

Section VII: CONCLUSIONS

Chapter 13 - Conclusions

13.1 Introduction

The previous chapters of this thesis consist of background, findings and analyses. It remains to take a final step into synthesis and to distil conclusions. In doing so, it is important to look back to the aims and objectives of this thesis. This journey began with the aim of improving the understanding of human-environment interaction, cooperative human behaviour and social justice in participatory natural resource management. The research has been driven by inquiry on three closely related questions of collective action processes and outcomes in CF; a) when do people cooperate, b) how and why does collective action in CF emerge and evolve, and c) what leads or does not lead to equitable outcomes? The thesis also aimed at making a fundamental distinction between equity and equality relevant to CF (Chapter 1).

Guided by these aims and objectives, the research has critically reviewed relevant literature and established a solid background for this research endeavour (Chapters 2, 3 and 4). The researcher has then designed a suitable methodology (Chapter 5), travelled to Nepal and carried out multi-stakeholders/ multi-scales study with a focus on three CF case studies, and collected relevant data and information by employing triangulation of sources, methods and instruments. As the literature has highlighted the importance of contextual factors, the context has been established for three case study sites in Chapter 6. Data was analysed during the field work, and systematically after the field work, and results are presented in Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10. The findings are analysed with the key research questions in mind (Chapters 11 and 12).

This chapter presents conclusions of the thesis in four parts. The first section summarises the major findings of this study. The second section discusses the theoretical implications of embedded collective action before the discussion turns to the implications of the research findings for community forestry policy and practice in Nepal. The last two sections identify avenues for further research followed by some final comments.

13.2 The major findings

13.2.1 Emergence of collective action in CF

The proposal for collective action becomes effective when it situates in local and wider contexts. Nepalese CF emerged from the realisation that the existing forest management was ineffective and

inefficient. It came after the failure of state's intervention to halt and restore perceived forest degradation. The failure was characterised by the ignorance of local people's needs, informal rights, use and management system. The external interventions overlooked the historically changing socio-economic and political processes that contributed to forest degradation. The emergence of collective action came as an alternative response to the perceived degradation of forests. Only after the understanding and appreciation of local and wider contexts, the proposal for collective action became an effective reality.

The initiation of collective action is not the same everywhere. It can be sponsored by external agents or initiated by local people. Sometimes, external agents can impose new arrangements over self-initiated collective action. When local social and political systems are destroyed by the existing forest management system, people lose a sense of ownership and the high level of forest dependence, clear boundaries of the forest and communities, small size and shared norms are unhelpful to initiate collective action. External agents are required, but they must recognise existing social relations.

Collective action can be initiated by heterogeneous groups of local people when they have a common understanding of collective danger, but such understanding is conditioned by social belief, political leadership and socio-economic processes occurring at different levels. Self-initiated collective action is recognised by the state when it has a backing from popular institutions, the good relationship between the state and communities and a danger of deforestation from alternative arrangements. However, the recognition of self-initiated collective action often fails to question unfair socio-economic relations. The recognition institutionalises bias and often transfers the use pressure on neighbouring forests and communities that are not recognised.

Sometimes, collective action is initiated by local people, but new arrangements can be imposed by the state, particularly when the community is characterised by social division and conflicts. Such intervention mainly serves the external interests, but also serves the interests of the community elites if they are in line with external interests.

The formal process of institutionalisation of collective action is often driven by the state. When the state agency drives the process, forest users' participation becomes ineffective and elite domination is widespread. Sometimes the domination is unproblematic when it is socially accepted, but the state's focus on elites to implement target-oriented approach to CF is a threat to the livelihoods of the community and the sustainability of CF.

13.2.2 Evolution of collective action in CF

Forests are improved through CF. It is due to effective protection systems employed by users, which are different in different places, based on their specific socio-economic and ecological contexts. The improvement of forest condition is also associated with the historical, socio-economic and political processes. CF is reversing degradation and regenerating degraded areas, which is a great achievement and an endorsement for CF. However, the improved forest condition is not an end in itself. Forests have not improved uniformly and the improved forests are not in a stage to produce surplus that can be sold and generate income. Forests managed under CF are not ideal for biodiversity conservation because the users tend to retain preferred species.

Underutilisation is a major issue of CF, which is caused by the politics of forest management that deprives users having knowledge about and authority to harvesting forest products. The underlying cause is the conservation interest of the state, shared by the elites for a variety of reasons.

