

Forest Management, Utilization, and People's Perception of a Van Panchayat in Garhwal, Uttarakhand, India

200921293 Kazuyo NAGAHAMA

In 1988, the new Indian National Forest Policy marked a drastic shift away from economic exploitation toward forest resources conservation. The Ministry of Environment and Forests implemented Joint Forest Management (JFM), a concept of developing partnerships between forest user groups and state Forest Department's (FD) in order to achieve better forest resource conservation. In spite of JFM proliferation, this policy has been subject to growing criticisms and concerns among local forest user groups as only a few benefits are derived from JFM (Saito-Jensen, 2007). Criticism is also centered on inequitable distribution of benefits (ibid.). In the state of Uttarakhand, one of the JFM regions, decentralized forest management was adopted almost 60 years before JFM initiation, and one of the largest and most diverse experiments in common property management developed in collaboration with the state was the Van Panchayat (VP) – a unique community-based forest management approach.

The idea of establishing VP's originated in conflicts between people and the state government for control of resources and they were created in response to a people's movement for the utilization of forest resources at the beginning of the 20th century (Ballabh et al., 1988; Guha, 1983; Saxena, 1987; Singh et al., 1991), which increased during the first few decades (Rawat, 1999; UK Forest Department, 2009). Nevertheless, there was a steady decline in VP practice, and a quantitative and qualitative decline of the once dense and well-managed forests in the Kumaon (Ballabh et al., 2002; Balooni et al., 2007). This study pays attention to new VPs in Garhwal.

This research targets the VP system, and examines forest management via the question: to what extent have local institutions achieved sustainable forest management successfully? The intention of this study is to clarify actual forest management and utilization, and analyze the perceptions within forestry in relation to the Management Committee (MC), which is responsible for VP, and other members of VP, and the FD.

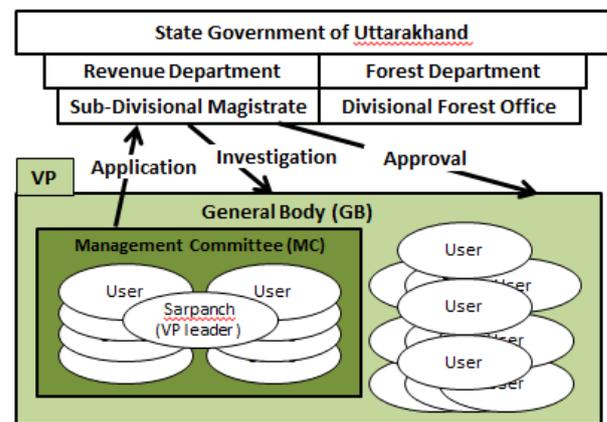


Figure 1. Constitution of VP (UFD, 2005).

For this purpose, field surveys were conducted in July and August of 2011 and 2012. As a preliminary step, visits were undertaken to the UK-FD for obtaining secondary data and some VPs in Mussoorie. Second, a structured interview was conducted at a village in Tehri Garhwal district in UK; the village was selected by design because the present chairman in this VP was a block committee leader of 151 VPs in Mussoorie, supporting the VP association. Discussions also intended to find out if an institutional VP was active in this region. Interviews were held with a total of 51 households from a VP in D village and 41 responses were collected from 38 household heads

and 3 household members including 6 women, which constituted 80% of the total members. Of the 41 respondents, 8 were MC members.

The VP of D village was established in 1993, and the freely accessible forest under VP rules (Figure 1) was 20 ha. However, the rules for forest management were not clearly described in the micro-plan prepared for the five-year period of 2003-2007 by the MC. The members constituting the MC were found to be almost the same since the VP establishment; the chairperson has held this post since the VP was formed.

Result of interviews revealed that 90% of the participants in VP were satisfied with the forest vegetation. Among numerous factors for people's participation, use of firewood was important as 78% of the respondents depended on the firewood for fuel for daily use. Although there is a MC to manage the VP, the context of forest management was not clear between the MC and non-MC members. The respondents, who were not the MC members, assumed there might be few forest-derived benefits for the MC. On the contrary, 15% of respondents answered that MC benefitted from VP (Figure 2). Furthermore, 29% of the respondents had participated in preparing the micro-plan however it has not been developed further since 2007.

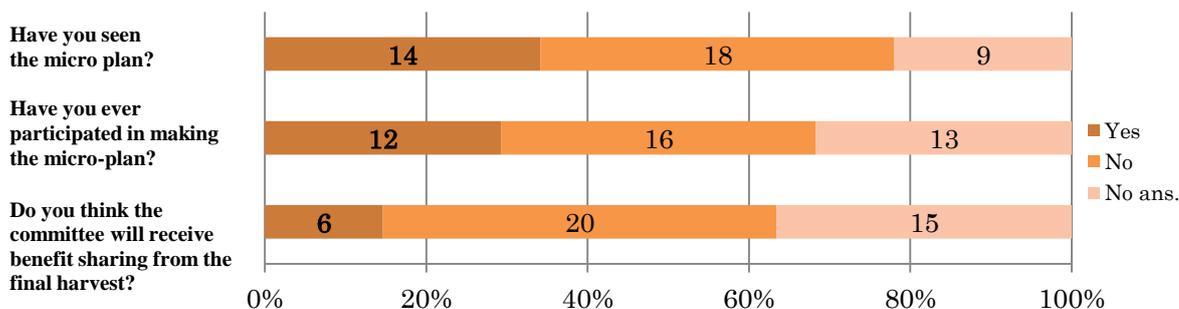


Figure 2. People's recognition of the micro-plan (n = 41).

Although this investigation presents a case study of a VP that was highly recommended by the FD officers, there are several issues and challenges associated with forest management, such as requirements or revision of the micro-plan. Other points to be considered are: i) no change in most of the MC members during the last seven years, ii) unfair selection of the MC members and chairperson, and iii) proper utilization of forest products. In the case of the third point, for example, villagers consumed firewood daily and did not shift to using liquefied petroleum gas provided by the government under various schemes to increase access to modern amenities; this is also necessary for forest conservation.

Keywords: *Community-based forest management, Joint Forest Management, Forest Department, Van Panchayat, Management Committee.*