

7

Monitoring and evaluating in the Nepal-UK community forestry project

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• Background

The Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project works with fifteen hundred Forest Users Groups (FUGs) in seven of the hill districts of Nepal. It aims to improve the living conditions of local people by supporting FUGs to manage community forests more effectively, sustainably and equitably. It is part of the government policy of transferring national forests to community management and works with the Department of Forests and other district level organisations. The objective of working with FUGs is to help them strengthen their planning, monitoring and reporting activities.

To give the best support possible, the project team (composed of Department for International Development and His Majesty's Government of Nepal employees) are encouraging the FUGs to share their experiences and ideas through a cycle of action-reflection-learning. However, the FUGs tend to be dominated by the more literate and resource rich elites in the communities. They capture the resources as they sit on the committees, receive information, and make the decisions. For all forest users to perform their management responsibilities and to function in the FUG, they need to be aware of the different decision-making fora within community forestry and have enough confidence, which they can gain through practical and management skills and knowledge.

To assist the less advantaged forest users in the FUGs, the project team sought ways to improve communication within the many FUGs of the project area. Participatory

monitoring and evaluation (PM&E) was considered an important element of an effective communication strategy. However, while FUGs play a leading role in planning, monitoring and evaluation have been largely extractive and carried out by the Department of Forests. But, with the ever increasing number of FUGs, the Department found it had insufficient resources to continue supporting the FUGs in this centralised manner. They felt that by ensuring the FUGs learn to monitor and evaluate themselves, the process would also be more relevant and effective.

In this context, the Nepal-UK Community Forestry Project is experimenting with a number of participatory monitoring methods. These methods are based on pictures to allow for greater ease of understanding amongst less literate FUG members. In this way and by emphasising the building of the forest users' and the committee's understanding of the process, PM&E becomes a strategy for empowering less literate forest users.

Four methods are described below, the FUG 'Health Check', one that builds on a pictorial literacy methodology, one using PLA techniques to situate the PM&E in a planning cycle and most recently, one based on the health check with user generated indicators.

The FUG health check

The main purpose of the FUG 'Health Check' is to help committees and forest users develop a better understanding of the forest management process by encouraging them to reflect on existing resources and their institution. The discussions are facilitated by the Department of Forests field staff, who have

included the views of the users to make this method more effective.

Pictorial formats have been developed to ensure equal involvement of non-literates, semi-literates and literates in the monitoring and evaluation process. The pictures have been very effective at provoking discussion within and between the groups. Four broad categories of indicators are covered in discussions provoked by these pictures (see Box 1). For each of these categories, different aspects are represented and discussed, and then assessed along a three point scale, such as poor, fair or good (see Figure 1).

For example, in forest resource management, the presence of a 'forest silvicultural system', a 'forest protection system', and a 'forest product distribution system' is assessed. Under the category 'Social and Institutional Development', indicators include 'fund mobilisation' and 'gender and equity', while 'Learning and Skill Development' includes the presence of 'innovative ideas for community forestry' and 'new skills for community forestry'.

Two aspects have needed special attention in the use of the Health Check. First, good facilitation of the discussions is essential. Second, preliminary discussions with the FUGs require a process of decoding or interpreting the pictures so there is a common understanding of which conceptual issues they represent. The FUGs continue to add to, and adapt, the Health Check, to enable more detailed reflections and more self-sustained use.

This Health Check has been taken up by the District Offices to identify the best FUGs for the annual district competition - thus all FUGs are exposed to it annually. FUGs are adapting the idea: the diagrams are seen as resource materials which can be used at different time for different purposes. FUGs reflect on the diagrams during their assemblies, annual harvesting period (once in a year) and even in their committee meetings.

BOX 1.

FOUR THEMES OF THE FUG 'HEALTH CHECK'

1. Forest resource management

The forest user groups can use the 'Health Check' to monitor the impact of their management plans on forest condition. They assess indicators like canopy density, condition of regeneration, and tree ages. With this information they then prioritise their silvicultural management plans.