Despite CF being implemented based on the assumption of widespread benefits, the benefits are often very limited. CF is supporting the local livelihoods far below the potential, particularly in relation to poorer users. There are examples of local users becoming worse off as a result of CF. The underlying reason behind this is the persistent control of CF by the DFO to meet its conservation interests. Poverty alleviation and rural development through CF are the rhetoric, not the reality, due mainly to the serious flaws in the existing formal and standardised system of CF.

Forest users are not, solely or perhaps even principally, motivated to act collectively by the direct benefits of CF. While users receive some products and anticipate future benefits, CF is perceived to be relatively better than the previous system and the available alternative forest management. There are social, cultural and economic benefits of participating in the process of action. Sometimes, collective action has been forced by powerful actors. The limited flows of direct benefits have frustrated users, but their motivations to continue collective action are embedded in a variety of economic and non-economic causes, including power relations.

13.2.3 Equity in CF

a) Distributive equity

Despite the formal provision of equality in local and national policy and implementation processes of CF, benefit distribution is often inequitable because it does not reflect the needs of the users, with the more needy receiving more support. There are problems of policy making at different levels that do not reflect the unequal conditions of the poor and minorities, hindering them from gaining equitable shares. Perhaps the most important reason of distributional inequity is the entrenched politics, in which the poor and minorities are deprived of equitable shares due to pre-

existing socio-cultural hierarchical relations, poor information flow, channelling of the FUGs' resources into communal activities and nepotism by the elites.

The formal provision of equality principle in distribution has led to inequitable distribution of benefits in two major ways. Firstly, equal distribution is not happening in practice because influential and powerful people have directly exercised their power to distribute benefits disproportionately. Secondly, even when the distribution is equal, disadvantaged users are suffering more from the protection focussed forest management because they do not have sufficient access to suitable forest products and they have divergent needs with fewer private resources. In some cases, CF has actually made the poor and disadvantaged groups worse off.

Distributional inequity cannot stop people acting collectively because there are rationales for tolerating present inequity. The perceived equality principles of CF are believed to be more progressive than oppressive and exploitative system prevalent in the wider society. People are uncertain about whether the new system will be more equitable than the present one and they tend to accept the status quo and tolerate persisting inequity, rather than risking further inequity. There are discourses that deny, excuse or oppose distributive inequity. Although these discourses are myths, they provide rationales for people to join and continue collective action. CF has a rigid framework, in which people do not have choice avoiding collective action, but they must join the action to secure legal rights and ownership of forest product. Peoples' motivation to act collectively is embedded within a variety of factors, not only in distribution of benefits.

Despite people acting collectively and tolerating inequity, aiming for distributive equity in CF is justifiable. There is a strong support for benefit distribution based on an equitable principle rather than on equality principle because the disadvantaged groups have something to offer and gain from CF. It is worthwhile making the effort to achieve desirable outcomes. Efforts from the disadvantaged groups are feasible to achieve and is important for enhancing and maintaining forest health. There are practical and ethical reasons for positive discrimination in favour of the poor and disadvantaged groups.

b) Procedural equity

The research has shown that little procedural equity exists because the formal provision of equality has led to inequitable processes in two major ways. Firstly, equal participation, rights, access and shares that are established by CF policy, are not equally implemented in practice due to socio-economic, cultural and political constraints. Secondly, even when the formal provision of equality is implemented, the relative weight and importance of resources between the poor and wealthy is not equal. Application of the equality principle can reinforce inequality and disadvantage those

who are already in a disadvantaged position. Equality principles have often made the poor and minorities worse off.

Three interconnected factors condition procedural inequity: socio-cultural and economic circumstances, knowledge about CF and the nature of knowledge, and politics of forest management. Socio-cultural and economic factors influence procedural inequity because these factors can exclude or make the disadvantaged groups passive in the process of CF. Social norms, ties and socio-economic interdependence often force the poor and disadvantaged groups to act collectively and follow the rules out of coercion rather than consent, even when the costs from cooperation outweigh the benefits. Collective action is, therefore, not always an entirely voluntary act, but it can prevail with significant inequities because of the webs of interdependencies in which people are embedded.

