

Interview with Apsara Chapagain – Chairperson, FECOFUN

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Background

The Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) is a formal network of Community Based Forest User Groups from all over Nepal.

FECOFUN emerged from the idea that forest users from all parts of the country should be linked in order to strengthen the role of users in policy making processes. Since its inception in July 1995, FECOFUN has grown into a social movement organization with about 8.5 million people represented - all of whom are forest users. To date, more than 11,200 Community Forest User Groups are affiliated with FECOFUN.

The following is the transcript of an interview with Apsara Chapagain, Chairperson of FECOFUN.

1.0 | Since FECOFUN is now 17 years old, it seems like a great time to reflect on its formation. How did the idea to create FECOFUN evolve, and what were your initial motivations behind forming the network?

FECOFUN was established in Kathmandu in June 1995, and is now entering its 18th year. While reflecting on the long journey of FECOFUN and the hard work put forth to initiate the network, I personally feel happy and proud of achievements we have made.

Looking back at the history of forestry as well as of FECOFUN, we find that the beginning of handing over government forest patches to communities was an important milestone. This was done according to the Forest Sector Master Plan of 1988/89 and subsequent Forest Act in 1993 and the 1995 Regulation and Community Forest Guidelines 1995 (and its second amendment in 2008). Initially, it was assumed that the transfer of resource management rights from the state to the community might face many obstacles, but at the same time, it was also realized that Community Forest User Groups (CFUGs) needed wider support and capacity to tackle new challenges and protect their rights over resources and pressure the government for more rights. For example more initiative among forest user groups is necessary to share best practices, and mobilize for other community development works such as education, local infrastructure, safe drinking water, health and sanitation. Users groups also started to promote their livelihood through income generating activities. In order to promote, publicize and defend local initiative the CFUGs realized that they needed to be organized at national level and as a result the users established FECOFUN.

Regarding my own involvement in establishing FECOFUN, Jyalachiti CFUG of the then-Ward no. 2 of Tokal Village Development Committee (VDC) in Kavre district comes to my mind. At the beginning, I was an office bearer (joint-secretary) of the local forest user group (FUG) and an active member. I generated and shared ideas regarding the users' rights and problems of the FUG, and drew attention

and obtained support of the various stakeholders. This experience was inspirational and furthered my commitment to benefitting local communities.

In 1992, the Nepal Australian Community Forest Project provided the opportunity for me to participate, manage and facilitate various meetings, trainings and interaction program for local FUGs in the Sindhupalchhak district. I did not think that the drive to safeguard users' right and build their capacity was not achievable through fragmented individual efforts. Rather it needed to be continuous and systematic and should be done under certain institutional structure to scale it up nationwide. Other people with similar beliefs were working to advance community forestry. We joined forces to open FECOFUN with 13 founding members, giving us an opportunity to utilize our skills and experience. I was the founding treasurer.

At the beginning, the general conception of Community Forestry (CF) was that forest meant the firewood, grass, leaves, fodder and house building materials only. Forests were important but there was not much awareness that they should be conserved and utilized and preserved for future generations. Earlier, I myself contributed in destroying forest. As the impact of the CF was increasing locally, other users asked me to join the group. With the good work of the villagers, I also learned the importance of the CF and realized what I could do to make a difference. That is why I joined the community forestry movement.

2.0 | Initially, how did FECOFUN plan on addressing gender inequity in forest governance and legal frameworks? Who were its target beneficiaries, and how were its interventions organized for effectively targeting a policy agenda?

Local level Forest User Groups (FUGs) are FECOFUN and they make its plans. Therefore, it is purely an umbrella organization of the local FUGs. As a woman in an official, decision-making role as treasurer, I was positioned to discuss women's status and promote it. To raise the level of women's representation we started discussing how to address the problems of under-represented groups such as women, poor, dalits, indigenous and others, particularly those in forest fringes who were, dependent on forest for their livelihoods. We opened a discussion to secure 50 percent participation of women in all forest management structures. We wanted to include such a provision in FECOFUN's constitution, but had to work hard to convince FECOFUN colleagues. It took 33 days to get this agenda approved. Some colleagues, both men and women, said that it would not be practical to make compulsory provision for 50 percent of seats to be filled by women at all levels given their limited education and heavy family workload, and suggested a 33 percent quota. I stood firm and even threatened to quit if they did not agree to 50 percent. At the end, this was included in our constitution. The unanimously approved constitution of FECOFUN mandates that there should be at least a woman chairperson or vice-chairperson; and similarly a woman between treasurer and general secretary. Apart from securing decision-making positions, the participation of other disadvantaged groups was ensured. We also agreed that people leading an organization of such scale should not be holding their positions long-term, but instead give opportunity to other potential colleagues to develop their leadership. As a result, we restrict the chairperson to one term.

In order to implement these rules, I have visited all 75 districts of Nepal. The amount of efforts taken to secure 50 percent women's participation at all levels – village, range post, district and centre – was challenging. That we have been able to do this is a big achievement of my personal life as well.

