

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Women in forestry: A study of Kenya's Green Belt Movement and Nepal's Community Forestry Program

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### Abstract

This literature review evaluates two programs that attempt to involve women in community-based forestry projects: the Green Belt Movement led by Wangari Maathai in Kenya, and Nepal's government-sponsored Community Forestry Program. To evaluate the extent to which each program is a successful community-based conservation venture, the recommendations developed at the Airlie House Community Based Conservation Workshop in 1993 are used. These recommendations stipulate that factors such as culture, participation, resource ownership, and skills and knowledge transfer must be taken into account for a community-based conservation venture to be successful. To evaluate the extent to which each program is successful in securing the active involvement of women, the study evaluates how well they overcome a set of four factors that commonly limit women's involvement in forestry projects, developed by Molnar in 1997; this list includes limited access to productive resources, limited decision-making roles, limited participation in the labor market and lack of incentives for project workers to incorporate women. By evaluating each program's strengths and weaknesses, the paper reveals certain characteristics, such as cultural awareness and the incorporation of civic education and skill development, that community forestry programs must have in order to successfully involve women in their efforts.

**Keywords:** *Community forestry, gender, Kenya, Nepal.*

### Introduction

Those involved in co-ordinating community-based forestry projects worldwide have become increasingly aware of the necessity of securing the active involvement of women, who in many cases are the primary forest users. According to Augusta Molnar (1997, p. 269), "women often have a better knowledge base than men in the same locality about the qualities, growing patterns, and potential uses of forest species and grasses." Although several major organizations like the World Bank (2004) and the United Nations (ex. World Commission on the Environment and Development, 1987) have officially recognized the importance of involving women in community-based forest management as well as in community development in general, doing so is not always easy. Given the fact that every woman in the world faces different circumstances and is part of a different society or culture, is it possible to make meaningful statements about how best to involve women in community-based solutions to deforestation? This

paper, researched through literature review, will compare two community-based forestry programs that work to involve women, the Green Belt Movement (GBM) in Kenya and Nepal's government-sponsored Community Forestry Program, with the goal of identifying practices or factors that are particularly important in their efforts to engage women in afforestation projects and areas in which each program has progress to make.

### Background to the Green Belt Movement

The GBM was founded in 1977 by Wangari Maathai. At the time Maathai was a member of the Environment and Habitat Committee of the National Council of Women in Kenya, and she suggested that encouraging rural women to plant trees would be "a project that would ... help our member [sic] in the rural areas to inexpensively meet many of their needs including wood fuel, building and fencing material and soil conservation" (Maathai, 2004, p. 17).

Although initially met with some skepticism, the idea proved to be successful; participants in the GBM have planted over 30 million trees (Green Belt Movement, 2003) and Wangari Maathai has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for her work. No longer directly linked with the National Council of Women in Kenya, the GBM today is structured around a network of women's groups throughout the country that maintain tree nurseries and engage in both environmental conservation and community development activities. According to their annual report for 2003, "The mission of GBM is to mobilize community consciousness for self-determination, justice, equity, reduction of poverty, and environmental conservation, using trees as the entry point" (Green Belt Movement, 2003, p. 6).

### **Background to Community Forestry in Nepal**

Like the GBM, Community Forestry in Nepal was introduced in the 1970s. Unlike GBM, however, it is a countrywide, government-sponsored method of forest management. Community Forestry was initiated when the international community perceived that Nepal's traditional model of strict top-down forest management was not successful at halting deforestation, and a new model was needed. With the goal of involving local communities in the management and preservation of the forests upon which they depend, a system of participatory forest management was introduced. This system developed into the forest user group (FUG) system in use today. In this model forest management is turned over to an FUG that is ideally composed of all the community members that make use of the forest. The forest still officially belongs to the government, but the FUG is free to manage it as it chooses provided it designs a management plan that is approved by the forestry department. Often the head of a household is the one to join the FUG, but women also join, and quotas exist to ensure that women are included in the FUG's executive committee that co-ordinates day-to-day management. Community forestry has become very widespread; it exists in every one of the country's districts (Buchy & Rai, 2008), and one in three Nepali citizens is an FUG member (Rechlin et al., 2008).