Procedural inequity has been partly created by the knowledge vacuum; a situation, in which the poor and disadvantaged groups have limited knowledge about their rights and roles under CF and the concepts and procedures of CF. The vacuum has emerged due to the state and elites that have used flawed forms and modes of information delivery and communication strategies to maintain the authority over valuable forest resources. These powerful actors have constructed and promoted different CF orthodoxies that have either denied inequitable processes or excused them and provided the poor and disadvantaged a justification to act collectively. The disadvantaged groups with limited knowledge of CF tend to accept CF orthodoxies because they are unaware that their interests are being jeopardised. In fact, CF knowledge cannot be correctly and sufficiently transferred to forest users within the existing institutional structures of the forest bureaucracy that ignore the social settings, in which knowledge is transferred. Even if existing CF knowledge is transferred to local users, there is an underlying problem in the nature of existing knowledge that is produced through orthodox forest science. The solutions based on the knowledge unfairly penalise the poor and disadvantaged groups. The fundamental barrier to procedural equity is less about knowledge, but more about the power involved in the creation and transfer of knowledge.

Procedural inequity has been created and exacerbated by the politics of CF, which is characterised by widespread elite domination, the control by the state and increasing conflict in forest management, which singularly or in combination, effectively prevent certain grievances from developing into full-fledged issues which call for decisions. Elite domination is a serious equity issue because it leads to committee forestry and participatory exclusions, which create a situation of non-decision making in which the poor and disadvantaged groups can choose not to decide or choose not to act (non-implementation). Clearly, the devolution and decentralised decision-making arrangements do not include concerns about social equity that extend to all groups that use, work in, and depend on the forest resource. Participatory democratic processes provide more weight to

the experiences and standpoints of privileged groups than to those of disadvantaged groups, whose concerns and interests may never be articulated or shared. The exclusionary history of collective action raises a serious concern that CF benefits are aligned with the interests and values of powerful elites, rather than with the poor and minorities. To promote equity, positive discrimination in favour to the poor and disadvantaged groups in decision making is needed.

Procedural inequity has been created and exacerbated by the state's decentralised policy that universally imposes formal democratic system based on equality without acknowledging the specific context of socio-culturally and economically unequal societies. The standardised implementation of CF policy by the state is conceptually flawed in promoting equity because it does not discriminate between people with different needs and endowments. The bureaucracy legitimates collective action on the basis of a rule-bound formalism, open to repeated exploitation by powerful groups. Inequity has further increased as most resistance to decentralisation comes from within the state during implementation. The resistance mainly comes from the persisting bureaucratic norms and ideology, which are heavily influenced by socio-economically and politically irrelevant orthodox forest science that traps individuals into a dehumanised system of control. The diffusion of bureaucratic norms and structures encourages the spread of cultural uniformity and isolation of individuals and do not take account of ethical values such as equity which inform people's behaviour.

The perceptions of different stakeholders indicate that the attitudes of the state's officials and the processes of policy making and implementation have disenfranchised the poor and minorities. Villagers are gradually isolated from wider society, economy and politics and informal institutions are gradually transformed to formal institutions, in which the elites are disorganising the processes by ignoring the needs and views of the poor and minorities. As the institutions become more formal, the office bearers became more accountable to the external agency rather than to the users. With the forest regenerating, the value of the resource and the perception of its value have increased and consequently, the FUGC's positions are viewed as positions of power and therefore are competitive. Earlier, the poor and disadvantaged groups had access to forests and forest products, but now there are increased restrictions. A few influential people have grabbed the benefits, while the weaker groups, who depend more on forests, have not been meaningfully involved in decision making. In terms of the costs, all households are supposed to contribute equally irrespective of the family's condition and constraints, but the poor have often contributed more than others. Even when the costs of protection are shared equally, the burden is unusually high on the poor. This has been a foundation for many tensions within the village and beyond.

13.3 Implications of the research

This research has important implications for the theory, policy and practice of collective action, equity and CF. There is very limited geographical study on Nepalese CF. Most discussions are technical and narrow, and some directs the interest to the issues of collective action and equity, but not explicitly in CF. No study focuses on equity in CF as the positive discrimination in processes and outcomes of collective action through embeddedness perspective.

