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## GOVERNANCE AT GRASSROOTS LEVEL: COMMUNITY FOREST MANAGEMENT GROUPS

### Bhutan: Participatory Forest Management Project (PFMP)

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## List of Abbreviations

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BPC	Bhutan Power Corporation
CBO	Community-based Organisation
CF	Community Forest/Forestry
CFMG	Community Forest/Forestry Management Group
Chiwog	Cluster of villages (sub-unit of a Gewog)
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
DFO	Divisional Forest Officer
DLG	Department of Local Governance
DoFPS	Department of Forests and Park Services
DT	DzongkhagTshogdu (= District Council)
Dzongdag	District Governor
Dzongrab	Deputy District Governor
DzFO	Dzongkhag Forestry Officer
DzFS	Dzongkhag Forestry Sector
Dzongkhag	District
FNCA	Forest and Nature Conservation Act
FNCR	Forest and Nature Conservation Rules
FYP	Five Year Plan
Gewog	Block (sub-unit of a Dzongkhag)
GFEO	Gewog Forestry Extension Officer
GT	GewogTshogde (= Block Council)
Gup	Block Head (elected)
LG	Local Government (District and Block levels)
Mangmi	Deputy Block Head (elected)
MoAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forests
MoHCA	Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs
MoWHS	Ministry of Works and Human Settlement

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MP	Member of Parliament
NWFP	Non Wood Forest Product
NRDCL	Natural Resources Development Corporation Ltd
PFMP	Participatory Forest Management Project
PM	Park Manager
SDC	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
SFED	Social Forestry and Extension Division
TFD	Territorial Forest Division
Tshogpa	Chiwog Head (elected)
Zomdue	Village meeting

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## 1. Background

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Community forestry (CF) is a fast growing movement in Bhutan. Since 2002, the Participatory Forest Management Project (PFMP), which is funded by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and implemented by the Social Forestry and Extension Division (SFED) and HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, has contributed significantly to the development of community forestry in Bhutan.

Phase II (2007-2013) of the project aims to contribute to the **improvement of rural livelihoods** by empowering local communities to manage forests resources allocated to them as community forests on a sustainable basis. The project focuses on three main outcomes: 1) an **enabling environment** for the establishment of community forests throughout the country, 2) **capacities built** at all levels for effective and sustainable implementation of the community forestry programme and 3) a contribution to **poverty reduction** through community forestry.

The present case study is based on interviews with CFMG in three Dzongkhags, discussions with Dzongkhag Forestry Officers, Gewog Forestry Extension Officers, SFED and PFMP staff and a review of existing literature<sup>1</sup>. The objective of the case study is to assess the evolution of CF in Bhutan, the limitations and potentials of CF, the role of CFMG in local governance and the contribution of the project to enhancing their capacities to play a more active role as planners and managers of CF. Therefore, CFMG are assessed in the wider context of the decentralisation process and the level of participation of other non-state actors in local governance. The CFMG's capacities to voice concerns and demands on behalf of their members and to hold the respective authorities accountable are also considered. A context analysis of power relations within and beyond the forestry sector that impact the development of CFMG provides the overall framework for this study.

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## 2. Context and Power Analysis

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### Community Forestry in Bhutan

Community forest is government-owned forest land, for which communities – organised as Community Forest Management Groups (CFMG) – are being granted management and use rights and responsibilities under conditions set out in a management plan approved by the Department of Forests and Park Services (DoFPS). CF is part of the broader concept of Social Forestry, which emerged in Bhutan through a royal decree in 1979. It can be seen as a paradigm shift away from the formerly highly restricted access to forests and use of forest resources for local communities.

During the early days of CF in the late 1990s, the DoFPS and TFDs only very reluctantly ceded management rights and responsibilities for forest resources to CFMG. They preferred to register degraded land as CF, stating their concerns regarding the groups' abilities to sustainably manage forest resources.<sup>2</sup> The fact that the sharing of monitoring responsibilities for community forestry between TFD/Parks and SFED/DzFS has led to a relative gain in power **of DzFS compared to TDF/Parks** might be another reason for TFDs' reservations towards community forestry.

