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## Community Forestry Unfazed by Political Turmoil

By Keya Acharya



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Godavari village expects to claim the UNFCCC's REDD plus carbon funds.

Credit:Keya Acharya/IPS

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**GODAVARI, Nepal, Nov 21, 2011 (IPS) - Nepal's joint forest management system has taken such deep roots that the country's prolonged political instability has had little effect on it.**

"We're doing well anyway," Ganesh Bahadur Silwal, 65, general secretary of the Godavari community forestry group, tells an international audience seated in an arc around him in a concrete hall in the scenic Godavari valley, 14 km southeast of Kathmandu, Nepal's capital.

Nepal's joint forest management system now boasts of 20,000 community forest management



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groups countrywide, and part of that success has been due to vigorous participation by women.

In Godavari village, Silwal explains that there are five women members in their 11- member village forest committee, the number having been decided by the members themselves.

With 120 user-households looking after 147 hectares of once degraded lands handed to them by the government in 1996, the maintenance of these lands has depended a lot on the community's women, who are responsible for fuel and fodder needs.

"Women do the weeding, cleaning and general maintenance work," says 50-year-old Ruku Bhujel, member of the committee.

With collaboration from the district forest officer (DFO), an official plan was initially signed, a village committee formed thereafter and the land sectioned off into four blocks.

Each year, one block is taken up for conservation work by the 120 users in the group, while the remaining three are left for natural regeneration.

The Kathmandu-based ICIMOD ( International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development), which has a field training site in Godavari, demonstrating various sustainable farming, forestry and livelihood options, has been supporting the group for technical and other expertise.

"Previously, we stole," says Rama Chettri, vice-president of the community forestry group. "Now that we find it is our land, we protect it," she says.

Ram Puri, forest guard of the group, smiles broadly. "Neither animals nor humans are allowed into natural regeneration areas until the trees are big enough to have their branches and leaves cut for selling as income," he says.

In 2011, the community earned Nepali rupees 50,000 (602 dollars) from the sale of branches and leaves alone.

The forests are now there in plain sight, verdant green around the village in the valley. There is enough fuel wood and fodder for the community and the group is now poised to earn more from various income-earning schemes.

The Godavari valley, known for its magnificent view of the Phulchoki forests of the Himalayas and its lush, fertile valley, is a popular tourist spot in Nepal. The village has in recent decades earned money from tourism-related activities.

But the members of the executive committee, which also feature the wife and daughter-in-law of general secretary Silwal, defend the committee's attempts at poverty alleviation through tourism.

"We made this hall as a 'picnic stall' to rent out to various tourist groups that come from Kathmandu to the valley. We earned 1,205 dollars as rental last year," says Silwal.

The community group has laid out around 20 water taps in the village, and included one government school and three monasteries in its user group.

"We are not sharing school expenses yet, but we have provided scholarships for members' children," says Silwal.

The group, which meets every Saturday, has now decided to form a separate group consisting of, and helping, low-income households.

"We need to wait for another generation to see equal inclusion of all castes and classes into these community forestry groups," says Samden Sherpa, head of ICIMOD's Godavari training centre.

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A 2009 study by the Washington-based International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) noted that "a continuing challenge is to ensure equitable distribution of benefits to women and marginalised groups."

IFPRI recommended "responsiveness of government and policymakers to a multi-stakeholder collaborative learning process," noting that since 70 percent of Nepal's population depended on agriculture community management of forests has been "a critically important intervention."

The programme has evolved from a protection-oriented, conservation-focused agenda to a much more broad-based strategy for forest use, enterprise development, and livelihood improvement with a third of Nepal's population directly managing one-fourth of Nepal's forest area.

In 2008, after a 10-year civil war, Nepal abolished its monarchy and became federal republic. But, this country of 27 million people is yet to decide on how best to make the transition to democracy under a permanent new constitution.

ICIMOD, meanwhile, has been conducting three pilot schemes, with help from the Norwegian Agency for Development Co-operation (NORAD), on REDD +, the UNFCCC's new plan on reducing emissions from deforestation and degradation, together with livelihood options.

Begun in 2009 with 104 community forest groups and covering nearly 28,000 hectares in east, west and central Nepal, ICIMOD's REDD+ runs the Carbon Trust Fund, one of the world's first, with capital from NORAD.

The fund pays for carbon sequestered through sustainable community forestry, aiming to generate enough money through future carbon stocks to run itself.

Payment depends on performance criteria combined with socioeconomic benefits, and has a training system for measuring conserved carbon.

"We are already in touch with government authorities to take this initiative into policy practice," says ICIMOD's Eak Bahadur Rana, in charge of REDD+.

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