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Actor Dynamics and Evidence Informed Policy Process in Nepal's Forestry Sector



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Actor Dynamics and Evidence Informed Policy Process in Nepal's Forestry Sector

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List of Acronyms

CBFM	Community-based Forest Management
CF	Community Forestry
Cft	Cubic feet
CFUG	Community Forest User Group
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease
DFO	Divisional Forest Office
DoFSC	Department of Forests and Soil Conservation
EnLiFT1	Enhancing Livelihoods and Food Security from Agroforestry and Community Forestry in Nepal
EnLiFT2	Enhancing Livelihoods from Improved Forest Management in Nepal
EPL	EnLiFT2 Policy Lab
EPPL	EnLiFT2 Policy and Practice Lab
FECOFUN	Federation of Community Forest Users Nepal
FENFIT	Federation of Forest-based Industry and Trade, Nepal
FY	Fiscal Year
LG	Local Government
LGOA	Local Government Operations Act
LPG	Liquified Petroleum Gas
MoFE	Ministry of Forests and Environment
MP	Member of Parliament
NTFPs	Non-timber Forest Products
OP	Operational Plan
PAC	Project Advisory Committee
SciFM	Scientific Forest Management
SFM	Sustainable Forest Management

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Policy challenges and the political economy of scale in forestry in Nepal	1
Policy challenges at local level: Forest under-utilisation in research sites	2
Strategies employed for policy influence and achievements	4
Evidence Informed Policy Dialogue (EPL/EPPL)	5
EnLiFT Policy Lab (EPL)	5
EnLiFT Policy and Practice Lab (EPPL)	6
Engagement with parliamentarians and citizen associations	8
Inputs to federal policies, laws, directives and standards	9
Mediation across higher (policy) level authorities vs policy implementation on the ground	9
Community empowerment / social movement	11
Discursive engagement (journals, social media, policy papers, media engagements)	12
Interpersonal networking with officials, policy makers and civil society leaders	13
Discussion and Lessons	13
Substantive policy analysis and insights	13
Policy engagement and influence strategies	14
Methodological insights in influencing policy	15
References	17

Executive Summary

This paper provides a fairly detailed account of multitude of approaches adopted as part of a journey of contributing to or perhaps influencing a policy process in Nepal's forest sector. We acknowledge that the policy making involves a series of formal consultation as well as often less formal negotiation processes. In addition, when we approach a policy from a system's perspective, the connection of policy extends from higher level legislative and bureaucratic processes to the motivation and attitude of street level bureaucrats and other actors involved in sub-national policymaking and policy implementation. Building on the EnLiFT Policy Lab (EPL) of EnLiFT1 (Enhancing Livelihoods and Food Security from Agroforestry and Community Forestry in Nepal), which was mostly focused on the national level policies and processes, and extending to the policies emanating from sub-national levels and implementation of the policies on the ground, this paper draws from at least following eight policy strategies and approaches we espoused for influencing policies in the last three years:

EnLiFT Policy Lab (EPL): organized among policymakers to discuss about the implications of proposed forest bill on the four decade long forest tenure reform and forest conservation.

EnLiFT Policy and Practice Lab (EPPL): organized two separate EPPLs on outstanding issues on the ground i) exploring and identifying ways to enable active, sustainable and equitable silvicultural and forest management technologies, and ii) tackling regulatory barriers to timber marketing.

Engagement with parliamentarians and citizen associations: major initiatives include providing inputs to parliamentary committee on forest bill, lobbying with parliamentarians on devolved and democratic forest sector governance, providing inputs to Federation of Community Forestry Users Nepal (FECOFUN).

Inputs to federal policies, laws, directives and standards: provided hands on analysis of the draft bills and regulations and contributed directly to draft standards of sustainable forest management.

Mediation across higher (policy) level authorities vs policy implementation on the ground: we worked simultaneously with national level authorities through the project advisory committee meetings, secured basic legal space for implementing technical forest management experimentation, and work with local forestry officials, FECOFUN leaders, market players, local government and forest users to expedite experimentation on silvicultural techniques and related interventions at forests and institutional landscapes.

Community empowerment and social movement: throughout the policy process and local implementation ForestAction engaged FECOFUN and continued engagement with local, district, provincial and national level FECOFUN and other civil society actors. It also offered information and analyses around scientific forest management, forest laws, regulations and enterprise development related processes and movements.

Discursive engagement (journals, social media, policy papers, media engagements): continued with publication of its two journals (Journal of Forest and Livelihood and Hamro Ban Sampada), prepared and disseminated papers and books, published in popular media and contributed in national level workshops.

Interpersonal networking with officials, policy makers and civil society leaders:

Nepal EnLiFT2 (Enhancing Livelihoods from Improved Forest Management in Nepal) team has continued to engage with policy actors on unfolding regulatory processes. A number of small meetings with MPs, experts and activists such as FECOFUN leaders were organised or participated, and inputs were provided

We combined both analytical work and reflective engagement with the policy actors, drawing on the field level action research experience in the two project districts of Kavre and Sindhuli. Despite some notable caveats, the simultaneous multiple methods and strategies of policy influence have paid back and contributions are most often heard and included in the policies and regulations.

Introduction

The main rationale for ENLIFT2 was that despite community forestry's success in the hills of Nepal, the increased biomass stocking level and area under forest resources did not lead to corresponding level of improvement on the livelihoods of local people, especially the poor, women and the marginalised. This problem was recognised as a involving technology, institution, and policy dimensions, and therefore, action research research and policy interface was planned accordingly.

Building on the success of the EnLiFT1 around silvicultural demonstrations, critical understanding of community dynamics and a policy lab innovation to influence policy, the second phase of the project aims to “enhance forest management practices in community forests and private land to improve livelihoods, social equity and environmental impact”.

One of the key pathways envisaged for achieving this aim is through “improved forest policy, planning and governance”. A dedicated research question has been used to guide the analysis: “How can research-policy interface be strengthened for equitable and effective community and private forestry governance in Nepal?”

Over the past two plus years of EnLiFT2 implementation, the research team has achieved some level of analytical work and reflective engagement with the policy actors, drawing on the field level action research experience in the two project districts of Kavre and Sindhu.

This brief report provides an overview of progress made, challenges experienced, and insights gained as of mid-January 2021. It starts with a brief review of the wider political economy and policy environment, followed by a brief statement of policy challenges EnLiFT2 is confronting, especially with reference to the two project districts. Section IV outlines strategies, methods and activities we have undertaken to confront and influence such challenges. This is followed by key lessons and insights – in relation to conceptualisation and methodologies of research-practice-policy interface for better development outcomes.