Fuelled by the accelerated democratisation and decentralisation process since 2008, there has been a rapid expansion of community forests in recent years. As per the end of June 2012, there were 431 community forests covering 43,166 ha and benefiting 19'559 households.<sup>3</sup> Today, about one fourth of all rural households in Bhutan are member of a CFMG. Whereas in the early days community forestry was promoted mostly to ensure the conservation and protection of forest resources, it is now widely recognised as a means to improve the livelihoods of rural communities by

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<sup>1</sup> See p. 7 for an illustration of the Local Government and Forestry Sector Structure.

<sup>2</sup> Such discussions revolved around the optimal use of forest resources, i.e. scientific management by professional foresters versus community management based on local knowledge. These discussions continue to date and tend to undermine the socio-economic importance of CF for rural communities.

<sup>3</sup> CF database maintained by SFED

generating income. Its contribution to the realisation of the 10<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (FYP) national goal of poverty reduction is also acknowledged. Also, it is seen as a way to promote participatory decision-making on natural resource management and democratisation.

As defined in the Forest and Nature Conservation Rules (FNCR) of 2006, CFMG are accountable to the DoFPS for the sustainable management of the entrusted resources, and the DoFPS have the right to revoke the certificate of a CFMG, if a group acts in violation of the management plan (with no redress rights for the CFMG).<sup>4</sup> This is a clear indicator of power relations between CFMGs as right holders of forest management and the DoFPS representing the state as the owner of the resource. Nevertheless, the DoFPS has not exercised this prerogative so far (SFED 2012).

### **Community Forest Management Groups and Civil Society Organisations Movement**

The Civil Society Organisations (CSO) movement in Bhutan gained momentum with the CSO Act 2007 and the establishment of a CSO Authority in 2009. Most of the 29<sup>5</sup> registered CSO are social welfare oriented and complement government activities, as foreseen by the act. Very few engage in advocacy and policy dialogue on behalf of their beneficiaries, and those who do cover mostly non-sensitive topics such as education and health. This development illustrates the cautious approach the CSO Authority has taken to enable the growth of CSO.

Whereas the CSO Act covers not-for profit organisations (either for mutual or public benefit), community-based organisations (CBO) and groups pursuing primarily economic goals such as CFMG or farmers groups fall under the Co-operative Act of Bhutan. Whereas the socio-economic benefits of such CBO are acknowledged and appreciated and their potential to promote democratisation recognised, their empowerment in political terms has received little attention.<sup>6</sup> The SFED for example highlights the impact of CFMG on social capital in Bhutan, e.g. strengthening social cohesion amongst members thereby effectively contributing to reversing social fragmentation in Bhutan (The Bhutanese, 10.8.12). However, the potential of such groups to address the concerns of their communities, voice their demands at Gewog or Dzongkhag level, and monitor the implementation of development activities at the local level, is of less concern.

### **Limitations regarding Decentralisation**

The Bhutanese state is generally considered to be a welfare state with a strong sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of its people. Socio-cultural limitations to decentralisation in Bhutan are rooted in the strong sense of hierarchies, seniority and a paternalistic approach to governance. While historically the practice of public consultation is widely spread in Bhutan, this has not yet led to active public participation in decision-making processes. While today's Gewog Development Plans are informed by community meetings (so called Zomdues) and seek to incorporate concerns and priorities of local people, the effectiveness of these consultative meetings depends considerably on the facilitator's capacity to promote active participation and voice the decisions of the Zomdue in the Gewog Council (GT).

Similarly, the historical forms of governance in Bhutan have not particularly promoted the development of civic culture, which is essential for the consolidation of the ongoing democratisation and decentralisation process. Today, local government elections are non-partisan and apolitical and civil servants are banned from engaging in political activities and from joining a political party. Local Governments only have decision making power and **lack legislative authority**.

