systems to perform efficiently, effectively and equitably. This challenge will demand a better understanding of emerging conflict situations in relation to climate change and environmental degradation. If conflicts are not addressed, they will worsen environmental degradation, compromise the desired impacts of public and private investments, and undermine livelihoods.



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Conventional participatory approaches, policies and legislations are constrained in their ability to consider and apply conflict management mechanisms in practice. Due to rapid socio-demographic and economic changes there is a need to develop consensus over the role of good forest governance in making national development investments focus on impacts. This article is based on a case study in India and Nepal, in which the authors were directly involved; it discusses the drivers of change, governance issues, stakeholder participation and approaches to resolving local conflicts.

The key objective of the study was to identify hidden local conflicts as entry points for a customized participatory planning approach that facilitated conflict management with the conflicting parties. It also endeavoured to find out if the valuation of economic and environmental benefits arising through the settlement of such conflicts can stimulate local actions for resource conservation and maximize the contribution of forestry sector to local development. Climate change impacts also put high demands on local conflict management.

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Managing conflicts

The main approach to settling forest resource conflicts is local empowerment. It is the key to judicious decision-making on resource management, which in turn is the outcome of decentralization implemented through participatory and multi-stakeholder consultation tools. The “Earth Summit” (Agenda 21; UN 1993) was the precursor to a wave of forest sector decentralization reforms in developing countries. In addition to achieving multi-stakeholders cooperation, the overall aim was to minimize conflicts between the state and local communities over forest use (Gleditsch, Salahyan and Nordas 2007; Reuveny 2007).

Thereafter, community-based forest management frameworks were broadened. The underlying rationale was that local people should not only help design participatory forest management (PFM) but also contribute to inclusive decision-making processes and effective norms for governing forest resources on an equitable basis, which are crucial to mitigating conflicts (Sikor, Barlösius and Scheumann 2008).

There is also a need to examine development programmes in terms of local understandings and approaches to community-based natural resource management initiatives, and of local power and status relationships with the environment (Twyman 2000). On the other hand, participatory approaches (e.g., Participatory Rural Appraisals, Appreciative Inquiry, etc.) are not designed to treat local conflicts. Public investments in forest production and conservation are often not sustainable, since projects/programmes operate on an ad-hoc basis, and project cycles seldom allow time for conflict identification and mitigation.

Despite the advancement of PFM in India and Nepal and huge investment, (e.g., about US\$ 141.4 million (from 1996–2011) through donor support in Nepal),¹ there are conflicts around forest areas. Forest encroachments in the state forests of Nepal are a clear clash of interests in protection on the one hand and access on the other. The poor survival rate of plantations on common lands in India is due to a conflict of interest between open grazing and conservation.

The overall lack of commitment and facilitative skills of implementing personnel add to the ability of forest governance to solve the local conflict of interest (e.g., exploitative fellings in remote community forests) in already degraded forests and plantations. This leads to forest cover loss in Nepal, where the annual deforestation rate from 2005–10 was 27,000 ha (Mongabay 2011).

The conventional mode of settling forest-based conflicts demands tactics that recognize two main challenges: First: managing conflicts must be part of future forest governance mechanisms. In extreme cases, violence is likely to occur when internal and external stresses are not countered by capable and legitimate institutions. Second: increased demands on the good governance of forest resources will emerge from the diversified range of stakeholders who seek inclusive participation in securing production, quality of services and equitable access and benefit sharing. Public schemes and donor-aided projects have targeted and scheduled implementation, and conflict management has often proved ideal to achieve the positive impacts of investments.

Case studies

Conflicts arise because of differences in the values and interests of diverse stakeholders. Because conflicts are inevitable, processes for dealing with them constructively are needed. The main objective is to analyze forest-based conflict situations and use the results to develop a new conceptual framework for planning sustainable forest management (SFM).² This case study relied on logical steps from conflict identification to its management:³

- selection of three sites (one in India and two in Nepal);
- identification of any conflicts that hindered SFM (what, why, who, how);
- use of a combination of participatory assessment and consultative tools to facilitate local sensitization and conflict management;
- conflict analysis (assessing the power and position of various stakeholders) and proposal of locally owned conflict resolutions and management; and
- distillation of lessons learned in order to propose a conceptual framework.

The three case studies had scenarios of resource scarcity, long-established social conflicts, a range of governance standards, and political instability at the local and national level that affects local lives, livelihoods and resources. They are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Impacts of integrating conflict management in participatory planning

Conflict	Approach adopted to facilitate inclusive conflict management	Impacts achieved
Bhodi Village, Kangra District of Himachal Pradesh, India		
upstream land use as open grazing area by watershed-based livestock keepers, against forest restoration planned by the Bhodi village institution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - watershed based vision-building and planning - third-party mediation, using downstream community facilitators - focus group discussion - cost-benefit analysis of current land use vs improved management, and its dissemination to watershed communities - exposure trips to sites where watershed communities benefited from forest-use-related conflict management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - proactive identification and management of conflict led to inter-watershed consensus and action on phased restoration of open-grazed communal land, instead of one-time area closure - community actions on fire management led to progress on conservation and future forest products for value addition - increase in forest cover led to improved micro-climate, biodiversity and grass production - women were champions for resource conservation and led further upscaling of the approach