Policy Challenges and the Political Economy of Scale in Forestry in Nepal

After the promulgation of the new Constitution in 2015, Nepal moved through a process of federal democratic restructuring. This involved the election of three levels of governments (federal, provincial & municipal), the enactment of new laws to match the 2015 constitution, the nomination of officials for various constitutional bodies. The election and formation of seven provincial governments, for the first time in the history of Nepal, was one of most notable changes of the restructuring process. However, a major debate ensued as to whether governance of a particular sector is to be under the jurisdiction of the federal, provincial or local governments. Among them, the forest sector was one of the most contested with claims for control coming from all different directions and levels of government. Eventually the national forest service was officially brought under the management of the provincial governments, though the federal government continues to exercise control through various ways.

However, other elements of Nepal's forest sector, particularly community forestry, continue to move through turbulent political changes, with questions around forest rights, governance and institutional authorities coming to surface once again. The debate reached the peak when a new Forest Bill was brought in 2018, with a less transparent drafting process at least at the beginning as compared to the previous policy drafting practices. Only after over one-and-a-half-year of covert process inside forest

bureaucracy, the Bill was open to the public debate, with communities and wider civil society groups being able to share their concerns to policy makers, including the parliamentarians. EnLiFT policy teams also contributed through policy and legal analysis and participated in a variety of public debates and consultations with policy makersⁱ.

The past two years also featured a fierce debate around 'Scientific Forest Management'. Since the government issued the Scientific Forest Management (SciFM) Guidelines in 2014, a widespread timber-production oriented program has been implemented by the Department of Forests and Division Forest Offices on state lands, which include community-managed and collaboratively-managed forests. The adoption of intensive technical procedures for forest management under this initiative has been seen as a means to undermine the rights of local communities (Khatri 2020). The Federation of Community Forestry Users, Nepal (FECOFUN) has opposed this initiative and presented their own alternative of 'Sustainable Forest Management'. The debate has too often been polarized between two different terminologies, although there is a lot of overlap in terms of content. The issue is, fundamentally, more about who controls forest resources rather than about the technology or method to be adopted for forest managementⁱⁱ. When SciFM was mired by allegations of over/unsustainable harvesting, financial mishandling and corruption, the Prime Minister halted the felling of trees across the country and constituted a high-level Commission to investigate the program. The Commission has submitted a post-investigation report recommending the scrapping of the SciFM guidelines. In addition, two parliamentary committees also looked at the issue and recommended cancelling the SciFM program.

The Local Government Operations Act (LGOA) 2017 has opened up new legal spaces for the interaction between community forestry and local government (See Appendix for details). In the most significant form of interaction, LGOA has touched on the subject of revenue sharing in community forestry system. It has required CFUG to pay 10% tax to local government on the sale of forest products by CFUGs to markets. In time to come, as CFUGs are likely to take more commercial path, and like other business, taxation policy for CFUGs is likely to be even more contested.

Parallel to policy and legal changes, Nepal also undergone profound socio-economic transitions. These are driven by long-term trends of out-migration and the associated feminisation and aging of the rural population, reduced dependence on forest resources in areas linked to markets and road networks, and emerging commercial opportunities involving timber and non-timber forest products. Meanwhile, in recent years, the media has also highlighted the ineffective domestic supply of forest products, citing the annual import of large volumes of timber and timber products from several countries including India, Indonesia, China, Myanmar, Malaysia, Singapore, Germany, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates and the United States of America.

In view of all these changes in the policy and socio-economic environment, it has become important to reposition community forestry in the new federal, democratic system of governance, in a marked shift away from the old Panchayat system, during which community forestry originated.

Policy Challenges at Local Level: Forest Under-utilisation in Research Sites

Even though Nepal's annual potential for timber production is as high as 100 million cft, the current production rate is limited to 20-30 million cft per annum due to lack of appropriate forest management, policy hurdles, and lack of market development. The working districts of Enliff-2, Kavrepalanchok and Sindhupalchok, are also suffering from this underutilisation of forest timber resources, which have become in many instances, overstocked.

Kavrepalanchok and Sindhupalchok districts are rich in forest resources, with a large proportion now under community management as community forestry. They are also the districts from where Nepal's formal history of community forestry began in the 1980s. Forests in Sindhupalchok and Kavre cover an area of 115,740 ha (77.87%) (DFO Sindhupalchok, 2018) and 75,871 ha (53.51%) (DFO Kavre, 2020a) respectively. Despite this large area of forest cover and good growing stock in the region, the annual production and sale of timber is lower than the potential production volume. For example, the annual potential timber production in Sindhupalchok is 558,050.5 cft (DFO Sindhupalchok, 2018) but only 27.30% (153,410 cft) was harvested in FY 2019/20 of which 90% was supplied by private forest (DFO Sindhupalchok, 2020). Figure 1 shows the annual timber sale volumes from CFUGs in the two districts through FY 2016/17 to 2019/20.