We were not seeking women's participation to increase statistics, but to be active in every process. We also simultaneously engaged in creating awareness that as well as becoming beneficiaries of managing the forest, women were equally responsible for any losses encountered. We encouraged women to take leadership in capacities building activities such as training, workshops, public speaking. Thus, identifying the needs of women and deprived people, giving them policy priority and supporting them has been paying off in leadership skills and capability.

Despite promoting equity in policy and on paper, there continues to be failure of men to give respect to women and give them their trust, and women still feel inferior, which is a barrier to development. The first five years immediately after the establishment of the Federation were most difficult. Not all people believed women could not shoulder leadership, but they delivered their duties effectively and with due integrity. This empowered women members, and they too started to ask for equal rights. Even after guaranteeing that women would either be chairperson or vice-chairperson, and treasurer or general secretary, there were tendencies not to let women to become chairperson and secretary. We had to amend our constitution to ensure implementation of this mandate.

3.0 | As a network of rural, community-based stakeholders, how does FECOFUN facilitate communication both among members and targeted to external audiences?

The Federation members are groups. As mentioned in FECOFUN's constitution, the local federation disseminates information and maintains regular communication with local FUGs. At the central and district levels, the Federation also provide information for local FUGs through the local federations. Policy, legal and advocacy issues concerning users groups are dealt with at the national level. For important information, the Federation uses both means- contacting the local users groups directly and the local level federations. The local groups normally relate to the center through their successive local federations but they sometime contact us directly. We exchange information through direct meeting, telephone, email, letters, press releases, pamphlets, posters, mass meeting, local visits and radio. Similarly we constantly contact government, NGOs and other agencies to discuss contemporary issues and challenges. We also participate in international meetings, forums, conferences, and trainings to share information about our work and institution with international community.

4.0 | What are FECOFUN's core strategic objectives, and how were these determined?

Our main objectives are to: support FUGs, promote and conserve community forests, help in lobbying and advocacy to gain local community rights over natural resources, make users self-reliance, help them to improve their livelihoods, support poverty alleviation activities, advocate for the FUG's rights and interests, publicize good practices of forest user groups, and take initiatives to promote groups that are lagging behind. FECOFUN organizes various gatherings and meetings to discuss and decide strategic objectives, including a council meeting in every two years and general assembly in every 4 years. The representation in these meetings is inclusive and democratic. Committee meetings can and do change or adopt new strategies. The national working committee meeting takes place once in every three months to discuss important issues and makes decisions to address them.

5.0 | What is the significance of organizing for women engaged in community forestry under an umbrella network? In other words, why a federation?

In Nepal, women engage the most in conserving and using forests as well as in agriculture. Economic benefits are provided through livelihood activities. In Nepal, women are regarded as very hard working. Unfortunately, this is not well recognised when it comes to making key decisions, distributing benefits, or allocating forest products. There was, and to some extent still is, a tendency to ignore women's participation. We were of the view that until women were given opportunity to participate and build capacity and become leader, they will leave confines of their house or their submission to men. FECOFUN felt this should change and made binding clauses in the constitution and encouraged women to participate actively and honestly.

Nowadays, men often leave home to study or look for jobs in the city or abroad. Women are left behind in villages, with a greater role in local forest management. We also considered the issues of income generation, livelihoods, social development, skill development, leadership. This made women a priority and helped FECOFUN remain united.

6.0 | FECOFUN's strategic plan states its adherence to the objectives and goals of "gender equality and women's autonomy." How does FECOFUN differentiate between these goals? Do you take a holistic approach to gender development that includes male stakeholders, and how is this approach communicated on the ground?

First it is important to understand that, for FECOFUN, gender equality does not only mean equal participation and opportunity. Gender equality entails equal rights to women, men, dalits, ethnic minorities, and disadvantaged communities and ensuring social justice. Each category of people is different; for example amongst the 'poor' some will have food available only for three months, others food for six months, and FECOFUN needs to understand the local situation and address it. The 50 percent leadership in all groups and levels provided an opportunity for women to develop their leadership capacity in FECOFUN and be active deciders.

Gender equality and women autonomy are different. I understand gender equality as a first stage towards women's autonomy, but it means participation and distribution of rights equally amongst all groups of people, in order to be self dependent--participation is an opportunity. Through this, women can move towards independence, and thereby increase skills, capacity and their level of confidence. Therefore, participation is an essential pre condition for all who are lagging behind because of social injustice to advance. FECOFUN understands that giving opportunity will help develop women's capacity. In FECOFUN's early years, few women spoke out in the meetings and assemblies; now, women are equally active as men.

In gender development, the role of men is equally crucial. In many FUGs, men are the ones who insist on women's greater participation and their capacity building. We have to give opportunities to whomever is disadvantaged on their terms. In our community there are people with different interests and need and opportunities should be tailored to each interest group. We have to mainstream such practice in all villages in rural areas. FECOFUN has been playing significant role throughout the country at different levels.