Lorpa Village, Jumla District, Nepal		
overuse of local forest resources for illegal purposes by local community members, against inadequate institutional capacity to counter misuse of these resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vision-building - non-confrontational style of conflict resolution - watershed planning based on resource balance studies if conflict of interest continues - focus group discussion with Community Forest User Group - Community-based Climate Vulnerability Assessment - climate modelling (downscaled) used for assessing future trends - exposure trips to good community forestry groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - awareness of communities to settle the conflict of interest between different forest stakeholders as the key to progress and prosperity through an Integrated Participatory Watershed Plan - the plan is the means to achieve good forest governance and an ideal response to climate change challenges
Rangapur Village Development Committee, Rautahat District, Nepal		
<p>wider group of stakeholders with demands on forest use, against local forest-dependent groups</p> <p>authoritarian conflict management style used by distant users</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - multi-stakeholder dialogue - focus group discussion - targeted development activities - collaborative forest management plan 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - no consensus for an inter-community dialogue to manage forests on long term was achieved - although a collaborative forest management plan could not be implemented, it did lead to the suppression of criminal elements carrying out illegal cuttings, and minimized further conflicts

General findings of case studies

Since earlier public investments on conservation and afforestation had failed, the authors established the link to conflict of interests on the common use of communal and forest lands. Therefore, the first focus-group discussions outlined the needs and probable solutions of conflicting groups. Rather than implementing the development programme, the authors linked the further planning of investments to non-climatic issues that hinder the regeneration of forests. This triggered the local response: "If we have to progress and prosper, we need to manage conflict of interests."

In Bhodi (see Table 1), a downstream community affected by soil erosion and water scarcity found the solution in restoring the forest cover in the upstream. This community was sensitized to facilitate a consensus for an integrated watershed plan that balanced the needs of livestock-keepers in upstream with a phased plan for forest conservation. In Lorpa (affected by heavy deforestation and degradation), forest-dependent groups were

made aware of the value of ecosystem services on the basis of sharing projected threats due to climate trends and impacts of non-climatic factors. This galvanized the work on a participatory climate-proofed watershed plan with clear perception on forest restoration.

In Rangapur, however, an agreement between the disputing parties could not be reached. There, the various stakeholders had different views on the illegal timber felling, and trust-building among key warring forum members could not be achieved.⁴ The communication gaps between the stakeholders were a major hurdle.

All the sites were subjected to participatory approaches and limited early investments were made to affect a constructive dialogue amongst conflicting groups. Box 1 provides the key conclusions.

Box 1. Key conclusions from case studies

Conflict management needs intensive and local manoeuvring to identify the latent or existing conflicts in the early planning phase, before projects are implemented.

Holistic thinking and valuation of local ecosystem services on the watershed scale forges cooperation between upstream and downstream communities, and facilitates collective short-and long-term decision-making on conservation, improved livelihoods and economic avenues, thus mitigating conflicts.

Inadequate local institutional capacities can lead to drawn-out conflicts, which threaten forest ecosystems and people's livelihoods.

Tenure security is important, not only as an issue between the state and local users, but as a source of conflict between users in a common watershed.

Non-climatic factors are now compounded by climatic factors, causing faster ecosystem degradation and creating additional challenges in managing conflicts (e.g., poor livestock keepers).

Marginalized and disadvantaged groups (e.g., women) are often alienated and suppressed through such conflicts.

The short duration of projects (e.g., less than three years) is not ideal to manage deep-rooted local conflicts as these tend to consider that investment flows from new economic sources can mitigate conflicts.

Recommendations

The conflict management skills of facilitators (including institutions, local resource persons and women) should be upgraded on a continual basis and used proactively during the early planning phase of development projects. Capacity-building support should be customized accordingly, from micro to macro level.

Non-climatic and climate-change arguments with grassroots communities should be used for facilitating in conflict situation by projecting negative impacts and opportunities (e.g., good forest governance and expected benefits from Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation, or REDD).

Performance-based progress in local conflict resolution should be applied to allow the flow of public and private funds for development.

Conflicts that clearly disadvantage marginalized groups need to be treated in the early stage through site- and situation-specific actions.

There is an urgent need for further research focused on how identifying and addressing local conflicts can be converted into local opportunities through a sense of belonging and mutual interest in their resolution.



Building a new conceptual framework for managing conflicts

These recommendations — combined with a rich body of literature that examines many relevant issues pertaining to the environment-development challenge — warrant a shift to proactively identifying and managing conflicts (Boyd et al. 2008). In the context of forest management, competition for finite resources, divergent beliefs and institutional factors can trigger and exacerbate conflicts over natural resources (Homer-Dixon 1994; Germain and Floyd 1999; Hellström 2001). Often these conflicts emerge as nonviolent, yet destructive, issues that impede development, social equality and conservation (Treves and Karanth 2003; Woodroffe, Thirgood and Rabinowitz 2005).