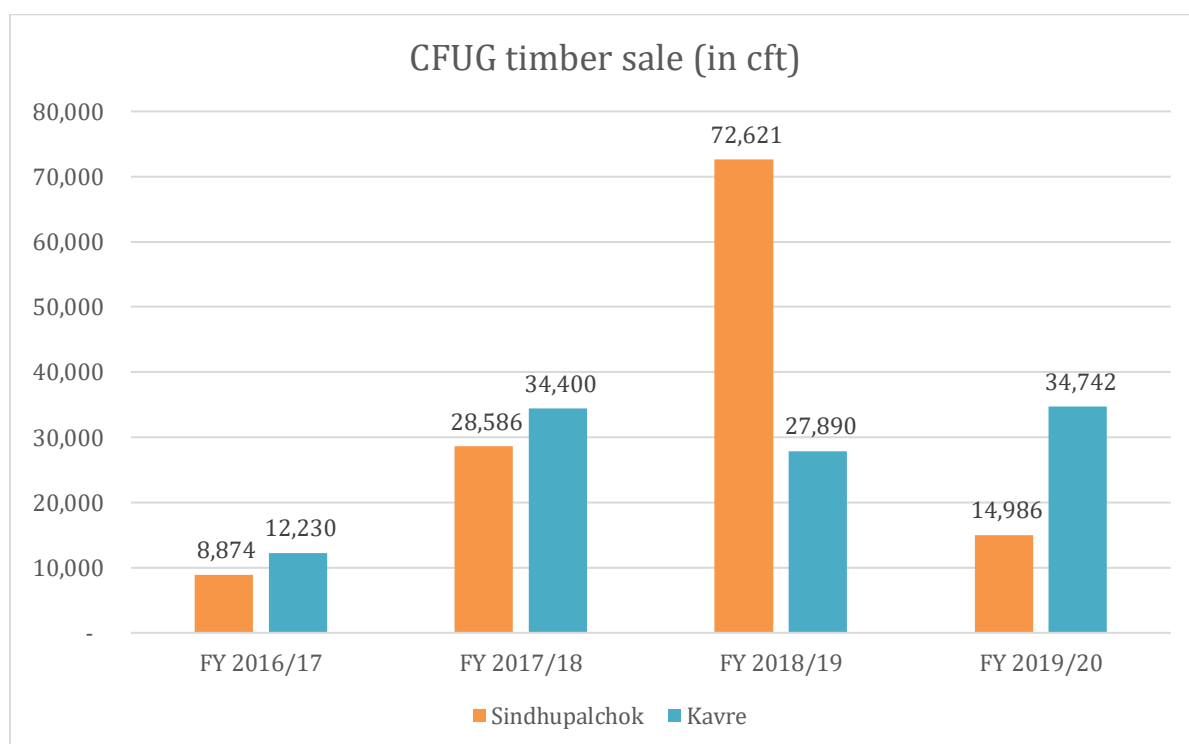


Fig 1: CFUG Timber Sale from Kavre and Sindhu (DFO Kavre, 2020a; DFO Sindhupalchok, 2018; DFO Sindhupalchok, 2020)

There is huge gap between consumer price and producer price of timber. CFUGs get Rs 300-400/cft of pine timber including labor charge while the consumer price in the market is around Rs 800/cft or even more.

Amidst the increasing import of timber, the pine timber rate is decreasing and the production volume is fluctuating each year. For example, the price of pine timber was Rs 102-Rs 152 in FY 2016/17 in Sindhupalchok while it increased in following two fiscal year reaching upto Rs 462 in FY 2017/18, Rs 436 in FY 2018/19 but again decreased to Rs 104-Rs 257 in 2019/20 (DFO Sindhupalchok, 2020). The price is except the labour cost (timber cutting and collection to depot) which is Rs 120/cft currently. Likewise, the timber price in Kavre also decreased from Rs 400 to Rs 200 in average after the end of post-earthquake construction (DFO Kavre, 2020b).

The national import of foreign timber has also increased steadily for the past few years. For example, import of wood and wood-related products in Fiscal Year 2075/76 (2018/19 AD) reached NRs 6.6 billion (DOC, 2019) and NRs 5.01 billion in FY 2019/20 (DOC, 2020). There is also an increasing trend to use iron and aluminum as the substitute of timber in construction and furniture products.

Rapid socio-economic change in the two districts is also altering forest-people relationships. Most user households now use LPG gas, electricity and also buy Sal timber from the market rather than using products from their community forests, specifically for doors and windows. Interests on community forests have switched to water management in many areas, commonly due to drying up water resources after earthquake and increased need for irrigating commercial vegetable farming. As a result, CFUG investment and activity in forest management has gone down sharply. On the other hand, the potentiality of matured pine plantation to generate substantial financial resource has prompted CFUGs to more actively use the forest. However, regulations, administrative hurdles, local 'goonda raj' and rent seeking practices have discouraged such efforts. CFUGs also have had bad experiences with timber entrepreneurs in the trading deal. Local leaders and change agents also find CFUGs much less attractive than other competing spaces such as local governments and political parties. With continued outmigration of youths from the rural areas, the community forests have become socially empty with limited incentives and attraction for people to engage in. All this possess serious challenges to community existing models of community forestry, suggesting the need for an exploration of alternative models that better suit in the changing contexts.

Strategies Employed for Policy Influence and Achievements

The EnLiFT 2 policy team has engaged with the unfolding policy processes from the beginning, albeit to varying degrees and using diverse methods and tools of engagement. Following EnLiFT-2's Research Question 8 (list question here), one of the priorities of the team has been to explore, experiment and innovate tools of effective engagement.

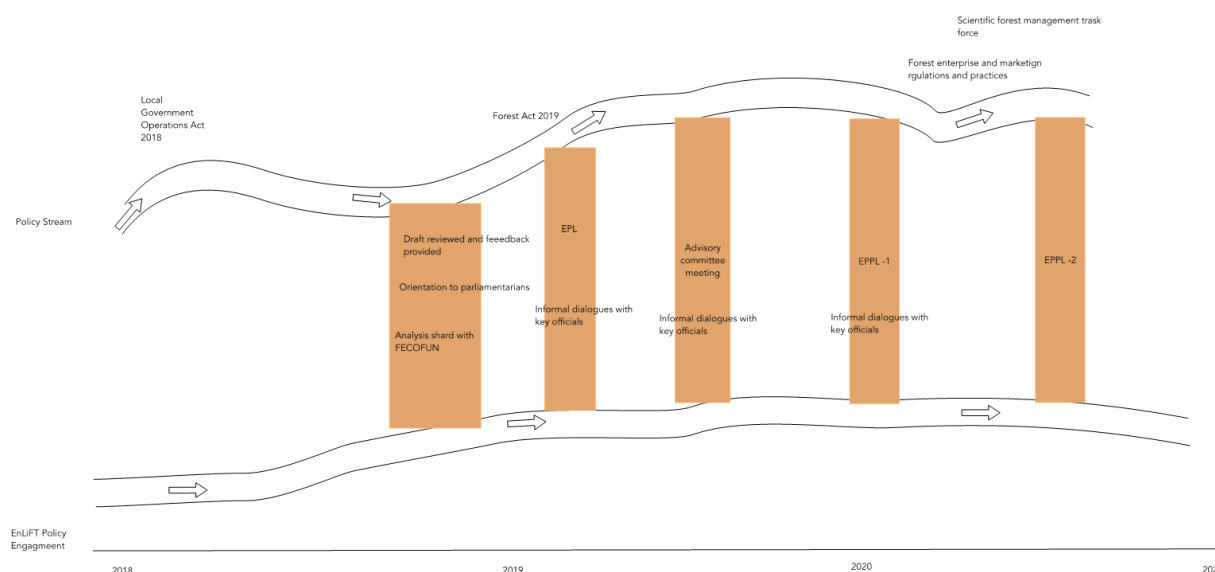


Fig 2. Policy Stream and EnLiFT Engagement

Below we outline various methods of policy engagement and influence followed by an assessment of outcomes that can be associated with these engagements.

