

IDS Bulletin

Transforming Development Knowledge

Volume 48 | Number 4 | July 2017

COURTING CATASTROPHE? HUMANITARIAN POLICY AND PRACTICE IN A CHANGING CLIMATE

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Rethinking Food Aid in a Chronically Food-Insecure Region: Effects of Food Aid on Local Power Relations and Vulnerability Patterns in Northwestern Nepal

Sigrid Nagoda¹

Abstract The impacts of repeated food aid programmes on households' livelihood strategies and capacity to adapt to stressors such as climate change were investigated in the chronically food-insecure district of Humla in Nepal, using food security as an entry point for analysing vulnerability. The study questions food aid as a tool to reduce vulnerability, and argues that it may indirectly impede the enhancement of food security by reinforcing inequalities and local power structures that drive household vulnerability. The article concludes that a refocus addressing the social dynamics that shape local vulnerability patterns is needed before food aid can contribute to enhancing households' long-term adaptive capacity.

Keywords: vulnerability, climate change, humanitarian aid, food security, power relations, Nepal.

1 Introduction

In many areas, climate variability and change are increasing the stress on already pressed farming systems (CCAFS 2012; IPCC 2014), leading to an increased focus on food security programmes and disaster risk reduction measures as ways of reducing vulnerability (IPCC 2014; IFRC 2014). Food aid is one of the main tools used by the humanitarian community to address food insecurity and to alleviate acute food shortages. In 2011, the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) delivered 3.6 million metric tonnes (Mt) of food to 99.1 million people in 75 countries (WFP 2012a). However, food aid is not without controversy. While some consider it a key tool for saving people from hunger (WFP 2012b), others have raised concerns that food aid may undermine livelihood strategies of already marginalised households and cause aid dependency among recipients when provided repeatedly over a long period of time (Barrett and Maxwell 2005;

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The *IDS Bulletin* is published by Institute of Development Studies, Library Road, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK

This article is part of *IDS Bulletin* Vol. 48 No. 4 July 2017: 'Courting Catastrophe? Humanitarian Policy and Practice in a Changing Climate'; the Introduction is also recommended reading.

Lentz, Barrett and Hoddinott 2005). Such criticisms of food aid have contributed to increased attention on the need for humanitarian assistance to be redesigned to address vulnerability to multiple stressors, including climate change, more effectively (IPCC 2014; Eriksen *et al.* 2015b).

The climate change literature increasingly describes vulnerability as being driven by multiple social and environmental processes including economic and political change, marginalisation, and inequality, rather than by climate change alone (Adger 2006; IPCC 2014). In particular, power through social relations has been identified as a key factor affecting and creating vulnerability, since it influences people's entitlement to resources, access to formal and informal networks of support, as well as their extent of decision-making (McLaughlin and Dietz 2008; Ribot 2010). An important dynamic identified by Nagoda and Eriksen (2015) is that in times of food crisis, local vulnerability patterns may be reinforced through a deepening of the inequality and dependency between those with access to resources and decision-making opportunities, and those who are excluded from these.

It is within such a complex vulnerability context that governments and humanitarian organisations face the difficult task of responding quickly to people suffering from acute food shortage, while at the same time reducing their longer-term vulnerability. Addressing this challenge requires an enhanced understanding of how aid may affect the different drivers of vulnerability (Eriksen, Nightingale and Eakin 2015a; Tschakert *et al.* 2016). Building on the recognition that power relations and marginalisation processes are key factors that shape differential vulnerability patterns (Ribot 2010; Pelling 2011; Taylor 2014), this article offers an empirical contribution to the nascent field of politics of adaptation by investigating social vulnerability patterns and food aid interventions in two villages in the district of Humla in northwestern Nepal.

Food aid interventions in Nepal provide a particularly interesting case for studying how aid interventions affect differential vulnerability patterns at the local level. Nepal is among the poorest countries in the world (WFP 2012b) and social exclusion based on caste, gender and ethnicity is considered a key factor affecting people's vulnerability and the poverty situation (Bista [1991] 1994; Cameron 2007). Several regions of the country are chronically food-insecure (Adhikari 2008) and highly vulnerable to climate change (Xu *et al.* 2007), leading humanitarian agencies to scale up their interventions in an effort to enhance food security and people's adaptive capacity (WFP 2009).