Encroachment on thousands of hectares of forest in Nepal is an example. The shifting of decision-making powers from central to local levels of government is part of a larger process of devolving resource rights to local-level institutions. This should minimize the chance of conflicts, which is an important first step for viable forest management. The reality, however, is that resource rights are often not vested in local institutions or individuals, and the poor are particularly likely to suffer from a lack of control over the forest resources, since their livelihoods depend on these resources (WRI, UNDP, UNEP and WB 2008).

Obviously, governments need to develop suitable conflict management strategies and more inclusive practices, recognizing the inter-relationships between conflict, social, political, economic and cultural factors (Upreti et al. 2010). An improved conceptual framework must assist in dealing with conflicts about the management of forests. This framework can be piloted at different scales and be made more robust through ongoing learning. The cases analyzed in this paper contribute to such a framework.

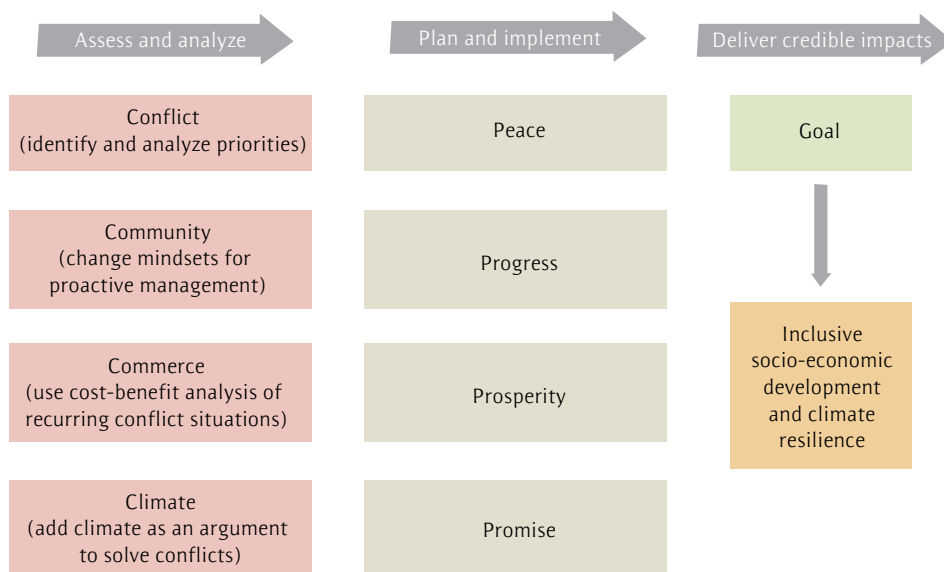
Proposed framework

A 4-C framework for managing conflicts is proposed that includes these elements:

1. Conflict: its resolution as the basis of successful short-long-term development outcomes and overall peace
2. Community: as the prime social medium to facilitate resolution and make development progress
3. Commerce: valuating and investing in inclusive economic initiatives to generate interest for conflict mitigation
4. Climate: as the precursor to conflicts, demanding integration in participatory tools and for galvanizing local community support.

The proposed framework aims to conceptualize the social dynamics between principles of equitable human development, technological advancement, environmental security and politically sensitive atmospheres and the ways forward to keeping conflict issues part of the focus of sustaining forest resources. Figure 1 provides the essential aspects of such a conceptual framework, bridging gaps where there is lack of governance, disruption of forest resources surrounded by conflict scenarios at micro and macro scales.

Figure 1. Proposed 4-C framework for managing conflicts in forest management



In other words, community conflicts need to be assessed and analyzed with the local communities. Short- and long-term resolution often needs to be accompanied by visible and sustainable income generation and conservation activities that address climate resilience.

When external planners design target investments, they often have the notion that community participation will take place as a precursor to planned targets, given an assumed mindset of collectivism and commonality within a community. In reality, this is not the case, as there are always latent or actual conflict situations in and among communities. These should be identified at the outset, and can be addressed by designing tangible and intangible benefits.

Acknowledgement

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Endnotes

1. Source: Ministry of Forests and Soil Conservation, Foreign Aid Division, Government of Nepal.
2. In these case studies, the authors have directly been involved in the design and analysis of the local conflict resolution process.
3. As a common guideline for selected case studies, FAO's *Land Tenure Manuals* format was used, using "Local Conflict" as the entry point.
4. This site was a test area for a new concept of community-based collaborative forest management, where traditional users and settled forest users were brought together under an institutional arrangement of District Forest Coordination Committee. However, forest destruction and illegal encroachments on the CFM area have been substantially increasing in these areas and CFM sub-committees have a very limited capacity and commitment (partly because it can be life-threatening) to protect local forests (barring a few proactive members of CFM sub-committees). In Rangapur there was no change in the intensity of encroachments/illegal felling after the Biodiversity Sector Programme for Shiwaliks and Terai (BISEP-ST)⁴. Visual assessment shows that intact forestlands can be converted to open area/agriculture in 7–10 years.

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