Evidence Informed Policy Dialogue (EPL/EPPL)

EnLiFT Policy Lab (EPL)

EPL is a deliberative forum comprising researchers/analysts, policy makers, professionals, and practitioners to reflect on ongoing policy issues and gaps through thorough analysis of the issues and alternatives, so that the policy makers can assess among various policy options and make informed policy decisions (Ojha et al 2019). EPL as a method bridges science and policy processes by creating a collaborative platform for sharing and engagement, that is built on multistakeholder deliberation and informed dialogical processes.

In the second phase of the project, an EPL was organised in order to inform *the Forest Bill* 2018. A team of policy experts undertook an analysis of the Bill comparing that with the previous Forest Act (1993), drew reflection from the field and reviewed literature around the globe. The analysis was followed by a workshop attended by senior officials involved in the drafting process within the Ministry of Forest and Environment, community leaders including those from FECOFUN, and the EnLiFT research group. The EPL participants discussed how the new Forest Bill aimed to regulate community forestry; its possible impacts; and identify areas for improved regulation of CF in Nepal. The research group presented their analysis followed by the discussion. The group recognized the diverse and contesting viewpoints of various stakeholder groups such as:

- The new forest bill was considered by FECOFUN as an attempt to curtail community rights ensured by the 1993 Forest Act.
- Senior forest officials believed that the Bill was a balanced product amidst a highly contested policy-making situation in the context of federalism, especially to avoid unnecessary regulatory control over CFUG by the sub-national level governments I.
- Researchers highlighted that evidence-based policy analysis opportunities were not adequately taken while drafting the new bill.
- Research groups also highlighted the need to consider some of the fundamental changes happening around forest and rural livelihoods (with reduced dependency on forest for firewood, for example) and the need for policy-makers to remain open to forming responsive institutional structure of the CFUGs in these changing contexts.
- Everyone appreciated the value of such a focused discussion on the policy among key actors, and highlighted the need for repeating the analysis around the time when the bill enters intense debate phase inside the parliament.
- Expert advice was provided to the parliamentary committee based on the expert analysis and EPL recommendation (see the details below under...)
- Significant change in the draft was already made because of the persistence lobbying of FECOFUN and their connection with the high level political leadership. EnLiFT researchers offered the analysis to FECOFUN leadership which indicated the areas where rights of the CFUGs were significantly curtailed. Constructively engaging with the leadership at the higher bureaucratic level within the ministry and political leadership was very important in making significant changes in the legal contents before forwarding that to the Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, and then to the Cabinet.

The EPL created some action plans to collaborate on improving the content of the Bill towards ensuring the rights of communities and improving the governance of Nepal's community forestry system. We later shared the review and comments to MOFE separately and persuaded them to make changes in the Bill. It also enhanced confidence on the part of both officials and the agitated community leaders towards a more constructive and collaborative process.

EnLiFT Policy and Practice Lab (EPPL)

After the Constitution of Nepal institutionalised Nepal as a federal state and elections at local, provincial and federal level were held, new legal frameworks created including the Forest Act 2019 and Local Governance Operation Act 2017 (LGOA) in congruence with the new constitution. Local governments became powerful entities in many fronts despite forest largely remaining within the jurisdiction of the federal and provincial governments. In view of the change in this regulatory landscape and also reflecting on the Kathmandu centric EPL that we have been part of for last five years and more, we decided to advance policy and practice labs (EPPL) to be held at local government or district levels or as a joint event between Kavre and Sindhu districts.

EPPL is a platform organized at the lowest level of state-society interface for a multi-sectoral dialogue on the policies and practices to promote sustainable and equitable forest management. It started with an analysis of the existing policies, institutional arrangements and practices, and drew insights from the experience of practitioners and users. The researchers and local stakeholders then undertook joint observation and reflection on the existing practices with the aim to develop common understanding of the issue and develop strategies to experiment innovative practices within the existing policy and regulatory framework. While the main focus here was to pilot and improve the existing practices on the ground, the recommendations related to policy change were also forwarded to the EPL.

One of the actionable opportunities we tapped into was the presence of discretionary regulatory spaces within sub-national authorities (such as the one held by the Divisional Forest Officers) and local governments. Given the increasing levels of contestations around the use of regulatory power in recent years, opportunities also exist to create trust, among multiple stakeholders, in advancing active silvicultural technology. Two EPPL events were organised: i) enabling silvicultural demonstrations, and ii) tackling regulatory barriers to timber marketing (virtual).

EPPL 1: Enabling Silvicultural Demonstrations

The first EPPL was organised on 27 January 2020 with aim of exploring and identifying ways to enable active, sustainable and equitable silvicultural and forest management technologies.

The rationale for this EPPL was as follows. The ENLIFT project team has established a number of silvicultural trials in the research sites. These involve significant intervention in the existing passive system of community forestry management, including the cutting of trees and poles. While formal regulatory instruments broadly allowed active silvicultural operations, ambiguities persisted around ascertaining formal clearance on how such active forestry operations could be carried out. The conversations between our research team and the officials at the district and central levels reinforced the unwillingness of government officials for implementing diverse silvicultural treatments in CFs in the context of current political uncertainty. Recent addition of the provincial layer of government had also created additional administrative work in relation to compliance and securing clearance for silvicultural innovation, especially at the stage of upscaling.

The ENLIFT team realised a need to develop a process of engagement among community leaders, DFOs, local governments and the media to make them appreciate the value of silvicultural trial work, understand the limitations and opportunities presented by the existing regulatory frameworks, and then actively support piloting and upscaling through moral, regulatory and administrative means. This process could also identify specific concerns of these local level actors and then find a way to address them through action research on the ground, as well as through the central level EnLiFT Policy Lab (EPL).

