Sustaining inequity? Rethinking the history of Nepalese forest policy

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ABSTRACT: Nepal has a painful history of social, political, economic and ecological problems affecting the majority of poor people. A history of forestry in Nepal highlights how the forest management shifted from being a local affair under the feudal regime to a situation where the state, following the nationalisation of forests in 1957, controlled the forest use and management. In 1976, this 'centralised' system shifted from the state's technical revenue-oriented forestry to people-centred community forestry, both in government policy and in the practice of halting and reversing deforestation through local communities. The policy shift was also based on concerns for rural development and poverty issues, particularly to improve livelihoods of the forest dependent poor people. By critically analysing the history of forest policy in Nepal, the paper argues that the policy shift and the current community forestry policy and practice have largely failed to address equity. Despite the increased emphasis on equity issues in the current policy, this historical inequity is presently continuing and hindering the potential of community forestry to improve the livelihoods of most forest dependent poor people. The key reasons for sustaining inequity is because of the policy and practice being driven by the protection-focussed restricted thinking informed by orthodox forest science, which generally ignores wider socio-cultural and political forces that influence forestry problems and solutions. The paper therefore by highlighting the need for rethinking the policy making and implementation processes in the Nepalese forestry sector.

1 INTRODUCTION

While a policy is broadly defined as anything that organisations do in the real world (Mayers and Bass 1999), a forest policy is the course of actions required to resolve problems, reduce uncertainty and increase assurance in forest use and management (Kanel 2001). Forest policies in Nepal and elsewhere are traditionally devised by the state agencies formally responsible for forest management. Policy making is therefore understood as a political process, in which the government bureaucrats and politicians identify problems and devise strategies to solve them. The majority of people, who are affected by the policy, are not involved in the policy-making.

Despite policy being a political process, the content and emphasis of the forest policies have changed over time. In the past, the policy emphasised forest management to maximise the state's revenue. Policies were focussed on the strict control over forest resources by policing people living in and around the forest. Local people were portrayed as forest destroyers and the professional experts as the saviours. Later, the poor outcomes that followed decades of revenue-oriented forest management strategies and planned development forced policy makers and scholars to reconsider

the role of communities in resource use and conservation (Agrawal and Gibson 1999). With an increasing call for decentralisation and bottom-up planning, there was a shift in the forest policy, particularly in many developing countries that emphasised the need for local people to involve in forest use and management. Emerging in the late 1970s, the new policy was internationally popularised in relation to forestry and was explicitly applied for poverty alleviation and community development in developing countries (FAO 1978). The policy shift clearly recognised local people, not as a problem, but as a solution to many forestry problems. This participatory approach has since been embraced by many countries as Community Forestry (CF), Joint Forest Management and Social Forestry. For the last three decades, as many as fifty countries in the world have officially involved local people in forest management (FAO 1999). Currently, CF is one of many approaches that has been increasingly accepted and recognised as suitable for the sustainable management and utilisation of forest resources.

The international shift in the forest policy can be clearly seen in the Nepalese forest policy. Despite the country being ecologically fragile and economically poor, the current Nepalese CF policy is often referred as one of the most progressive CF policies in the world. Yet, there are many aspects of Nepalese CF being unexplored and understudied. One of them is the issue of equity. While there are encouraging outcomes of CF in terms of restoring degraded lands in Nepal (see Dev et al. 2003), it is unclear whether the policy has also significantly improved the livelihoods of local people (e.g. Malla 2000). Moreover, there is a limited understanding of the impacts of forest policies to different sections within a local community, particularly the most forest dependent women and poor people (Hobley 1990; Graner 1997; Timsina and Ojha 2004).