13.3.1 Implications for the theory

By examining the emergence, evolution and outcomes of collective action in CF, the thesis has highlighted the significance of the concept of embeddedness in analysing CF. The research has demonstrated that collective action is interlinked with changing social, cultural, economic and political factors at different levels and therefore, it is variable in different locations. Without the understanding of the complexities, in which collective action is embedded, we cannot penetrate the emergence and evolution of collective action in CF. This supports the recent trend of CPR research that the management of natural resources by communities is not simple because it is embedded in complex sets of contextual factors (e. g. Peters 1987; Fisher 1994; Mosse 1997; Edwards & Steins 1998; Petrzalka & Bell 2000; Cleaver 2002). In the context of state sponsored decentralisation, the research finds that politics and unequal power relations are influential to different aspects of collective action and political embeddedness is perhaps more important than other forms of embeddedness.

People's motivation to act collectively is not solely driven by self-interest to maximise economic gains. The thesis has demonstrated that users' behaviour is not, solely or even principally, driven by economic benefits of CF, but by diverse non-economic causes. The choice to cooperate also depends on people's perceptions of the current system and uncertainty associated with the available alternatives. CF orthodoxies popularised by powerful actors also shape people's behaviour. Individuals often act collectively against their economic gains because social norms and unequal power relations force them to do so. Social ties and other interdependence influence actions and thereby offset pure self-interest. Therefore, people's motivation cannot be reduced to economic costs and benefits. This challenges the rational choice tradition and supports the new economic sociology proposition of economic action being socially situated (Granovetter 1985; Zurin & DiMaggio 1990; Granovetter & Swedberg 2001). The thesis refines new economic sociology's focus on economic action and argues that collective action, both economic and non-economic, is socially embedded.

The research challenges certain key points of the Contribution thesis (i.e. CPR theory). Firstly, by analysing the complexity of collective action in CF, the research shows that collective action is not the same everywhere and does not have the same causes or preconditions in different locations. The actions are embedded in changing social, cultural, economic, political and ecological factors. The use of long-enduring resource management criteria proposed by CPR theory is too mechanistic and fails to recognise the depth of social, economic and cultural embeddedness of decision making and co-operative relations. Secondly, CPR theory supports community-based approach in managing the communal resource sustainably and equitably. However, this research shows that under CF, the resource condition may be improved and maintained with significant inequity because of the politics, in which the elites control the processes and outcomes. Therefore, CPR theory over-emphasises the image of community-based management for promoting equity and sustainability, and pays less attention to the socio-cultural and economic hierarchy and to the disadvantaged groups that are mostly affected by institutions. Thirdly, the research questions the role of the state, which is taken for granted, or often ignored, in the Contribution thesis. The research shows that the state persistently controls the processes and outcomes of CF by simplifying and formalising local institutions, often by employing community elites so that CF will be more predictable to govern. The state retains key authorities over forest use and management and controls the direction of the institutions. It is centralisation through an apparent process of decentralisation.

The thesis contributes to the understanding of a fundamental difference between equity and equality in participatory natural resource management. The thesis argues that the application of the principle of formal equality can actually lead to inequitable outcomes. The formal equality principle of decision making and benefits distribution is not happening in practice, mainly due to the ignorance of the existing socio-cultural and economic hierarchy within the community and also the state controlling the way decisions are made and implemented. It is reinforcing the state's control and leading to committee forestry and participatory exclusions. Even when the formal equality is implemented, the poor and disadvantaged groups are often worse off because the current equality principle overlooks the pre-existing unequal conditions and circumstances, thereby it reinforces inequality. CF founded upon equality is a legacy of the historical development of democracy in the formal organisations, but the thesis rejects the use of formal equality principle, in which many aspects of democratic system are based. Instead, it argues that the processes and outcomes of participatory natural resource management must be based on positive discrimination in favour of the poor, women and disadvantaged groups for practical and ethical reasons.

The thesis supports the recent trend in political ecology in criticising the use of environmental orthodoxies in policy making that unfairly penalises the poor and minorities (Fairhead & Leach