<sup>4</sup> FNCR 2006, Art. 35

<sup>5</sup> As of 15<sup>th</sup> August 2012

<sup>6</sup> The Co-operative Act of Bhutan 2001 provides for the establishment of Federations of Co-operatives and also Unions of registered Federations. However the purpose of Federations is limited to production and marketing and only Unions are encouraged to promote their co-operatives interests and engage in advocacy at national level. (Co-operative Act of Bhutan 2001, Art. 9 & 10)

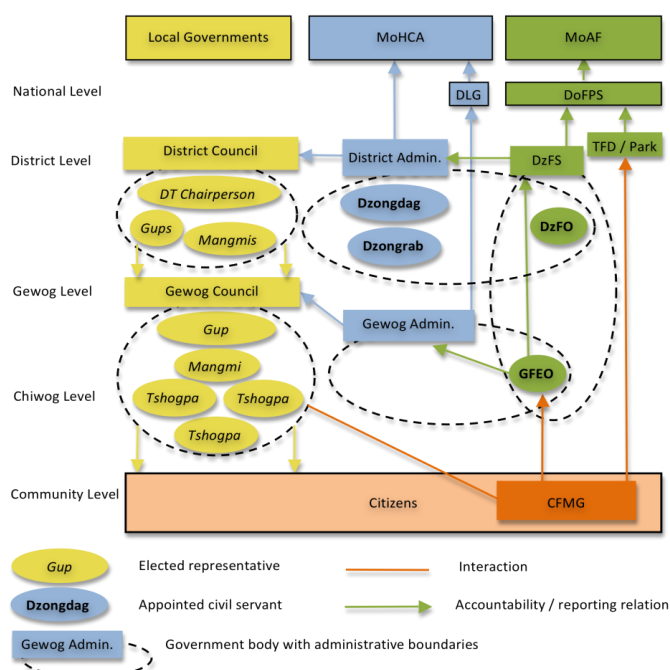
A shortage of elected representatives at Chiwog level (despite two by-elections after the first nationwide<sup>7</sup> local government elections in 2011), along with the weak capacities of elected local government representatives and low participation of women in local government elections<sup>8</sup>, remain the biggest challenges for local governments today. The DLG is witnessing a recent trend of local people increasingly sidelining local governments and directly seeking redress with their representatives at national level or central government agencies. This is an indication that the institutionalisation of local government structures is still weak and that there is a lack of awareness at the local level of the functions and mandate of the local government (LG).

Due to high poverty rates, low incomes from agriculture-based activities in rural areas, and the fact that many taxes are levied by central agencies, **tax revenues** generated at the local level are very minimal and local governments depend strongly on central funding. Consequently, the financial autonomy of local governments both in terms of raising adequate revenues from their constituencies as well as in fully determining how to spend resources allocated to them is limited.

Accountability relations between local governments, sector extension staff and local communities are complex and tend to be horizontal or upward oriented. Although administratively all Gewog sector extension agents report to the Gewog Council (GT), as civil servants they are also technically accountable to their line ministries. Similarly, the Dzongkhag Forestry Officers (DzFO) report administratively to the District Council (DT) and to the Dzongdag and technically to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forests (MoAF). This considerably reduces the power of local governments and local communities to effectively hold sector staff accountable. However, concerning development activities and implementation of decisions of the DT, the Dzongdag (as chief executive officer at district level) and his deputy the Dzongrab, are both accountable to the DT – as well as to the Ministry of Home and Cultural Affairs (MoHCA) for administrative and to different line ministries for technical matters. In contrast, TFD/Parks report exclusively to their ministry.

These limitations to decentralisation have a direct impact on the sphere of influence and voice of community-based organisations such as CFMG.