2. Social and institutional development

The Health Check helps to build users' confidence in analysing their own social and institutional development and encouraging more participatory decision-making. Forest users reflect on indicators such as: current decision-making processes in the FUG; the role of disadvantaged groups and whether they are benefiting; and who implements the decisions made by which group members. Ideas are shared about conflict management and prevention.

3. Awareness and flow of information

There is much room for improvement in the flow of information and communication in FUGs, and the Health Check aims to draw attention to ways in which communication fora can be improved. Users reflect on their roles and responsibilities in bi-annual assemblies and in monthly committee meetings. These fora provide feedback from the members, and allow for a review of the implementation of the group plan and of the group's constitution. In these meetings, members also discuss forest policy, and their own process for planning, monitoring and evaluation. Indicators include 'feeling ownership in community forestry' and 'awareness of legal status'.

4. Skill development and learning processes

By sharing information within and amongst the groups, the forest users develop their skills. They organise networking fora from time to time to share ideas. They prioritise their needs and assess what resources are available to initiate new activities like forest-based income generation activities.

Figure 1 Pictorial self-monitoring and assessment of FUG - learning and skill development

			
Innovative Ideas for CF management	Absent	Starting	Many
			
New skills of CF	Absent	Starting	Many
			
Income Generation Activities	Absent	Starting	Many
			
Innovative ideas for CF	Absent	Starting	Many

User-generated pictorial decision-making M&E

Another PM&E method was developed to increase women's participation by encouraging them to assess their involvement in forest use and group activities. This method was tried in two FUGs where women had been attending a literacy class using REFLECT techniques¹. By the end of the literacy class, the women had become skilled in developing pictorial formats to assess their involvement in household and community level activities, such as who makes the major decisions in, for example, buying and selling livestock.

Similarly in forest-related activities, women use the visual formats to assess their involvement at the community and household level in activities such as: who makes decisions about harvesting different forest products and who does the actual work (see

¹ REFLECT stands for Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques which combines PRA methods and Freirean Literacy principles. It was developed by Action Aid. (See David Archer in *PLA Notes* 23 and forthcoming issue of *PLA Notes* in June 1998).

Figure 2). This process is helping women to see more clearly their level of participation in different aspects of forest management. With careful facilitation to make the link between literacy classes and forest management, women can develop their own monitoring and evaluation system and change their role in decision-making. Of course it not easy to separate the effects of developing the monitoring tool and of the literacy classes. However the women have become considerably more vocal in the FUG. They have also established a group to give them greater autonomy over their income generation and savings activities. They are considering further development of their M&E tool to cover more that just decision making. But they have not yet used it to reassess their situation.

PM&E in information management

The project team soon realised that simply providing tools and methods in a project context was unlikely to work. They recognised that monitoring and evaluation had to be linked to the present situation, to goals, and to action plans. Therefore, interactive workshops became a key strategy for effective PM&E. The main purpose of the workshops was to

develop the users' understanding about participatory monitoring and evaluation based on linking PRA methods to collective action. Through repeating this workshop annually, we are able to compare the current condition of forest resources and forest product needs against the goals that were set. To date, this is a pilot process within one district.

Analysis of the current situation is the first step. This is achieved by creating a resource and social map. The forest users completed this task, also identifying scarce resources, resource-rich, and resource-poor households. Then they discussed what the ideal situation would look like and made another resource map based on this ideal scenario. The two maps were compared by considering:

- How are resources distributed in the community?
- What new resources need to be developed to fulfil demands?

- What activities need to be performed to generate resources in the community and to reach the ideal situation?

This activity helped users to reflect on their existing resources, and to make a list of activities needed to reach their goals. Prioritising the many identified needs then followed, using pair-wise ranking. During this process, the users analysed each activity, old and new, in terms of how they were affecting, or would make an impact on, resource availability. This process also helped forest users to identify where outsider support would be needed. For example, if forest users prioritised the plantation of fodder trees to fulfil the demand for fodder, they can contribute with the provision of labour and even seedlings, but they might require technical support in determining the correct spacing between the trees.