This paper investigates the relations between the Nepalese forest policy and equity in a historical perspective. The paper is divided into four sections. First, the concept of equity and community forestry is discussed. Second, the paper critically reviews the historical shift of forest policy and its attempts to address equity. It analyses the pre and post community forestry policy in terms of involving in and benefiting to the disadvantaged sections (poor, women and lower caste) of the community at the local level. Specifically, it focuses on the current community forestry policy and practices, identifies the gaps between them and explains the impacts and implications to the livelihoods of the disadvantaged sections of the community. Third, the paper discusses the implications of sustaining inequity within the historically changing policy and current practices. The paper argues that the sustaining inequity is due mainly to the policy and practices being largely constrained by the restricted thinking of the protection-focussed forest management informed largely by orthodox forest science that generally ignores wider socio-cultural, political and economic systems. Finally, the paper concludes by emphasising the need for prioritising the needs and concerns of the poor and disadvantaged sections in the forest policy and practices. This requires major rethinking in the traditional policy approach based on scientific knowledge and understanding of the problems.

2   EQUITY AND COMMUNITY FORESTRY: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Central to the equity debate is concern for the poor, women and minorities (Ringquist 1998). While equity can be defined in various ways, here it refers to fairness in decision making processes (procedural equity) and consequences of such decisions (distributional equity). We believe that in hierarchal and unequal societies such as in Nepal, equality may not be fair and the fairness may need inequality. Therefore, here equity is not equality, but it is 'priority' to the poor, women and other disadvantaged sections. We believe however that equity may be a way towards equality. Messerschmitt (1981) however argues that in a hierarchical society, unequal outcomes are not necessarily seen as inequitable. Conversely, Fisher (1989) argues that equity involves getting a fair share, not necessarily an equal share. In both cases, the question remains; who defines what is meant by equity. When equity is decided by the wealthy and powerful people, it is likely that the poorer sections receive less than other sections of the community and the outcome is yet interpreted as equitable. Additionally, many natural resource management interventions are used to address social

justice and ecological issues through the democratic and egalitarian principles that employ equality of access and shares in the pre-existing unequal society. These interventions aim at providing an equal, but not necessarily a sufficient share for the poor people. In some cases, such interventions can dismantle the indigenous and socio-culturally conditioned hierarchical systems that promote equity (Mosse 1997). Equity as giving the priority to the poor people has been ignored.

Theoretical literature emphasises equity over equality. For instance, Parfit (1991, p.19), argues that "Benefiting people matters more, the worse off these people are". He adds that "equality is the default: what we should aim for when we cannot justify distributing unequally" (p.15). While Parfit has not argued for or against priority or equality, he implies that priority is a more useful concept than equality. The explicit emphasis on priority comes from Raz (1986), who states that "egalitarian principles often lead to waste" (p.227). He argues in favour of priority based on the argument of "concern":

> … what makes us care about various inequalities is not the inequality but the concern identified by the underlying principle. It is the hunger of the hungry, the need of the needy, the suffering of the ill, and so on. The fact that they are worse off in the relevant respect than their neighbours is relevant. But it is relevant not as an independent evil of inequality. Its relevance is in showing that their hunger is greater, their need more pressing, their suffering more hurtful, and therefore our concern for the hungry, the needy, the suffering, and not our concern for equality, makes us give them the priority (p.240).

In the case of CF, while not all forest policies explicitly aim at or expect to promote equity, concerns over equity is "one of the fundamental principles of community involvement in forest management" (Anon 2003, p.1) and is the philosophical basis for community-based natural resource management (Li 1996). Equity is particularly important in Nepalese CF because the forest policy aims at alleviating poverty. Since the poor, women and other disadvantaged sections in Nepal are socio-economically and politically worse off than other sections of the society, there are moral and practical rationales for their concerns to be prioritised in the forest policies.

However, Nepalese CF policies and practices have largely failed to ensure equitable access to, and share of, benefits to the weaker population and to involve them equitably in the process of policy formation and implementation (Hobley 1990; Malla 2000; Timsina 2003). It is believed that the CF has not addressed livelihood or poverty alleviation issues (Springate-Baginski et al. 2003), and therefore is a poor policy for the poor people (Graner 1997). Previous studies have suggested that the limited success of CF is due to "institutional incompatibility" between the "customs" of the forest administration and the "customs" of rural people (Fisher 1990, p.12), elites' domination (Malla et al. 2003), the decentralisation of responsibilities but a limited devolution of authorities (Ribot 2002) and the innovation without a change in power relations (Fisher 2003). More over, the limited effectiveness of CF has been linked to the policy formulation and implementation being guided by off-the-shelves approaches that ignore local specificities and wider contexts (Brown et al. 2002). More broadly, the unfair environmental outcomes are attributed to the adoption of approaches based on neutral, universal and accurate orthodox science (Fairhead and Leach 1998; Forsyth 2003). However, there is a limited understanding on whether and why the shifts in Nepalese forest policies between pre and post community forestry have exacerbated or improved inequity. In this context, a historical investigation of shifting forest policies is useful to understand how and why equity issues have addressed in different forest policies in Nepal.