The EPPL process consists of the following four steps: design and team orientation, multi-actors review of silvicultural trials, team discussions and further analysis, and a plenary event to share reviews and discuss action strategies for improvement. Key stakeholders of the two project districts (DFOs, Community Forest User Group leaders, Local government representatives, FECOFUN, local forest entrepreneurs), a senior official from the Ministry of Forest and Environment, and members of the EnLiFT Research team participated in this EPPL cycle. The process was considered illuminating for most of the participants and could generate immediate response from the DFO, who requested at the end of the plenary event: "Please pass me all the action points identified for the DFO and I will soon act on these". The ENLIFT research team then organised the outcomes of this EPPL cycle into five categories: 1) action points for DFOs and local stakeholders; 2) issues that needed more research and evidence by the research team; 3) issues that needed to be presented at the EnLiFT Advisory Group meeting; and 4) and issues that required national level EPL action. It was agreed upon that an EPPL cycle be repeated, at the least, annually.

EPPL 2: Tackling Regulatory Barriers to Timber Marketing (Virtual)

As highlighted earlier, the project area of Kavre and Sindhuli has plenty of aging pine forest. CFUGs have been protecting community forests for over 40 years now but they have accrued minimal benefits through harvesting and sale of forest products, particularly timber. In the first phase, we demonstrated active and equitable harvesting of pine timber from community forestry areas and several groups earned a significant amount of revenue from these pilot works. However, regulatory and administrative constraints have intensified and CFUGs and entrepreneurs now find it extremely challenging to harvest and sell surplus products into the market. This has been a very exhaustive process for CFUGs as they have to follow much written and unwritten advice from the government. Communities are currently losing out on commercial and employment opportunities, the government is forgoing potential tax revenues, and the mature pine forests are also dying out, with increasing loss from forest fires and winds.

Considering this challenge, an EPPL was organized virtually, in the midst of the COVID-19 crises in Nepal. It was titled "Timber Harvest and Trade Issues: Scope for District/Local Level Initiation" and was organized on 15th October, 2020. The main objective of this EPPL was to use EnLiFT research findings to stimulate discussions among local policy and practice actors on what can be done locally and what needs to be brought to the national policy level. Clearly, there are some issues around policy, administrative, managerial, technical and capacity amongst others that is hindering the timber business. The focus of this EPPL was to identify actionable items and facilitate cooperative action among divergent stakeholders who often have very conflicting positions on the issue of forest timber extraction and marketing.

Invited to the EPPL meeting were key stakeholders directly involved in timber harvest, trade and monitoring and those who also participated and contributed to ENLIFT's action research. Altogether, 17 participants attended the meeting from Sindhupalchok and Kavre districts, representing the various interest groups such as CFUGs, FENFIT, FECOFUN, DFOs. All stakeholders – DFO, CFUGs, and entrepreneurs – shared their problems and concerns, some of which were caused by a lack of cooperation at the district level. Everyone shared their view that more dialogue is needed to find ways out of the impasse. Two specific action points identified and agreed upon were: a) holding forest technician workshops to discuss and harmonise methods of timber measurement for approval and monitoring; b) documentation of timber harvesting approval procedures and steps, and then making it transparent to every CFUG. The participants agreed to simplify the timber marketing approval process; reduce the current 16 step process to 5-6 most important ones.

Engagement with Parliamentarians and Citizen Associations

Parliamentarians are the legitimate actors to draft and approve a law and the government shall prepare regulations and working procedures accordingly. However, technobureaucratic domination in the policy process is often influencing the policy decisions. Interest groups and citizen associations are increasingly creating pressure to policy-making. Acknowledging the critical role of parliamentarians and civil society networks in policy making, our research team engaged with them with analysis of contributions of CF in conservation and livelihoods and how that can be further strengthened; the key engagement activities are listed below:

Date	Policy actors or forums	Agenda discussed and outcomes	Remarks
19 June 2019	Meeting with FECOFUN Chair	Finalised key points to be highlighted in the Parliamentary Committee	Only a few MPs were well informed of the agenda. Many of them were unaware of the relative roles and responsibilities of CFUG and DFO. In general, they appreciated the CF/CBFM and more decentralised forests. Some of them questioned the capacity of the FUGs and some even questioned the potential corruption and poor governance. We realised that we needed good empirical and quantitative evidence to inform the discourse.
19 June 2019	Meeting with Shanti Pakhrin (MP) on forest bill and its presentation	Got familiarity on the role of experts, context under which to present and likely responses from MPs	
19 June 2010	Presentation in Parliamentary Committee	Structured presentation on major gaps and issues in the existing Bill and how it can be improved to respect federal system and community rights	
25 July 2019	Inputs on Forest Bill to Agni (Maoist leader, past Forest Minister)	Major issues and gaps in the Bill was updated	
13-14 Jan 2020	visit to Janakpur (in Bardibas) for province2 Forest Act	Highlighted the role of CF/CBFM and needs to protect their rights considering its effectiveness, low cost and avoid conflicts	

There is an established system within parliamentary committees to invite issue specific experts but there is hardly any roster of experts maintained to solicit their inputs on the issue under debate. Normally, ex-bureaucrats are invited. The other experts are only invited when there is a good relationship of any expert with specific parliamentarians or have been in close working relationship with civil society actors, who have some relationship with the parliamentarians.

While engaging with parliamentarians during policy processes, particularly during forest bill preparation and approval by the parliament, we observed that many parliamentarians were ignorant of the information or the analysis of the issue whereas some others were aware of the contemporary discourses around the issue. In addition, we also found that some MPs are influenced by the interest of certain groups, and were found well prepared against the rationales given from certain interest groups or civil society. Therefore, the experts presenting an analysis of the issues and possible policy implications have to recognize the diversity of the legislators and be informed of the existing narratives and prepared with information and analysis to substantiate or counter certain narratives carried by the legislators. During deliberation with parliamentarians, arguments developed through large scale and quantitative analysis were found more appealing and powerful than evidence and insights

generated from one or few cases. Similarly, presenting the established theories (e.g. common property), international experiences and national level longer term experience and site specific concrete evidence were found very effective during the discussion with parliamentarians.

Engagement with parliamentarians was found more effective in regular and, often, in less formal settings as compared to the formal deliberations at the parliamentary committees. Less formal conversations would provide more comfortable space to exchange ideas, conversations as such become more receptive and would be more dialogical in nature, which would also give an opportunity to experts and parliamentarians to understand the language of each other.