Figure 2. Users generated pictorial decision making monitoring and evaluation

	 Household head	 Male	 Male/Female	 Female
 Collection of Grass				
 Collection of Fuelwood				
 Collection of Poles				

Venn diagrams were used next to help the users reflect on the nature of co-ordination between user groups and other organisations. These helped them to identify which organisations would be able to help them. Again the 'ideal scenario' concept was used so that the group could develop guidelines as to what they wished to achieve institutionally. The idea with the PM&E process is that they return to the Venn diagrams periodically and reflect on trends in the changing relationships. As the workshop only occurred recently this is yet to happen.

Finally, a seasonal calendar is used as the basis for the operational forest management plan. The user group members depict their activities throughout the year pictorially in a calendar, alongside the seasonal availability of various forest products. Pictures of the various activities are also placed on the map, in the appropriate forest block. This helps reinforce the idea of how forest management plans will differ for different forest conditions and for the provision of different products.

The user generated self monitoring system

The latest development within the project area uses the basic format of the health check, whilst incorporating learning from the other processes. The process was developed through joint discussion and planning by the project team with a FUG. To ensure the fullest incorporation of perspectives in developing the monitoring system, the FUG was divided by *toles* (or neighbourhoods according to castes), with each tole initially developing their own indicators and assessing the FUG's current status as described below.

The toles initially consider what the 'ideal' FUG would be, or where they should be in 10 years time. These goals form the basis for indicators for their monitoring system. The indicators are then coded as pictures by the users. Illiterate users proved to be as adept as their literate neighbours in producing pictures to represent the indicators. Discussion arises on how to capture the real issue as the picture is shown to the other users and adaptations are made. Using pictures allows full participation of the users, and, as they develop the pictures themselves, they become the owners of the

system and refine the indicators as discussions proceed.

The indicators are then arranged in a matrix to be scored on a four point scale of moons. Through using phases of the moon rather than sad, content and happy faces, there is less implicit criticism of the FUG; i.e. a crescent moon implies the indicator is currently absent rather than the users are unhappy. Furthermore, a four points scale forces discussion beyond a compromise middle score which is often allocated in a three score system.

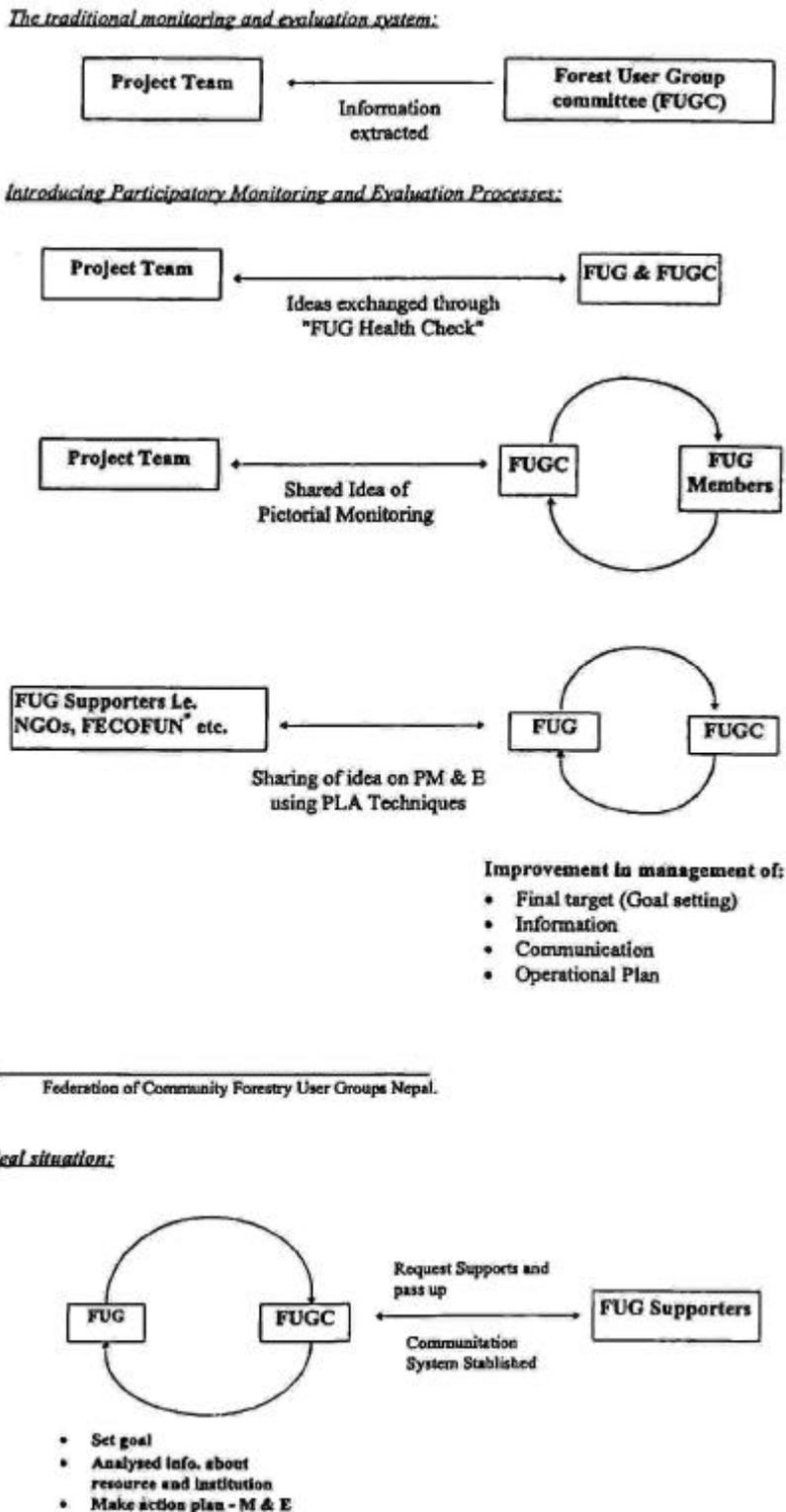
The indicators from the different toles were combined and categorised by the facilitators, with exact repetitions being removed and gaps identified. The categories identified were: forest management and condition; forest products; group management; communication; community development activities and income generating activities. The tole assessments were then compiled for each category.

