



Special briefing

Contributions of community forestry to COVID-19 response and recovery in Nepal



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 poses particular challenges to the world's poorest and most marginalized people, many of whom depend heavily on forests for livelihoods and incomes. The ways that such people can use forests vary greatly among and within countries, but there is evidence that when communities have rights to use forests, both the people and their forests fare better.

Community forestry is a broad term for approaches that empower people to manage, protect and benefit from local forests. Several studies have shown the benefits of community forestry for improving local livelihoods, building community resilience and enabling sustainable forest management. However, there has been little research into whether community forestry can act as a social and economic safety net during and after disasters or crises. The COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity to ask that question.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) wanted to understand if and how community forestry contributed to the resilience of communities (who depend on forests) during the pandemic's onset, and how this possible contribution and the community forestry approach itself could be strengthened. FAO partnered with RECOFTC to conduct this study in seven

Asian countries: Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Viet Nam.

The study aimed to learn how forest communities were dealing with COVID-19 and the related lockdowns and restrictions. In particular, it examined how important community forestry management schemes have been in helping people cope during the crisis and what kinds of support community forest members need to recover.

Phase 1 of the study involved a survey of 435 people (around 60 in each country). Roughly three-quarters were formal community forest members and one-quarter were not.¹ RECOFTC conducted this initial survey early in the pandemic, between July and August 2020. It thus focused on the immediate impacts of the pandemic and its restrictions on ordinary life and economic activity. Phase 2 of the study, undertaken during December 2020 and January 2021, involved discussions with members of two community forests in each of the seven countries. RECOFTC chose these as examples of community forests that appeared (from the Phase 1 findings or from other interactions with RECOFTC and partners) to be responding well to the pandemic and communities that appeared to be faring less well (one each per country for comparison).



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Summary of key findings

The surveys confirmed that forests provide a variety of uses and products to local people across all seven countries, including fuel, materials, food, medicine, income, recreation and spiritual value. While many people collected forest products for both home use and sale, most (74 percent) of the Phase 1 survey respondents said that selling agricultural products was their main source of income.

Negative impacts of the pandemic-related lockdown on livelihoods and food security were widespread across all groups. Eighty percent of respondents in the Phase 1 survey said they suffered such impacts. Travel restrictions, export bans and market closures reduced incomes while the cost of imported food increased, all of which put pressure on household budgets.

As large numbers of migrants to urban areas lost their jobs and returned to their native villages, they added to the economic burdens facing forest communities. In Cambodia and Myanmar, one in five respondents in the Phase 1 survey reported an increase in illegal activities as a major concern, with community members often the perpetrators.

The pandemic-related lockdowns have affected women and men differently. In Thailand and Indonesia, the women survey respondents were more likely than men to say they had experienced negative impacts of the lockdown on their livelihood and food security. Across all countries, many more women than men reported having greater workloads because of home schooling and family health care. Respondents reported perceiving increased incidents of domestic violence, particularly in Viet Nam (at 13 percent of respondents).

The study showed that community forests have boosted people's resilience in several ways. Although travel restrictions prevented people from accessing markets and selling forest products, they did not prevent most people from accessing and harvesting forests for subsistence use. In all seven countries, respondents reported that their community forest committee helped to protect their forest from illegal harvesting, poaching or encroachment during the lockdown.

The Phase 2 discussions revealed the different ways in which community forestry can strengthen livelihood assets and the ways in which these assets contributed to people's resilience after onset of the pandemic:

Human assets: Community forest committees applied communication, coordination and leadership skills to access and distribute information and

supplies of masks and hand sanitizer and to mobilize personnel to enforce health and travel restrictions and protect forests. Community members have applied knowledge gained through experience or training to provide food and income for their families.

Social assets: Community cohesion translated into high levels of compliance with public health advice. Good external relations generated financial and material support from non-governmental organizations and government agencies. Trade networks allowed some communities to continue to sell their forest products.