Inputs to Federal Policies, Laws, Directives and Standards

A team of experts analysed the forest bill 2018 and provided critical commentary on the specific provisions made in the bill. The analysis was made covering what new elements were added that would have longer term implications on forest sector (e.g. forest-based enterprise development and commercialization of forestry products was first time given emphasis on the proposed Forest Act) or provisions that constricted rights and space of local communities, which might trigger forest destruction or discourage local people in forest protection and utilization. We presented the analysis among policy makers (high level bureaucrats and politicians), which was partially taken by policy makers while giving a final touch to the bill.

An analysis was carried out and recommendations shared with policy-makers and other stakeholders on Scientific Forest Management. In addition, ForestAction coordinated an expert group consultation meeting with the high-level committee formed by the cabinet to investigate corruption and embezzlement around scientific forest management and recommend appropriate forest management approaches in community-based forestry. The meeting provided critical insights on the pros and cons of scientific forestry in Nepal and issues around it. The committee members also acknowledged the inputs from the expert group. Based on the recommendation of the committee the government revoked the scientific forest management working procedure and directed MOFE to develop sustainable forest management standards to help manage community forests among others. EnLiFT researcher became an active member for developing SFM national standards, who fed the analysis and insights from AEFM research. The EnLiFT researcher contributed significantly in drafting standards by drawing the expertise of other EnLiFT researchers and other experts.

Mediation Across Higher (Policy) Level Authorities Vs Policy Implementation on the Ground

The key issues related with felling of trees were discussed and decided at the EnLiFT2 Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) meetings. Initially, silviculture research design with four treatments were agreed and approved by the PAC (PAC decision on 18 Aug 2019). Accordingly, the DG of the DoFSC sent a letter to the DFOs. DFOs approved the research plans accordingly. Similarly, based on the alleged irregularities in government's scientific forest management programme, the government has banned tree felling and transportation. This induced fear and confusion among the DFOs. The PAC discussed this issue and decided to go ahead with the felling in research sites. Moreover, the PAC Chair, also the DG of the DoFSC, offered to provide all needed support to the DFOs to implement the research activity. However, despite these discussion and decision at the PAC level, the overall, environment has remained insecure and harvesting is still not going ahead.

PAC has been helpful in moving the project forward. However, in some of the crucial issues even such mechanism has been struggling. As the above case with timber harvesting permit tells, the broader political dynamics and higher-level decisions are often not very helpful for timely implementation of project activities.

A total of five PAC meetings were held for the first two years of the project before the brunt of COVID-19 observed everywhere (see the meeting summary in the following Table). PAC decision was instrumental in undertaking silvicultural practices related research (e.g. establishment of research plots, harvesting of timber from those plots in accordance with the treatments defined in the research) in the sites despite national level policy confusion in harvesting forest products from CF in the last couple of years. The PAC also endorsed the research design including silvicultural treatments in the research plots, which made DFOs easier to implement the decisions. PAC also decided to allow to use portable saw mill in the research sites irrespective of the current legal arrangements. Which could not be implemented on the ground yet. Inclusion of Director of Forests as a member of PAC was important in making the effective link between different levels of government. DFOs wanted all the policy decisions come from the higher level to minimize the risks whereas higher level authorities were insisting to use DFO prerogative in making such operational decisions.

16Dec2018 (1 Paush, 2075) first PAC meeting	Formed the PAC structure, asked Naya to develop operational modality, formed a committee to review and refine the operational modality
06Jan2019 (22 Paush, 2075) 2nd PAC meeting	Approved the project operational modality including roles and responsibilities of various institutions
22Jan 2019 (8 Magh, 2075) 3rd PAC meeting	Formed a technical committee to review silvicultural research design proposed by the project team and present to the PAC
18Aug2019 (1 Bhadra, 2076) 4th PAC meeting	Approved the silvicultural research design and agreed to write to DFOs through Provincial Director
25Nov 2020 (10 Mangsir, 2077) 5th PAC meeting	Decision on: i) allowing harvest during the nationwide confusion on halting harvesting; ii) allowed experimentation with portable saw mill; iii) funding MSc thesis work-3

PAC haven't conceived its role to influence policy (except the decision to mobilizing portable saw mill), and so far haven't been acted as a contributor to the policy process. It was only useful in facilitating project implementation.

Despite PAC endorsing the research design and operational procedures and forwarded that to DFOs for implementation, there was reluctance to implement some aspects of the project on the ground. For example, tree felling in research plots was not approved in Kavre. On the other hand, the government's own scheme of establishing small scale forestry enterprises was supported in Kavre and not in Sindhupakchowk. Similarly, the provincial government authorised DFOs to allow harvesting in CFs that didn't follow the SOPs of scientific forest management but local forestry officials didn't implement it. This can be described as a selective interpretation of national policies and programs by local officials.

In this context, EnLiFT adopted direct engagement with operational level actors, mainly the regulators and service providers as an important strategy to enhance a robust understanding of the field level issues and facilitate actions on the ground. We adopted a two-pronged strategy: i) bilateral engagement with DFO/AFOs, LG actors, FECOFUN and FENFIT leaders; ii) create and facilitate multilateral forums and other temporary spaces. Meeting with DFO staff and preparing periodic plans to expedite field actions.

We observed that authorities generally participated in the PAC meeting as a ritual. They have neither any enthusiasm nor any resistance and criticism. Generally they tend to pass the burden to others. For example DFO often expect more bold and precise decisions from PAC on tree felling. Instead, higher level officials tend to project that DFOs have every rights and there is no need for any higher level decision. This tendency is well observed and noted by the MTR report as well. COVID-19 hugely limited the role of PAC as despite their interests they could not visit to the field. During previous phase of the EnLiFT several higher level officials visited the field and such visit remained getting their support to many actions - exemption of OP expiry for three harvesting during earthquake, operation of saw mill in Chaubas, introduction of NTFPs in core pine forests in Chaubas, etc.

Community Empowerment/Social Movement

In the last three decades or so, the role of civil society in Nepal's policy process has been very critical. FECOFUN and other actors have led social movement to protect the rights of local forest users. There have been instances that the government's regressive regulatory changes were challenged and revoked because of the movements of FECOFUN and pressure from other civil society actors. In various crucial moments of policy changes ForestAction coordinated with various actors in analysing the existing policy provisions and proposed draft regulatory instruments together with informing civil society networks.

For example, ForestAction maintained close relationship with FECOFUN and continued engagement with local, district, provincial and national level FECOFUN and other civil society actors. It also offered information and analyses around scientific forest management, forest laws, regulations and enterprise development related processes and movements. We also collaborate with FECOFUN and other actors on experimentation of various silvicultural practices.