This was presented to a forum of the FUG committee and representatives from each tole. Under each category, the indicators were reviewed and negotiations took place over the exact meaning for each picture and whether new ones should be added where gaps had been identified by the facilitation team. Overall, however, it was striking that the list of indicators was so complete.

By contrasting the tole assessments, different perspectives became apparent. In future the indicators need to be ranked to strengthen the link into planning and the apparent differences between toles need to be addressed. As the FUG uses their monitoring system, they may need to begin to quantify some of the indicators to make them more sensitive to change and less open to bias during assessment.

The strength of this process was in the high level of ownership and self realisation that it developed within all households. The disadvantaged groups had as strong a voice as the elites. Due to the simplicity of the process it takes little time to develop confidence in facilitation. In the final meeting, the process was evaluated very positively and the FUG is keen to share their experience widely.

Figure 3. Implication of Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E) process in the role of different actors



- **Lessons learnt from the process so far**

The project team are clear that the developing PM&E process is an important strategy for making forest users more aware of their situation, and for encouraging learning-oriented FUGs and thus more sustainable institutions. This will in turn help them to manage better their forest resources. By being involved in designing and adapting their own monitoring and evaluation systems, the users develop a stronger sense of ownership over it.

Monitoring and evaluation should not be separate from other aspects of identifying and implementing a development process. We have linked the M&E to goal development, analysis of local resources and institutions and action plan formulation. This integration will, we expect, also allow the users to change and adapt the methods as they monitor and evaluate.

Finally, we have found that the roles of different actors involved in the Nepal-UK Community Forestry project are shifting in the monitoring and evaluation process as a result of greater participation (see Figure 3). Initially M&E focused on performance evaluation and was an extractive process with no direct involvement of FUG members. As community forestry workers came to value local forest knowledge, monitoring and evaluation aimed more at combining outsiders' knowledge with that of local forest users.

Ultimately, forest users are, in fact, the evaluators of a project's success and failure. We are now seeing stronger links within the FUGs and more sharing of information between different groups. Ideally we would like to see the FUG committee and its members operate independent PM&E systems, and only seek advice from others, like ourselves, when necessary.

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