3   THE HISTORY OF FOREST POLICY IN NEPAL

A history of forest policy highlights how forest management in Nepal shifted from a feudal and state control to a situation where the community, following the emergence of CF in 1976, has a significant influence over the use and management of forests. The analysis of forest policy in the pre and post community forestry era and within the current policy and practice suggests that the

needs and views of the most forest dependent poor people have been historically ignored. Despite the CF policy being concerned with rural development and poverty issues, the inequity has been continuing and hindering the potential of the CF to improve the livelihoods of the poor people. The following sections critically analyse and explain the link between the shift in Nepalese forest policies and issues of equity.

3.1   Forest policy in Nepal before CF, before 1976

The history of forestry before the rise of CF in Nepal can be divided into two stages: a) Feudalised forestry, before 1951; and b) Nationalised forestry, between 1951 to 1976. Before 1951, there was no official forest policy. No systematic records were maintained. Therefore, we simply do not know exactly how the forest was managed. However, what we reasonably know that the forest use and management was controlled locally under the feudal regime. From 1951 onwards, with a socio-political chaos following the democratic revolution in 1951, there was a formal forest policy, the nationalisation policy of 1957 that institutionalised the state's control over forest use and management. A common denominator for both stages is the control of forest resources by a few people or by the state at the expense of the majority of poor people.

3.1.1   Feudalised forestry, before 1951

Until 1951, the forest management in Nepal operated under a feudal regime that locally controlled both forest resources and forest dependent poor people. Prior to 1846, the state deliberately encouraged peasant farmers to convert forests into agriculture lands mainly to increase the tax base (Stiller 1975). The state-appointed local functionaries collected taxes from the poor farmers and in return, these local agents received the ownership and rights of land as a gift in the form of Birta (a grant of tax-free and heritable land to individual nobles) and Jagir (a grant of land to a government employee in lieu of salary) (Regmi 1984). While the peasants were controlled from taking independent actions in forest management (Bajracharya 1983), they did not have severe problems of access to and use of essential forest products. Their misery however increased when the Ranas (the hereditary prime ministers who overshadowed the King between 1846-1950), transferred the ownership of the land and valuable forests to their private names (Regmi 1978). This privatisation was employed to control land tenure and to collect taxes from people through various systems such as Talukdari, Rakam and Banjanch Goswara systems (see Bajracharya 1983; Mahat et al. 1986). The local functionaries fully supported Ranas' policies so that they could receive as much lands and forests as possible through Jagir and Birta. They became local landlords and used local peasants as tenants to cultivate their land and extract rents. This forced peasant farmers to become heavily dependent on the Jagir and Birta holders (Stiller 1975).

Although Nepal was never colonised, the presence of British-East India Company had a significant influence on the ways forests were used and managed in Nepal. In one hand, the Nepalese government had to supply timber to British India free of charge as part of Nepal's contribution to the First World War (Collier 1976). On the other hand, British foresters such as J. V. Collier and E. A. Symthies were appointed to create a forest service within Nepal, structured in line with that of India for exploitation of forests in Terai (the plain and productive lands in the southern part of Nepal, bordering to India) (Regmi 1978). In order to meet colonial interests, the orthodox forestry knowledge and the restricted thinking of forest management was imported by sending Nepalese students to Imperial (Indian) Forestry School in Dehra Dun to study scientific forest management (Hobley 1996). The newly graduated foresters became either commercially oriented foresters or total custodians of the forest. They were trained to perceive forest-dependent poor people as forest destroyers and professional foresters as forest saviours. The needs of the most forest dependent poor users were disregarded.