At times, we also observed that while local level FECOFUN are ready to participate in experimenting new institutional mechanisms (e.g. cluster level mechanism being developed in Bhumlu and Chautara sites), province and national level FECOFUN demonstrated skepticism and reluctance in testing these arrangements. Similarly, FECOFUN has been advocating for CFUG-led forest based enterprises, which in most cases are not properly functioning. We are continuously questioning civil society actors to be open to test different modalities of forest-based enterprises. We worked together with government policy makers and FECOFUN during EnLiFT 1 to open up regulatory space for CFUGs in establishing and operating forest based enterprises which has been reflected in Forest Act 2019 and draft Forest Rules.

Date	Policy actors or forums	Agenda discussed and outcomes
30 Aug 2019	Meeting with FECOFUN on forest bill	Key issues and gaps were identified. A plan to develop further analysis was agreed
09 Sept 2020	SFM vs ScFM, strategies to secure SFM	More constructive and widely acceptable pathway was explored.
02 March 2021	Presentation in the FECOFUN National Council Meeting held in City Hall. Reframing CF	300+ FECOFUN representatives from across the country listened and got a chance to reflect on the changing context around CF in Nepal.

27April 2021	Strategies on Enterprise support. Provided expert opinion on the topic to Steering Committee members	Some pragmatic approaches that include not excluding private sector and instead develop multiple modalities of partnership was agreed
16Aug, 2020	Meeting on SFM	Strategies to garner support in favour of SFM was explored
21Aug, 2020	Meeting on SFM and role of scholars	Researchers and professionals agreed to develop stronger case for SFM that could be widely communicated

Discursive Engagement (Journals, Social Media, Policy Papers, Media Engagements)

As part of influencing policies and practices, ForestAction has also given high emphasis on discursive engagement. While it continued with publication of its two journals (Journal of Forest and Livelihood and Hamro Ban Sampada) it also led various occasions of developing papers and books, contributing in national level workshops and writing in popular media. For example, 'Revitalising CF' report was prepared with contribution from 40 plus forestry and natural resource management related scholars and experts, which captured the status, achievements, challenges and future prospects of Nepal's community forestry from policy, institutional, climate change, biodiversity, gender and livelihoods perspectives. The process also included series of meetings among the experts and other actors. Similarly, ForestAction organized or actively contributed to a series of workshops (including webinars) such as CF day and FECOFUN day. EnLiFT experts actively contributed in the first national silviculture workshop, where idea of social and institutional aspects of silviculture were shared and appreciated by policy actors and other stakeholders. Finally, ForestAction and EnLiFT scholars also prepared and published papers on popular national level newspapers and online media on pressing forestry related issues (e.g. scientific forest management, relevance of community-based forestry, etc.).

Date	Discursive arena	Discursive agenda and outcomes
25 June 2019	25June Mani report on analysis of Forest Bill	Shared among key colleagues that helped develop a common understanding in the critique
12Nov2019	FA-SIAS meeting on Forest Bill	Actors from diverse sector participated, including some opinion makers exchanged views, developed a better understanding of the gaps in Forest Bill. They used their networks to strengthen the case for revision in favour of communities
	Interview with some FM radio and several print media on the critique of Forest Draft	Gaps and key areas of improvement reached to the wider public, which may have helped develop critical mass in favour of community rights

Interpersonal Networking with Officials, Policy Makers and Civil Society Leaders

Nepal EnLiFT team has continued to engage with policy actors on unfolding regulatory processes. A number of small meetings with MPs, experts and activists such as FECOUFN leaders were organised or participated, and inputs were provided. We engage with officials by supporting their policy work – participate and contribute during policy/regulation formation and amendment process, collaborating in scholarly analysis, reports; bilateral connections as friends. Similarly, we also engage with CSO leaders by expressing solidarity in their movement, providing diagnostic evidences to strengthen their case for movement and capacity building of their own network. Officials, policy maker and civil society leaders all seek our inputs and that has helped us to feed in EnLiFT findings. Moreover, engaging with them has helped refine our research agenda and methods.

During COVID-19 pandemic, EnLiFT team started a major work on reframing Nepal's CF. Considering the increasing challenges with CF management in Nepal, the team decided to produce a report with an analysis of current challenges and their drivers, and strategic measures to revive CF again in the context of changing socio-economic and environment at local, national and global levels. We over 40 scholars comprising of government officials, university teachers, forestry professionals and alike have collaborated in it and are working towards producing a good comprehensive report on the status and future strategies of CF.

Discussion and Lessons

Influencing policy in a top-down techno-bureaucratic systems with politically chaotic situation is not an easy task. And COVID-19 took much of 2020, limiting face to face meetings and interpersonal engagements so vital to catalyse policy learning. Here we summarise our reflections in three areas: substantive policy agendas that emerged and remained dominant in the past few years, our engagement efforts, and methodological insights in relation to how an action research project / team can connect their work to shifting policy dynamics.

Substantive Policy Analysis and Insights

A number of substantive features in the forest policy field have been observed:

- Forest sector in general, including community and private forestry, featured in the policy spotlight of the government of Nepal, at the level of the Prime Minister and the federal parliament. This is in part a result of the appreciation of the commercial value of the forest sector, especially the timber resources.
- The debate around scientific forest management peaked during this period, with formation of the high level commission by the Prime Minister and eventually scrapping of the regulation. Community and private forestry have been facing increasing levels of regulatory restrictions in practice. We see that in various ways federalism is adding challenges (if not risks) to community forestry.
- Community forestry can have a multi-dimensional and more enabling interface with the new local government system, if that interface is crafted well. CFUGs are increasingly interested in coordinating with local governments, compared to DFOs, on some aspects such as institutional regulation. There is an opportunity to use EPPL to explore CFUG-local government interface for democratic and efficient local governance system for community forestry.