1998; Forsyth 2003). The dominant orthodoxies that generally represent the interests and concerns of the state and elites are based on knowledge generated from sampling and inferences of orthodox forest science, which search for universally acceptable laws of nature based on practices that guarantee accuracy and lack of political bias. The knowledge produced is socio-economically and politically irrelevant and therefore, is misleading and inappropriate to address issues in different contexts. The fundamental problem is the link between the knowledge and power, but decentralisation pays little attention on this linkage. Despite the shifts in policy approach, there is little shift in basic conceptual apparatus and assumptions as the concept is still to draw on and thus reinforce disembodied views of nature-society relationships. Decentralisation universally imposes formal democratic system based on equality without acknowledging unequal societies. There is very little reorganisation of the forest bureaucracy and the existing bureaucracy is unable or unwilling to transfer knowledge to forest users. Most resistance to decentralisation comes from within the state during implementation. There is need to avoid the pitfalls of overemphasis of the democratic idea of formal equality associated with standardisation and formalism, and to transform bureaucratic norms and ideology. One way, in which these problems can be combated, is by reversing the logic of institutional development within our societies. The alternative logic must be founded on the ideological vision that equality-based democracy and supposedly impersonal bureaucracy does not necessarily lead towards equitable outcomes. The logic must be grounded in specific socio-cultural, economic and political contexts that provide the organisational system for acknowledging moral values, specificity and flexibility.

13.3.2 Implications for policy and practice

The embeddedness approach to CF should be reflected in the policy, practices and planning of government, non-government and users organisations. One way of doing this, according to Batterbury (2001), is by focusing on local decision making processes and contextualising these decisions in wider social and political systems. Implementation processes are also important because, as Bryant (1992) argues, the impacts of policies depend on the manner, in which the policy is implemented because social divisions are fully recognised during the implementation. The thesis has argued that in policy and planning, CF must be seen as a part of a wider system because the management and sustainability of CF is an imperative for improving livelihoods of forest users, particularly the poor and disadvantaged groups. The policy circle must critically assess the role of CF within the imperatives of rural development and poverty alleviation and reframe equity as a central part of CF.

When collective action is institutionalised, the policy makers must not assume that forests are uniformly improved, but specific distinction must be made on the basis of specific contexts of the different sites. The improved forest is not an end itself because it may not necessarily produce

surplus and generate income and may not be ideal for biodiversity conservation. The policy and practices should emphasis the proper utilisation of community forests because forests are significantly underutilised and the needs of the users are not met. One important way to better utilise forests is by providing users with proper knowledge about their rights and genuine authority to harvest forest products. There is a need for the state to realise that the focus on forest conservation risks the sustainability of CF because CF has not significantly contributed to improve the livelihoods of people, particularly the poor and disadvantaged groups. Poverty alleviation and rural development has remained as rhetoric, but not has been converted into reality. There is need for changing existing formal and standardised system if CF is to assume as a vehicle for poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

There are strong practical and ethical reasons for CF aiming at equity, but first, the policy and practice must acknowledge that the existing formal provision of the equality principle in distribution and decision making leads to inequitable outcomes. This is due mainly to widespread elite domination, limited knowledge on rights and politics of CF. There is a need for policy and practices to promote CF processes and outcomes to be based on positive discrimination in favour of the poor and minorities.

One way to promote positive discrimination is to recognise the need to correct underlying unjust structures and procedures of dominance by elites. As Walzer (1983) argues, this recognition requires constant attention and reworking for breaking the dominance. The reworking should be directed to people having one sort of good (like wealth) not automatically getting access to other sorts of goods (in this case, CF benefits). By breaking the dominance of some goods over access to other goods, a group's supremacy over different types of goods can be reduced. To do this, there is a need for establishing institutional and procedural norms that ensure the deliberations of the poor and disadvantaged groups being given more weight than that of the elites to offset the historical dominance of elites. These norms must be accepted, established and supported by an independent body comprising donors, state, civil society and accountable directly to the parliamentary justice advisory board and users. Once it is accepted, there will be philosophical and pragmatic reasons for equity as an aim of CF.

Achieving equity as a CF goal requires initiating and strengthening the participation of the poor and disadvantaged groups and increasing their visibility. The meaningful participation of those previously excluded requires more than inviting them to join the discussion. It needs an effective platform that facilitates the development of participatory structures based on positive discrimination. External actors including the state, civil society and donors have a critical role to provide the platform for users. Fisher (1999; 2003a) argued in reference to collaborative forest management in Kyrgyzstan that the establishment of an independent commission that is not

principally an instrument of the forest department, can play an important role to rule the way different stakeholders work in forest management. Similar initiative is worth considering in Nepalese CF, with a close appreciation to socio-cultural, economic, political and ecological specificities of Nepal. Clearly, further research is needed on the mechanism and success of such structures before they can be advocated, but some suggestions can be made.