### Local Government and Forestry Sector Structure



Source: Own illustration

<sup>7</sup> Following a Royal Edict in 2002 to adopt universal suffrage in elections for local governments, first elections were held in 199 out of 201 Gewogs to elect the Gups. (Ura 2004, p. 2)

<sup>8</sup> In the 2011 local government elections, 8% percent were female candidates. ([www.election-bhutan.org.bt](http://www.election-bhutan.org.bt))

### 3. Participation/ Accountability Mechanism(s)

#### Legal Framework for Participation and Accountability

CFMG are responsible “to ensure transparency and accountability in the management of the forest and affairs of the CFMG” (FNCR 2006, Art. 31). Compliance requirements for planning and management of CF as spelled out in the Forest and Nature Conservation Act (FNCA) are rather complex and consequently prevent groups to take effective control. With the revision of the FNCR in 2006, responsibility to develop the CF management plans has been transferred from CFMG to the DzFO who prepares the plans “in consultation and collaboration with CFMG” (FNCR 2006, Art. 28.3). This has effectively reduced the power of local communities in the planning of forest management. Furthermore, the DoFPS reserves the right to take action with regard to both forestry and other developmental activities in the CF if there is a perceived a government interest / need (FNCR 2006, Art. 35).

The GFEO provides services (technical assistance, facilitation) to the CFMG, yet there are no feedback mechanisms in place to assess the performance of service providers apart from the general forum of GT. In addition, the **lack of ownership rights** has resulted in certain insecurity about management rights among certain groups as reported by Wangdi and Tshering (2006, p.5).

Despite these limitations, the overall framework for CF is overall enabling and the National Strategy for CF (SFD 2010), which was drafted with project support, encourages mutual accountability: „Both parties in CF agreements, Government and community, have responsibilities as well as authorities. In the interests of enhancing transparency and accountability, procedures should be established to enable CFMG members to hold Forest Officers accountable for their actions“ (SFD 2010, p. 54). SFED (mandated by the MoAF) is currently in the process of revising the rules for CF based on the national strategy and experience gained with CF over the past years.

Important accountability and monitoring instruments are the groups’ by-laws, meetings, annual reports and the accountability mechanisms between GFEO and DzFO who ultimately report to GT and DT respectively. However, concerns of the Government regarding accountability and participation are mostly related to internal group governance and to a lesser extent to their own accountability towards the groups – effectively disempowering the CFMG to hold forest authorities directly accountable. Many extension agents seem to be concerned with the groups’ **internal governance, which they consider to be weak** (Hool 2012, p. 11). Administrative and management capacities are certainly a challenge for newly established groups. Nonetheless all the groups visited had a good understanding of the principles of good governance and their executive committees were committed to implementing these. Equitable socio-economic development is promoted through the needs based allocation of the often scarce timber resources, benefiting poorer households. Membership fees are kept low to allow for participation of all societal groups. However none of the groups visited had complaints mechanisms in place - except for general assemblies that do not particularly call for feedback. The literature on CFMG suggests that this is common practice (see Wangchuk 2011).

While the participation of these groups in the protection and management of forest resources is considerable, i.e. they have the right to hold offenders accountable and fine them according to their by-laws, their participation in other stages is still limited. The responsibility for the participatory planning of a community forest is formally in the hands of the DzFO, decision making processes are often accompanied by forestry staff, and the space for decision making is limited to the approved management plans. Considering the high level of involvement of Gewog and Dzongkhag extension agents in advising and technical backstopping of CFMG, some observers have described CFMG as an extended arm of the DoFPS rather than as an independent organisation that could challenge the authority of DoFPS regarding forest management (Rasul and Karki 2007, p. 24). The effective level of participation of CFMG members in planning and implementation depends considerably on the interest and commitment shown by the members and on the facilitation skills of forestry extension staff.