3.1.2   Nationalised forestry, between 1951 and 1976

The democratic revolution in 1951 that overthrown the feudalist Rana rulers, brought a radical change in Nepalese forestry that officially prohibited people in accessing the forest. While there

was a people-oriented forest policy drafted in 1952/53, this was abandoned in favour of the *Private Forest Nationalisation Act* 1957. This Act was enacted to take over all private forests in the country. In one hand, the Act released all private lands and forests from the control of a few powerful Birta and Jagir holders, especially from the Ranas to fulfil the revolutionary mood of the public to dispose the feudalist system of governance. On the other hand, inspired by the centralisation of forestry in India and other countries in contributing to economic development, the state enacted the radical forest policy to regularise the revenue flow to the state (Regmi 1978). The policy perceived the feudal control of forests as a problem and the central control as a solution to address many forestry problems and to realise wider forestry potentials. This perception of problems and solutions was largely based on the positivist understanding of forestry problems and potentials, influenced by the modernisation paradigm (Pokharel 1997). However, the feudal private tenure of lands and forests was embedded in the wider socio-cultural and economic factors. The previous tenure system was not replaced, but was informally operated in many places. Despite the official policy change, there was a little change on the ground and the poor people were remained in the control of the local elites.

   The Nationalisation Act attracted many controversies in relation to the increased deforestation in Nepal. In one hand, this policy that imposed central control in place of feudal control, was believed to have accelerated deforestation (FAO/World Bank 1979). As forests managed by local systems were appropriated, traditional rights were curtailed, and any use of the forest was prohibited, the local system became officially dysfunctional. The forests were converted into open access that induced deforestation as the state was initially weak and remote to effectively control the forest. It was believed that the deforestation was accelerated when the government formally demarcated private lands from the forests, many elites, mainly the former Birta and Jagir holders seized the opportunity to capture forest lands as they were better equipped with money and power to use and exclude poor people (Karki et al. 1994). On the other hand, scholars argued that the Act did not have such an impact because most of the rural residents remained unaware of the Act (Karan and Ishii 1996). The Nationalisation hardly caused widespread or unusual amount of deforestation in the context of crisis and instability that might have there before and after the collapse of the Rana regime (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). By late 1950s and during the 1960s however, the state strengthened its institutional and administrative capacity under the partyless *Panchayat System*, a centrally controlled partyless council system of government. Various legislative instruments were employed to effectively control forests and generate revenues. This extended awareness of the Act and strengthened the state's control over forest resources. The socio-cultural, economic and informal systems were ignored. By the early 1970s, the function of state's forestry staff was established as a police and the policy became disturbingly cruel to the subsistence needs of poor users (Soussan et al. 1995). The forest-dependent poor people, who had no alternative to stop using the forest, were forced to become legal culprits.

3.2   *Community Forestry, after 1976*

CF policy emerged in Nepal in the 1970s after a failure of the state's forest policy to halt alarming deforestation and by a realisation for a forest management responsive to and built upon the local needs and indigenous systems. Conceptually, it was a paradigm shift from the state's centralised control (top-down) to users' decentralised control (bottom-up) (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). This shift can be analysed in two stages. First, the policy included local people in forest management but controlled them in forest use. Second, the policy empowered local people setting objectives for forest management and use. While it was a major turnaround in the forest policy, the poor people could not receive as much priority as they needed, due largely to the policy being persistently informed by the limited understanding of forestry problems and target-oriented universal solutions devised by bureaucratic organisations. Additionally, the increasing gap between the policy and practice has hampered the poor more than other sections of the community.