Natural assets: Forests provided non-timber forest products (primarily) and timber (to a lesser extent) that communities could use for subsistence or to generate income. In many cases, it was the lowest-income members of communities who depended most on these resources.

Financial assets: Savings helped families to face the initial shock of the pandemic. The study estimates that more than 3 million community forest members across the lower Mekong countries covered with this study depended significantly on their savings generated by selling community forest products and services to cope during the lockdowns. Community forest funds also supported ongoing forest management and patrols. Revolving credit schemes provided easy and low-interest credit to people in urgent need of fast money.

Physical assets: In some places, low-income families were able to use timber to construct buildings. In one community, a building made with timber donated by the community forest user group became a venue for COVID-19 information sharing.

The study also examined the factors that enabled community forests to generate or obtain these assets. It concludes that efforts to put the following enabling factors in place would strengthen community forests and their ability to boost people's resilience and adaptive capacity:

- strong and secure long-term tenure
- high-quality and large areas of forest
- effective restoration of degraded forest
- rights to sell non-timber forest products and timber
- access to markets
- community forest funds with bank accounts and rules

- revolving credit schemes with adequate capital to support community members in a crisis
- networks connecting community forestry groups to one another in order to share information, experience, and support
- strong links with external partners, including in the private sector
- diverse livelihood options, including the ability to add value to forest products
- training programmes to build capacity for sustainable livelihoods and forest management
- effective leadership and participatory decision-making

The study demonstrates that while community forests can provide important safety nets during a crisis, they are not meeting their potential to do so universally because of a range of interacting external and internal factors. There are particular gaps with respect to gender awareness, financial management and general disaster response. The findings emphasize the importance of expanding community forests and also ramping up capacity-development programmes for community forest groups so that they can raise and manage more funds, recognize and address social disparities, and find ways to help their members cope with the COVID-19 responses and any future disasters that may strike their climatically and financially vulnerable nations.



Findings from Nepal

Community forestry context

Nepal has several types of community-based forest management regimes (Table 1), the two largest of which (in terms of numbers of participating households) are community forest and collaborative forest management. In the former, community forest user groups and executive committees that the group members elect govern the forest. They have a community forest operational plan that defines harvesting and other uses. Division Forest Offices have the authority to hand over forests to community forest user groups. The tenure is indefinite, but the operational plan must be reviewed every five to 10 years. Tenure rights include full community use of timber and non-timber forest products and other use rights, except actual land-ownership. Financial accounts are compulsory and are independently managed by the executive committee. Benefit-sharing is also compulsory and is part of the operational plan. Community forests allow ecotourism, land allocation to the poorest members of the groups, the establishment of forest-based enterprises and several other activities.

In collaborative forest management, forest areas are jointly managed in a partnership among the central government (represented by Division Forest Office), the local government and local communities. Those stakeholder groups form a Collaborative Forest Management (CFM) group comprising representatives of those stakeholders, with a local community representative as the president. Tenure is indefinite, but once again, the operational plan (which dictates use and harvesting) is reviewed every five to 10 years. Tenure rights include community use of 50 percent of available forest products (with 40 percent for the federal government and 10 percent for the local government) but do not include land rights. Financial accounts are mandatory and managed by the Division Forest Officer, CFM president, and Accountant of Division Forest Office. Benefit-sharing is also mandatory and is developed as described. Collaborative forest management allows ecotourism but none of the other uses of community forests.

Table 1. Status of community-based forest management models in Nepal

Management regime	Area (ha)	Remarks
Community forest	2,312,545	Community has full rights to manage and use forest resources. Some 22 266 community forests are registered (as of January 2020),* with 8.5 million people in households engaged in community forestry.
Collaborative forest management	75,665	Government and communities jointly manage the forests. Communities do not have full rights.
Leasehold forest	45,043	Leased to poor people for 40 years with full management and use rights.
Religious forest	2,054	Handed to religious institutions with limited management intervention.
Buffer zone community forest	138,184	Located in buffer zones around protected areas. Communities have limited management roles and use rights.
Buffer zone leasehold forest	257	Leased to poor families in buffer zone areas for management and use of resources.