## PFMP Support to Inclusive Participation and Accountability Mechanisms

The project is in the process of developing a **series of tools** to further improve the internal governance of CFMG and to strengthen external links to local governments. These will address issues such as the inclusion of poor households, pro-poor provisions in the by-laws, recommendations to lower transaction costs for poor households, equitable benefit sharing, reporting and information sharing, implementation of by-laws, compliance with government rules and regulations, meaningful participation, access to forest products, use of CF funds, and meaningful record and book keeping. The adoption of rules and mechanisms in the groups' by-laws to support disadvantaged members and the by-laws' implementation is a focus area. The importance of equitable cost and benefit sharing, and the inclusion of provisions promoting concrete actions to benefit disadvantaged households, have been widely addressed among foresters and CFMG with the objective of tackling poverty reduction more explicitly in the CFMG by-laws. While the project has mostly addressed the broader issue of social equity and focussed to a lesser extent on gender, it has established the use of sex-disaggregated data for determining the composition of CFMG executive committees, the selection of participants for trainings, for reporting purposes, and awareness raising. Further, the project has facilitated the discussion on introducing soft quotas for executive committees, resulting in a broad agreement on 1/3 minimum representation of each sex<sup>9</sup>. This consensus will also be reflected in the revised version of the CF manual and rules.

Although the **promotion of downward accountability** of government actors has not been a particular focus of the current phase, accountability has been a regular topic in workshops and discussions on governance with extension staff. Downward accountability will be an important topic in the next phase of the project. With existing accountability relations in place between the Gewog and Dzongkhag Administration and Local Governments, the focus will be on strengthening these existing relations and empowering CFMG members in their role as citizens, rather than on creating additional channels for CFMG exclusively.

The project also supports **workshops** at district level to provide CFMG with a platform to raise and discuss issues around CF management, exchange experiences, directly address government representatives, and seek accountability. Panel discussions with participants from the SFED are broadcasted live on Bhutan Broadcasting Service with some support from the project. Viewers are invited to share their concerns and hold the panellists accountable.

**Exposure visits, short-term trainings and regional workshops for CFMG** supported by the project are also important fora to exchange lessons learnt and share best practices among CFMG. It is hoped that these platforms will advance the establishment of federations of CFMG to allow CFMG to make use of synergies in a more structured way.

The drafting of the **National Strategy for CF** (SFD 2010), which was supported through technical assistance funded by the project, was preceded by consultative meetings with stakeholders, a national stakeholder workshop and several discussions with senior level bureaucrats to ensure support and ownership. This resulted in political and administrative commitments from decision makers. The launch of the strategy was broadly covered in the media and the project ensured the broad dissemination of the strategy to all relevant stakeholders.

**Awareness raising events** with LG officials are organised in order to give them a better understanding of CF and to promote the new CF Strategy.

The project's **inclusive approach to capacity building** for foresters, which targets DzFS as well as staff of protected areas and the TFD, aims at improving the collaboration and coordination between different services of the Department of Forests and Park Services and at achieving a shared understanding on the benefits of CF. Addressing a broad range of issues, e.g. didactics, facilitation

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<sup>9</sup> This applies to the overall composition of the executive committee (usually comprising between 6 and 12 members) as well as to the main office holders (Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer).



skills, NWFP management, group and conflict management, and marketing, these trainings aim at improving extension staffs' capacities to support CFMG, thereby furthering CFMG's role in planning and implementing CF management plans.

**Limitations** to participation and accountability can be found in the legal framework as described above, but also in the institutional set up of the forestry sector as it lacks regular platforms at community level to interact with non-state actors. The GT and DT meetings provide a venue to bring up issues related to the CF programme. With public participation limited to observer status, issues have to be addressed through the Chiwog Tshogpa (or the Gup) on behalf of the CFMG. To enhance the participation of CFMG in local governance issues, these channels have to be appropriated by the groups to voice their interests.

### **CFMG - Safeguarding Community Interests**

The role of CFMG in the effective protection of community interests can be illustrated by Norbugang CFMG in Sarpang District. There, the CFMG rejected the proposal of a private mining company to establish operations in their CF, because of the expected huge environmental impact this would entail. Another project to establish high voltage power transmitters in connection with a hydro power project was also rejected, as it would have severely undermined the development of forest resources in some parts of the CF. The very limited benefits for local communities of these national development projects explain the reluctance of these communities to allow such projects to be realised within their CF boundaries. However, there are voices accusing CFMG of not acting in the interest of the country by putting their community first. In light of the importance of forests for local communities to secure their livelihoods, and the still only marginal share of community forests of the total forest cover, these arguments appear to be unfounded.