3.2.1 *The emergence of CF, between 1976 and 1989*

The emergence of CF policy in 1976 largely failed to provide significant benefits to the most forest dependent poor people. A new forest policy introduced by the National Forestry Plan 1976 provisioned for handing over the responsibilities of forest protection and management to *Panchayat*, a local level political body, in the form of Panchayat Forest (PF) and Panchayat Protected Forest (PPF). The *Pradhan Panchha*, a locally elected leader of the *Panchayat*, became the manager of the forest. The subsequent legislation was devised and interpreted to suit the needs of the panchayat officials, patrons and followers (Bhattarai et al. 2002). The policy and legislation emphasised the plantation and protection of the forest by motivating people to look after it (Bhattarai et al. 2002). Nurseries were built, plantations were established and forest watchers were hired to protect the forest area (Britt 1998). There was no provision for the use of forests, unless the hand over was accompanied by a forest management plan. However, the majority of PF and PPF did not have the plan as the state deliberately emphasised the protection of forests rather than using the forest to meet the needs of local people. Since the forest dependent poor people were locally controlled by Pradhan Panchha and were forced to use the forest illegally to meet their basic needs of firewood and fodder, the externally supported plantation and protection-focussed forest policy did not significantly benefit to local people (Hobley 1996). The policy transferred limited authority to the wrong people, not to real forest users. It largely failed to address local needs and concerns.

The failure of the policy to address livelihood issues of the forest dependent poor people can be attributed to two factors. First, the emergence of policy was misleadingly informed by the positivist understanding of environmental crisis in Nepal. The crisis arguments such as alarming deforestation in Nepal and the disastrous flooding in Bangladesh (Hoffpauir 1978), the Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation (Ives 1987), and the denudation of Nepal's forests by 2003 (World Bank 1978), were largely based on the quantitative and economic assessments of the forest loss. The arguments were more often based on assumptions and judgements, not on facts. They assumed the problems being the over use of resources by poor hill farmers and the solutions being a need for reducing forest uses and establishing extensive afforestation activities. They failed to understand local people's needs and indigenous initiatives to protect tress for economic, cultural and religious purposes (e.g. Campbell et al. 1987; Fisher 1989). Deforestation was not new and widespread in Nepal, as many hill forests were reduced to the present size between 1750 and 1900 as a result of Birta and Jagir land tenures, which encouraged the conversion of forests into agricultural land holdings in order to extract rents from peasants cultivators (Mahat et al. 1986). The complete forest decline did not happen in Nepal according to the grim prediction of the World Bank. Despite the accumulation of evidence to suggest that those crisis arguments were flawed, they were continued to be used in the forest policy making because they helped to empower the Forest Department. This is what Fisher (1997) called the crisis arguments as myth. These myths were translated into policies and subsequently such policies imposed unnecessary restrictions on the livelihoods of the poor and marginalised people.

Second, the policy had a wrong assumption that the panchayat was synonymous with community. It ignored the locally recognised use rights, which were more important than the use rights dictated by the panchayat boundary (Gilmour and Fisher 1991). Together with a poor understanding of the sociology of resource use and the emphasis on the political structure, the externally imposed policy attempted to entice the majority of poor users to protect forests without giving a real power to address their needs and concerns.

3.2.2 *The transformation, after 1989*

A major forest policy breakthrough in Nepal came in 1989, when the government approved the Master Plan for the Forestry Sector (MPFS). The plan, which is being implemented and will be effective until 2010, aims primarily at meeting the basic needs of the local people, particularly of poor communities, or of the poor in a community by handing over all accessible hill forests to the communities to the extent that they are able and willing to manage them (HMGN 1989). With the restoration of democracy in 1990, and by the enactment of *Forest Act* 1993 and other legislation, actual forest users have been entrusted and empowered to manage and use forest resources.

Uniform procedures are established for the implementation of CF by which the state forestry agency, the Department of Forests (DoF) through District Forest Office (DFO) is required to hand over its responsibilities and authorities of forest management and use to an independent local institution, called Forest Users Group (FUG). The FUG is given rights and responsibilities to set objectives and prepare an Operational Plan to manage and use the forest, while the DFO is required to approve the plan and facilitate users. The role of the state's forestry staff has been officially shifted from that of policing the users to that of helping users to plan, manage and use forest resources. The shift of policy endeavoured to transform Nepalese forestry from an externally driven program to a community driven process.