Note *= Unpublished data provided by Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal.
Source Unpublished data provided by the Ministry of Forests and Environment.

The Government's Forest Sector Strategy (2016–2025) sets the goal of allocating 60 percent of the country's forest to community-based management by 2025, including 2.3 million hectares (40 percent of the country's forest area) as community forests. Recent statistics suggest that the target for community forests has been met (Table 1).

Nepal has a nationwide membership-based network of 22,415 community forest user groups called the Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal. According to the Federation, between March and May 2020, 252 of its member forest user groups mobilized social, financial (USD 99,058) and human resources to support the poorest and most vulnerable households within their groups. In addition, they donated USD 70,184 in financial support to the local government's relief fund, reaching 152,700 poor and vulnerable people in total.² More than 1,400 community forest user groups offered their buildings as quarantine centres during the crisis.

Phase 1 findings

Among the survey respondents in Nepal, using savings was the top way of coping after the onset of the economic fallout of the COVID-19 crisis. With 74.6 percent of respondents giving this answer, it was the highest reported use of savings of any country surveyed. When difficult economic times hit, the first thing people do is cut back on leisure spending. When that is not enough, using savings will be the next option. Only once savings have been exhausted do people seek out more extreme measures of coping, such as borrowing or going without more basic needs, such as adequate food.

This result suggests the importance of savings as a coping mechanism for community members. Community forestry has long existed in Nepal and has been successful at protecting forests. These resources have a greater potential to be used by people to develop stable livelihoods that allow them to save money as well. In the country's community forests, benefit-sharing and financial accounts are compulsory and can help communities save money and be mobilized to support vulnerable members in times of need. These mechanisms should be replicated elsewhere throughout the region and bolstered in any community forest in Nepal with relatively smaller savings.

Almost 12 percent of the survey respondents reported increased violence towards women in the community forest area. This is consistent with reports from around the world that COVID-19-associated lockdowns have resulted in more gender-based violence. The RECOFTC WAVES programme has been training gender leaders in the forestry sector in Nepal and throughout the Asia-Pacific region. We suggest that gender awareness and sensitization training be

greatly expanded into the forest communities and to the local government and police forces. There are also many ways to improve women's ability to report on violence, including through phone apps that also help them locate a safe shelter or receive advice and mental health support. Investing in such technologies is an important part of protecting the women who are often the primary users and protectors of a forest.

Despite the long-standing tradition of community forests, only 27 percent of the survey respondents reported that they had received assistance from their community forest committee.³ This may be because community members had enough savings to weather the crisis as it existed at the time of the survey, or received relief support from local governments or other sources. It could also suggest that despite benefit-sharing and finance mechanisms, community forest committees are not set up to provide aid in times of crisis. We recommend digging deeper into this subject to find out why support from committees was not received. We recommend providing capacity support to integrate disaster preparedness in community forest management.

No survey respondent reported using a "very degraded" forest. In fact, the respondents in Nepal had the largest proportion of respondents reporting use of "pristine" forest of any of the seven countries (at 41 percent of the forest sites mentioned, compared with 13 percent on average across Cambodia, the Lao PDR, Indonesia, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam). But respondents here also reported the smallest number of uses of forests of any of the seven countries. They cited an average of 3.3 uses as "important". In contrast, survey respondents in Indonesia reported an average of 9.4 important uses. In Nepal, use is concentrated in three categories: collecting fuel for home use or sale (96.6 percent of respondents); fodder, bedding and grazing land for livestock (79.7 percent) and collecting building materials for home use or sale (57.6 percent). Given the reported high-quality of forests, this suggests that greater use could potentially be made of these resources to generate funds for community forests to improve members' livelihood and to weather future crises.