The study undertakes a twofold analysis. First, it investigates the impacts of repeated food relief distribution in enhancing or substituting local livelihood strategies, including the extent to which it creates food aid dependency at the household level. Second, it considers how food aid influences power and interdependency relations within villages, and the impacts of such interactions on household vulnerability. With growing attention and resources directed to promoting climate change

adaptation worldwide (Agrawal and Perrin 2009; IPCC 2014), this study contributes to the debate about how humanitarian interventions can better address the related problems of chronic food insecurity and vulnerability to climate change in poor rural households.

2 Theoretical framework: humanitarian interventions and social vulnerability

The danger of creating aid dependency is frequently raised as a criticism of humanitarian aid (Lentz *et al.* 2005; Barrett and Maxwell 2005; Little 2008). Most definitions of food aid dependency converge with Little's claim that it is 'a condition where farmers modify their social and economic behaviour in anticipation of food aid' (2008: 861). The assumption is that by abandoning their livelihood activities in expectation of food aid, households may become more vulnerable to climate variability and change.

However, a definition of dependency that focuses only on the direct consequences of the anticipation of aid may be too narrow to explain how aid interventions affect vulnerability. The indirect influence of aid on pre-existing sociocultural and power relations among households may be at least as important in determining long-term household vulnerability (Mosse 2005; Barnett 2008). For example, Duffield *et al.* (2000), and Harvey and Lind (2005) found that food aid may impact on local social relations and pre-existing *interdependencies* between individuals and households, as well as between populations, groups and communities. On the one hand, such interdependencies may have a positive impact on people's vulnerability in terms of generating social capital when households have a mutual interest in helping each other through a crisis. On the other hand, the impact may be negative if the intervention leads to increased inequality and a risk of becoming trapped in an exploitative relationship (Harvey and Lind 2005). In Humla, interdependencies are formed by formal and informal sociopolitical structures and networks along the lines of caste, class, gender, ethnicity, kinship and other social groups that are important in shaping local vulnerability patterns (Nagoda and Eriksen 2015).

The main question this study addresses is: 'How does food aid impact on people's vulnerability in the context of climate stressors and socioeconomic changes?' First, to analyse the effect of food aid on livelihood strategies, we examine the importance placed by the interviewees of this study on food aid as a coping strategy in times of crisis and how it influences various livelihood options such as agriculture, trade, and daily labour. This analysis builds on the assumption that if food aid leads to more robust livelihood strategies, for example by contributing to more diversified livelihood options, it may have a positive and lasting influence on households' vulnerability to stress. Second, the analysis examines how local power relations are affected by food aid and how changes in local interdependencies affect differential vulnerability patterns at the household level.

The article builds on the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) definition of food security as 'a situation that exists when all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life' (FAO 2002: Glossary). Since people's perception of their food security situation is subjective, the information collected in the interviews is not interpreted as an absolute measure of food security, but rather as an entry point for analysing causes and processes driving vulnerability. Several researchers such as Eakin, Lemos and Nelson (2014) and Lemos *et al.* (2016) show that reducing vulnerability 'requires a combination of interventions that address not only climate-related risks (*specific capacity*) but also the structural deficits (e.g. lack of income, education, health, political power) (*generic capacity*) that shape vulnerability' (Lemos *et al.* 2016: 170). Hence, and in line with a contextual interpretation of vulnerability (O'Brien *et al.* 2007; IPCC 2014), the study analyses not only the challenges and possibilities that people experience in securing food, but also other factors they consider important for their wellbeing and adaptive capacity, such as health, education, dignity, and freedom from oppression.

Since vulnerability is dynamic and ever-changing (Eriksen, Brown and Kelly 2005; Twyman *et al.* 2011), this article analyses the effects of food aid as part of a contextual vulnerability dynamic where environmental, sociocultural, economic and political factors interact, and where food aid is one of various factors leading to changes. In the investigation, a failure to provide nutritious food of sufficient quality is thus seen as an outcome of the processes and structures driving the inherent state of vulnerability. Hence, the study does not attempt to isolate the impacts of food aid on vulnerability, nor does it pursue a quantitative line of argument based on the volumes of food aid that have been provided. Rather, it seeks to understand how, by being part of the social dynamic of a village, food aid interventions may strengthen, or weaken, the social power relations that shape differential vulnerability patterns.

