

Book review: Richard Thwaites, Robert Fisher, Mohan Poudel (eds): Community Forestry in Nepal - Adapting to a Changing World

Schmidt-Vogt, Dietrich

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Rezension / review

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Schmidt-Vogt, D. (2021). Book review: Richard Thwaites, Robert Fisher, Mohan Poudel (eds): Community Forestry in Nepal - Adapting to a Changing World. *International Quarterly for Asian Studies (IQAS)*, 52(1-2), 147-150. <https://doi.org/10.11588/iqas.2021.1-2.15417>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

more longevity than many others caught up in day-to-day politics and descriptions of Pakistan, with the majority of the contributions offering alternative images of a country too often portrayed in a stereotypical way. Many of the articles will allow other scholars to build on the academic insight provided here. Interestingly, what is missing in most of the papers is the “nation state” mentioned in the book’s title. By side-stepping the debate about the “nation state”, the authors are able to focus on their specific themes and areas of interest, and to imagine the “nation state” in their own and different ways without explaining the term further. While this is perfectly acceptable, one might well ask why, then, the term appears in the title.

S. Akbar Zaidi

RICHARD THWAITES / ROBERT FISHER / MOHAN POUDEL (eds), *Community Forestry in Nepal. Adapting to a Changing World*. London / New York: Earthscan from Routledge, 2019. 204 pages, 10 figures, 36 tables, £38.99. ISBN 978-0367-4037-20

The shift from centralised management of natural resources by government agencies to decentralised management by communities or with the participation of communities has been one of the most dramatic policy changes of the recent past. It is a global phenomenon that is, however, more pronounced in countries of the Global South. Community-Based Forest Management (CBFM), of which Community Forestry (CF) is one of several manifestations, has attracted particular attention.

The shift commenced in the 1970s in a context of increasing awareness that forest is an important asset for people in rural areas of developing countries, of global concern about deforestation, especially in the tropics, and of a reassessment of the role and capacity of farmers and communities to manage forests. Community Forestry, which can be broadly defined as community participation in forest management with at least some commitment to generating benefits for rural dwellers, started earlier and has been implemented more vigorously in Nepal than in other countries. With currently 30 per cent of its forests under CF management, Nepal is considered a success story and some elements of CF that were developed in Nepal, such as Community Forestry User Groups (CFUGs), have been adopted in other countries as well. A book on CF in Nepal is therefore of interest not only for readers with an affinity to Nepal, but also for those with a broader interest in policy changes concerning the management of natural resources, especially of forests.

The editors and authors of this book are notable for the length and intensity of their involvement with CF in Nepal. This is especially true for Robert Fisher, who is a “man of the first hour” of CF in Nepal due to his early involvement with the Nepal-Australia Community Forestry project – which itself was a pioneer in the launching of CF in Nepal – and who has maintained a lifelong commitment to this cause. Except for Robert Fisher and Richard Thwaites of Sturt University, Australia, all other authors in this book are Nepali nationals with a strong record on CF, among them four PhD graduates of Sturt University. The book is partly based on the primary research of these graduates, partly on a review of the literature.

The first two chapters provide background on the origins and history of CF in Nepal. One of the major drivers of this policy change was the international alarm sounded in the 1970s about the imminent deforestation of the Nepal Himalayas. Deforestation was initially blamed on farmers, and later, in the wake of a re-evaluation of the role of farmers as resource managers, on the ineptitude of the state in managing its forests. In the face of what was perceived as an impending environmental disaster, CF was introduced and implemented with an initial focus on forest conservation and reforestation. Later, the focus shifted to livelihoods and poverty reduction. This shift of focus was paralleled by a shift of emphasis towards empowering forest user groups, which was codified by the Forest Act of 1993. *Community Forestry in Nepal* tells the story of how CF was established and how it has evolved up to the present. The book also assesses the outcomes of this policy change with respect to the environment, rural livelihoods, poverty reduction, community development and land tenure issues, and explores how CF must adapt to a changing context of global challenges such as climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as national challenges such as permanent political instability, outmigration and the emergence of a remittance economy.

According to the findings presented in this book, the record for CF in Nepal is mixed. CF was successful with respect to its original purpose – to address deforestation and forest degradation. A masterful analysis of a range of sources and data sets provides evidence in chapter 3 that forest cover has increased in the lower-altitude Mid Hills, which is the primary domain of CF activities, and that CF has also had a positive influence on forest conditions in terms of biodiversity and provision of forest products. The record with respect to livelihoods and poverty reduction is not so positive. The findings on these issues, which are based on case study research in three locations along an altitudinal gradient in Central Nepal from the Inner Terai through the Mid Hills to the High Mountains, show that CFUGs are dominated by local elites and that benefits from CF are unequally distributed within the communities. In some cases, the poor were found to be even worse off than before the introduction of CF. Environmental outcomes therefore do not reflect social and economic outcomes.