Despite its progressive vision, the forest policy has continued to disadvantage the most-forest dependent poor people due mainly to three underlying reasons. First, the democratic and egalitarian principles upon which the policy was formed and implemented, failed to prioritise the poor. Instead, it imposed a rule-based formal system by dismantling socio-culturally shaped indigenous systems that may have maintained social equity. By emphasising equality, it reinforced the pre-existing inequality. Secondly, the MPFS was largely informed by the sampling, inferences, and cost-benefit analyses that did not fully acknowledge social, cultural and political contexts in which forestry problems were experienced. The use of these methodologies was supported by the widespread use of them in the analysis of wider population, social and economic changes in Nepal. Thirdly, the policy was formed by the forest bureaucracy and donors, which were primarily concerned on forest conservation. The bureaucracy has been established on the basis of efficiency, technical superiority and standardisation. It inherited feudalistic culture and a widespread corruption. Legislative instruments were devised in such a way to adopt protection-focused, target-oriented and universal procedures, which practically encouraged the community elite capturing FUG committee to implement CF. Together with a historical tendency of the bureaucracy resisting to change, the key authority to set objectives remained with the DFO. The policy disadvantaged the poor by ignoring their problems being conditioned by diverse factors and failed to involve them in CF processes.

There are significant gaps between the policy and practice of CF that has severely hampered the most forest dependent poor users. In 2001/2002, three FUGs from Nepalese CF were studied and the study found that CF does not operate as a participatory process at the local level. The local decisions are mostly dominated by the community elite and forestry staff leading to the lack of inclusion of poor, women and socially marginal groups in decisions. The lack of inclusive process is due mainly to District Forest Office (DFO) employing target-oriented, quantitative and universal process to hand over the forest and support the FUGs. The process is practically owned and controlled by the DFO with the help of the community elite. The local processes are generally isolated from wider social, economic and political processes and institutions. The DFO staff and community elites set forest management objectives primarily to ensure forest protection, which is the key interest of the Forest Department, rather than to meet the needs of most forest dependent poor people. This protection-oriented practice has led to under-utilisation of forests. CF is supporting the local livelihoods far below the potential of the forests. The study also found that the distribution of forest products is not equitable because the poor users do not receive sufficient and suitable forest products. They mainly collect the low quality products such as leaf litter and dry fuelwood at the forest opening times (which is only about 3 months per year) because they are free, while wealthy users are more interested in fuelwood and timber even if there is some price tag attached. This is also consistent with previous findings (e. g. Malla 2000; Neupane 2003). The distribution of forest products is carried out by the principle of equality, by which the most forest dependent users do not receive sufficient forest products and their needs are not met. As the poor users closely dependent on forests for the whole year and since they do not have sufficient alternative sources such as private lands to meet their needs, they are either forced to steal, or change their way of living. In this sense, CF has legitimised the exclusion of access to the forest to the poor and their livelihoods are therefore worsened by the introduction of CF.

4 IMPLICATIONS

The analysis of the shift in Nepalese forest policies suggests that the policy making is driven by the restricted thinking of forest management that focuses on the protection of forests. This thinking heavily draws on orthodox forest science, which has a more severe impact on the poor and other disadvantaged sections than other sections of the community. The quantitative approaches in sampling and inferences informed by the forest science have been historically popular among policy makers, because policy makers are also heavily influenced by the orthodox science. These approaches supposedly provide uniform, verifiable and accurate information required for them to meet targets and maximise their efficiency. The historic practices of sampling and inference did not fully account for the social and political contexts in which forestry problems were experienced. The policies were poorly informed, which could not address issues surrounding the influence of social, economic and political forces on forestry problems and solutions. Such policies failed to prioritise needs of the poor, which was evident in both nationalisation policy and the externally driven participatory policy. Even when the current policy has attempted to prioritise the poor, it has been implemented through a universal and target-oriented model of the Department of Forest which practically marginalises the poor and encourages the community elite. This is consistent with Forsyth's (2003) argument that the adoption of science without acknowledging how it is affected by social and political factors produces different policies that unfairly penalise the livelihoods of the poor. Therefore, forestry problems can be addressed and policies can be improved by understanding socio-cultural and political forces creating and impacting on forestry problems and solutions. Approaches, particularly from anthropology and political ecology, are useful for addressing these issues.