3 Methods and case study

3.1 The study sites

The district of Humla in far northwestern Nepal is particularly appropriate for studying the impacts of repeated food aid on local vulnerability to stressors, including climate change. The district is one of the poorest in Nepal (UNFCO 2013), with around 80 per cent of the 50,000 inhabitants being classified as food-insecure (DFSN 2010). Humla is also vulnerable to climate change, including changes in precipitation patterns (NPC 2010; Ministry of Environment 2010), which contributes to further deterioration of the region's food security situation (WFP 2012b). In response to the chronic food insecurity situation, the district has received food aid for more than three decades, leading some authors to question the impact of food aid on people's longer-term adaptive capacities and coping strategies (Bauck *et al.* 2007; Adhikari 2008).

Humla is a mountainous district with altitudes varying from 1,524 to 7,337 metres above sea level (masl) (Roy 2010) and is characterised by its remoteness, limited infrastructure, and weak and sporadic presence of government institutions, in particular beyond the district headquarters at Simkot (Roy 2010; Nagoda and Eriksen 2015).

The main livelihood strategies in the district are subsistence agriculture and trade in non-timber forest products (NTFPs), *Furu*,² and rice and salt exchanged with Tibet, in addition to daily labour and temporal migration (Roy 2010). Ownership of livestock is an important part of these strategies. Out of Humla's 5,655sq km (DDCO 2006), only around 98sq km are cultivated and less than 11sq km are irrigated (UNFCO 2013). Land endowments are small, with an average of about 0.5 hectares per household, but with important differences between households, especially in the southern part of Humla where better-off households may have up to two hectares while destitute households have as little as 0.1 hectares of land (Nagoda and Eriksen 2015).

People in Humla can be roughly divided into two groups based on religion and mother tongue: the communities of Buddhist Tibetan-speaking Lamas who live in northern parts of Humla, and the Hindu Nepali-speaking communities that live in southern parts of Humla. The Hindu Nepali-speaking people are further divided according to the caste system of the Hindu religion. The most important castes in Humla are Brahmin, *chhetri* and *thakuri* who are considered high castes, and *dalits* who are considered low castes (untouchables).

Local social, political and economic networks and relations are essential parts of people's survival strategies (Bishop 1990; Cameron 2007). Such relations are also shaped by social inequalities and marginalisation processes based on caste, class, ethnic group and gender, and form part of a broader system that enhances or inhibits people's access to various assets (Bista 1994; Cameron 2007). A previous study has revealed a strong correlation between people's food security situation and their caste, gender and ethnic belonging (Nagoda and Eriksen 2015). While all of the *dalits* interviewed for this study were considered food-insecure, this was the case for about 60 per cent of the high-caste households and none of the Lama households. Women often face greater economic marginalisation since their access to land and means of production are in the hands of their male family members. Buddhist Tibetan Lamas have better access to economic networks, in part due to their geographic and cultural proximity to Tibet, making them less vulnerable to variations in agricultural output than most Hindu-speaking households.

3.2 Food aid in Humla

According to interviews with government officials, food distribution in Humla began in the 1950s through the Nepal Food Corporation (NFC), an agency under the Ministry of Industry, Commerce and Supplies that is still selling rice at subsidised prices in food-insecure regions today. Although sporadic during the early decades, food distribution in the

Table 1 Characteristics of the villages studied, Humla district, Nepal

Village	Syaandaa	Khankhe
Region	Northern part of Humla	Southern part of Humla
Altitude (masl)	2,745*	1,700
Religion	Hindu	Hindu
Caste	<i>chhetri</i>	<i>thakuri and dalits</i>
Number of households	152*	90
Persons per household	6.3*	7.2
Child mortality per household	1.4	0.9
Main livelihood strategies	Agriculture, trade, and wage labour	Agriculture, trade, wage labour, migration, and food aid
Main crops cultivated	Buckwheat, millet, barley, wheat, potatoes, and seasonal vegetables	Rice, millet, barley, wheat, corn, and seasonal vegetables
Main livestock	Yaks, yak/cow hybrids, horses, sheep, and goats	Cows, buffaloes, sheep, and goats

Note Data based on fieldwork 2010–11, except those denoted with an asterisk, which are *based on Roy (2010).

