This article explores the factors that influence pro-poor commercial management of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) in 3 community forest user groups (CFUGs) in the Dolakha district in Nepal. Management of NTFPs through CFUGs is an important poverty-reduction strategy in rural Nepal. National policy documents encourage management of NTFPs by CFUGs for commercial purposes, particularly by involving marginalized communities. It is therefore important to understand the existing mechanisms of their involvement. We followed a case study approach and collected data through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, formal and informal discussions, participant observations, and study of secondary data, such as the constitutions and operational plans of the CFUGs. Because institutional arrangements varied across the 3 study CFUGs, the ability of marginalized people to benefit from the commercial management of NTFPs also differed. Results suggest that the involvement of external agencies, and the consequent conducting of NTFP-based pro-poor programs, positively influences commercial management of NTFPs and minimizes elite domination. Likewise, inclusion of representatives of marginalized people in the CFUG executive committees empowers them to lobby with external agencies for pro-poor programs. Furthermore, the geographic location of the community forest limits the involvement of external agencies and marketing of NTFPs. Therefore, because members of CFUGs in remote areas are heavily dependent on collection and sale of NTFPs for their livelihoods, we suggest increasing the focus of external agencies in such areas and including marginalized people in CFUG executive committees.

Keywords: Community forest user groups (CFUGs); inclusion; institutional arrangements; NGOs; non-timber forest products (NTFPs); pro-poor programs; Nepal.

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Introduction

In Nepal, non-timber forest products (NTFPs) have great conservation and economic value. NTFP-related economic activities can contribute up to 90% of a rural household’s income (Bista and Webb 2006). The importance of NTFPs is also reflected at the national level. In 2002, the government earned US$ 1.11 million in revenue from the sale of NTFPs or almost 18% of the total revenue from the forest sector (HMG 2003). Olsen (2005) estimates that from 7000 to 27,000 tons of NTFPs, with a value of US$ 7–30 million, are harvested and traded in Nepal every year. In recognizing this economic value, the Ninth Five-Year Plan (1997–2002) recommended sustainable NTFP management for poverty reduction (NPC 1997). The Tenth Five-Year Plan (2002–2007) aimed to further strengthen this by incorporating NTFP management plans in the operational plans of community forest users groups (CFUG) (NPC 2002).

CFUGs are the local institutions authorized to manage, consume, and sell excess forest products, including NTFPs, from the forests handed over to them by the government. NTFP management in community forestry is considered one of the approaches for reintegrating marginalized communities in the mainstream of development (HMG 2004). In the socioeconomic context of Nepal, marginalized communities refer to communities that are marginalized because of historical discrimination on the basis of caste, ethnicity, and sex. For the purpose of reintegration, a growing number of CFUGs are including NTFP management plans and provisions for the betterment of such communities in their operational plans and constitutions. These documents have to be approved by the district forest office (DFO).

Commercial management of NTFPs for livelihood improvement has been well researched in Nepal and elsewhere. The factors that determine the commercialization of NTFPs are mostly socioeconomic, technical, financial, and political in nature, or are related to market access (Marshall et al 2003; Nygren et al 2006). Most of the studies focus on commercial collection of, and