### **Criteria for analysis**

Any attempt to make a comparison between the GBM in Kenya and efforts to involve women in Community Forestry in Nepal must be made with caution. First, the types of literature discussing each program are not equivalent to one another. Researchers analyzing the GBM have done so from a generally positive point of view, while research on community

forestry in Nepal has a wider variety of perspectives. Secondly, the two programs are significantly different in nature. The GBM is a non-governmental organization (NGO) specifically focused on empowering women; it can choose to enter communities when interest is there, and does not function in all areas of the country. Community forestry in Nepal, in contrast, is an official program used by the national government to manage its forest land. Although involving women in its efforts has been increasingly seen as important, the program was not originally designed with this goal in mind.

Despite their differences, however, both the GBM and Nepal's Community Forestry Program have the goal of being community-based forestry ventures that involve women as some of their main participants, and they can be compared on the basis of how well they meet this goal. To compare the programs, two questions were asked: how successful is each as a community-based conservation effort, and how successful are they at involving women in their work? To evaluate the extent to which each program is a successful community-based conservation venture, the recommendations developed at the Airlie House Community Based Conservation Workshop in 1993 were used. These recommendations stipulate that the following factors must be taken into account for a community-based conservation venture to be successful: culture, participation, resource ownership, skills and knowledge transfer, institutions, and policy (Western, 1994). Of these six factors, only the first four are used in this analysis as they are relevant to both programs. To evaluate the extent to which each program is successful at securing the active involvement of women, this study evaluated how well they overcome a set of four factors that commonly limit women's involvement in forestry projects, developed by Molnar (1997); this list includes limited access to productive resources, limited decision-making roles, limited participation in the labor market, and lack of incentives for project workers to incorporate women.

### **Analysis**

*How do these two case studies measure up as community-based conservation efforts?*

An analysis of the GBM using the factors identified at the Airlie Workshop reveals both strengths and weaknesses. In the area of "culture", a strength includes the fact that GBM's programs take traditional gender roles into account; although women are empowered by participating, Maathai maintains that GBM also "reaffirms accepted roles for African women as mothers, wives, housekeepers, income earners, and community organizers" (in Slawter,

2006, p. 70). Men who wish to be involved can also be comfortable doing so, since agriculture is both a female and a male domain. Programs also rely on local knowledge, and the methods used are easy for illiterate women to understand. "Participation" is facilitated by the fact that community members initiate group formation, ensuring their active participation throughout the process. "Skills and knowledge transfer" is addressed through frequent skill development programs, on topics such as civic education and agriculture. "Resource ownership" is also addressed in the civic education programs, which help to teach resource ownership rights.

One possible weakness in the area of "culture" is the fact that GBM programs, although widespread, are not present in all of Kenya's regions, meaning that some ethnic groups, such as the Turkana and the Maasai, benefit less than those concentrated in the areas where GBM is active. Perhaps its programs need to be adjusted to benefit these groups, which in many cases are from nomadic cultures. In the area of "participation", there is no apparent method documented in the literature to ensure that all individuals and groups who wish to participate are involved in group formation; in areas with multiple ethnic groups, it is possible that those who are traditionally dominant will also dominate the GBM group. When tree planting is carried out on the private land owned by participants, the landless poor could be potentially excluded from some benefits.

An analysis of Nepal's FUG program using the Airlie Workshop criteria also reveals both strengths and weaknesses. A strength in the area of "culture" is the fact that efforts are being made to address cultural diversity in forester training programs; several courses at the Institute of Forestry in Pokhara mention culture and gender as issues to be discussed (Tribhuvan University, 2000). In the area of "participation", the program has impressive scope; one in every three Nepalis is an FUG member (Rechlin, 2008). In addition, there are organized efforts to involve all stakeholders when groups are formed; quotas are one example. "Resource ownership" is also well addressed; through participating in an FUG, community members can determine how important forest resources are used. Local skills and knowledge are valued, and local uses of forest resources have been extensively documented, addressing the criteria of "skills and knowledge transfer".

Weaknesses include the fact that, despite official quotas to ensure equal participation, traditionally excluded groups are often underrepresented when it comes to decision making (Klatzel, 2007). Extension workers can sometimes be hindered in their work by caste divisions, making it hard for them to interact with all castes and groups present in an FUG

(Klatzel, 2007). In the area of resource ownership, women-only FUGs are sometimes given control over inferior resources (Buchy & Rai, 2008). In addition, according to many studies, the poor often do not benefit as fully from community forestry as the rich (e.g. Klatzel, 2007).