Source Based on data from Table 1 in Nagoda and Eriksen (2015).

region increased steadily during the 1990s due to the support of the WFP (Adhikari 2008).

No data have been made available for this study regarding total volumes of food aid to the district, but conservative estimates based on interviews with WFP staff indicate that approximately 7,980 Mt of food were distributed in Humla between 2004 and 2011. This equates to around 20kg per capita per year for the district as a whole, but with large annual variations as well as large variations between villages.

At the time of the study, the WFP was implementing Food for Work and Food for Assets programmes (FFW/FFA) in Humla, as part of the organisation's Protracted Relief and Recovery Operation (PRRO) in Nepal. Each of these programmes lasted for a period of 40–60 days, with participants undertaking labour activities in exchange for food that was supposed to cover three to four months of the households' food consumption (WFP 2012a). In the villages visited, most households were expecting to receive 120–160kg of rice by participating in the programmes. The objective of the PRRO is to 'strengthen the resilience of the most vulnerable households and communities by building long-term human capital and productive assets' (WFP 2012c: 9). The focus is on creating new income-generating activities by building irrigation systems, roads, paths, fences, community buildings, and cultivating new crops for commercialisation (e.g. *attis*³ and apples). All households may participate in the projects.

3.3 Data collection

Field studies were carried out over a five-year period from 2009 to 2014 with two long-term stays in the field in 2010 and several shorter visits between 2011 and 2014, in order to take the temporal dynamics in the villages into account. Using qualitative methods, data were collected through 48 semi-structured and informal household interviews in the village of Syaandaa and 49 in the village of Khankhe. To follow up on particular issues raised in household interviews, a total of seven focus group interactions were undertaken in the villages, with participants from different castes and wealth categories including women, traders and elders. An additional 74 interviews were conducted with policymakers, donors and representatives of aid agencies in Kathmandu (46 interviews) and Simkot (28 interviews). Hence, all the data presented in this article have been triangulated by a high number of interviews at local, district and national levels, through observations of everyday life in the villages, and by participating in informal and formal meetings and gatherings.

The villages of Khankhe and Syaandaa were considered highly food-insecure in 2010 (DFSN 2010) and received approximately 624 Mt and 144 Mt of rice respectively between 2008 and 2013.⁴ Both villages are situated on the eastern part of a mountain range with access to forests and rivers, but with different environmental and sociocultural characteristics (see Table 1).

4 The effect of food aid on vulnerability in Humla

4.1 Food aid and the dependency syndrome

Government officials and development workers frequently express concerns that repeated food aid may create aid dependency in the region of Humla. However, although data from the study highlight that (i) more land is left fallow today than ten years ago; (ii) villagers consume more rice and eat less of the traditional crops; and (iii) food trading patterns have changed over recent years, these changes in livelihoods cannot be attributed to food aid alone. Rather, they are the result of the interaction of complex social and environmental changes.

The observed increase in fallow lands was primarily explained in household interviews as the result of changes in climatic conditions, and by a shortage of manpower and manure. For example, finger millet (*L.n. kodo*) – a crop that needs abundant rain and manpower – has become difficult to cultivate because of changes in rainfall patterns. Informants attributed the lack of manpower to more children going to school, and the shortage of manure to the fact that many poor households sold their animals as they could not afford the increased fees claimed by the Forest User Groups⁵ in the south for grazing during winter. Hence, the study does not support the argument that food aid has created disincentives for agricultural production. In fact, only 5 per cent of the informants in Syaandaa and 7 per cent in Khankhe considered that they had a surplus of food annually, and none of the households would work less on their fields because of food aid. As one informant said: ‘We are too poor to take the chance of not working on our fields.’