In general, CF in Nepal has been a success story, especially with respect to community development. Soon after their establishment, local CF institutions developed into central institutions with an agenda for broader local development, including micro-enterprise development, infrastructure development, capacity building, etc. The strength of these institutions became apparent during the Maoist insurrection from 1996 to 2006 when, following the breakdown of local government institutions, CFUGs were forced to assume these institutions' functions and continued to play this role after the end of the insurgency.

The context of CF in Nepal has changed with the emergence of climate change and biodiversity loss as global challenges, and with the implementation of policies to deal with these challenges. The case of the UN Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation in Developing Countries (REDD +) presented in chapter 8 is particularly instructive. While the objectives of REDD + to maintain or increase carbon stocks in forests are in line with the original conservation objectives of CF, there is a potential for conflict with other objectives, e.g. the objective of strengthening local governance. The authors of this chapter fear that the need to align local policies with national and global REDD+ policies and to spend REDD+ funding through government channels and in accordance with donor guidelines may undermine or even reverse the decentralisation process.

Chapter 9 moves from the changing global context to the volatile national context and discusses the effects on CF of labour migration and the concomitant emergence of a remittance economy on the one hand, and of political instability caused by the Maoist insurgency, frequent changes of government, an ongoing constitutional crisis and the rise of identity politics, on the other. The authors of this chapter see CF endangered especially by the effects of labour migration and a remittance-based economy, as when reduced dependence on forests leads to loss of interest not only in forests but also in local governance organised around forests. The book concludes with recommendations for a revitalisation of CF through, among other things, an emphasis on inclusive and strategic planning.

The book covers aspects of CF that have been covered before. The self-effacing statement on p. 196 that the findings reported in this book "are not new findings" is a welcome break from the hyperbolic invocation of novelty that runs through so many other publications. I agree with the authors that the value of the book lies not in the novelty of reported findings but in the quality of the supporting case studies. *Community Forestry in Nepal* does break new ground in chapter 9, however, by discussing the negative effects of the remittance economy, a perspective that has thus far been neglected in the literature on CF in Nepal. In doing so, it points towards a fundamental conflict between some aspects of global change and decentralisation, for which CF in Nepal is an instructive example. I find, on the other hand, that the astounding fact that CF was able to persist through the Civil War of 1996 to 2006 and that it continues

to function in a context of ongoing political anarchy has been dealt with too briefly and that this resilience should have deserved more space in the book.

Community Forestry in Nepal is a highly competent and professional effort to take stock of the development and performance of CF in Nepal up to the present, and to sketch out possible future pathways. It is a profound source of information and insights due to the professional experience of its contributors and to the combination of a thorough literature review with the results of primary research presented in the text, as well as in numerous tables. The provision of maps, on the other hand, is rudimentary. Readers with some familiarity with Nepal would have welcomed a map or maps showing the location not just of districts but also of the many places mentioned in this book. This lack notwithstanding, the publication is remarkably cohesive for an edited volume, mainly due to the close professional ties among its contributors and to the excellent synthesis in chapter 9 – “Community Forestry Reinventing itself in Nepal” – which ties the various narratives together with references to each relevant chapter.

Dietrich Schmidt-Vogt

ASHLEY JACKSON, *Ceylon at War, 1939–1945*. Warwick: Helion and Company, 2018. 240 pages, £35.00. ISBN 978-1-9123-9065-6

This book is another addition to the growing body of studies that look at WWII through the lens of a nation-state, even if one in the making, as in this case. The works on India by Yasmine Khan and Srinath Raghavan represent two excellent examples of such studies with comprehensive treatment of the military, political, economic and cultural impact the war could have upon a country. It would of course be daring to compare the small island of Ceylon (as it was known in colonial times) to the subcontinent that is India, whose contribution to the Allied war efforts was indeed massive by almost any measure. But once this difference in scale is adjusted, Ceylon’s contribution can be reassessed and re-appreciated. The island’s importance rested largely on becoming the home of a major base of the Royal Navy at Trincomalee (or Trinco, in short), which was a crucial factor in Mountbatten’s decision to move the headquarters of the Southeast Asia Command from Delhi to Peradeniya and Kandy.

Jackson’s study begins with this story of an island becoming a site of decision-making. Chapter 1 explains the rise in importance of the naval base at Trinco as a result of the fall of Singapore, which made Ceylon a “surrogate Singapore”. The next chapter discusses a lesser-known aspect of this defeat: the influx