#### **Box 1: The case of Nimazor CFMG**

Conflicts mostly arise over activities that have been approved before the establishment of the community forests and which have not been revised to include the clearance of CFMG. Nimazor CFMG in Tsirang has been trying to hold the Bhutan Power Corporation (BPC) accountable for damages caused to their forest and for the illegal felling of trees. The CFMG has penalised the BPC according to its by-laws. However, the payment of the fines is still pending. The TFD has also penalised the BPC for the use of excavators to ply their way to the transmitter site and the BPC has cleared their debts with the TFD. Nevertheless, Tsirang Division has not considered transferring this payment to the CFMG whose CF has been affected. Several letters, drafted with support of the GFEO to the Tsirang Forestry Division, the District Governor and the BPC (with cc to the Gup, Branch Officer and DzFS) have remained unanswered and the group is at its wits' end. This kind of follow up is a considerable burden (in terms of time and financial resources) to the Secretary and Chairperson of the CFMG who also does not receive professional legal support. The CFMG now considers legal steps to enforce its rights.

This case highlights the very visible power dimensions CFMG have to face. The BPC is a government owned company who is mandated by RGoB to provide the necessary infrastructure for the transmission of power generated by different hydropower projects. The hydropower sector is the backbone of Bhutan's economy and is projected to grow substantially during the next 10 years.

Some groups actively sought to establish a community forest after development activities had been proposed in their customarily used forests in order to secure access to assets such as timber<sup>10</sup> or in order to avert such activities.

<sup>10</sup> While timber felled in a CF due to development activities is handed over directly to the CFMG, timber from GRF is handed over to the Natural Resource Development Corporation Limited (NRDCL) who then decides on its further use and distribution.

The construction of farm roads has a considerable impact on forests and the general landscape in rural Bhutan. Generally, there is little opposition to the construction of farm roads or rural electrification as most communities acknowledge the benefits of these activities. All of the groups that were interviewed were involved in monitoring road constructions that affected their CF as members of “Road Committees”. However, the case of the Dramtse-Narang farm road construction showcases the need for close monitoring.

**Box 2: Dozam CFMG corrects flaws in road construction procedure (Norbu 2008)**

In 2007, the construction of a farm road from the village of Dramtse to a neighbouring village started. The new road was expected to partly lead through a plantation established by the Dozam Community Forest Management Group. As the construction violated the standards agreed upon before work started, the group obstructed the continuation of construction. This action was widely reported on in the Bhutanese media. The road was eventually built observing the existing standards for environmentally friendly road construction thanks to the Dozam CFMG’s intervention.

## 4. Analysis and Main Lessons Learnt

Bhutan’s approach to forest management has been subject to substantial changes in the past decades. The enactment of the FNCA in 1995 marked the beginning of a more people-centred approach to management of forest resources in the form of CF and brought to an end the highly restricted access to forests since 1969. Fuelled by the decentralisation process, i.e. devolving powers to sub-national levels and promoting community participation in local planning, the contribution of CFMG to sustainable forest management, protection and conservation of natural resources is widely acknowledged today.

There are indications that incidences of illegal logging and forest fires have decreased - a fact that local observers partly attribute to CF. Thanks to the effective protection of water sources, many CFMG benefit from an improved supply of drinking and irrigation water. The project has contributed to an enabling policy environment by supporting the development of the National Strategy for CF (SFD 2010) and the ongoing revision of rules pertaining to CF. Also, it has contributed to improved coordination and collaboration among different actors in the forestry sector. Within this framework the CF programme has thrived and become a nationwide movement. The number of community forests has grown rapidly since 2007, and community forests are now present in all 20 Dzongkhags. An increasing number of groups derive income from the management of forest resources thereby contributing to poverty reduction in rural areas. The demand to establish a CF is now community-driven. It is expected that the number of applications for new community forests continues to be high. Today, CF is broadly supported at all levels - from community to national, from decision makers to administrators. Given this dynamic, the project has assumed a new role in supporting the consolidation of the approach and the assurance of quality. The general success of the CF programme and the broad acceptance it has gained over the past years can be partly attributed to the holistic approach taken by the SFED, the wider processes of democratisation and decentralisation, as well as the support from politicians and high level civil servants “championing” CF. This is resulting in a nationwide and systemic impact, as well as contributing to a shift in power relations in forest management by empowering CFMG.