During interviews, some policymakers recounted how food aid creates disincentives for local trade, referring specifically to the reduction in the traditional salt–rice trade between Tibet and neighbouring districts. For centuries, the salt trade was a major livelihood strategy in the region, where traders would buy salt in Tibet and exchange it for grains in southern Nepal (Von Fürer-Haimendorf 1988; Bishop 1990). However, reasons for the decline in the trade are complex. Older informants, who had been involved in the salt trade, said that the decline started in the late 1960s with the closing of the Tibetan borders by China and the distribution of subsidised salt by the Government of Nepal (Salt Trading Corporation of Nepal 2013). The salt trade is known to be a tough and time-consuming activity that requires animals, and was conducted mostly by the better-off Lama people in the North. Nowadays, Lama households prefer the more lucrative trade in NTFPs, and to buy rice from the NFC office in Simkot.

In addition, food aid is considered too unreliable to replace other coping strategies. All of the food-insecure households stated that the food received is insufficient and its supply too unpredictable to meet their needs in times of stress. Indeed, borrowing food and money from fellow villagers is a much more important coping strategy than receiving food aid. Eighty-three per cent of the food-insecure households interviewed in Syaandaa and 81 per cent in Khankhe said they would borrow food and money within the village in order to survive a food shortage, thus highlighting the importance of local social networks and relations in times of crisis. Other coping strategies include daily labour (12 per cent of interviewees in Khankhe; 48 per cent in Syaandaa), trade (23 per cent in Khankhe; 9 per cent in Syaandaa), selling assets (12 per cent in Khankhe; 5 per cent in Syaandaa), and seasonal migration (12 per cent in Khankhe; none in Syaandaa). In times of crisis, food aid is appreciated as a short-term opportunity to access food. For example, one informant explained how, for a few weeks, quick access to rice through food aid programmes enabled him to engage in daily wage labour and repay his debts. However, apart from some temporary changes in coping strategy for a few households, no informants claimed that food aid had replaced more erosive coping strategies, such as eating seed, selling land, or taking their children out of school.

Hence, food aid is found to be only one among several factors influencing the production systems, economy and trading patterns in the study area. Other factors such as changes in climatic conditions and diversification of trading opportunities with NTFPs are more important in altering livelihood activities. Using Little's (2008) definition of food aid dependency, it may therefore be argued that food aid has not created a situation of 'aid dependency' in the study area, as households have not 'modified their social and economic behaviour in anticipation of food aid' (Little 2008: 861). On the other hand, food aid is not found to have any long term positive effects in terms of reduced vulnerability of the poorest households. Section 4.2 presents a discussion on how food aid interventions influence the power relations that shape local-level vulnerability patterns.

4.2 The effect of food aid on interdependencies, power, and inequity

External interventions such as food aid occur in a context of pre-existing structural and cultural intra-village dependency relations (Duffield *et al.* 2000; Harvey and Lind 2005). This investigation suggests that food aid interventions affect households' vulnerability patterns over time by consolidating interdependency relations in two main ways that are closely interlinked: first, by reinforcing the gap between the better-off and the poor; and second, by reinforcing existing power dynamics and unequal power relations in decision-making processes at the village level. These two aspects are discussed below.

First, interviews and observations show that livelihood opportunities created by food aid and the accompanying programmes (FFW/FFA) remain confined mostly in the hands of the better-off members of the community. The analysis demonstrates, for example, that in Khankhe, irrigation systems supported by FFW/FFA programmes were built to bring water to the rice fields of the *thakuris* and not to the *dalits*, since the fields of the *dalits* are of poor quality, in areas too steep for cultivating rice or too far from the village. The cultivation of *attis* and apples, which was supposed to facilitate trading opportunities, is another illustration of how the poorest tend to be excluded from the benefits of food aid interventions. Out of 97 respondents, only two stated that their food security had improved as a result of opportunities to engage in trade and none of the most food-insecure households interviewed had the time, financial resources or manpower required to take advantage of new trade opportunities. As summarised by one informant: 'Nothing has changed with food aid. The rich stay rich and the poor stay poor.'

The differential impact of food aid interventions means that not only do poorer households benefit relatively less than wealthier households, but participating in the projects may also have other unintended effects that can undermine their future adaptive capacity. For example, families with little manpower are usually among the most food-insecure, and whilst most of them praised the food received from WFP, they also explained that the work associated with the WFP activities has to be undertaken in addition to all their daily tasks. In a focus group discussion several women from poor households admitted to taking their children out of school in order to participate in the FFW/FFA projects, and said that they had even less time to breastfeed their babies and cook for the household. One woman said: 'Because of all the work, women have more health problems, and with the WFP projects the workload is even bigger. People don't count our work as productive unless we are working in the field.' During the fieldwork, many women and children were seen carrying stones for WFP projects.