*How do these case studies measure up in their efforts to involve women?*

The criteria to answer this question are taken from a paper by Molnar, wherein she identifies the following four challenges to involving women in community forestry:

1. Women's restricted access to productive resources, such as credit, land, information, training, inputs, and marketing channels,
2. Lack of skills or incentives for project personnel to incorporate women's knowledge, needs, and preferences into the design of interventions and the menu of technical recommendations,
3. Restrictions on women's participation in the labor market due to conflicting demands of child care and daily household tasks, including food preparation and fodder, water, and fuel collection,
4. Women's restricted roles in public decision making outside (and sometimes within) the household (Molnar, 1997, p. 270).

GBM does relatively well at addressing all of these challenges. It remedies "restricted access to resources" by providing resources such as trees and training programs to female (as well as male) participants, and through civic education programs educates women about their property rights. Participants are compensated financially for trees planted, and this added income, combined with skills learned through GBM-sponsored workshops, helps to enhance women's decision-making power. Participation aids women with domestic tasks, instead of causing a conflict with these demands, especially when the trees become mature, providing easy access to firewood and improving water resources. The projects are initiated by women at the local level, not by outside project personnel who may or may not consider women's needs.

Weaknesses in these areas are few. "Restricted access to marketing channels" does not appear to be directly addressed by GBM's programs, but owing to the nature of the programs, improved access to marketing channels does not appear to be needed. A more significant challenge is the fact that, as an NGO, GBM is reliant on outside donors to meet its financial needs. At times, it has found it difficult to compensate all participants for the trees planted (GBM 2003), and

in cases where they are not compensated, women could feel more of a conflict between their domestic responsibilities and their participation in GBM programs.

Strengths of Nepal's program include the fact that participation in an FUG is designed to increase access to resources, for both female and male members. Civic education, which is sometimes included in the FUG formation process (e.g. Hughes, 1994), can also increase access to resources. The use of target groups, such as women-only discussion forums, at the time of group formation, can increase participation in decision making (Hughes, 1994). In addition, as mentioned earlier, gender issues are addressed in forestry training programs, making it more likely that forestry workers will work to involve women in FUGs.

Weaknesses include the fact that, in some cases, FUGs can limit access to resources, such as when a women-only FUG is given control over inferior land. Sometimes field staff can have their own agendas, and want to form groups as quickly as possible, not taking time to involve all stakeholders (Buchy & Rai, 2008). Illiteracy and lack of confidence can still hinder women's decision-making roles (Klatzel, 2007), despite the best intentions of forestry workers and legal provisions such as quotas designed to ensure that women are involved.

### Lessons learned

A study conducted through literature review, like this one, is naturally subject to limitations. By relying on research done by others, the information accessed has already been colored by the biases and goals of other writers. The author was also unable to ensure that uniform information had been collected about both case studies. In this particular case, the literature on the GBM was generally found to be quite positive, while literature on Nepal's FUG system had a wider variety of perspectives. This study could certainly be strengthened through future on-the-ground research, to collect parallel data on both programs.

That being said, much can be learned through analyzing community forestry systems by analyzing existing research. Many of the sources drawn upon in this paper either focused on a narrow geographical area or were based on studies and interviews conducted over a limited period. They were written by authors from different academic backgrounds and with different viewpoints. By combining the findings of several researchers and organizations into one paper, this study was able to encompass a wider scope than would be possible through first hand research. This makes it easier to make comparisons and draw conclusions that can be applied by community forestry workers worldwide.

In conclusion, both Nepal's Forest User Group system and Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement

have much to teach the community forestry worker hoping to ensure women's involvement. Both programs illustrate the importance of taking cultural setting and pre-existing gender roles into account. The value of civic education and skill-building workshops is also illustrated; that is, programs that increase women's capacity to be full participants in community forestry programs. Any organization hoping to involve women in community-based forestry or conservation must take a holistic approach, focusing on both environmental and social factors, addressing the needs of female participants as well as viewing them as a valuable resource in environmental conservation.

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