7.0 | Do you foresee any strategic opportunities, such as a trend towards decentralized statutory tenure in Nepal, and a more robust civil society presence and growth in domestic forest and ecosystem services markets, that will allow FECOFUN to better fulfill its objectives, benefit more women and their communities, and potentially expand the network's scope?

There are many options to strengthen the status of women and multiple structures. In FECOFUN, most forest user groups strive for equal participation of men and women by its inclusion in the constitution, bylaws and forest management plans. During the second revision of community forestry development guidelines, FECOFUN strongly lobbied for an equal number of members in the executive committee, and currently in more than 18,000 forest user groups 50 percent of their executive committee members are women. There is a special provision for the poor to receive 35 percent of the group income for their needs. In most FUGs, management and disbursement of funds by women member has significantly increased.

The 50 percent provision is also included in the constitution of other civil society organizations and federations in other sectors such as drinking water, irrigation, electricity water and energy, the national confederation of natural resources and the Himalayan Grassroots Women's' Natural Resource Management Organization (HIMAWANTI). Interestingly, political parties and their subunits now also encourage women's participation in decision making. FECOFUN is helping in this process by example.

It is very difficult to find FUGs with all women literate, though most women have basic literacy. In such cases, FECOFUN is supporting non-formal education programs. In many cases, community learning and action centers are established scheduling discussions of topical issues involving both men and women at local level. Such centers remained instrumental in exploring ways to develop local capacity and solving FUG problems.

FECOFUN has a stated gender policy: equal participation of both men and women in every structure at all levels. Priority has been given to all disadvantaged groups when hiring staff. FECOFUN discusses gender equity with government and non government organizations and raised this issue at the National Planning Commission for national policies.

8.0 | What are the major obstacles facing resource-dependent women and their livelihoods in Nepal? What new or expanded threats on women's land and forest tenure rights do you predict will become more prominent in the next 5-10 years?

Bottlenecks for empowering women include: inability to implement programs they have designed, undue influence of men in making key decisions, household chores, limited access to finance or financial management skills, undervaluing of women's work, no land and property ownership, limited organizational experience, and limited documentation of their own children's citizenship.

These require constant and collective work on three levels

1. Policy level: by developing policies, regulation, law and guidelines and by revising them periodically in favor of women and disadvantaged groups

2. Implementation level: by changing attitude of people, which is also not an easy task as it takes lots of time and efforts to change the perception of people about gender roles

3. Establishing rights: This is very challenging but possible and may generate conflict. If we can manage land, water and forest properly we can have sustainable development. For this, we need to establish ownership of women over those resources. It is important to give leadership to those who raised the agenda. Support from every stakeholder is necessary to establish resource rights and empower women. In this process, the government is an obstacle--many high level policy people are not convinced about handing over rights and ownership to local communities. Therefore there is a need of continued advocacy

9.0 | The development of REDD+ for climate change mitigation presents opportunities and dramatic impacts on forest management in Nepal as well as implications for decreased tenure security. Is REDD+ an issue you're actively tracking? In its current form, does it present more potential harm than good for women's forest rights? How can REDD+ be further engendered in order to maximize benefits to women, particularly those invested in community-based forest management or smallholder enterprises?

Like other least-developed countries, Nepal is struggling with the effect of REDD+ and climate change at all levels. The poor, women, dalits and disadvantaged communities remain vulnerable and most affected by climate change. It is still not clear whether or not REDD+ can provide benefits to the forest user groups and local people, but there is a feeling that decisions made by rich countries hardly account for the concerns of poor people from poor countries. Due to this lingering doubt and suspicion that there might be some hidden agenda behind REDD+, FUGs in Nepal are not fully convinced about possible benefits of REDD+ schemes. However, as a pilot, FECOFUN is working to create public awareness that REDD+ schemes, if implemented with rights and incentives, could help local communities contribute to sustainable forest management.

10.0 | What are the lessons learned from FECOFUN's achievements to date that could translate beyond the Nepali context to women and women's organizations with a similar mission in other regions?

A few of FECOFUNs learning points are:

1. Women's participation can increase significantly with supportive policies, laws and guidelines. For example, FECOFUN increased women's participation within its organization in its bylaws and constitution.
2. Membership organizations like FECOFUN should always take care of constituencies and their concerns connecting all levels.
3. Federation members need to understand the rationale and concept behind community based management of natural resources, especially forest management.
4. Widespread belief in community rights over natural resources will increase as people directly participate collectively in managing such resources. For example, in FECOFUN, members of

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forest user groups have great motivation in managing forests as they have seen improvement in forest condition and their livelihoods.

5. Advocacy work to ensure rights of community over natural resources needs strong lobbying groups, mobilizing social workers, volunteers, forest professionals, and supporting civil society groups and their networks.
6. In addition to civil society groups, recognition and support from donors, international organization and government is also necessary.
7. Practice of extending mutual cooperation amongst women groups, dalits and other disadvantaged communities could strengthen bonding relations and help establish networks of such groups.
8. A strength of the federation model is that people bring a positive attitude towards volunteerism. We should always encourage such attitude for survival of networks like FECOFUN.

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