- Discussions on fundamentally reframing the CF system have started, considering a) the increasing level of forest stocking and the prospect of marketing, b) decreasing dependency of people on forests, c) migration of youth and active population from the rural areas, c) feminisation of rural agrarian societies, and d) increasing road access to mountain forests and communities. This is a collaborative review of community forestry in the changing context by engaging government agency based, academic and civil society experts on community forestry and development commonly agreed principles (Paudel et al 2021)
- Promoting the active management of forests is now even more important. The management costs seem to be absorbing all revenues with no net benefits left to the community groups. Decreasing participation means CFUGs are going to be less transparent in their dealings, and internal governance will become even more challenging in the days to come.
- The influence of Commission for the investigation of abuse of authority (CIAA) has waned over the past few years, and this may lead to an increase in rent-seeking practices, in relation to timber trade from both private and community forests.
- Tax and revenue sharing still remain a contested issue. We are not aware of studies that present detailed calculations of revenue and tax sharing from different scenarios of community forestry and forestry enterprises, not to even mention studies addressing these in the context of the new federal system. In fact, there is a need for basic clarification work on taxation and revenue sharing, since, for example, people often mix 'revenue' with 'tax' in these debates.
- Timber trade agenda has become more politicised at the national level, and procedures even more bureaucratised at the implementation level. Frequent transfer of DFOs from project districts has led to dissipation of our investments in engagement.

Policy Engagement and Influence Strategies

The EnLiFT team is adopting a multi-pronged strategy of policy engagement, which has brought some positive impacts – such as countering some of the unfavourable proposals of the initial drafts of Forest Bill 2018. This happened through partnership with community leaders, engagement with parliamentarians and dialogues with forest officials. A dedicated EPL to use research insights to inform the policy development process was an effective step taken.

We spent quite a bit of our time in opportunistic, organic policy engagement and discussions. These have led to a few important insights:

- First, these are very costly, inefficient methods. We have participated or organised over a dozen of meetings where most of the policy issues were repeatedly put, discussed, recommended. The actual outcome is too little.
- Second, quite often stakeholders, even the civil society groups tend to put their own point without considering its potential impacts on other groups interests, rights. Sometimes too many diverse interests make it difficult to converge them into a major provision to be amended.
- Third, officials and political leaders often tend to accept many of the suggestions in public and when the draft comes, there is little change.
- Fourth, in many cases, it is hard to access policy drafts in progress. One person points to the other and other. This makes difficult to understand the policy changes early on in the process.
- Conceptualisation and testing of EPPL (EnLiFT Policy and Practice Lab) building on the national focused EPL method developed in the EnLiFT 1. EPPL has emerged as a new science-practice-policy

platform at the lowest level of state-society interface. One EPL organised to facilitate evidence-informed dialogues on the new Forest Bills in 2019 (Report – Ojha and Bajnade 2019).

- Intensive engagement of two district level stakeholders in joint sessions of dialogues around the merits and value of active and silviculture-based forest management
- A third way perspective of Active and Equitable Forest management has been shared with policy makers, creating a neutral policy pace in the highly contested environment around Scientific Forest Management. This was not as effective as we would have liked to see.
- Analysis of CF-LG regulatory systems overlap and contradictions (Banjade et al 2020) – a ground prepared for EPPL which can facilitate more cooperative interactions in forest governance at the local level.
- Value chain analysis has generated more evidence on regulatory fault lines (Paudel et al 2021)
- Annual EPL events on AEFM can make significant contributions to science-informed silviculture policy, but more human resources and capability is needed to deliver this.
- Work on CF planning and governance needs to better aligned with EPPL and enterprise related activities of the project. More efforts needed to reduce bureaucratic and regulatory burden on CFUGs. Market oriented modalities of CFUGs organisations need to be tested through EPPL process.

Methodological Insights in Influencing Policy

The adaptation of EPL to EPPL was a good move but it has not been possible to hold an adequate number of events to be able to generate generalisable lessons on the methodology.

On the wider science-policy interface, it looks paradoxical that spaces for critical analysis and debate have actually declined, despite deepening trends in democracy (at least constitutionally).

We also acknowledge that it is taking some time to have new project team members in Nepal to internalise EPL approaches to policy engagement. The policy team is now ready to deploy EPL and EPPL events to link EnLiFT research with regulatory development and implementation practices.

Frequency of EPL and EPPL was reduced due to COVID-19 and this should be increased through virtual or face to face depending on the COVID-19 impact situation.

We are also reflecting critically on the potential and limitation of EPPL (see Box 2).

Box 1: Team reflections on factors limiting achievement

Inadequate efforts on national silviculture workshop follow up and use research trials to improve the silviculture policy understanding.

Attention and investment focussed more on horizontal scaling out and less on vertical policy engagement (such as revitalising silviculture working group etc).

Team efforts and skills need to be improved to present and communicate evidence to influence publish debate drawing on active and equitable silviculture work demonstrated on the ground. Project advisory group can be better mobilised to create more enabling space for silviculture.

Inadequate team efforts in policy engagement in an opportunistic way when windows of opportunity emerged.

Improved team capacity and resources to craft and communicate policy-oriented messages into and out of EPL/EPPL processes.

We need to continue to recognise and invest in complementary and diverse forms of policy engagement to optimise the impact of EPL/EPPL.

Box 2: Hemant Ojha's reflection after the meeting highlighted various dimensions as being important in advancing theoretical and methodological insights on EPPL.

- Motivation of researchers in the praxis approach
- Level of efforts needed to run a reasonably effective EPPL
- The importance of relationships and personal connections in forging open and critical dialogues
- Can districts actors be trained to become champions of change?
- How to handle sensitive issues (such as rent seeking etc.)
- What are the best forms of evidence that inspire action? (bad consequences, positive examples...?)
- How should EPPL itself be conceptualised as a part of the socio-technical innovation pathways (which we do not know beforehand)
- How many iterations of EPPL are needed for kicking off the change process?
- How do we shift research focussed discussion within the research team to EPPLY style of conversations?
- What is it that EPPL does exactly? How is it different from standard multi-stakeholders' dialogues?
- What are the vital researcher roles for EPPL: designer, moderator, keynote presenter, subject experts....?
- The dialogue process in the Event itself –
- Balancing 'analytic scepticism' and 'normative optimism' in all practices of dialogue?
- How best to contextualise EPPL style work in specific cultures and political setting?
- Who are the people among whom this dialogue is happening?

We expect that over the next 2-3 years, there will be opportunities to inject our ideas when amendments are needed in the existing policy arrangements.

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ⁱ See media opinion piece by Hemant Ojha published by Seto Pati online 27 Phalgun 2075. How can Nepal's community forestry be adapted to new federal system? <https://en.setopati.com/view/141655>

ⁱⁱ Ojha, 2020; Nepal Needs to shift from scientific forest management to democratic forest governance; Onlinekhabar, 22 July 2020; <https://english.onlinekhabar.com/nepal-needs-to-shift-from-scientific-forest-management-to-democratic-forest-governance.html>