The analysis also shows that there is a significant gap between the policy and practice. The disadvantaged people, while prioritised by the current policy, have neither been meaningfully involved in decisions, nor received sufficient forest products to meet their needs. Instead, decisions have been made by few people and DFO staff, which confirms Malla's (2003) findings of the elite's domination in Nepalese CF. The DFO staff continues to set objectives and prioritise a protection-oriented approach because their effectiveness is judged in terms of forest protection. This implies that practically, there is a decentralisation of responsibilities by which local people are required to manage the forest, but not devolution of power to make key decisions. This is consistent with Ribot's (2002) argument that participatory natural resource management is often characterised by a limited devolution of power to communities. This also means that there is innovations, but no change in power relations (Fisher 2003). Since there is a provision of equality in product distribution which is promoted by the state and happily accepted by the elite, the disadvantaged people have not received sufficient products. An important implication of this gap between the policy and practice is that the CF policy has not transformed into a participatory process. This also contradicts with the participatory concept of CF.

The forest policies and practices have largely failed to equitably involve and benefit local people. The policies and practices guided by the narrow thinking drawn from the orthodox forest science and based on the democratic and egalitarian principles, have simply reinforced pre-existing inequality in which the livelihoods of the poor have often been worsened. This is consistent with Raz's (1986) claim that egalitarian principles referring to equal to all, often lead to waste. In the context of the poor and other disadvantaged sections being more dependent on the forest and their livelihoods sufferings more pressing than other sections of the community, equity is more useful concept than equality. This supports Parfit's (1991) emphasis on equity over equality. Pressing needs and greater sufferings of the poor both practically and morally justify for policies and practices to prioritise the concerns of the poor. Raz's (1986) explicit emphasis on the priority to the worse off section is therefore useful for the forest policy and practices in Nepal. This is also consistent with one of the key principles of CF that the more dependent users have more interest in sustainable use and management of forest than other users and organisations (Li 2002). This implies that there is a need for the priority to be given to the worse off sections of the community in both forest policy and practice.

5 CONCLUSION

The historical shift of forest policies in Nepal has largely failed to prioritise the most forest dependent poor people. While the current CF policy attempts to prioritise the poor, the actual practice fails to do so. This failure represents the perpetuation of inequity and can be attributed to the restricted thinking which led to forest management putting protection first. The restricted thinking is linked to the orthodox forest science which provides knowledge and skills to facilitate narrow understanding of forestry problems and solutions. The knowledge produced by the orthodox science has traditionally focussed on collecting what are perceived to be politically neutral, universal and accurate facts through quantitative and economic analyses of forestry problems. This knowledge informs policies because they are widely accepted in the policy circle. The policy markers failed to appreciate wider social, economic and political forces influencing forestry problems and solutions. Then, the policies have often ignored and mis-represented the relationship between forest and the most-forest dependent poor people. The conventional power relations remain unchanged, as the traditional bureaucratic policy making style maintains status quo. This style has been transferred to the local level through the handing over of forests to local communities and inequity has been institutionalised. Therefore, this traditional policy approach based on scientific knowledge and limited understanding of the problems requires major rethinking. While we do not assert that improved policies may be devised if past policy failures are displayed, a useful way to improve policy would be to realise that the forest policies are variously influenced by economic as well as socio-cultural and political forces.

The rethinking should aim at improving the policy and practices by genuinely prioritising the poor and other socially disadvantaged sections of the community. The restricted thinking of a narrow focus on the forest protection should be modified so that social goals such as equity are paramount and that technical knowledge from the orthodox forest science is used to promote such social goals. This may however be controversial because it challenges the structures of power and privilege of the better off sections of the community. Further it may be upsetting for the forestry department as it challenges long-held bureaucratic practices and processes. Nevertheless, an analysis of forest history suggests that it is overdue to question policy assumptions and to set agendas, with which the Nepalese forest policy, process and practice can be advanced.

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