Phase 2 findings on community forestry and livelihood assets

The two community forest users groups surveyed in Phase 2 were located in Bagmati Province: Shreechhap Deurali Community Forest Users Group in Sindupalchowk District, and Phagarkhola Community Forest Users Group in Kavrepalanchowk District. By the time of the Phase 2 survey, the livelihood assets associated with these community forests had contributed during the pandemic period in the following ways.

- **Human assets:** In Shreechhap, the return of migrants meant there were more people to take part in fire control, if needed. In Phagarkhola, returnees regularly attended meetings of community forest user groups. They increased their understanding of the importance of the community forest and their role in managing it.
- **Social assets:** In Shreechhap, the community forest committee actively engaged with the local government to mobilize support for their users. The local government support included food and sanitary kits.
- **Natural assets:** Harvesting of fodder, firewood and non-timber forest products increased in both communities as migrants returned to the villages. Because logging had been halted, timber was not available.
- **Financial assets:** The Shreechhap Deurali Community Forest user group donated NPR 5,000 (USD 50) to the local government as COVID-19 recovery support.
- **Physical assets:** Not available.

Shreechhap respondents suffered from the lack of timber extraction during lockdown, while Phagarkhola community forest members depended less on their forest for timber. The forest in Phagarkhola is dominated by shrubs and is therefore unable to supply timber to send to the market. Both communities said they experienced no significant impacts of the COVID-19 restrictions, apart from increased demand for firewood due to the return of migrants from cities.

Conclusions and recommendations

Community forest user groups are the lowest-level grass-roots organization and the smallest unit recognized by law in Nepal. Because they can be mobilized to identify the most vulnerable groups, they can coordinate, plan, implement and monitor recovery activities related to the COVID-19 pandemic. They can receive technical support and funds from municipal governments, other government agencies and funding agencies and channel it to the most vulnerable people in the communities.

The following strategic interventions could help community forests to support the recovery of the people most affected by the pandemic in Nepal:

- **Allocate certain areas of community forest for income generation by poor and vulnerable people.** Economic opportunities are limited for poor and vulnerable people, including in the surveyed communities (both rounds). They have been unable to find jobs, given the high rate of unemployment⁴ in the Nepali job market and their lack of skills and education. Another consistent pattern is that most of the poor and vulnerable people have limited access to land for farming,

which is the main source of livelihood for the majority of Nepalese and most common for those lacking skills and education. A large share of such people, about 3 million people, many of whom are Dalits, have either no land or have just enough to build a house. Providing them land would enable them to practice agroforestry and produce food or animals for their own consumption or send products to the market. Such activity would have important contributions in savings (which 74.6 percent of respondents in the Phase 1 survey reported using). Those without savings are likely the ultra-poor households. When the pandemic hit, they were affected the most. Neither of the surveyed community forest user groups have allocated any land for ultra-poor members to produce food or commercial agroforestry products. With technical and financial support (including long term support for sustainable business development), these groups can develop areas for short-, medium- and long-term economic opportunities through multilayered agroforestry programmes. The Community Forestry Development Guidelines 2008 allow such practice inside community forest areas, and are already practiced by many community forest user groups. This intervention has contributed towards alleviating poverty or reducing the vulnerability of ultra-poor households.⁵ This could be expanded by supporting community forest user groups to identify potential land for allocation, identify ultra-poor or vulnerable members, form subgroups and help them (with resources and capacity) plan and implement activities on the allocated forest land.