While in the early days of CF, communities were invited to spaces that were closed earlier, they now claim these spaces themselves, turning the establishment of community forests into a bottom-up process. However, they do so mostly at local level and very few CFMG have so far exercised their rights beyond the local level. An exception is the case of one CFMG that took legal action to enforce its by-laws and succeeded before the district court. It is expected that CFMGs will increasingly be able to enforce their provisions and other relevant legislation, thanks to a better understanding of their rights, increased capacities, public support, and more exchange with other CFMGs.

Future challenges in the support to CF include, apart from poverty reduction, the establishment of an effective monitoring system that takes into account the reach and scale of CF, the capacities of (newly established) groups to actively manage forest resources and the groups' empowerment to address issues beyond forestry and the local level, eventually leading to their active participation in decision making processes and policy discussions. Equally seen as a limitation is the lack of an integrated approach to plan natural resources management and the development of infrastructure at the landscape level in a participatory way.

The transfer of rights and responsibilities for the management of forest resources to local communities has increased their sense of ownership and has resulted in a **more sustainable, conscious and farsighted approach** towards the management of forest resources. Communities have been empowered to protect their resources from outsiders - people, government and private companies - and they take pride in these responsibilities. One group has been able to establish itself as service provider to a neighbouring municipality in supplying drinking water for which the group is remunerated. The provision of ecosystem services, particularly irrigation and drinking water from protected sources within the CF, could become a business model for other CFMGs. Also, the groups' contributions beyond the local level should be recognised by Dzongkhag authorities and compensated accordingly.

Community Forest Management Groups have actively participated in the ongoing 11<sup>th</sup> FYP planning meetings at Gewog level and it is hoped that this engagement in governance processes at local level will strengthen the links between community-based organisations such as CFMGs and local governments. It is further expected that leadership experience gained in the CFMGs' executive committees, positions CF members to take up a leading role in local governance. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the existence of an active CFMG leads to improved citizen engagement in Zomdues.<sup>11</sup>

Accountability mechanisms in CF are mostly upward and only to a limited extent downward as in the case of internal accountability between executive committee members and ordinary group members. However, these mechanisms are little institutionalised, and no formal complaints mechanisms exist to seek redress internally. None of the groups interviewed felt the need for such a mechanism. This could lead to the interpretation that the groups have a tendency to avoid rather than manage conflicts (see also Wangchuk 2011). While all groups interviewed assessed their CFMG's composition as representative of community at large, women are still underrepresented in the groups' executive committees.<sup>12</sup> Also language and literacy requirements seem to contribute to the persistence of existing social relations rather than challenge them. Also elite capture of benefits derived from CF, as widely reported from community forestry programmes in the region, might also become an issue in Bhutan (see Carter et al. 2009). However, the groups' growing acknowledgement of the importance of equitable cost and benefit sharing for effective poverty reduction and the adherence to good governance principles, seem to effectively limit such social risks.

In the project context, efforts have already been made to promote the equitable distribution of benefits (rather than equal distribution only). Further, the project has moved from a rather narrow understanding of poverty defined by economic aspects to a broader and multi-dimensional understanding of poverty. This is reflected in the practice of "wellbeing" rankings that substituted the earlier wealth rankings. However, the SFED follows a cautious approach to address aspects of social divides or discrimination, based on the reasoning that such changes should emanate from the communities themselves and should not be imposed by external actors. Nevertheless the latter may be well placed to promote the provision of space for agents of social change.