CF commission could be established as an independent and nested statutory body, inclusive of the state, donors, civil society and forest users to establish certain principles of CF processes and outcomes, facilitate the processes and knowledge flow and review management plans and policy. The commission must be answerable to the parliamentary advisory board and forest users, not to the forest department. The commission must have the will, resources and power to challenge the existing bias and unfair structure and processes and pursue activities based on positive discrimination in favour of the poor and minorities. The commission undertake diverse activities such as developing mechanisms for improved flow and mode of information and service delivery, fair decision making and benefit distribution, incentives scheme and conflict resolution. One example of the mechanism is to create differential access and use rules for different groups so that the distribution matches the specific needs. It is important to clarify that these activities are not what the commission does in Kyrgyzstan. If people's prosperity changes, the system has to adjust by redefining different groups and amending the rules accordingly. These mechanisms must ensure that at the first level, the participation must be seen as an end to give the control of development agenda to a group, not the means to meet an external agenda. At the next level, the elites must be controlled (or disempowered) to empower the disadvantaged groups, otherwise participatory exclusions and committee forestry will continue. When the positive discrimination principle is established and institutionalised and the disadvantaged groups become powerful, the role of the commission becomes to strengthen, improve and sustain such activities.

To promote and sustain equity, the policy and practices must ensure that the users, particularly the poor and disadvantaged groups have clear knowledge about their rights and responsibilities. Without knowing what their rights are, it is impossible for users to claim and receive equitable access, shares and opportunities. The existing agents, modes and forms of information and its delivery are flawed and there is a need for change. CF knowledge cannot be transferred to forest users by the forest bureaucracy because it employs standardised methods to transfer information to elites or a formal committee. There is a need for alternatives and an independent commission can play useful role. However, the problem is much deeper than this. Even if existing CF knowledge is transferred, there is an underlying problem in the nature of existing knowledge produced through the various tools of orthodox forest science which is socio-economically and politically irrelevant. The identification of problems and formulation of solutions are often misleading and inappropriate

to address equity in different contexts. The solutions devised from the knowledge often unfairly penalise the poor and disadvantaged groups. Knowledge based on orthodox forest science that informs the policy must involve a major rethinking. The fundamental barrier is less about knowledge of CF, but more about the power involved in the production and transfer of knowledge. An independent commission may be useful to overcome this barrier.

13.4 Further research

Research is a continuous process of gathering and synthesising data and information, producing knowledge and increasing understanding and wisdom. We have much to understand about the complex interrelationships between forests and people. This requires a concerted effort on the behalf of researchers, policy makers and donors. There are further need for research on the issues of equity and equality in relation to participatory natural resource management, broadening the scope of research in different contexts and the refinement and application of the concept of embeddedness.

The issues of equity, equality and democracy analysed in this thesis are not limited to CF, but are important to participatory natural resource management in general. There is the need for research that analyses other participatory natural resource systems with a focus on developing mechanisms for positive discrimination to the poor and minorities. Comparative analysis of different resource management systems or involving different resources is important to further this approach.

The geographical scope of the thesis has been limited. There is potential to undertake similar type of research in other parts of Nepal and other CF around the world. The problems addressed here are not unique to Nepal but reflect a common problem of CF. The focus should remain on the critical assessment of the processes conditioned by social, economic and political processes.

There is a pressing need for widely applying the concept of embeddedness in CF research and developing conceptual tools with the concept. The analysis of the relations between the market and globalisation on equitable management of CF is an interesting aspect. This should be done with a focus on equity and complexity of human-nature relations in different scales, time and contexts.

13.5 Final comments

This thesis has shown the problems associated with collective action processes and outcomes of CF regarding the concept, policy and practices. While CF is yet to be significant for promoting social justice, poverty alleviation and community development, the thesis has not rejected the possibilities of CF to do so. CF has an important role in Nepal and beyond, but it must be

recognised that CF possibilities have been limited by the equality and formal system being imposed by the state. Continuation of formalism and the standardised approach to forest management is damaging the prospects of promoting social equity in CF; it can only increase the exploitation of the poor and minorities. Alternative approaches must emerge to take account of specific social, economic and political contexts so that social equity is contextualised and suitably considered in theory, policy and practice. Critical assessment of CF, such as this research, is not anti-CF. It is a sympathetic, positive contribution to the existing understanding of human-environment relationships for the purpose of developing community forestry.