

Decentralized Forest Policy for Natural Sal (*Shorea robusta*) Forests Management in the Terai Region of Nepal

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Abstract : The study outlines the impacts of decentralized forest policy on natural Sal (*shorea robusta*) forests in the Terai region of Nepal. The government has implemented community forestry program to manage the forest resources and improve the livelihood of local people collectively. The forest management authorities such as conserve, manage, develop and use of forest resources were shifted to the local communities, however, the ownership right of the forestland retained by the government. Local communities took the decision on harvesting, distribution, and sell of forest products by fixing the prices independently. The local communities were putting the low value of forest products and distributed among the user households on the name of collective decision. The decision of low valuation is devaluating the worth of forest products. Therefore, the study hypothesized that decision-making capacities are equally prominent next to the decentralized policy and program formulation. To accomplish the study, individual to group level discussions and questionnaire survey methods were applied with executive committee members and user households. The study revealed that the local intuition called Community Forest User Group (CFUG) committee normally took the decisions on consensus basis. Considering to the access and affording capacity of user households having poor economic backgrounds, low pricing mechanism of forest products has been practiced, even though the Sal timber is far expensive in the local market. The local communities thought that low pricing mechanism is accessible to all user households from poor to better off households. However, the analysis of forest products distribution opposed the assumption as most of the Sal timber, which is the most valuable forest product of community forest only purchased by the limited households of better economic conditions. Since the Terai region is heterogeneous by socio-economic conditions, better off households always have higher affording capacity and possibility of taking higher timber benefits because of low price mechanism. On the other hand, the minimum price rate of forest products has poor contribution in community fund collection. Consequently, it has poor support to carry out poverty alleviation activities to poor people. The local communities have been fixed Sal timber price rate around three times cheaper than normal market price, which is a strong evidence of forest product devaluation itself. Finally, the study concluded that the capacity building of local executives as the decision-makers of natural Sal forests is equally indispensable next to the policy and program formulation for effective decentralized forest management. Unilateral decentralized forest policy may devalue the forest products rather than devolve of power to the local communities and empower to them.

Keywords : community forestry program, decentralized forest policy, Nepal, Sal forests, Terai

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