<sup>11</sup> Hobley, M.: Community-based forestry and governance - opportunities for potential Phase 3 PFMP, De-briefing, DoFPS, Thimphu, 10.10.2012.

<sup>12</sup> Data from 116 CFMGs collected from the CF Annual Reports 2010 provide the following figures of women's representation: Chairperson: 2%, Secretary: 13%. Treasurer: 12%, Other executive committee members: 34%. On average women's overall representation in executive committees comes to 23%.

The project has brought up issues on behalf of the groups and has been a catalyst for the development of the CF programme into a movement. However, the voice of most groups has been limited to sub-national levels and only very specific topics have been addressed due to the limited experience of community-based organisations in Bhutan in advocacy and policy dialogue, a predominantly paternalistic approach from the government towards civil society actors, and the lack of an umbrella association of CFMGs. Nevertheless, CFMGs have come a long way in the past decade by claiming their rights in CF management and effectively managing the entrusted resources by practising democratic decision-making at grassroots level. Examples of CFMG actively enforcing their rights and holding private as well as government agencies accountable, point to the potential of community-based organisations to safeguard the interest of their communities.

The focus of the project on building capacities amongst CF group members has led to an empowerment of communities as planners and managers at the local level, providing rural households with direct, tangible results from their participation in decision-making processes. With this in mind, it is now an opportune moment to address broader issues of forest and landscape governance, including concerns such as justice, access and equity, and to capitalise on the benefits of decentralisation and local governance for CF. Managing the groups' expectations regarding benefits derived from CF and the effective contribution to improved livelihoods and poverty reduction of devolved management of natural resources, will remain challenges.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

CF has come a long way in Bhutan characterised by rapid developments in recent years. Today the social, economical and environmental benefits of CF are widely recognised and the current legal framework provides an enabling environment for the implementation of the CF programme. However, much remains to be done when it comes to scaling up the CFMGs' sphere of influence and their empowerment as political actors, effectively participating in local decision making and in governance. Many Community Forest Management Groups face constraints in terms of human capacities, which in turn limit their abilities to take actively part in the planning and revision of management plans, thereby limiting their political powers. It is hoped that the anticipated gain in knowledge and capacities in forest management will foster the groups' engagement in broader issues of forest governance and further improve the quality of participation, representation, planning and management.

From the Government's perspective, benefits of community forests are mostly internal, i.e. income generation for local communities and poverty reduction, increased social cohesion, improved water source protection etc. rather than external. External benefits of CF actors are that they can be considered important stakeholders in the decentralisation and democratisation process by promoting downward accountability and transparency, inclusive and participatory governance, grassroots informed policy dialogue etc. However, senior government officials often refer to the contribution that they expect CF to make to local democratisation in the country. This clearly points to the potential of CF to capitalise on good governance outcomes for improved livelihoods and to become a role model for democratic and decentralized natural resource management which is inclusive, transparent and equitable and committed to being accountable as well as to holding decision-makers accountable.

However, some foresters seem to be wary of an "over-empowerment" of such groups that might lead to delay or even rejection of development activities, thereby foregoing national interests. This concern is not limited to CFMGs but is commonly voiced by civil servants in regard to non-state actors such as CSOs, CBOs and the media. The development and empowerment of non-governmental organisations is still in its infancy in Bhutan and so is the civic culture. However, voices for more accountability from the urban elite directed at political leaders and central agencies have grown considerably over the past months. Similarly, the uncovering of corrupt practices of high level civil servants by the media and the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the outspoken public disapproval, are signs of change. It is hoped that these developments will eventually trickle down to

the local levels and rural parts of Bhutan, encouraging local people to voice their concerns and hold their representatives accountable. The forthcoming elections, that might see as many as six parties competing<sup>13</sup>, and the early efforts of some MPs to secure votes, have made citizens aware of their power: suddenly, their opinion matters and their vote counts - turning established power relations upside down.

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## 6. References

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<sup>13</sup> This is however subject to their registration with the Election Commission of Bhutan. So far only two parties are registered.