The second way that food aid interventions affect households' vulnerability patterns is that they tend to strengthen the decision-making authority of the most influential over the most vulnerable. This could be observed in the user committees (UCs) that were formed to ensure that the FFW/FFA projects are well planned and implemented according

to local needs. The UCs are organised in each village and are supposed to be representative of the different groups within the community. However, although women and *dalits* appear on the lists of UC members, these groups complain that they are not heard during meetings. Many *dalits* and poor families are of the opinion that the UCs do not represent their interests, and some choose not to attend the meetings feeling that it is a waste of time since they cannot influence any decisions. A woman belonging to a UC expressed that she felt excluded from decision-making, since 'the men do not want to listen to the women'. Many development workers were aware of these challenges, but felt they did not have the mandate to challenge social structures at village level. As one development worker put it: '*Dalits* and women only participate on paper, but are not part of the decision-making process. Unfortunately, we [development organisations] can do little to change this, since the UC is formed by the community itself.'

Importantly, in interviews and focus group discussions the most food-insecure households identified exclusion from decision-making processes as a main reason for their vulnerability. Because the policy spaces at the local level are dominated by male members of better-off high-caste families, the most food-insecure households felt they had no real opportunity to influence the design of food aid programmes in the villages. This leads to types of interventions that, as described above, do not address the longer-term needs of the most food-insecure, but rather consolidate the pre-existing intra-village power structures where the food-insecure households have to borrow food or money from the better-off in order to survive a crisis. This creates a precarious situation for the most vulnerable as the need to repay their debt, for example by working on other people's land, limits their capacity to manage and improve their own livelihoods. At the same time, the better-off households see their status and position in the village being reinforced.

The above shows that power relations are important in defining who benefits from food aid projects and illustrates how a technocratic approach (such as food distribution, construction of irrigation systems or paths) to food insecurity fails to challenge pre-existing, structural, intra-village relations. It also suggests that food aid, through using and thus legitimising existing power structures and relations (exemplified here by the UCs), risks consolidating the very inequalities and power relations that cause household vulnerability in the first place. This challenge is, of course, not unique to food aid but a dilemma all external interventions may face when the most vulnerable are excluded from decision-making processes.

5 Conclusion: questioning food aid's capacity to reduce vulnerability

The study finds that while food aid may alleviate short-term food shortages, it does not effectively reduce vulnerability or enhance long-term livelihood strategies. Food aid and the accompanying development programmes (FFW/FFA) in Humla are found to reinforce power relations and inequalities that drive vulnerability by

legitimising existing power structures at the village level and where the food-insecure, in times of crisis, have no choice other than to rely on the better-off households for survival. As such, food aid itself forms part of the complex dynamic that shapes the local vulnerability context and may indirectly impede the enhancement of food security because it contributes to consolidating unequal power relations rather than challenging the local power structures that drive household vulnerability in the long term.

Humanitarian aid is regarded by some as a mechanism that could potentially boost adaptation efforts when activities are appropriately planned (WFP 2012c; IPCC 2014). However, adding to the results of recent studies that have uncovered social, institutional and political barriers to improving the link between development and climate change adaptation efforts (Nagoda 2015; Lemos *et al.* 2016; Tschakert *et al.* 2016), the findings of this study underscore the risk that humanitarian responses that do not take unequal power relations into account may increase the vulnerability of the poorest when faced with future crises. A profound refocus that addresses the power imbalances and social dynamics that drive local vulnerability is needed before food aid can be expected to contribute to enhancing households' long-term adaptive capacity.

Notes

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- 2 *Furu* is a cup made of wood that is collected by the Lama people of Upper Humla in forests in the southern parts of Nepal.
- 3 *Atis* is a herb with an economic value in Humla of about 500 Nepalese rupees per kg (see Roy 2010).
- 4 Data obtained through interviews with WFP staff.
- 5 Forest User Groups in Nepal can be defined as 'village-based organisations established to protect, develop, and use a particular area of national forest as a community forest' (Khadka 2009: 56).

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