- **Facilitate collaboration among the community forest user groups with similar potential to achieve scale to develop and send forest products to market.** As reported by communities surveyed in Phase 2, community forest has contributed to improved forests. This finding echoes findings from the Department of Forest Research and Survey assessment in 2015 that there has been an increase of more than 5 percent in stem numbers between 1987/1998 and 2010/2014.⁶ The improvements in forests, however, are not reflected in providing economic benefits to community forest members. This is evident in community forests without timber to sell, a reality that has contributed to the declining interest of members who are now more drawn to tangible income (not in forest products such as fuelwood and fodder in the past). There is scope for promoting non-timber forest products and harvesting timber products from forests that increase the availability of local employment and income opportunities to poor and vulnerable households and communities who have lost incomes and sources of livelihood due to the pandemic responses. Yet, a cumbersome regulatory process⁷ and the high cost of harvest and transportation do not make economic sense for them to send their small surplus to the market. With policy and capacity support, the communities

producing small amounts of such products could collectively fulfill the regulatory requirements and access markets, lower their transaction costs and increase their per-unit return. Given that community forest user groups in Nepal are required to spend at least 35 percent of revenue to uplift vulnerable groups (by supporting their income-generating activities), increasing the income of community forest user groups would improve their assistance to vulnerable members.

- **Support local (municipal) governments to develop integrated development plans that prioritize recovery and support the livelihoods of poor and vulnerable people.**

Local governments are financially strong (with a more than USD 3 million annual budget) and have a strong mandate for local development, which includes supporting poor and vulnerable households. Despite the Forest Act 2019 and the Local Government Act 2017 that mandate local

governments to engage with community forest user groups in local development (and spend 35 percent of their budget to directly benefit women, Dalits, poor and vulnerable communities), their actions are not coordinated. This has constrained the capacity of community forest user groups without resources to support their members affected by the pandemic. Likewise, resource-rich community forest user groups, such as those which are able to sell timber, have sizable funds but have not been effective in reducing the vulnerability of its members. An integrated plan of municipalities that identifies the most vulnerable families and strategic interventions to enhance their resilience by collective mobilization of municipality and community forest user groups' resources would quicken the recovery process and reduce their vulnerability to similar events in the future. This requires facilitation and capacity support to municipality and community forest user group

Endnotes

1. Non-members surveyed were local people living in adjacent landscapes who also depend on forests but were not part of any formal community forestry group.
2. Gentle, P., Maraseni, T.N., Paudel, D., Dahal, G.R., Kanel, T., & Pathak, B. 2020. Effectiveness of community forest user groups (CFUGs) in responding to the 2015 earthquakes and COVID-19 in Nepal. *Research in Globalization*, 2: 100025. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.resglo.2020.100025>.
3. This is however contested by some community forestry leaders, who said they facilitated relief distribution closely working with local governments.
4. According to the Nepal Labour Force Survey 2018–2019 by Central Bureau of Statistics, 11.4 percent people were unemployed and 39.3 percent people were underemployed.
5. Oli, B.N. 2014. Pro-Poor Leasehold Forestry in Nepal: A New Dimension on Livelihoods. Proceeding of Regional Workshop on Pro-poor Leasehold Forestry, June 2014, Kathmandu.
6. Department of Forest Research and Survey (DFRS). 2015. State of Nepal's Forests: Forest Resource Assessment. Kathmandu.
7. Gritten, D., Greijmans, M., Lewis, S.R., Sokchea, T., Atkinson, J., Quang, T.N., Poudyal, B., Chapagain, B., Sapkota, L.M., Mohns, B. & Paudel, N.S. 2015. An uneven playing field: Regulatory barriers to communities making a living from the timber from their forests—examples from Cambodia, Nepal and Vietnam. *Forests*, 6:3433-3451.



At RECOFTC, we believe in a future where people live equitably and sustainably in and beside healthy, resilient forests. We take a long-term, landscape-based and inclusive approach to supporting local communities to secure their land and resource rights, stop deforestation, find alternative livelihoods and foster gender equity. We are the only non-profit organization of our kind in Asia and the Pacific. We have more than 30 years of experience working with people and forests, and have built trusting relationships with partners at all levels. Our influence and partnerships extend from multilateral institutions to governments, private sector and local communities. Our innovations, knowledge and initiatives enable countries to foster good forest governance, mitigate and adapt to climate change, and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda.



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